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Prospectus of higher education among most disadvantaged group: Bridging the gap

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Abstract

This paper explores the deep-rooted educational inequalities in India and their impact on inclusive economic growth. Despite policy efforts, disparities in access and outcomes persist across gender, caste, class, dis- ability, and geography. Drawing on government data and scholarly analysis, the study highlights how marginalized groups particularly Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), women, transgender individuals, and persons with disabilities continue to face structural and systemic barriers in accessing quality education. Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) data reveals a steep decline in enrollment beyond primary levels, especially for SC/ST females. The analysis incorporates six key diagrams to illustrate these trends. It also critiques the growing privatization of education, underfunding of public institutions, and urban-centric policy focus, which collectively deepen educational exclusion. The paper connects these disparities to economic outcomes, showing how unequal education leads to unequal employment, lower female labor force participation, and limited upward mobility for marginalized groups. It argues that education alone cannot correct inequality without structural reform in both policy and institutional culture. Recommendations include increased public in- vestment, inclusive curriculum development, rural infrastructure enhancement, and robust monitoring systems. The paper concludes that equitable education is essential for sustainable economic growth and social justice in India.

Keywords: Education, Inequality, Caste, Gender, Budget

1. Introduction

It is a widely acknowledged fact that education plays a central role in the economic development of a nation and in the preservation of democratic values. In India, however, the persistence of social inequalities across caste, class, gender, region, and ability has significantly compromised the promise of equitable education. Education is more than just a mechanism for learning, it is a vehicle for mobility, empowerment, and human development. While India has expanded its education infrastructure over the past few decades, disparities in access and outcomes remain deeply entrenched. Despite government promises and constitutional guarantees, education continues to be unequally distributed (Prakash, 2007). Marginalized groups such as women, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), transgender individuals, and persons with disabilities remain disproportionately underrepresented in higher education and formal employment.

Social Statistical Division (2019), India's economic growth potential is constrained by educational inequity. In a country where over 60% of the population is below the age of 35, failing to ensure universal quality education poses a national risk. Moreover, as the world transitions into a knowledge economy, nations that fail to equip their population with critical skills and education will be left behind. Women at any vulnerable group are doubly vulnerable in terms of region, religion, language, ethnicity, caste and class. Education is perceived as an instrument or changing the discriminatory status and reducing inequality in society (Patel, 1998). It is prerequisite for women's equality too (Patel, 1998).

2. Conceptualizing Inequality in Education

Educational inequality is not simply a matter of access; it encompasses dis- parities in quality, outcomes, participation, and progression. Tilak (1979), education is a social system that distributes future honor, in- come, and occupation. When access is unequal, the outcomes are predictably skewed leading to a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty, social exclusion, and economic stagnation.

There is difference in Structural and Social Inequality. Natural in- equality refers to differences in cognitive ability, aptitude, or physical attributes. Social inequality, in contrast, is manufactured through societal norms, discrimination, and unequal resource distribution.

In India, social inequality is the more prominent barrier to education. Caste- based exclusion, gendered curricula, urban-rural divides, and abled infrastructures reinforce barriers that begin in early childhood and intensify through higher education. As Collins (1971) posits in his conflict theory, education systems reflect and reproduce societal inequalities rather than correcting them. This view resonates strongly with the Indian context, where historically marginalized communities continue to remain on the fringes of formal education systems.

2.1 A Historical Perspective: Education, Gender and Caste

The caste system in India has long dictated access to knowledge. Traditional Brahmanical systems excluded Dalits and Tribal communities from education altogether. Although the Constitution of India (1950) outlawed caste discrimination and mandated equal access to education, systemic inequalities continue to persist.

The Gendered nature of education in the post-independence period, girls were often excluded from education based on the assumption that their primary role was domestic. Educational policies in the 1960s and 1970s reinforced these assumptions. As Patel (1998) points out, early curricula institutionalized women's roles as mothers and housewives, limiting their scope for intellectual or professional advancement.

Despite policy reforms, including the National Policy on Education (1986) and the New Education Policy (2020), women continue to face structural barriers such as early marriage and pregnancy, domestic responsibilities and gender- based violence and harassment, and lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure (e.g. toilets, transportation).

2.2 The Rise of Public-Private Partnerships and the Shrinking State

Since liberalization in the 1990s, the Indian state has gradually receded from its role as the primary provider of social services, including education. The rise of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) has effectively shifted the responsibility of education to the private sector, leading to increased commercialization.

Srivastava (2010) argues that PPPs have not expanded access equitably. Rather, they have intensified existing disparities by making quality education a commodity accessible mainly to the urban elite. The poor and marginalized, who cannot afford private education or coaching, are left behind.

3. Educational Trends: GER and Dropout Patterns

Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is a key indicator used to measure the number of students enrolled at a specific education level as a percentage of the eligible population. While GER has improved across all social groups, the data reveals sharp drops in enrollment as one moves from primary to higher education, especially for girls, SC/ST students, and rural youth.

Table 1: Education Level by Gender (in percentages)

Education Level	Male	Female	Total
Primary (1–5)	103.7	103.7	103.7
Upper Primary (6–8)	90.5	90.5	90.5
Secondary (9–10)	77.8	77.8	77.8
Higher Secondary (11–12)	52.4	52.4	52.4
Higher Education (18–23)	27.3	27.3	27.3

Source: DSEL & DHE, Ministry of Education (2019–20)

The above table 1, shows an alarming trend: While GER is above 100% at the primary level (due to overage and underage students), the ratio plummets at higher education. This suggests that a significant proportion of students drop out before reaching post-secondary education. Gross Enrollment Ratio may exceed 100% due to over-age/under-age children.

Table 2: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of Females by Education Level

Level	GER (Female %)
Primary (1–5)	103.7
Upper Primary (6–8)	90.5
Secondary (9–10)	77.8
Higher Secondary (11–12)	52.4
Higher Education	27.3

Source: DSEL & DHE, Ministry of Education (2019–20)

In above table 2, Despite near parity in primary enrollment, the GER for female's drops by nearly 75% by the time they reach higher education. This can be attributed to several factors: 1) financial constraints; 2) domestic labor bur- dens; 3) patriarchal control over girls' mobility; 4) lack of safety and sanitation in schools.

Table 3: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education by Gender (2015– 2020)

Year	GER (All)	Male (%)	Female (%)
2015–16	24.5	26.7	22.3
2016–17	25.2	27.1	23.5
2017–18	25.8	27.3	24.5
2018–19	26.3	27.8	25.4
2019–20	27.1	28.3	26.4

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), Ministry of Education, GoI

In above table 3, this five-year trend shows that female participation in higher education is improving yet still lags behind male counterparts. While the difference has narrowed, systemic obstacles remain that prevent many women from completing higher education.

Despite the affirmative action policies (such as reservations and scholar- ships), SCs and STs remain underrepresented in higher education. The table 4, shows GER for SC and ST students has gradually increased but remains well below the national average (27.1%). The reasons include: 1) Longstanding socio-cultural exclusion, 2) Poverty, 3) Inadequate support systems, 4) Discrimination and micro-aggressions in school environments

Table 4: GER for SC & ST students in Higher Education (2015–2020)

Year	SC GER (%)	ST GER (%)
2015–16	19.9	14.2
2016–17	21.1	15.4
2017–18	21.8	15.9
2018–19	23.0	17.2
2019–20	23.4	18.0

Source: DSEL & DHE, Ministry of Education (2019–20)

Table 4, data shows a clear pattern: as educational levels increase, enrollment sharply declines for SC/ST students. While access at the primary level has become nearly universal, retention and progression remain challenges.

Female students from SC/ST backgrounds face compounded vulnerabilities. Intersectional barriers include caste-based discrimination, gendered household roles, early marriage and lack of autonomy and poor access to learning materials and guidance. It can be seen in table 6, While SC/ST girls have near-universal primary enrollment, their representation in higher education is dismally low. This illustrates how caste and gender intersect to perpetuate inequality, especially in rural India.

Table 5: GER of SC & ST by Education Level (2019–20)

Level	SC Female (%)	ST Female (%)
Primary (1–5)	114.5	106.6
Upper Primary (6–8)	98.1	93.0
Elementary (1–8)	108.3	101.5
Secondary (9–10)	83.8	77.2
Higher Secondary	55.1	43.9
Higher Education	24.1	17.7

Source: DSEL & DHE, Ministry of Education (2019–20)

Table 6: GER of SC and ST female Students by Education Level (2019–20)

Level	SC Female (%)	ST Female (%)
Primary (1–5)	114.5	106.6
Upper Primary (6–8)	98.1	93.0
Elementary (1–8)	108.3	101.5
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Higher Secondary	55.1	43.9
Higher Education	24.1	17.7

Source: DSEL & DHE, Ministry of Education (2019–20)

Learning outcomes and quality issues

Even for those who remain in school, learning outcomes are sub-optimal. As per NITI Aayog's 2020 report, only 71.88% of Grade 8 students achieved minimum proficiency levels. Poor infrastructure, untrained teachers, and lack of instructional materials disproportionately affect SC/ST and rural schools. It has been observed that Universal enrollment exists only at the primary level. There is sharp declines occur at secondary and higher education, especially for girls and SC/ST students. The SC/ST females face double discrimination and lowest progression rates. Gender and caste are significant, intersectional determinants of educational inequality. GER trends have improved slowly over five years, but gaps remain stark.

4. Transgender Learners: An Invisible Population in Education Policy

India's transgender community, officially recognized as the 'third gender' by the Supreme Court in 2014, continues to face widespread social exclusion. Despite constitutional protections and growing awareness, transgender individuals remain absent from mainstream education discourse and statistical tracking. The key challenges they faced are 1) stigma and discrimination in schools and communities, 2) lack of gender-neutral infrastructure (e.g., restrooms, hostel arrangements), 3) bullying and violence leading to high dropout rates, 4) Exclusion from welfare programs or ambiguity in identity documentation.

Rajkumar (2016), transgender individuals are rarely educated beyond the secondary level. Their disconnection from family and community results in social alienation, homelessness, and poverty making formal education inaccessible or irrelevant to many. Though the NITI Aayog SDG Index (2020) notes a labor force participation rate of 64% for transgender individuals (relative to men), the quality and dignity of work remain questionable. Educational attainment is a key factor in this disparity. Without access to inclusive and sensitive educational institutions, most transgender people remain locked out of skilled employment and economic empowerment.

5. Persons with Disabilities (PwDs): Systematic Exclusion through Infrastructure and Policy

Another critically underserved population in the Indian education system is that of persons with disabilities (PwDs). Although the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) mandates inclusive education and barrier-free access, implementation remains slow and fragmented. The main issues faced by them are lack of physical access (e.g., ramps, tactile paths, assistive technologies), shortage of trained special educators, inaccessible learning materials, exclusion from regular classrooms and peer learnings.

As per the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UD- ISE+, 2020), only 19.3% of persons aged 15 and above with a disability have completed 15 years of education. This is a devastating figure when considering that education is often the only means for PwDs to access meaningful work and social inclusion. Furthermore, cultural stigma and parental neglect compound these issues, especially in rural areas. Children with disabilities are often seen as" uneducable" and excluded early from both private and public schooling.

6. Challenges faced by education system

6.1. Rural Disadvantage: The Urban Bias in Educational Infrastructure

Despite over 65% of India's population residing in rural areas, the country's educational infrastructure remains urban-centric. Most higher education institutions, including technical and professional colleges, are located in cities and metropolitan areas. This disproportionately affects a) the students from low-income households who cannot afford relocation b) Women, who are less likely to migrate due to safety concerns or social norms c) Marginalized castes and tribes, who have fewer social and economic resources. Prakash (2007) emphasizes that rather than increasing the intake of urban institutions, the state should prioritize building new institutions in backward areas. However, limited state funding and rising privatization mean that expansion in rural areas is slow or non-existent.

6.2. Structural Barriers and Institutional Culture

Beyond access, the culture of educational institutions also reflects broader societal biases. Women, transgender persons, dalit students, and persons with disabilities often experience institutional micro aggressions, discrimination from peers and staff, and lack of cultural sensitivity.

These barriers contribute to high dropout rates, low self-esteem and poor performance, under-representation in prestigious programs and leadership roles. As Manjrekar (2003) observes, educational institutions not only reflect social hierarchies but also reproduce them through segregated curricula, biased evaluation, and a hidden curriculum that favors upper-caste, urban, male norms.

6.3. Educational Filtration: A Two-Stage Process (Tilak, 1979)

Jandhyala Tilak's conceptual framework remains especially useful in understanding why education fails to deliver economic equality. At stage one – entry: Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds are filtered out before reaching higher education due to a) Economic hardship, b) school infrastructure gaps, c) lack of parental support, d) language barriers

At stage two – Conversion: Even when these students enter higher education, they face inequities in job placement, unequal recognition of credentials and discrimination in professional networks. The failure to address both filtration points explains why education alone has not led to proportional economic advancement for marginalized groups.

6.4. Gender Roles and Occupational Segregation

While enrollment of girls has improved, gendered subject selection remains a persistent issue. Women are often encouraged (or restricted) to pursue "feminine" fields such as home science, education, or social work—fields that pay less and offer fewer opportunities for leadership. As Patel (1998) and Manjrekar (2003) point out, educational reforms have failed to dismantle the division of labor institutionalized through curricula and school culture. This occupational segregation mirrors labor market outcomes, where even highly educated women struggle with unequal pay, job insecurity, poor representation in STEM and leadership.

6.5. Curriculum, Textbooks, and Representation

Even the content of education reflects and reinforces social hierarchies. Early policy reforms called for rewriting textbooks to reflect diverse gender roles and social experiences. However, biases continue to dominate. Studies show that textbooks under-represent women in science and leadership roles. Caste oppression is either erased or understated. Stories and examples favor urban and upper-caste contexts. This leads to alienation of marginalized learners who cannot see their realities reflected in what they study.

Transgender and disabled individuals remain grossly underserved, with high dropout rates and systemic neglect. Rural students face spatial exclusion due to urban-centric development. Educational institutions often reinforce existing hierarchies rather than challenge them. Socially marginalized students are filtered both at the point of entry and in translating education to economic benefit. Curricula and teaching practices remain culturally biased, limiting the emancipatory power of education.

6.6. Educational Inequality and the Labor Market

While education is widely considered a means of enhancing economic productivity, it does not guarantee equitable outcomes in India's labor market. Unequal access to quality education—alongside persistent social barriers—translates into unequal access to decent employment.

6.6.1. The Female Workforce Paradox

Despite improvements in female literacy and enrollment, India's female labor force participation (FLFP) remains one of the lowest in the world. World Bank (2018) found that men participation is 79% and women participation are 27%. Even educated women struggle to find jobs due to occupational segregation into low-paying sectors, limited access to networks and mentorship, safety concerns, lack of childcare, and patriarchal restrictions, and glass ceilings and gender wage gaps. Thim (2019), unpaid domestic labor by women constitutes a huge but invisible contribution to GDP. In some countries, this has been quantified: 33% in China, 23% in Argentina. India has yet to account for this, but estimates suggest the value is immense.

6.6.2. Women's Economic Contribution: A Missed Opportunity

UN India Business Forum (2018), "If Indian women participated equally in the economy as men, it would add $2.9 trillion to the GDP by 2025. Yet most female labor remains informal, unpaid, or underpaid. Women also experience: 1) Wage inequality (30–40% gender pay gap in pensions and salaries), 2) Insecure jobs, especially in agriculture and care giving, 3) low representation in leadership and policy-making roles. This underutilization of women's potential is not only a gender issue—it is a critical developmental failure.

6.7. Education, Caste, and Employment Disparities

Caste-based disparities extend beyond education into employment. Dalits and Adivasi's face discrimination in hiring, wages, and workplace culture even when they have comparable or higher qualifications. Studies (Tilak, 1979; Manjrekar, 2003) have shown that education alone does not erase caste-based disadvantage. The pathways from education to employment remain riddled with social and institutional biases.

For instance: (a) SC/ST graduates have lower placement rates in professional colleges (b) Many are hired for low-status, low-skill jobs regardless of education. (c) Soft-skill expectations and language barriers disadvantage first-generation learners This translates to economic inequality, reinforcing cycles of poverty within marginalized communities.

6.7.1. Employment of Persons with Disabilities and Transgender Individuals

For persons with disabilities and transgender individuals, the post-education transition into the labor force is particularly difficult: Many employers refuse to hire transgender persons due to stigma Disabled individuals face inaccessible workplaces and discrimination Unemployment rates for both groups are much higher than the national average. NITI Aayog (2021), only a small fraction of the transgender population is engaged in formal work, and most rely on informal or stigmatized occupations (e.g., begging, sex work).

6.7.2. Skill Mismatch and Educational Quality

Even for the general population, a major concern is the mismatch between education and market demands. Many graduates are not "job-ready" due to outdated curriculum, lack of practical training, inadequate exposure to technology, and poor soft skill development. This has led to a paradoxical situation: rising graduate unemployment alongside labor shortages in technical and skilled trades. The National Education Policy (2020) seeks to address this by integrating vocational training and promoting interdisciplinary learning but effective implementation remains pending.

6.7.3. International Comparisons and Lessons for India

Table 7, countries that have successfully linked education to growth (e.g. South Korea, Finland) invested heavily in universal early childhood education, teacher training and salaries, curriculum innovation, and equitable infrastructure. India, by contrast, continues to rely on exam-centric models and rote learning. Moreover, the absence of proper monitoring in Public Private partnership models has allowed mushrooming of sub-standard institutions. These comparisons show that investment in education and inclusion correlates strongly with economic growth and equality.

Table 7: Cross-country comparison of education spending, literacy, female labor force participation (FLFP), and inequality

Country	% of GDP on Education	Adult Literacy Rate	FLFP (%)	Inequality Index
India	3.4% (2019)	~74%	~27%	High
South Korea	~5%	~99%	~60%	Low
Finland	~6%	~100%	~70%	Very Low

Source: World Bank, UNDP, OECD (2019–2021)

India's failure to integrate all its citizens into the education and labor economy leads to massive opportunity costs under-utilization of female labor, loss of GDP due to under-education, overburdened welfare and health systems, social unrest and low productivity. These effects are not abstract—they manifest in slower national growth, poor human development indicators, and persistent intergenerational poverty.

Educational inequality severely limits labor force participation, especially for women and marginalized groups. Even with qualifications, discrimination and poor policy implementation prevent equitable employment. Unpaid care work by women and stigma-based exclusion of transgender and disabled individuals magnifies inequality. Without alignment between education and employment, growth becomes skewed, benefiting only a small segment of the population. Comparative models show the positive effects of inclusive, well-funded education on national prosperity.

7. Policy Landscape: Gaps and Missed Targets

India has no shortage of education-related policies. From the Right to Education Act (2009) to the National Education Policy (2020), successive governments have recognized education as a national priority. Yet, implementation remains deeply flawed, particularly when it comes to inclusion and equitable access. There are multiple key policy provisions like Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 which Mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14. National Policy on Education (1986, revised 1992) that emphasizes equity and inclusion. National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 calls for universalization of education up to secondary level and greater focus on vocational training, digital access, and foundational literacy.

However, none of these policies have fully addressed. The systemic underfunding (actual spend 4% of GDP), disability-inclusive learning systems, LGBTQIA+ education rights, gender-sensitive infrastructure, teacher training and curricular reform in rural areas are major concerns.

The Privatization Dilemma

Privatization of education, often promoted through Public-Private Partner- ships (PPPs), has widened the educational divide. While elite students benefit from world-class facilities and faculty, low-income and marginalized students are often stuck with poorly regulated private institutions.

As Prakash (2007) warns, Public Private Partnership without proper checks create profit-driven education markets. It also leads to unethical practices (e.g., fake degrees, capitation fees). It erodes public accountability and quality standards. It sidelines the state's constitutional duty to provide education. Privatization also contradicts the spirit of inclusive growth. As Tilak (1979) asserts, only a well-financed, publicly accountable system can achieve both access and equity in education.

Digital Divide and Post-Pandemic Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated educational inequality. The shift to online learning revealed a stark digital divide. The rural and low-income students lacked internet access, devices, and electricity. Students with disabilities were excluded from inaccessible platforms. Girls were disproportionately affected due to increased domestic burdens. UNESCO (2021), over 320 million Indian students were affected by school closures. Recovery has been uneven, with many children permanently dropping out or falling behind.

Monitoring, Data, and Accountability

Another major issue is the lack of disaggregated and timely data on marginalized learners—especially transgender persons, disabled students, and out-of- school youth. Without granular tracking, policy cannot respond to ground realities.

Furthermore, most policies lack mechanisms for community monitoring, feed- back, or third-party audits. This results in inefficient spending, corruption, and loss of public trust.

8. Conclusions

Education as a Catalyst for Inclusive Growth. Education is not merely a sectoral concern, it is the foundation of human development, social equity, and economic progress. India's demographic dividend can become a liability if educational inequalities remain unaddressed. The evidence is clear that girls, SC/STs, disabled, and transgender individuals are falling behind at every stage. Economic growth without inclusive education benefits only a privileged few. Privatization and underfunding have weakened the public system. International examples (e.g., Finland, South Korea) prove that inclusive, quality education fuels long-term prosperity.

The potential strategic recommendations can be – A) Increase Education Funding and meet the 6% of GDP target by 2027. Prioritize primary and secondary education in rural and tribal belts. Ring-fence funds for gender, caste, and disability-based inclusion; B) Strengthen Public Education: Revitalize government schools and colleges with improved infrastructure, salaries, and accountability. Implement neighbor- hood schooling models to reduce access gaps (Kothari Commission, 1966); C) Curriculum and Pedagogical Reform- Update textbooks to reflect diverse gender, caste, and regional realities. Promote critical thinking, language inclusion, and emotional intelligence over rote learning; D) Gender and Inclusion Mainstreaming Build safe school environments (transport, toilets, redressal mechanisms). Provide mentorship, career guidance, and role models for marginalized learners. Recognize transgender identity in admissions, uniforms, and documentation systems. E) Disability and Digital Equity Create accessible digital platforms and content. Train special educators and invest in assistive technologies. Bridge the urban-rural digital divide through infrastructure and subsidies; F) Data and Monitoring Disaggregated all educational data by gender, caste, disability, and geography. Introduce community report cards, public dash- boards, and RTI-based audits.

As India moves toward becoming a global economic power, it must prioritize human capital over headline GDP. Equitable education is not a cost, it is an investment with the highest social returns. Only when we bridge the educational divide can we hope to achieve the vision of a just, prosperous, and democratic India.

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