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Higher Education in India: Access, Equity and Inclusiveness

Tamanna Khan

Research Scholar, Department of Economics, AMU Aligarh, India

Nasim Ansari

Research Scholar, Department of Economics, AMU Aligarh, India

Dr. Zeba Sheereen

Associate Professor, Department of Economics, AMU Aligarh, India

Abstract:

The most common meaning of the term “inclusive” is “not excluding any section of the society”. Inclusive growth is defined as new economic strategy which takes into account the betterment of every section of the society. The approach paper of the Eleventh Five Year Plan stressed the need for inclusive growth in India. It was argued that growth must be inclusive so that mass of the people have access to basic facilities such as health, education, clean drinking water etc. Inclusion in education is the most important instrument to enhance human capabilities and to achieve the desired objectives of socio-economic development.

In spite of concerted efforts were made by the government in the 11th FYP with respect to access and equity in higher education, their educational status is still far from satisfactory. With a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 19.2 per cent, India is still below the world average. Further, disparity also exists in terms of inter-regional, inter-social group, gender and urban and rural areas and points out that educational disparity are major threats to the process of “inclusive education”. Removal of these disparities, however, is pre-requisite for making the “inclusive education” to succeed. It is argued that a strong equity enhancing and inequality reducing thrust to the education plan is an imperative, particularly in view of the emphasis on “Inclusive Growth”. Provision of access to education at all levels i.e., from primary education to higher education is essential to achieve the goals of inclusive growth. Thus, the present study analysed the issues of access and equity in higher education in India.

1. Introduction

India, the second most populous country in the world, is home to one-sixth of humanity (Gupta, 2004). It has also risen to become one of the world's new economic giants. The economy of India is the tenth largest in terms of nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and third largest by Purchasing Power Parity (PPP)¹. The major contributor to this striking performance is India's thriving services sector, led by information technology. This sector's expansion has far out-stripped that of agriculture and industry. Services now account more than half i.e., 55.6 per cent, whereas the industrial and agricultural sector contributes 26.3 per cent and 18.1 per cent respectively (ASHE, 2012). According to the 2005 report of the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) and McKinsey, India is estimated to have a 65 per cent share of the market in offshore IT. Moreover, there remains enormous potential for further growth in these markets (Smith, 2007).

These all shows that India's economy has grown so quickly and become one of the most important economic powers in the new world economic order. The main factor behind this success in India is education-particularly higher education. Today, India is acknowledged to have the largest higher education systems in the world in terms of number of institutions and 2nd largest in terms of enrolments, behind China (Ernst & Young, 2012). However, its phenomenal growth is not uniform. Large regional and social disparities continue to prevail. Issues of inclusiveness in development have therefore emerged. Education, particularly higher education, is a key driver of economic growth and productivity. Its role in driving India's inclusive development, therefore, places it at the centre stage in any policy debate.

Thus, keeping these perspective the paper tries to address the issues that, whether the slogan of Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12) 'Inclusive and Faster Growth' has reached to the higher education segment in India in terms of access and equity or not.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To examine access in higher education in India.
- To understand the equity related issues in Indian higher education system.
- To examine inclusive growth in higher education in India.

¹ GDP (current US\$) data for 2011, World Bank Database.

3. Data Sources

The present study is based on secondary sources of data. Various sources have been used for the same include the reports and documents of Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), University Grants Commission (UGC), National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) 61st and 64th round and Five Year Plan documents etc.

4 Meaning of Inclusive Growth

According to World Bank (2006) inclusive growth is “the only sure means for correcting the deeply ingrained regional imbalances, inequalities and for consolidating economic gains”, as inclusive growth is the growth “with emphasis not only on the distribution of economic gains but also on the security, vulnerability, empowerment, and sense of full participation that people may enjoy in social life”. Inclusive growth is, however not new, though it seems to be a new concept. The Oxford Dictionary defines the most common meaning of the term “inclusive” is “not excluding any section of society”. Here we can define inclusive growth as a new economic strategy which takes into account the betterment of every section of the society. It is akin to the development strategies such as “growth with justices”, “growth with equity”, “growth with distribution”, growth with a human face”, “pro-poor growth” etc., (Tilak, 2007). In this sense, the little of the approach paper on the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12) “Towards faster and more inclusive growth” reflects the need to make growth “more inclusive” in terms of benefits flowing through more employment and income to those sections of the society, which have been bypassed by higher rates of economic growth witnessed in recent years.

Thus, the strategy of the inclusive growth is to focus on the poor, the marginalised, the neglected, the disadvantaged and deprived sections of the society, and the backward regions of the country. An added dimension of the new development strategy also includes linking growth to the quality of basic services like education and healthcare (Tilak, 2007).

4.1. Need for Inclusive Growth

The approach paper of Eleventh Five Year Plan comes at a time when the Indian economy has reached on a cross roads. The Indian economy, though achieved a high growth momentum during 2003-04 to 2007-08, could not bring down unemployment and poverty to tolerable levels. Further, a vast majority of the population remained outside the ambit of basic health and education facilities during this high growth phase. In recent decades, economic and social inequalities have increased alongside high growth rates which have exacerbated regional inequalities. Over 25 per cent of Indians continue to live in abject poverty. Not only this, there are also wide gap between different social groups in India, more glaring in case of SCs, STs, OBCs and minorities. These groups are still continuing to lag behind the rest. Another important aspect of differences is gender discrimination, similarly a wide gap from development point of view between urban and rural India has become a truism of our times.

As a result, inclusive growth has become a national policy objective of the Union Government. The 11th Five Year Plan envisions inclusive growth as a key objective. The Plan document notes that the economic growth has failed to be sufficiently inclusive particularly after the mid-1990s. It has identified agriculture, infrastructure, health care and education as critical areas for achieving higher inclusive growth. Thus, the Eleventh Plan document tries to restructure the policies in order to make the growth faster, broad-based and inclusive by reducing the fragmentation of the society. Huge investments in agriculture, education and health, and rural infrastructure were the key elements of the inclusive growth strategy as envisaged. Broadly, the policies aim at increasing the income and employment opportunities on the one hand and on the other; it tries to finance programmes which are capable of making the growth more inclusive (Chakravarty, 2010). Thus, all these show that there is a need for ‘Inclusive growth’.

5. Growth of Higher Education in India

Education is universally accepted as a central component of human capital. It provides a foundation for all process of development, the base, on which much of our economic and social well being is built. Higher education in particular, is also vital importance for the nation, as it is a powerful tool to build knowledge-based society of the 21st century. Higher education is recognised as a critical factor for inclusive and faster growth. It generates skilled labour force and inputs for research and development. It fosters higher growth rates and enables people to complete in a globalised labour market. Therefore, for the development of the nation with social justice, there is a need of equitable and balanced progress of all the sections of human communities and for this perspective, it is imperative to bring the weaker, deprived and discriminated sections such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Schedules Tribes (STs), Backward Classes (OBCs), minorities etc in India to the forefront of educational revolution and main stream of national development (Singh et al, 2011).

Broadly the term ‘higher education’ in India’s context covers the full spectrum of education beyond the 12 years of formal schooling (Jayaram, 2004). Generally, it comprises three levels of qualifications: bachelor or undergraduate degree programs, master’s or post-graduate degree programs, and the predoctoral and doctoral programs- master of philosophy and doctor of philosophy (Xiaoguang & Yan Fengqiao, 2010). Since independence higher education in India has grown steadily over the years. There were 20 universities and 500 colleges at the time of independence. At present there were 299 state universities, 140 private universities, 130 deemed universities. Along with these universities, the country has 39 institutes of National Importance, (that specialize in the fields of engineering & technology, management, medical sciences, language, information technology, statistical research etc). In total the country has 652 universities and university level institutes that impart higher and technical education and provide affiliation to more than 33,000 colleges and institutes in the country (ASHE, 2012). The number of teachers and enrolments has also gone up from around 24,000 in 1950-51 to 699,000 in 2010-11 and student enrolment increased from a tiny base of 100,000 to a whopping level of 1, 69, 74, 883² over the said period.

² UGC Annual Report Various Issues.

The private sector has played an instrumental role in this growth, with private institutions now accounting for 64 per cent of the total number of institutions and 59 per cent enrolment in the country, as compared to 43 per cent and 33 per cent respectively a decade ago. The government has also given the required thrust to the sector in its five year plans. Growth in private institutions has been significant during the Eleventh Plan period, with 98 private state universities, 13 private deemed universities, 6335 private colleges and 2321 private diploma institutions being set up during this period (ASHE, 2012). They are mainly interested in professional or vocational education.

Higher education has received high priority in the 11th plan. It is important to note that 11th plan marks a major break from the past and brings higher education on the priority list of the government. This is abundantly borne out by the fact that Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh describes the Eleventh Plan as “Education Plan” and mentions this change as “Second Wave” in higher education (Thorat, 2009).

6. Inclusiveness, Access and Equity in Higher Education

For inclusive growth education in general and higher education in particular is the most important instrument to enhance human capabilities and to achieve the desired objectives of socio-economic development. It is one of the most powerful instruments known for reducing poverty and inequality and laying the basis for sustained economic growth. Inclusive growth which is a broad and multidimensional concept is not merely linked with poverty reduction but also with enlargement of opportunity, capability, access, equality and security of people. It implies the participation of all sectors and regions of the society in the growth process and equitable distribution of growth benefits to every section of society. The Eleventh Five Year Plan said that a key element for the strategy of inclusive growth must be to provide the mass of our people access to basic facilities such as health, education, clean drinking water etc. and the government at different levels have to ensure the provision of these services. But despite the various efforts, inequities in our economy still exist and education sector of our economy is also not an exception. During the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-12), significant progress was made in the areas of access and equity in higher education.

- **Access:** During this period, India’s GER³ crossed 15 per cent taking the country’s higher education from an “elite” (GER of less than 15 per cent) to a “mass” (15 per cent – 50 per cent GER) system. The number of higher education institutions grew by 9.6 per cent per annum from 29,384 to 46,430 during this period. Central institutions witnessed a historic growth (with a CAGR of 11 per cent) with 51 new institutions being set up during the plan period and further 7 new IIMs, 8 IITs and 10 NITs were established. The number of private institutions grew at a CAGR of 10 per cent during the plan period. This growth included the establishment of 98 state private universities, 17 private deemed universities, 7818 private colleges and 3581 private diploma institutions.
- **Equity:** The government increased the intake capacity of central institutions to provide 27 per cent reservations for OBCs without affecting the number of general seats. Merit-cum-means scholarships were in 2008-09 for students who are 80th percentile and above from different school boards and have family incomes of less than INR 0.45 million per annum. Since 2009-10, the central government has begun providing full interest subsidy loans during the moratorium period to students whose annual family income is less than INR0.45 million. Out of the proposed 374, 45 model colleges were established in low enrolment districts.

In spite of these progresses, India’s higher education system still faces many challenges on these fronts: - including low and inequitable access to higher education across states & union territories, gender, socio-economic and rural-urban divide. Yet, in terms of GER, India lags behind most developed/developing countries. Critical gaps exist in the capacity and management systems of the higher education structure. India’s large and young population requires access to affordable and credible higher education in order to raise equity and promote inclusive growth.

Country	GER
China	26
Mexico	28
UK	59
Australia	80
India	19.4*
Russian Federation	76
USA	95
Japan	60

Table 1: GER in Higher Education among Selected Countries (2010)
Note: * Data of 2011 Source: Global Education Digest (2012) & AISHE (2013)

India’s GER for higher education stood at 19.4 per cent in 2010-11, significantly lower than the global average of 29 per cent in 2010 (GED, 2012). In the United States the corresponding figure is 95 per cent, for china 26 per cent, Mexico 28 per cent and for UK it is 59 per cent (see Table 1 & Figure 1).

³ The Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) is a frequently and widely used indicator of educational advancement of a country/region. It is defined as the ratio of persons enrolled in higher education institutions to total population of the persons in age group of 18 to 23 years.

It is recognised that for growth to be inclusive, the access to higher education must be broadened so that, all sections of population could benefit from new and productive employment opportunities generated by faster growth. But unfortunately not only the overall access to higher education is low, there are inter-regional and inter-social group disparities in India.



Figure 1: GER in Higher Education among Selected Countries (2010)
(Source: Table 1)

The gap in inter-state variation in access is the largest for some of the states like Delhi, Chandigarh and Pondicherry, attract a large number of students from outside their states, have GERs exceeding 30 per cent while states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam, Rajasthan, Tripura, Odisha, Dadar & Nagar Haveli and West Bengal have significantly lower GERs as can be seen from Figure 2. Thus, this figure shows wide regional disparities across states and union-territories. This indicates the need for higher educational institutions in the backward states and the need for launching programmes which can increase effective demand for higher education. Further, there is also a need for state-specific strategies in addressing issues of expansion of higher education during the Twelfth Plan Period (ASHE, 2012).

Even though our higher education system is one of the largest in the world, the GER is far below the world average. The national target was to increase the GER to 15 per cent by the end of the Eleventh Five Year period (2011-12), which has been achieved, and 30 per cent by 2020. While this goal requires higher capacity for intake, it also requires steps to improve access to higher education across gender and different social groups, and to bridge the rural-urban divide in order to ensure more equitable outcomes in educational participation.

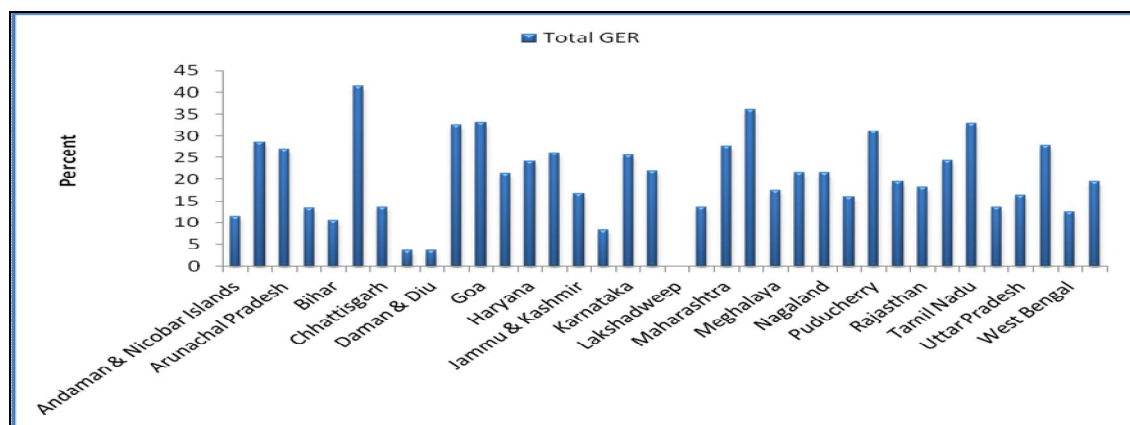


Figure 2: GER (18-23 years) in Higher Education across States & Union Territories in 2010-11
(Source: AISHE, 2013)

Further table 2 shows that, Indian higher education system suffers from a large rural-urban divide in access parameter. The NSSO data for 2004-05 indicates significant disparities among rural and urban enrolment rate however, during the Eleventh Five Year Plan significant efforts were made by the government to bridge down these disparities in spite of that, this disparities exists. The NSSO data for 2007-08 also depict significant rural and urban disparities- enrolment rate being 11.06 per cent and 19.03 per cent for the rural and urban areas respectively- the GAR⁴ in the urban areas being three times higher compared to rural areas. No doubt, there is significant increase in enrolment rate among rural and urban areas in these two rounds but still, there is large gap between them. India will not able to achieve its sectoral and overall targets in equity and inclusion unless the following gaps in access to higher education are further bridged. Historically, rural population constitutes a large section of farmers as the largest section of

⁴ Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) also referred to as (Gross Attendance Ratio in the National Sample Surveys) is often used to measure higher education access (ASHE, 2012)

our population survives on occupations related to agriculture. But in the 21st century, knowledge-based system should serve as an equalizer and include people of all geographical areas.

	Rural	Urban
NSS 61 st Round (2004-05)	8.42	6.18
NSS 64 th Round (2007-08)	11.06	19.03

Table 2: GER (18-22) years in Rural and Urban Areas
[Source: (1) NSSO 61st & 64th Rounds and UGC (2012)]

It is observed that, although the enrolment rate in higher education is 17.21 per cent in 2007-08, there are significant intergroup disparities in access to higher education. Table 3 depicts total enrolment and enrolment rate among different social groups and among Muslims and non-Muslims.

However, the data reveals that there are significant variations in GER in higher education in terms of different social groups. From the data given below, it may be observed that the total enrolment in higher education in India was 15.48 million in 2004-05 which increased to 18.62 million in 2007-08. Similarly, the GER also increased from 14.19 per cent to 17.21 per cent during the same period. While the GER among the scheduled tribes decreased from 8.44 per cent in 2004-05 to 7.67 per cent in 2007-08, GER with respect to others category increased from 22.52 per cent to 26.64 per cent, that of OBC's increased from 11.48 per cent to 14.72 per cent and that of scheduled caste increased from 8.72 per cent to 11.54 per cent during the corresponding periods.

Further, data also depicts significant differences in the GER in higher education with respect to Muslims and Non-Muslims. The GER among Muslims increased from a mere 8.5 per cent in 2004-05 to 9.51 per cent in 2007-08, the GER among non-Muslims increased from 15.1 per cent to 18.54 per cent during the same period.

An acute problem, however, still persists and pulls the country backward is the low percentage of students from the SC/ST/OBC categories in higher education. Despite a large number of remedial measures taken in the different plan periods, there exist large differences in enrolments among different groups. It is notable that the GER in the ST category is one-fourth that of general category students. It is less than half for the SC and more than half for the OBC students. When compared with the 2004-05 data, there is improvement in the situation for the SC and OBC groups, but a lowering of the figures for the ST group. Further, the enrolment and GER for Muslim population is much lower than that for non-Muslim students. The GER for Muslim students is half that of the total GER as is evident in Table 3. Thus, this is a serious situation and needs immediate attention.

Also, there are wide gender disparities in terms of access to higher education. Access is generally lower for females as compared to the males- the GER for males has increased from 14.4 per cent in 2004-05 to 19.0 per cent in 2007-08 similarly for the females, GER increased from 10.6 per cent to 15.2 per cent during the same period (see table 4) The data shows that GER for both males and females has increased, in spite of this, the gaps between them still exists.

	NSS 61 st round (2004-05)		NSS 64 th round (2007-08)	
	Enrolment (000)	GER %	Enrolment (000)	GER %
General and Reserved Categories				
SC	1898.5	8.72	2485.5	11.54
ST	767	8.44	652	7.67
OBC	5027.4	11.48	6599.6	14.72
Others	7787.2	25.52	8886.6	26.64
Total	15480.1	14.19	18623.7	17.21
General and Minorities				
Muslims	1308.8	8.5	1521.4	9.51
Non-Muslims	14170.9	15.1	17102.4	18.54
Total	15479.7	14.9	18623.8	17.21

Table 3: Enrolment and GER (18-22 years)
Source: NSS 61st & 64th Rounds and UGC (2012)

Year	2004-05	2007-08
Male	14.4	19.0
Female	10.6	15.2
Total	12.6	17.2

Table 4: GER of Males and Females in India
Source: Ernst & Young, 2012

Thus, from the above analysis, it can be concluded that, in spite of significant efforts were made in 11th Five Year Plan (FYP) still there are significant differences in GER among different social groups, between the rural and urban areas, inter-state disparity as well as gender disparities. This calls for strong measures to achieve more equitable and inclusive growth in higher education in India.

7. Inclusive Education Policies

The 11th Five Year Plan recognised the problem of multiple natures of disparities in enrolment rate and proposed policy measures to enhance their access to higher education. It brought the inclusiveness in higher education at the centre of our higher education policy. Inclusive education essentially requires an increased access to higher education to these multiple groups who suffers from lower access to higher education. The approach and strategy thus, formulates policies and schemes for the SCs, the STs, the OBCs, girls, minorities particularly the Muslims, physically challenged persons, semi-nomadic and de-notified and the poor. For enhancing the enrolment rate in higher education, the 11th plan proposed number of measures for inclusive education.

- Firstly, the plan proposes to support universities and colleges located in 373 districts having lower GER and also envisage under the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh's initiative to open new colleges in these districts with matching contributions from the states.
- Secondly, it proposes special support to universities and colleges located in rural, hilly, remote, tribal and border areas. Further, about 90 districts concentrated with Muslim population have been identified for Central Support.
- Thirdly, the plan also proposes enhanced support to universities and colleges with a high concentration of the students belonging to SC/ST/OBCs and Muslims population.
- Fourthly, the plan focussed on developing schemes to improve language and competency through remedial coaching classes. Besides, the plan specifically emphasises on augmenting fellowship and opening up of hostels, particularly for women to enhance their access to higher education.

Further, opening up of new polytechnics in un-served districts, 500 new community polytechnics, new 210 community colleges and various other programmes of the UGC in the ongoing schemes will help to include the excluded social groups. Again, the setting up of 30 Central Universities under initiative by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh has a strong component of inclusiveness insofar as it will offer affordable access with due share to the SCs, STs, and OBCs.

The implementation of the Oversight Committee's recommendations and the Sachar Committee's recommendations will also facilitate enhanced access of the OBCs and the Muslims to institutions of higher education. Thus, inclusiveness has a definite strand of thought as well as action in the 11th Five Year Plan (FYP).

Above all, the 11th FYP makes provisions for the disbursement of scholarships for 2 per cent of the total students along with Education Loan Interest Subsidy through Higher Education Loan Guarantee Authority. Further, there are provisions for research fellowships for NET and non-NET qualified PhD students. Eleventh plan had developed a scheme under which a separate cell, "Equal opportunity office" will be setup in universities to operate all schemes for SCs, STs, OBCs, girls, minority students, physically challenged students, semi-nomadic and de-notified and other weaker section students under one-umbrella office (Thorat, 2009). However, if these provisions will come into action the inclusiveness in higher education will promote the inclusive growth through skill enhancement.

8. Conclusion

Inclusive growth refers to a process of growth in which the benefits are equally distributed across different regions, communities and groups of people. It includes several inter-related components: rapid growth that reduces poverty and creates employment opportunities, access to essential services in health and education especially for the poor, equality of opportunity, empowerment through education and skill development etc. Thus, inclusive education is a pre condition for socio-economic growth of the country

The inclusiveness in higher education holds the key position in inclusive growth strategy of India. Higher education plays very significant role in economic growth and development of the economy. It has expanded at a very fast rate since independence in terms of universities, colleges, enrolments and teachers. In spite of tremendous growth in higher education in India, it still plagued with fundamental challenges of access and equity in higher education.

It is a matter of grave concern that despite the initiative done by the government in the 11th FYP, the issue of inclusiveness in higher education remains. There are wide regional disparities, gender gap, rural-urban gap and also gap between different communities and social groups. The study pointed out that educational disparity is major threats to the process of "inclusive education". Removals of these disparities, however, are pre-requisite for making the "inclusive education" to succeed. It is suggested that, in order to increase access, not only state government efforts, but citizen, NGO and private participation is also an essential requirement. Thus, special efforts were needed to bridge these gaps in terms of growth in higher education. The government should provide additional facilities to the marginalized sections of the society. Equitable access may still be a misnomer for policy makers as there are complex challenges in assuring the same.

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