

The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Promoting Democracy, Equality and Social Justice in Contemporary India

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in promoting democracy, equality, and social justice in contemporary India. Using a descriptive and analytical research design, the study relies on secondary data from AISHE, the Ministry of Education, NEP 2020, UGC guidelines, and relevant academic literature. The findings indicate significant expansion and social diversification in Indian higher education. Total enrolment increased from approximately 3.42 crore in 2014-15 to 4.50 crore in 2023-24, while the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) rose from 23.7% to 30.0%. Female GER increased from 22.9% to 31.2%, SC GER from 18.9% to 27.8%, and ST GER from 13.5% to 22.8%. Despite this progress, participation disparities persist, particularly among disadvantaged groups. The study concludes that HEIs can strengthen democratic citizenship and social justice by combining equitable access with inclusive institutional practices, constitutional education, critical thinking, student participation, and effective support mechanisms.

Keywords: Higher Education Institutions; Democracy; Equality; Social Justice; Inclusive Education

1. Introduction

Higher education occupies a distinctive position in the social, political, economic and cultural development of a democratic nation. Its purpose extends considerably beyond the transmission of disciplinary knowledge, acquisition of professional qualifications and preparation of individuals for employment. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), particularly universities and colleges, also function as important spaces for intellectual inquiry, social interaction, critical reflection, civic learning and the development of values necessary for democratic citizenship. In a socially and culturally diverse country such as India, the role of higher education assumes particular importance because educational institutions bring together individuals from different castes, classes, genders, religions, languages, regions and socio-economic backgrounds. Through curricula, institutional practices, student participation, community engagement and academic dialogue, HEIs have the potential to cultivate respect for diversity, constitutional values, equality of opportunity, human dignity and social responsibility. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 explicitly recognises this broader purpose, stating that higher education has an important role in developing India in accordance with its constitutional vision as a democratic, just, socially conscious and humane nation that upholds liberty, equality, fraternity and justice for all (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020).

The relationship between higher education, democracy and social justice in India is deeply rooted in the constitutional framework. The Constitution establishes justice social, economic and political alongside liberty, equality and fraternity as foundational aspirations of the Republic. Within this framework, equality is not merely an abstract democratic ideal but a principle that shapes access to public opportunities and protection against

discrimination. Articles 14, 15 and 16 establish important protections relating to equality before law, prohibition of discrimination and equality of opportunity in public employment, while the Directive Principles of State Policy provide a broader social-justice orientation. Article 46, in particular, directs the State to promote the educational and economic interests of weaker sections, especially Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and to protect them against social injustice and exploitation. These constitutional provisions make education an important instrument for expanding capabilities and addressing historically rooted inequalities. Consequently, HEIs may be understood not simply as institutions that award academic credentials, but also as institutional mechanisms through which constitutional commitments to equality, dignity and social justice can acquire practical meaning in the lives of citizens.

The democratic role of higher education is equally important. Democracy cannot be sustained solely through periodic elections or the formal existence of political institutions; it also depends on citizens who can evaluate information, engage in reasoned discussion, understand rights and responsibilities, respect differences, question unsupported claims and participate constructively in public life. Universities can contribute to these capabilities by encouraging critical thinking, evidence-based reasoning, debate, dialogue, research and exposure to different intellectual perspectives. The NEP 2020 therefore conceptualises quality higher education as education that develops not only disciplinary knowledge but also character, ethical and constitutional values, intellectual curiosity, scientific temper, creativity and a spirit of service. It further associates higher education with constructive public engagement and productive contribution to society (MoE, 2020). In this sense, higher education can serve as an institutional bridge between formal democratic structures and the everyday practice of democratic citizenship.

The scale of India's higher education system makes this democratic and social role particularly significant. According to the *All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2023-24*, approximately 4.50 crore students were enrolled in higher education in India during 2023-24. The corresponding Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for the 18-23 age group reached 30.0, compared with 29.5 in 2022-23 and 23.7 in 2014-15. Thus, over roughly a decade, the GER increased by 6.3 percentage points. The institutional network has also expanded considerably: AISHE 2023-24 recorded 1,289 registered universities/university-level institutions, 48,246 colleges and 15,221 standalone institutions. More than 90% of registered HEIs participated in the survey, with 59,533 participating institutions out of 64,756 registered institutions (MoE, 2026). These figures demonstrate the enormous reach of the Indian higher education system and, correspondingly, its potential influence over the values, aspirations and civic orientations of a substantial proportion of India's young population.

Expansion in access is particularly relevant to the principle of equality. AISHE data indicate substantial improvement in participation among women and historically disadvantaged social groups, although important disparities remain. Female GER increased from 22.9 in 2014-15 to 31.2 in 2023-24, while the overall GER reached 30.0. During the same period, the GER of Scheduled Caste students increased from 18.9 to 27.8, while the GER of Scheduled Tribe students increased from 13.5 to 22.8 (MoE, 2026). These trends indicate progress in broadening access to higher education, but they also reveal continuing differences: in 2023-24, the ST GER of 22.8 remained 7.2 percentage points below the national GER of 30.0, while the SC GER of 27.8 was 2.2 percentage points lower. Therefore, increased aggregate participation should not automatically be equated with the complete achievement of educational equality. Social justice in higher education requires examination of who gains access, who remains underrepresented, what barriers different groups experience after admission, and whether students possess comparable opportunities to participate, learn and complete their education.

The composition of enrolment provides further evidence of the increasing social diversity of Indian higher education. AISHE 2023-24 estimated approximately 69.72 lakh Scheduled Caste students, 28.83 lakh Scheduled Tribe students and 1.80 crore Other Backward Classes students within an estimated total higher-education enrolment of approximately 4.50 crore. The presence of such large and socially diverse student populations places significant responsibilities on universities and colleges. Institutions must address not only formal access but also the academic, economic, linguistic, technological and social barriers that may affect students differently. A first-generation learner from a rural or economically disadvantaged household, for example, may face challenges that cannot be resolved simply by securing admission. Financial constraints, unfamiliarity with institutional processes, language barriers, digital inequality, inadequate academic preparation and lack of

mentoring can affect meaningful participation and educational outcomes. Equality of admission, therefore, does not necessarily guarantee equality of educational experience.

Gender participation offers another important dimension of equality in Indian higher education. The female GER of 31.2 in 2023-24 exceeded the male GER of 28.9, and the national Gender Parity Index (GPI) stood at approximately 1.08. The GPI was about 1.11 among SC students and 1.08 among ST students according to AISHE 2023-24 data (MoE, 2026). This improvement represents an important development in the quantitative participation of women in higher education. Nevertheless, numerical parity or a favourable GPI should not be treated as equivalent to complete gender equality. Gender equality also involves the distribution of students across disciplines, opportunities for progression and leadership, campus safety, freedom from harassment and discrimination, access to accommodation and other institutional facilities, and equal opportunities for academic and professional development. Consequently, HEIs must approach gender equality as a multidimensional institutional responsibility rather than merely an enrolment indicator.

The concept of equality in higher education therefore needs to be understood in substantive rather than purely formal terms. Formal equality implies that similar rules apply to all individuals, whereas substantive equality recognises that people enter educational institutions with different social, economic and educational circumstances. Students from historically disadvantaged communities, economically weaker households, remote geographical areas, linguistic minorities or persons with disabilities may require differentiated forms of institutional support to participate on genuinely equitable terms. NEP 2020 acknowledges this distinction through its emphasis on Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). It identifies barriers such as limited awareness of higher-education opportunities, financial constraints, the opportunity cost of pursuing education, geographical and linguistic barriers, admission-related difficulties and insufficient student-support mechanisms. The policy therefore calls for measures such as financial assistance and scholarships, greater access in disadvantaged regions, enhanced gender balance, opportunities for learning in Indian languages and bilingual modes, outreach programmes and technology-enabled participation (MoE, 2020).

Social justice in higher education must consequently be examined beyond the question of enrolment. An institution may formally admit students from diverse backgrounds yet remain socially unequal if those students encounter discrimination, inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate academic support, exclusion from institutional participation or ineffective grievance-redressal systems. HEIs promoting social justice must therefore create conditions under which students are treated with dignity and provided with meaningful opportunities to develop their capabilities. Scholarships, reservations, mentoring, remedial and bridge support, accessible learning materials, disability-friendly infrastructure, gender-sensitive campuses, anti-discrimination measures, counselling services, grievance-redressal mechanisms and equal-opportunity structures are examples of institutional arrangements through which formal inclusion can be translated into substantive inclusion. The objective is not merely to place diverse students within the same institution but to ensure that institutional structures do not reproduce disadvantages that originate outside the university.

Higher education also contributes to social justice through its relationship with social mobility. Access to a university or college can provide individuals with knowledge, qualifications, professional networks, technological skills and opportunities that can improve their economic and social position. This role is particularly important for first-generation learners and students from communities historically underrepresented in higher education. NEP 2020 explicitly notes that access to quality higher education can create possibilities for individuals and communities to move out of cycles of disadvantage and consequently identifies equitable access to quality higher education as a major policy priority (MoE, 2020). However, social mobility depends not only on entering higher education but also on the quality and relevance of education received, successful completion, acquisition of transferable capabilities and access to subsequent employment or further educational opportunities. Thus, expansion of enrolment must be accompanied by attention to quality and educational outcomes.

Alongside equality and inclusion, HEIs perform an important function in cultivating constitutional and human values. The University Grants Commission's *Mulya Pravah 2.0: Inculcation of Human Values and Professional Ethics in Higher Education Institutions* emphasises the responsibility of educational institutions to promote respect for Fundamental Duties, constitutional values and awareness of citizens' responsibilities. The guidelines

were revised in 2023 to incorporate key recommendations of NEP 2020 and seek to integrate human values and professional ethics into the culture and pedagogy of HEIs (University Grants Commission [UGC], 2023). The framework is particularly relevant to democracy and social justice because it identifies equality, justice and dignity as foundational constitutional values and links higher education with the development of a more just and equitable society.

The democratic potential of higher education also depends on how students experience democracy within the institution itself. Classroom discussions, seminars, academic associations, student forums, research activities, community projects and interactions with people from different backgrounds can provide practical opportunities for learning democratic behaviour. UGC's *Mulya Pravah 2.0*, for example, recommends activities including expert discussions on the Constitution, project work on constitutional matters, student forums and engagement with wider social and global issues (UGC, 2023). Such activities can complement formal curricula by encouraging students to understand democratic principles through participation and discussion. However, the effectiveness of such initiatives depends on institutional culture—particularly whether students can engage in respectful dialogue, whether different perspectives can be examined academically, and whether decision-making and grievance processes are transparent and accountable.

2. Review of Literature

Higher education has increasingly been examined not only as a mechanism for developing human capital but also as an institutional space in which democracy, equality, citizenship and social justice can be strengthened or constrained. In the Indian context, the literature indicates substantial expansion in access to higher education alongside continuing inequalities associated with caste, class, gender, economic status and other forms of disadvantage. Recent scholarship therefore distinguishes between formal access to higher education and substantive inclusion within higher education institutions (HEIs). The following literature reviews these interconnected dimensions.

Sabharwal (2020) examined caste relations and student diversity in Indian higher education through the perspective of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's conception of education, democracy, liberty, equality and fraternity. The study argued that increasing diversity on university campuses does not automatically create democratic or inclusive environments because peer relationships may continue to be shaped by caste identities and experiences of discrimination. Consequently, the author proposed a civic-learning approach through which HEIs can encourage meaningful interaction among socially diverse students. This suggests that universities contribute to democracy not merely by expanding enrolment but also by developing institutional environments in which students learn equality, mutual respect and democratic coexistence through everyday interaction (Sabharwal, 2020).

Maini (2022) investigated the relationship between student voice, pedagogy and social justice within Indian public universities. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with teachers and students at the University of Delhi and engaging with Paulo Freire's pedagogy of consciousness, the study identified experiences of both structural and epistemic injustice. Participants pointed to limitations in spaces available for the expression and understanding of dissenting or marginalised voices. Maini argued that democratic higher education requires more than institutional reforms; teaching and learning processes should also enable students to develop voice, critical consciousness and the capacity to challenge unequal social relations. The findings are particularly relevant to the present study because they connect democratic participation directly with pedagogical practices within HEIs (Maini, 2022).

Anamika (2022) examined student activism in Indian universities as a mechanism for developing awareness of human rights and social justice. Using a critical qualitative methodology, the research investigated how university student activists acquire human-rights consciousness and how participation in grassroots campaigns contributes to educating other students. The findings indicated that students' historical, cultural and family backgrounds influence their understanding of human rights and social justice, while participation in activism can become an important source of civic learning. The study therefore illustrates that HEIs can function as practical democratic spaces in which students learn about rights, participation, collective responsibility and social problems outside the conventional classroom (Anamika, 2022).

Goswami (2022) investigated unequal higher-educational attainment across different social backgrounds in West Bengal using secondary data from the National Sample Survey's 64th Round, covering approximately 5,300 respondents. The analysis demonstrated that social class, gender, type of educational institution and household expenditure influenced higher-education attainment. Students from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds experienced lower educational attainment, with inadequate economic, cultural and social capital acting as barriers. The study concluded that expanding admission opportunities alone is insufficient because socio-economic inequalities continue to influence whether disadvantaged students can successfully pursue and complete higher education (Goswami, 2022).

This conclusion becomes particularly important when considered alongside the continuing expansion of Indian higher education. According to the Ministry of Education's 2024-25 Annual Report, total higher-education enrolment increased from approximately 3.42 crore in 2014-15 to 4.46 crore in 2022-23, representing growth of about 30.5%. Female enrolment increased to approximately 2.18 crore, representing growth of around 38.4% over the same period. Among the 4.46 crore students in 2022-23, approximately 15.5% belonged to Scheduled Castes, 6.4% to Scheduled Tribes and 39% to Other Backward Classes (Ministry of Education, 2025). These data indicate substantial expansion and diversification of the higher-education population while simultaneously reinforcing the importance of examining whether numerical participation translates into substantive equality.

Research by Azam and Bhatt (2023) examined the effect of caste and religious background on participation in higher education in Uttar Pradesh. The researchers found substantial differences in participation among social and religious groups, with Scheduled Castes and Muslims lagging behind relatively privileged social groups. Importantly, improvements in household income did not completely eliminate disparities in participation. The findings suggest that educational inequality cannot be explained exclusively by economic conditions; social-group affiliation independently influences educational opportunities. A considerable portion of the participation gap remained unexplained even after accounting for observable characteristics, indicating the continuing relevance of structural and social factors in determining access to higher education (Azam & Bhatt, 2023).

The findings of Azam and Bhatt (2023) are particularly significant for understanding the distinction between economic inequality and multidimensional social inequality. If income improvement alone cannot eliminate participation gaps, policy interventions confined to financial assistance may be insufficient. Scholarships and financial support remain important, but HEIs may also need mentoring, outreach, bridge programmes, language support, anti-discrimination measures and mechanisms that strengthen social belonging. The study therefore supports a multidimensional approach to equality and social justice in Indian higher education.

Kumar (2023) examined the lived experiences of Dalit and Adivasi students in an elite Indian higher education institution. The research documented experiences of discrimination, alienation and exclusion in both academic and non-academic spheres. The analysis demonstrated that institutional mechanisms and everyday interactions can reproduce caste inequalities even when marginalised students have formally obtained admission. Kumar consequently identified important limitations in conventional approaches to inclusion, arguing that physical presence within an institution should not be confused with meaningful social inclusion (Kumar, 2023).

Gender constitutes another important dimension of social justice in higher education. The expansion of female participation represents one of the significant changes in India's higher-education landscape. Ministry of Education data indicate that female enrolment increased by approximately 38.4% between 2014-15 and 2022-23, reaching around 2.18 crore students. SC female enrolment increased to approximately 33.89 lakh in 2022-23, representing growth of 61.2% since 2014-15, while ST female enrolment reached approximately 14.67 lakh, with the Ministry reporting an increase of 96.3% over the same period (Ministry of Education, 2025).

The relationship between reservation, social justice and academic merit has long been an important theme in Indian higher-education research. Deshpande (2009) examined debates surrounding reservations for Other Backward Classes in publicly funded elite professional institutions and analysed the competing concepts of inclusion/social justice and excellence/merit. The study demonstrated that discussions about fair access cannot be separated from the historically unequal distribution of educational and social opportunities. It highlighted the need to understand merit in relation to unequal starting conditions rather than treating academic outcomes as independent of socio-economic and educational backgrounds (Deshpande, 2009).

Recent research evaluating India's National Education Policy 2020 has examined its potential to strengthen inclusive higher education. A 2024 study titled *Pathways to Inclusive Higher Education: Learnings from India's National Education Policy 2020* identified caste, socio-economic status, gender, geography, religion, language and place of birth as important dimensions affecting educational inclusion. The study noted that inequalities between socially advantaged and disadvantaged groups have persisted despite the expansion of the higher-education system and emphasised the importance of redistributive justice, representation and institutional mechanisms for widening participation.

Babu (2020) explored political education and confidence among Bahujan students, focusing on a personality-development camp in Bengaluru involving young women. The study distinguished between conventional understandings of confidence as an employability-related soft skill and the anti-caste conception of confidence as self-respect. Participants were encouraged to understand contemporary caste relations and the histories of oppressed communities as part of developing confidence and social awareness. The study demonstrates how education can contribute to empowerment not only through employment skills but also through identity, dignity and understanding of structural inequality (Babu, 2020).

2.13 Research Gap

Despite substantial scholarship on educational inequality, caste, gender, student activism, social exclusion and inclusive education, the existing literature is often fragmented. A considerable body of research examines access and participation, while another body focuses on caste or gender discrimination, and separate studies examine student voice, civic learning, academic freedom or democratic engagement. Comparatively fewer studies integrate the three interrelated dimensions of democracy, equality and social justice within a single analytical framework for contemporary Indian HEIs.

Furthermore, rapid expansion of the Indian higher-education system and recent policy developments make a contemporary assessment necessary. Existing studies demonstrate that increasing enrolment does not necessarily eliminate differences in participation, institutional experience or educational outcomes. There is therefore a need to analyse simultaneously how HEIs contribute to democratic citizenship, equitable educational opportunities, representation of disadvantaged communities, inclusive institutional environments and social mobility.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of Higher Education Institutions in promoting democracy, equality and social justice as interconnected rather than independent objectives. It combines evidence concerning participation and social-group representation with literature on student voice, institutional inclusion, civic learning, constitutional values and social justice. This integrated approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of whether and how the expansion of Indian higher education is contributing to the constitutional objectives of an inclusive and democratic society.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study, entitled "The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Promoting Democracy, Equality and Social Justice in Contemporary India," adopts a descriptive, analytical and exploratory research design. The descriptive component is used to examine the present structure and changing pattern of Indian higher education, particularly enrolment, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), gender participation and representation of socially disadvantaged groups. The analytical component evaluates the extent to which the expansion and institutional development of higher education are associated with the constitutional principles of democracy, equality and social justice. The exploratory component is used to identify emerging institutional practices, policy interventions and challenges relating to inclusion, democratic participation, constitutional values and equitable educational opportunities.

The study follows a predominantly secondary-data and document-analysis approach. This design is appropriate because the major dimensions under investigation democratic values, educational equality, social inclusion and social justice are reflected in national policies, official higher-education statistics, regulatory frameworks and existing empirical research. The study does not attempt to establish a simple causal relationship between higher

education and democracy or social justice. Instead, it examines trends, disparities, institutional mechanisms and policy developments to understand how HEIs can contribute to these constitutional objectives.

3.2 Nature of the Study

The study is qualitative as well as quantitative in orientation. The quantitative component consists of analysis of secondary statistical indicators such as total enrolment, male and female enrolment, GER, Gender Parity Index (GPI), and participation of Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and other social categories. The qualitative component involves systematic analysis of policy documents and academic literature relating to democracy, constitutional values, equality, discrimination, inclusion, student participation, social justice and community engagement.

Combining quantitative and qualitative evidence allows the research to move beyond numerical expansion of higher education. For example, an increase in GER may indicate greater access, but it cannot by itself establish whether students experience equal treatment, meaningful participation or social inclusion. Consequently, statistical indicators are interpreted alongside policy and research evidence concerning institutional culture and support mechanisms.

3.3 Sources of Data

The research is based primarily on secondary data collected from reliable governmental, regulatory and academic sources. The principal statistical source is the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) published by the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education, Government of India. AISHE collects information relating to institutions, teachers, student enrolment, programmes, examination results, infrastructure, scholarships and other dimensions of Indian higher education.

The study also draws upon the National Education Policy 2020, the Constitution of India, Ministry of Education reports and University Grants Commission guidelines. NEP 2020 is particularly relevant because it identifies access, equity, inclusion, multidisciplinary learning, constitutional values and Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) as important areas of educational policy.

Academic evidence is obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly publications indexed or published through recognised academic databases and publishers. Literature relating to caste, gender, educational participation, student voice, democratic citizenship, disadvantaged communities and institutional inclusion is used to interpret official statistical trends.

3.4 Period of the Study

For quantitative trend analysis, the study primarily considers the period from 2014-15 to 2023-24, subject to availability and comparability of official data. This approximately ten-year period is selected because it permits examination of changes in access and social participation over a sufficiently long period while remaining relevant to contemporary Indian higher education.

Particular attention is given to AISHE 2023-24 as the most recent dataset used in the study. Where a particular indicator is not consistently available for every year, the nearest comparable reporting years are used and clearly identified.

The qualitative policy analysis gives particular attention to developments from 2020 onwards, especially NEP 2020 and subsequent UGC initiatives relating to inclusion, human values, professional ethics, SEDGs, accessibility and community engagement.

3.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation

The present study analyses the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in promoting democracy, equality and social justice in contemporary India through secondary quantitative and qualitative evidence. Quantitative analysis is primarily based on the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), with emphasis on the period from 2014-15 to 2023-24. The major indicators selected for analysis include total enrolment, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), female participation, Gender Parity Index (GPI), participation of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and representation of Persons with Benchmark

Disabilities (PwBD). These indicators provide measurable evidence of changes in access, representation and inclusion. However, numerical participation alone is not treated as proof of social justice; the data are interpreted alongside the broader principles of equitable opportunity and institutional inclusion.

3.5.1 Growth of Higher Education Enrolment in India

One of the most significant developments in Indian higher education has been the substantial expansion of student enrolment during the last decade. Total enrolment increased from 3.42 crore students in 2014-15 to 4.50 crore in 2023-24, representing an increase of approximately 31.5%. This means that approximately 1.08 crore additional students were participating in higher education in 2023-24 compared with 2014-15.

Table 1: Growth of Total Higher Education Enrolment in India

Academic Year	Total Enrolment	Change from 2014-15
2014-15	3.42 crore	Base Year
2022-23	4.46 crore	+30.4% approx.
2023-24	4.50 crore	+31.5%

Source: Ministry of Education, AISHE 2022-23 and 2023-24.

The data demonstrate a substantial widening of access to Indian higher education. An increase from 3.42 crore to 4.50 crore suggests that HEIs are reaching a much larger section of the population than a decade earlier. From the perspective of equality and social justice, expansion is important because access to higher education can create opportunities for knowledge acquisition, professional qualifications, social mobility and participation in public life. Nevertheless, aggregate enrolment growth does not indicate whether access has expanded equally across all sections of society. Social-category and gender-based indicators therefore require separate analysis.

3.5.2 Trend in Gross Enrolment Ratio

Gross Enrolment Ratio is one of the principal indicators used to assess access to higher education. For higher education, GER expresses enrolment as a proportion of the population in the 18-23 years age group. The national GER increased from 23.7 in 2014-15 to 29.5 in 2022-23 and 30.0 in 2023-24.

Table 2: Growth in Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education

Year	GER (%)	Change from 2014-15
2014-15	23.7	—
2015-16	23.7	0.0
2016-17	24.1	+0.4
2017-18	24.6	+0.9
2018-19	24.9	+1.2
2019-20	25.6	+1.9
2020-21	27.3	+3.6
2021-22	28.4	+4.7
2022-23	29.5	+5.8
2023-24	30.0	+6.3

Source: Compiled from Ministry of Education/AISHE reports.

The national GER increased by 6.3 percentage points between 2014-15 and 2023-24. In relative terms, this represents growth of approximately 26.6% over the base GER. The increase suggests that opportunities for participation in higher education have expanded considerably. At the same time, a GER of 30.0 should not be

interpreted as universal participation; it indicates that there remains substantial scope for further expansion among the relevant age group.

3.5.3 Gender Equality in Higher Education

Gender participation provides one of the strongest indicators of progress towards educational equality. Female enrolment increased from approximately 1.57 crore in 2014-15 to 2.24 crore in 2023-24, representing growth of 42.2%. This rate of increase was higher than the approximately 31.5% increase in overall enrolment.

Table 3: Growth in Female Participation in Higher Education

Indicator	2014-15	2023-24	Change
Female Enrolment	1.57 crore	2.24 crore	+42.2%
Female GER	22.9	31.2	+8.3 percentage points
Overall GER	23.7	30.0	+6.3 percentage points
Gender Parity Index	Below 1 in earlier period	1.08	Above parity

Source: AISHE 2023-24, Ministry of Education.

The increase in female GER is particularly notable. Female GER rose from 22.9 in 2014-15 to 31.2 in 2023-24, an increase of 8.3 percentage points. In 2023-24, female GER was also 1.2 percentage points higher than the overall GER of 30.0. These figures indicate substantial progress in women's participation in higher education.

3.5.4 Gender Parity Index

The Gender Parity Index provides another useful measure of gender equality. GPI is calculated as the ratio of female GER to male GER. A value of 1.0 represents numerical parity, a value below 1 indicates lower female participation and a value above 1 indicates higher female participation relative to males.

The GPI for Indian higher education stood at 1.08 in 2023-24. Importantly, AISHE reports that GPI has remained above 1.0 for seven consecutive years.

Table 4: Interpretation of Gender Parity Index

GPI Value	Interpretation
Less than 1.00	Female participation lower than male participation
1.00	Numerical gender parity
More than 1.00	Female participation higher than male participation
India, 2023-24: 1.08	Female participation exceeds male participation on GER measure

Source: AISHE 2023-24.

The GPI evidence indicates a major change in the gender composition of higher education. However, a GPI above one should not be interpreted as evidence that every dimension of gender inequality has disappeared. Gender equality also concerns subject choice, completion, progression to postgraduate and research programmes, leadership opportunities, safety, employment outcomes and representation in different disciplines. Therefore, the data establish numerical participation but do not independently establish complete substantive equality.

3.5.5 Scheduled Caste Participation in Higher Education

Participation among Scheduled Caste students has increased considerably during the study period. SC enrolment increased from 46.07 lakh in 2014-15 to 69.72 lakh in 2023-24, representing growth of approximately 51.4%.

Table 5: Growth in SC Participation

Indicator	2014-15	2023-24	Change
SC Enrolment	46.07 lakh	69.72 lakh	+51.4%
SC GER	18.9	27.8	+8.9 percentage points
SC Share of Total Enrolment	13.44%	15.5%	+2.06 percentage points

Source: AISHE/Ministry of Education.

SC GER increased from 18.9 to 27.8, an improvement of 8.9 percentage points. This increase is larger than the 6.3-point increase in overall GER over the same broad period. The SC share of total higher-education enrolment also rose from approximately 13.44% to 15.5%. Together, these indicators demonstrate a widening of participation among SC students.

At the same time, SC GER of 27.8 remained 2.2 percentage points below the national GER of 30.0 in 2023-24. Thus, the analysis reveals both progress and a remaining participation gap.

3.5.6 Scheduled Tribe Participation

The increase among Scheduled Tribe students is even more pronounced in relative terms. ST enrolment rose from approximately 16.41 lakh in 2014-15 to 28.83 lakh in 2023-24, representing growth of approximately 75.7%.

Table 6: Growth in ST Participation

Indicator	2014-15	2023-24	Change
ST Enrolment	16.41 lakh	28.83 lakh	+75.7%
ST GER	13.5	22.8	+9.3 percentage points
ST Share of Total Enrolment	4.8%	6.4%	+1.6 percentage points

Source: AISHE/Ministry of Education.

ST GER increased by 9.3 percentage points, from 13.5 to 22.8. This represents substantial improvement in access. The ST share of total enrolment also increased from approximately 4.8% to 6.4%.

Nevertheless, the comparison with national GER reveals a significant remaining gap. With the national GER at 30.0 and ST GER at 22.8, the difference was 7.2 percentage points in 2023-24. Therefore, the data indicate strong improvement over time while also showing that participation remained below the national level.

3.5.7 Comparative GER Analysis: Overall, SC and ST

A comparative analysis provides a clearer understanding of progress towards social equality.

Table 7: Comparison of GER by Social Category

Category	GER 2014-15	GER 2023-24	Increase	Gap from National GER in 2023-24
Overall	23.7	30.0	+6.3	—
SC	18.9	27.8	+8.9	-2.2
ST	13.5	22.8	+9.3	-7.2

Source: AISHE 2023-24.

An interesting pattern emerges from Table 7. SC and ST GER grew more in percentage-point terms than overall GER. SC GER increased by 8.9 points and ST GER by 9.3 points, compared with 6.3 points nationally. This suggests some narrowing of participation disparities over the decade.

However, the remaining 2023-24 gaps show that convergence is incomplete. The ST gap is particularly significant at 7.2 percentage points. Therefore, the results support a nuanced interpretation: social inclusion has improved substantially, but parity in participation has not yet been fully achieved.

3.5.8 OBC Participation in Higher Education

OBC students constitute a substantial proportion of Indian higher-education enrolment. Their total enrolment increased from approximately 1.13 crore in 2014-15 to 1.80 crore in 2023-24, representing an increase of approximately 60.2%.

Table 8: OBC Participation in Higher Education

Indicator	2014-15	2023-24	Change
OBC Enrolment	1.13 crore	1.80 crore	+60.2%
Share in Total Enrolment	32.8%	40.1%	+7.3 percentage points

Source: AISHE/Ministry of Education.

The increase in OBC participation is significant both numerically and proportionally. Their share in total enrolment rose from approximately 32.8% to 40.1%. Among the broad social categories reported in recent official summaries, this represents a particularly large increase in enrolment share. The data indicate substantial diversification of the social composition of Indian HEIs.

3.5.9 Comparative Growth of Social Groups

The growth rates can be compared to determine whether expansion has been socially broad-based.

Table 9: Comparative Enrolment Growth, 2014-15 to 2023-24

Category	2014-15	2023-24	Growth
Total Students	3.42 crore	4.50 crore	31.5%
Female Students	1.57 crore	2.24 crore	42.2%
SC Students	46.07 lakh	69.72 lakh	51.4%
ST Students	16.41 lakh	28.83 lakh	75.7%
OBC Students	1.13 crore	1.80 crore	60.2%

Source: AISHE 2023-24, Ministry of Education.

Table 9 provides one of the most important findings of the analysis. While total enrolment grew by 31.5%, enrolment increased more rapidly among women (42.2%), SC students (51.4%), OBC students (60.2%) and ST students (75.7%). This pattern indicates that expansion has not been confined to the aggregate student population; participation among several historically underrepresented groups has increased at a faster rate.

Nevertheless, faster growth should not be equated automatically with equal educational outcomes. The GER analysis, particularly for ST students, demonstrates that a group can experience rapid growth while still remaining below the national participation level.

3.5.10 Intersection of Gender and Social Category

The intersection between gender and social background provides an important test of social inclusion. Ministry of Education data show substantial growth among women from SC and ST communities.

Table 10: Female Enrolment among SC and ST Students

Social Category	Female Enrolment 2014-15	Female Enrolment 2022-23	Growth
SC Female	21.02 lakh	33.89 lakh	+61.2%
ST Female	7.47 lakh	14.67 lakh	+96.3%

Source: Ministry of Education, *Annual Report 2024-25*.

SC female enrolment increased by 61.2%, while ST female enrolment almost doubled, increasing by approximately 96.3% between 2014-15 and 2022-23. These figures are particularly relevant from a social-

justice perspective because women belonging to disadvantaged social categories may experience overlapping educational barriers associated with gender, socio-economic conditions and social background.

The substantial increase indicates improved access, although further analysis of completion, progression, disciplinary distribution and employment outcomes would be required before drawing conclusions about full substantive equality.

3.5.11 Participation of Persons with Benchmark Disabilities

Disability inclusion is another important component of social justice. Official data indicate that PwBD enrolment increased from 64,298 in 2014-15 to 88,816 in 2022-23, representing growth of approximately 38.1%.

Table 11 PwBD Participation in Higher Education

Indicator	Value
PwBD Enrolment, 2014-15	64,298
PwBD Enrolment, 2022-23	88,816
Growth, 2014-15 to 2022-23	38.1%
PwBD Enrolment, 2023-24	54,080
Male PwBD Enrolment, 2023-24	34,080
Female PwBD Enrolment, 2023-24	20,000

Source: Ministry of Education/PIB factsheet based on AISHE.

The 2023-24 figure should be interpreted carefully because it is substantially lower than the 2022-23 figure and may reflect reporting or classification differences that require examination before making a direct year-to-year trend claim. What is clear from the reported 2023-24 composition is a gender imbalance: approximately 34,080 male PwBD students compared with 20,000 female PwBD students. This suggests that gender equality within disability inclusion remains an area requiring attention.

3.5.12 Gender Inclusion in STEM Education

Equality also concerns access to disciplines that influence employment, research and technological development. Total STEM enrolment increased from approximately 91.5 lakh in 2014-15 to 1.02 crore in 2023-24.

More significantly for gender equality, women's share of STEM enrolment increased from 38.4% in 2014-15 to 44.0% in 2023-24.

Table 12 Gender Inclusion in STEM

Indicator	2014-15	2023-24	Change
Total STEM Enrolment	91.5 lakh	1.02 crore	+11.5% approx.
Female Share of STEM	38.4%	44.0%	+5.6 percentage points

Source: AISHE/Ministry of Education.

The 5.6 percentage-point increase in women's share indicates movement towards greater gender representation in STEM. Nevertheless, women represented 44% rather than half of STEM enrolment in 2023-24, so numerical parity had not yet been reached within this broad disciplinary group.

3.5.13 Composite Interpretation of Equality and Social Justice

The major quantitative findings can be brought together to evaluate the broader direction of Indian higher education.

Table 13 Summary Indicators of Equality and Social Inclusion

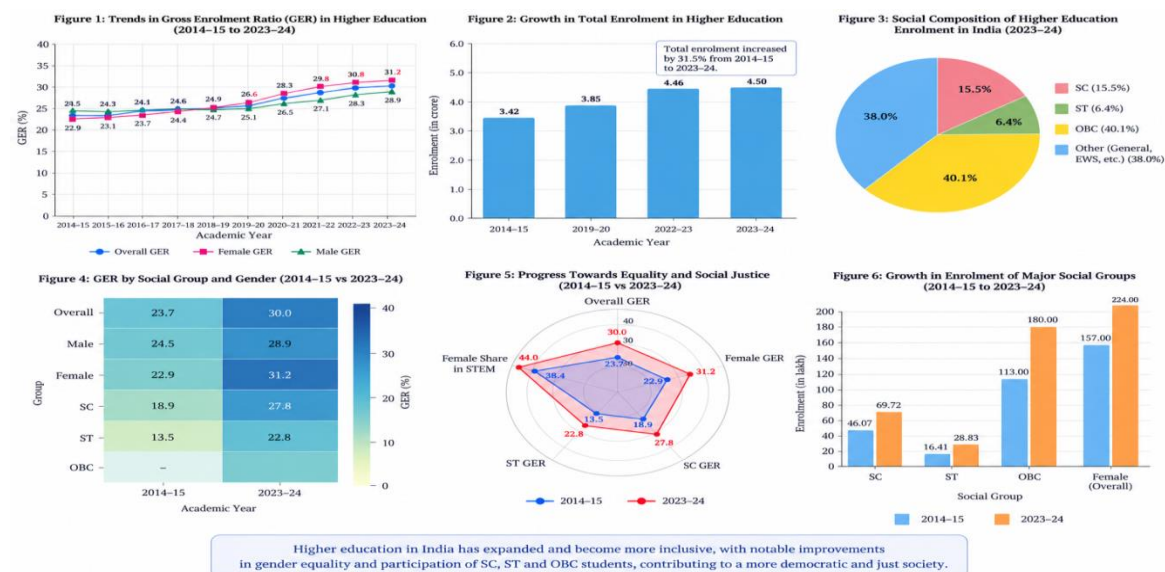
Indicator	Earlier Value	Latest Value	Interpretation
Total Enrolment	3.42 crore	4.50 crore	Strong expansion
Overall GER	23.7	30.0	Improved access
Female Enrolment	1.57 crore	2.24 crore	Strong gender participation
Female GER	22.9	31.2	Major improvement
GPI	Below parity historically	1.08	Female GER exceeds male GER
SC Enrolment	46.07 lakh	69.72 lakh	Improved social inclusion
SC GER	18.9	27.8	Gap substantially narrowed
ST Enrolment	16.41 lakh	28.83 lakh	Rapid growth
ST GER	13.5	22.8	Improved, but gap remains
OBC Enrolment	1.13 crore	1.80 crore	Strong growth
Female STEM Share	38.4%	44.0%	Improving representation

Source: Compiled from AISHE and Ministry of Education data.

The combined evidence indicates a broadening and diversification of participation in Indian higher education. Total enrolment and GER have increased, while female, SC, ST and OBC participation has grown faster than total enrolment in several cases. These patterns are consistent with movement towards greater equality of access.

However, equality cannot be evaluated solely from positive growth rates. ST GER remained 7.2 percentage points below the national GER in 2023-24, SC GER remained 2.2 points lower, women represented 44% of STEM enrolment, and gender imbalance remained evident within reported PwBD enrolment. Therefore, the evidence supports a conclusion of substantial progress alongside continuing disparities, rather than complete equality.

Figure 1 to 6



- Figure 1: Trends in Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER).** The graph demonstrates a clear expansion in access to Indian higher education between 2014-15 and 2023-24. Overall GER increased from 23.7% to 30.0%, while female GER increased more strongly from 22.9% to 31.2%. By 2023-24, female GER exceeded male GER (28.9%), indicating substantial improvement in women's participation in higher education.

- **Figure 2: Growth in Total Enrolment.** Total higher-education enrolment increased from approximately 3.42 crore students in 2014-15 to 4.50 crore in 2023-24, an increase of about **31.5%**. The sustained expansion of enrolment indicates that higher education has become accessible to a considerably larger population, strengthening its potential contribution to social mobility, civic awareness and inclusive development.
- **Figure 3: Social Composition of Enrolment.** The pie chart illustrates the social diversity of Indian higher education in 2023-24. Approximately 40.1% of enrolment was represented by OBC students, 15.5% by SC students and 6.4% by ST students. The remaining share consists of other reported social categories. The substantial representation of historically disadvantaged communities demonstrates the increasingly diverse social composition of Indian HEIs, although representation alone does not establish equality of educational experiences.
- **Figure 4: GER Heat Chart.** The heat chart highlights changes in participation among different groups. Overall GER increased from 23.7% to 30.0%, female GER from 22.9% to 31.2%, SC GER from 18.9% to 27.8%, and ST GER from 13.5% to 22.8% between 2014-15 and 2023-24. The particularly large increases for SC and ST students demonstrate progress towards greater inclusion, while the lower 2023-24 GER for these groups—especially ST students—shows that participation gaps remain.
- **Figure 5: Radar Chart of Equality and Social Justice.** The radar chart provides a multidimensional comparison of progress between 2014-15 and 2023-24. Improvements are visible across overall GER, female GER, SC GER, ST GER and women's representation in STEM. Female participation in STEM, for example, increased from approximately 38.4% to 44.0%. The outward movement of the 2023-24 profile illustrates broad improvement in educational participation and inclusion, while differences across dimensions indicate that progress has not been uniform.
- **Figure 6: Growth in Enrolment of Major Social Groups.** The graph shows that enrolment growth among several disadvantaged groups exceeded overall enrolment growth. SC enrolment increased from approximately 46.07 lakh to 69.72 lakh, ST enrolment from 16.41 lakh to 28.83 lakh, and OBC enrolment from approximately 1.13 crore to 1.80 crore. Female enrolment also increased from approximately 1.57 crore to 2.24 crore. These trends indicate that the expansion of Indian higher education has been accompanied by greater participation among women and major disadvantaged social groups

4. Findings of the Study

The study finds that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have an important role in advancing democracy, equality and social justice in contemporary India by expanding educational opportunities, increasing the participation of historically disadvantaged communities, promoting constitutional values and providing institutional spaces for civic learning. The expansion of the higher-education system has increased the number and diversity of students who can potentially participate in academic dialogue, critical inquiry and community engagement.

The analysis shows a substantial improvement in access to higher education. Total enrolment increased from approximately 3.42 crore in 2014-15 to 4.50 crore in 2023-24, representing growth of about 31.5%. Overall Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) also increased from 23.7% to 30.0% during this period. These trends indicate considerable expansion of educational opportunities, although the GER level also demonstrates continuing scope for widening participation.

A particularly significant finding concerns gender equality. Female GER increased from 22.9% in 2014-15 to 31.2% in 2023-24, while female enrolment increased from approximately 1.57 crore to 2.24 crore. The Gender Parity Index reached 1.08 in 2023-24, indicating that female participation exceeded male participation on the GER measure. These trends demonstrate substantial progress towards gender parity in access to higher education.

The study also identifies significant improvement in the participation of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students. SC enrolment increased from approximately 46.07 lakh to 69.72 lakh, while SC GER increased from 18.9% to 27.8%. ST enrolment increased from approximately 16.41 lakh to 28.83 lakh, accompanied by an increase in ST GER from 13.5% to 22.8%. These trends demonstrate that the expansion of higher education has included substantial growth among historically disadvantaged social groups.

Nevertheless, the findings reveal that social disparities have not completely disappeared. In 2023-24, SC GER remained 2.2 percentage points below the national GER, while ST GER remained 7.2 percentage points below it. Thus, although SC and ST participation improved substantially, the data indicate that equality in participation has not yet been fully achieved. The persistence of these gaps reinforces the need for scholarships, academic support, mentoring, outreach and other inclusive institutional measures.

OBC participation also expanded considerably, increasing from approximately 1.13 crore students in 2014-15 to 1.80 crore in 2023-24. Together with increased SC and ST participation, this indicates that the social composition of Indian HEIs has become increasingly diverse. Greater diversity provides an important institutional foundation for social inclusion, interaction among different social groups and wider representation within higher education.

The findings further indicate progress in women's participation in STEM education. Women's share of STEM enrolment increased from approximately 38.4% in 2014-15 to 44.0% in 2023-24. Although this represents meaningful improvement, the remaining difference from numerical parity suggests that gender equality needs to be examined not only through overall enrolment but also across disciplines, research opportunities, leadership positions and subsequent employment outcomes.

With regard to democracy, the study finds that the contribution of HEIs extends beyond quantitative expansion. Universities and colleges can promote democratic citizenship through critical thinking, constitutional literacy, academic discussion, student participation, community engagement and exposure to diverse social perspectives. However, enrolment and GER data cannot directly demonstrate democratic attitudes. Democratic contribution therefore depends substantially on institutional culture and the opportunities students receive to practise dialogue, participation and civic responsibility.

The study also finds that social justice requires more than admission to higher education. Numerical representation must be accompanied by meaningful inclusion after admission. Students from socio-economically disadvantaged groups may require financial assistance, academic mentoring, accessible infrastructure, language and digital support, protection against discrimination and effective grievance-redressal mechanisms. Consequently, substantive equality depends on whether students are able to convert access into successful educational participation and personal and professional development.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have become increasingly important instruments for promoting democracy, equality and social justice in contemporary India. The expansion of higher education has considerably widened educational opportunities, with total enrolment increasing from approximately 3.42 crore in 2014-15 to 4.50 crore in 2023-24, while the national Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) increased from 23.7% to 30.0%. These trends demonstrate significant progress in access to higher education and strengthen the potential of universities and colleges to contribute to social mobility, critical thinking, constitutional awareness and responsible citizenship.

The study also reveals substantial progress towards gender and social inclusion. Female GER increased from 22.9% to 31.2%, while the Gender Parity Index reached 1.08 in 2023-24. Similarly, SC GER increased from 18.9% to 27.8% and ST GER from 13.5% to 22.8% between 2014-15 and 2023-24. However, the continuing gap between the national GER of 30.0% and the ST GER of 22.8% demonstrates that educational equality remains incomplete. Thus, numerical expansion and representation should be accompanied by scholarships, mentoring, accessible infrastructure, anti-discrimination measures, academic support and effective grievance-redressal systems.

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