

Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The higher education sector in India has experienced an unprecedented expansion in recent decades. It is thus necessary to address the following question: How have the benefits accruing from the massive expansion in higher education been shared among different social groups. Based on empirical evidence, this paper argues that while access to higher education has improved across all segments of the population thanks to progressive state policies of affirmative action's, the rate of progression has varied, resulting in the widening of regional inequalities and persisting socio-economic inequalities. The prevalence of inter-group inequalities in access to opportunities for pursuing higher education, in turn, determines employment outcomes, earnings, and social inequalities among the subsequent generations. Achievements in ensuring equity in access are further overshadowed by the unfavorable conditions associated with the academic progress and success experienced by students from disadvantaged groups inside the higher education institutions and campuses. The prevalence of non-inclusive campus culture and the relative ineffectiveness of institutional mechanisms to address diversity result in inconsistent performances, and poor academic achievement and labor market outcomes for students from disadvantaged groups. It is argued that favorable public policies and institutional strategies can help equalize opportunities for pursuing higher education and promote equity in student learning and labor market outcomes.

Keywords: Equity, Inclusion, Diversity, Achievement, Strategies.

Introduction:

The idea of inclusive growth is based on the notion of equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity demands that deserving students from all social groups are provided sufficient opportunities for self-development. The main bases of exclusion in India are region, religion, caste, gender, economic disparities, and disabilities. Therefore, strategies for achieving inclusive growth necessarily need to include affirmative policies targeting the socially disadvantaged, marginalized, economically poor, and people with disabilities. The progress made in any society needs to be assessed based on the distribution of benefits among different social groups for assessing the inclusiveness of growth and development. India has made considerable progress in reducing poverty and improving the quality of life for its people. The economic and social indicators of development in India have shown substantial improvement. There has been an increase in the per capita income levels and life expectancy, and a decline in the share of people below the poverty line, fertility rates, and infant mortality rates.

Education has been one of the instrumental

interventions for improving access to participation in economic activities and the social well-being of the people. Access to education has improved at all levels and most children born in this century are enrolled in schools. Ironically, however, these commendable achievements are accompanied by widening income inequalities and persisting social inequalities.

This paper analyses the issues related to equity in the development of higher education. The mainline of argument in the paper is as follows:

While access to higher Education has improved across all segments of the population, the disadvantaged groups continue to lag in their access to core study programs such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. Further, achievements inequity in access is overshadowed by the unfavorable conditions of progress and success faced by students from the disadvantaged groups inside the higher education institutions and campuses. The relative ineffectiveness of institutional mechanisms to address diversity and discrimination results in uneven performance and poor academic achievement among

the students from disadvantaged groups. This, in turn, leads to low learning outcomes and poor labor market outcomes, causing aberrations in inclusive growth.

The plan for the paper is as follows. The next section presents the concept and imperative of equity and inclusion in higher education and its role in facilitating the creation of an equitable society. Section 3 examines the empirical evidence on expansion in access to higher education, and the persisting inequalities within the context of massification. Section 4 identifies the determinants of access to higher education. Section 5 delineates the factors affecting equity in educational attainment by analyzing learning and employment outcomes for students from disadvantaged groups. The final section concludes the paper by highlighting the nature of emerging inequalities in the massified era, and the need for devising new strategies to ensure inclusive higher education campuses and promote educational attainment across student groups.

Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education

The turn of this century was characterized by growth in economies across the globe. However, it was less recognized that this positive economic growth was accompanied by widening economic and social inequalities. Studies have shown that human capital is the single most important factor contributing to faster economic growth (Engelbrecht, 2003). It can be argued that in the current context, the unequal distribution of opportunities for developing human capital can be an important source of inequalities. Therefore, promoting faster growth of higher education among the disadvantaged sections of the population is a necessary condition for ensuring equity in the future.

The expansion of the education system is expected to lead to greater inclusion as compared to a corresponding system that is not inclusive and not growing. For example, empirical evidence shows (Shavit, Arum, and Gamoran, 2007) that expansion may be accompanied by widening inequalities when the benefits of expansion are shared by the rich. When the expansion is accompanied by no change in inequality indicators, both the rich and the poor benefit; when expansion is accompanied by a reduction in inequality indicators, the poor benefit more than the rich. Based on these situations, it can be argued that in an unequal society such as India, there is a need for a higher rate of progression for the disadvantaged

classes to neutralize the existing inequalities in access to higher education.

The policies to improve access need to focus on achieving an accelerated rate of growth of higher education for disadvantaged groups. Strategies focusing on equity in development are driven more by a commitment to democracy and social justice rather than by narrow economic objectives. Democratic societies are, in general, less tolerant of all forms of inequalities and the unequal provision of opportunities for facilitating progress in life. Further, the public good nature of knowledge (Samuelson, 1954; Stiglitz, 1999) and institutions producing knowledge demands progressive State policies and enhanced public investment in higher education. It would also be desirable for the State to fund the growing demands of an expanding higher education sector. However, the fiscal constraints faced by the State may not permit it to allocate adequate funds to the sector.

The experience in many countries shows that when the higher education system catered mostly to the elite, offering limited access to the marginalized sections, State support was guaranteed and offering subsidies was a common practice. When the system expanded and started admitting students from relatively poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, the financial burden of pursuing higher studies systematically shifted to the students and their households. This is reflected either in the privatization of public institutions or the promotion of private higher education institutions (HEIs).

The access policy in higher education was dominated by three principles, namely, inherited merit, equality of rights, and equality of opportunity (Clancy and Goastellec, 2007). The concept of 'inherited merit' relates to access to higher education to the circumstances of birth. Access to higher education was earlier mostly confined to the elite with inequalities persisting in the system. Thereafter, democratic principles and political compulsions started challenging the inherited merit approach to access to higher education. The idea of inherited merit was replaced by the notion of equality of rights, which reduced, if not eliminated, barriers to entry and promoted access to higher education for the disadvantaged groups. The move towards equality of opportunity highlights the variations in the opportunity structure in any given

society. This approach focuses not only on removing barriers to entry but also on widening the net to select talents from all social groups. Fairness and inclusion in access are the bases for ensuring equality of opportunity. The concept of equity as fairness entails that access to higher education and achievement of one's educational potential is not influenced by group membership, that is, gender, socio-economic position, place of residence, or disability. Fairness is achieved only when the student composition in HEIs at each level.

The hierarchy reflects the social diversity of the population.

The second dimension of equity in education relates to inclusion, which, as noted by Marginson, "moves beyond changing the terms of social competition (the objective of fairness policies) to focus on strengthening human agency of persons hitherto excluded". Marginson defines inclusion as the enhancement of human agency through "building aspirations, confidence, and educational capabilities", with a focus on strategies that "facilitate the democratic process of agent formation". Inclusion is achieved when "each advance in the participation of persons from the under-represented groups is a move forward, regardless of whether the participation of the middle class is also advanced" (Marginson, 2011, pp. 27, 34, 35). An expanding higher education system with high participation rates "by definition is more socially inclusive than elite higher education" (Marginson, 2016, p. 413) and is qualitatively different (Trow, 1973). However, the expanding higher education system also offers a stratified structure of opportunities, with hierarchy in institutional prestige and the field of study, which in turn, determines earnings and social outcomes. This paper provides an analysis of the levels of social participation and the nature of social inclusion in higher education in India, which is the second-largest higher education sector in the world, with around 37.4 million students and a GER of 26.3 percent (MHRD, 2019). Over the last few decades, higher education in India has seen a shift from the elite stage of development to a stage of massification (Varghese and Malik, 2016).

In operational terms, ensuring equality of opportunity may imply that merit-based admissions are supplemented with affirmative action measures to ensure equality of opportunity. The disadvantaged

sections are provided additional incentives for pursuing higher education. The quota system in admissions and other incentives is based on the understanding that equal inputs need not always lead to equal outcomes in education. Students belonging to different socio-economic backgrounds may vary in their ability to compete and may find it difficult to compete with those from privileged backgrounds.

The additional inputs are meant to equalize conditions to enable the disadvantaged to compete with their more advantaged counterparts. Inequalities in higher education are influenced by inequalities in the preceding levels of education. In a country where basic and secondary education facilities are not equally distributed, it is very difficult to ensure equality of opportunity in higher education. Higher education is offered only to those who have completed the secondary level of education, and the existing inequalities in secondary education may be reflected in the higher education sector too. On the other hand, in countries where secondary education is universal, as is the case in most developed countries, equity in access to higher education may be more easily achieved.

Many strategies devised to improve equity are common across countries. One of the most common strategies is relaxation of the admissions criteria and extension of financial support to students to allow them to continue their studies. The quota system, as well as the implementation of special incentive programs for those admitted from the disadvantaged groups is examples of this trend. For example, Brazil has affirmative measures in the form of a 'quota' system. In the United States and South Africa, affirmative action takes the form of 'preferential boosts', which accord additional points to such candidates for boosting their scores and enabling them to compete for tough positions.

Equity in Attainment: Factors Affecting Attainment Widening access to higher education is a necessary precondition for achieving equity in higher education. However, access, though a necessary initial step, alone is not sufficient to achieve equity. Both the learning and employment outcomes depend on the creation of conducive conditions for studies and social interactions in institutions. The more important question confronting those already enrolled in institutions is the extent to which the institutions

succeed in providing opportunities for diverse student groups to help them optimize their potential.

The Issue of Inclusion

The dynamics of contemporary campuses in India need to be located in the larger context of the massification of the system. With the expansion of the system, a large several non-traditional learners are entering into HEIs, including students from disadvantaged social groups, lower-income groups, from rural areas, and those who studied in schools with regional languages as a medium of instruction, especially government schools. It can be seen that a large share of students in HEIs comprises mostly first-generation higher education learners. This adds to the widening diversity of higher education campuses in India. While the social distance between those who are inside and outside the higher education system is narrowing down, among student groups enrolled in institutions of higher education are widening. This is an important characteristic of the massification stage in contrast to the elite stage in the development of higher education. It may also be observed that the currently disadvantaged social groups constitute a major share of those enrolled in higher education. In fact, in some institutions, their share is close to 70 percent.

As reported in a large-scale study by Sabharwal and Malish (2016), increasing campus diversity leads to different forms of discrimination and is a major source of social tensions on campuses. This also leads to the reproduction of prevalent social values and associated practices like discrimination based on caste and ethnicity and gender stereotyping in campus life. It can be argued that caste and ethnic origins continue to impact the social and academic lives of students in higher education, with This impact lasted from the first day of the students' admission right until they graduate from the HEIs.

In the recent context, discrimination exists in three major domains of campus life (Sabharwal and Malish, 2016), including academic space, social space, and administrative space. Discrimination also assumes direct and indirect forms and exists at both the individual and institutional levels. As far as academic space is concerned, the discriminatory attitude of teachers is reflected in the treatment they mete out to students from the former 'untouchable' castes, often shunning them as 'unteachable' students. Many

teachers believe that affirmative action has resulted in the deterioration of quality and standards in higher education. This is reflected in their attitude towards students from disadvantaged groups both in the classrooms and outside. In classroom transactions, students from disadvantaged social groups face high levels of exclusion and perceive that they are ignored in the classroom. They are less likely to receive any encouragement from teachers to engage in academic activities that help them develop their learning skills and leadership qualities. An extensive field visit as part of the CPNRE study by Sabharwal and Malish (2016) shows that classrooms are becoming arenas of exclusion due to the widening of social distances between teachers, who mostly belong to high-caste groups, and students, who are largely from the low castes.

Discrimination in social space is reflected in the lack of participation from disadvantaged students in extracurricular activities. It has been found that any particular activity in which there is higher whenever participation of the disadvantaged students is stigmatized. For instance, in campuses where a higher number of SC and ST students are active in the National Service Scheme (NSS), a caste stigma is attached to the NSS, thereby preventing participation from students belonging to other higher-caste groups. Ideally, campuses should be spaces that provide opportunities for students to live with and learn from their diverse peers. This is, in fact, an important dimension of the social purpose of higher education. The formation of groups on campuses is determined by social group identity. Identity-based peer group formation is a dominant practice in many campuses and leads to the ghettoization of social groups. While the fear of discrimination and the comfort levels they aspire for are reasons for identity-based grouping for disadvantaged groups, preference for associating with the same or a similar peer the group leads students from the privileged groups to remain in their circles. This leads to reduced interactions with the other groups, and the decline of campuses as social spaces for the learning of democratic principles and respecting diversity.

The student-administration relationship is another area of discrimination.

Discriminatory behavior and the uncooperative attitude of the administrative staff increase the

vulnerability of students in campus life. Rude behavior from the administration, particularly against the SCs and STs, is reported from many campuses. Such behavior also often assumes takes the form of shaming of the students through jokes and derogatory statements against reservation. The disadvantaged students also report that they are compelled to visit colleges more than once even for submitting their admission forms as compared to their advantaged peers, who are given preference in submissions during their very first visits. Further, the SC and ST students have to frequently visit the administrative offices in HEIs to find out about the disbursement of their stipends/scholarships. They do not even receive dignified responses to their queries on this issue and are instead often subjected to insults. There is also a tendency among the staff to suppress information related to scholarships/stipends. As a result, the students from the marginalized classes lack awareness about their entitlements to scholarships and other benefits. This situation also indicates the lack of receptivity towards the SCs and STs.

In addition to the individual forms of discrimination in various domains, the institution as a system also perpetuates discrimination through its policies and practices. This form of discrimination is called institutional discrimination (Pincus, 1996). The insensitivity of institutional leaders to concerns related to the disadvantaged groups, such as the ineffective implementation of schemes targeted at these students, is an example of institutional discrimination. Non-functional and ineffective mechanisms for addressing discrimination are common features across institutions. Given the lack of knowledge about higher education among the socially disadvantaged groups and first-generation learners, it is crucial to organize orientation and induction programs for the disadvantaged students during the early days of their admission. Paradoxically, however, the disadvantaged students are less likely to get invitations to attend such orientation programs.

Equity in Outcome

Equity in outcome in higher education has two dimensions, viz. the attainment of outcomes in terms of (i) the grades and scores or successful completion of courses; and (ii) transition from educational institutions to the labor market. Equity can be fully realized only when those who enter the system can

complete their respective study programs within the prescribed duration while also gaining access to decent employment commensurate with the academic degrees they have acquired. Further, institutional practices need to be sympathetic to these objectives for facilitating equity in development.

Successful Completion

Several studies have shown that a relatively higher proportion of dropouts from HEIs are students belonging to the disadvantaged social groups (Sivasankaran and Raveendran, 2004; Henry and Ferry, 2017; Sabharwal et al., 2014). The SCs and STs constitute a major share of those who drop out of the system. A recent study by Henry and Ferry (2017) reports that in elite engineering colleges like IITs, the drop-out rates for SCs, STs, and students from the General category are 9.9 percent, 7.7 percent, and 2 percent, respectively, indicating that the drop-out rates for SCs are five times higher than those for their counterparts from the General category.

All These findings suggest that the lack of 'academic integration' among all categories of students is a major issue to be addressed (Tinto, 1975). It is also true that various factors, such as the lack of social inclusion, a comparative lack of academic preparedness, and the prevalence of a non-supportive institutional environment in HEIs, adversely impact the capacity of students from the disadvantaged social groups to integrate academically with their more privileged peers. More than being a mere academic issue, the problem of dropouts is linked to the larger context of the social dynamics of education. In the context of school education, Reddy and Sinha (2010, p. 1) have argued that children do not simply drop out voluntarily but are "pushed out" of school due to multi-faceted social, economic, cultural, political, and pedagogical reasons. Empirical evidence points to the existence of a similar phenomenon in HEIs.

The medium of instruction and interactions is another fact that constrains academic integration among all categories of students. Since a major share of the disadvantaged, including first-generation higher education learners, are more likely to have studied in schools with regional languages as the medium of instruction, the transition to English as a medium of instruction in HEIs poses a major academic challenge. A study by Borooah and Sabharwal (2017) sheds

light on the relationship between the medium of instruction and unequal educational opportunities.

Conclusion:

Education, or lack of it, impacts the economic growth of nations, individual incomes, and the social well-being of all the citizens of a country. The attainment of education provides an opportunity for all to grow and improve their life chances. Given this crucial role of education, it is important to provide everybody an equal opportunity to pursue education. To conclude, the overall development of the higher education sector has been commendable in recent times. However, empirical evidence indicates that inequalities assume new forms as the system expands. Thus, systemic efforts are required for understanding the underlying processes of the emerging inequalities and for assessing their magnitude. This necessitates the formulation of policies based on robust research and perspectives. Secondly, more institutional interventions are required to equalize educational opportunities and outcomes. State support should, of course, be continued, but expansion demands more proactive interventions from institutions to make higher education inclusive. There is scope for devising better strategies for social integration and developing inclusive higher education campuses in India. The issues of equity and inclusion in the expanding system can be assessed based on the extent to which HEIs succeed in producing equitable outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds.

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