



Historical Growth of Inclusive Higher Education in India

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Abstract: Inclusive education signifies that education is a fundamental right for every individual, irrespective of class, caste, gender, disability, or socio-economic background. It is a transformative system that ensures every individual across the globe deserves the opportunity to learn, pursue higher qualifications, and contribute meaningfully to society. However, the journey toward this ideal in India has been a complex transition from deep-seated exclusion to a rights-based framework.

Historically, the Indian educational landscape was characterized by rigid social hierarchies. For centuries, formal learning was a privilege permitted only to the elite classes. Marginalized sections of society were systematically deemed 'ineligible' for education. Ancient legal texts, most notably the *Manusmriti*, codified these exclusions by explicitly denying education to the backward classes. This created a historical legacy of educational poverty and social stratification that persisted well into the colonial era. It is only in the post-independence period that India began the arduous task of dismantling these barriers to ensure that every individual has a fair chance to get educated.

This paper aims to study the historical growth and trajectory of inclusiveness in Indian higher education. The research traces this evolution from the colonial period—where education was designed for administrative convenience—to the present day, where inclusion is a constitutional mandate. The study covers landmark achievements such as the establishment of the **University Grants Commission (UGC)** in 1953, which standardized higher education, and the successive **National Education Policies (NEP 1968, 1986, and 2020)**. A significant focus is placed on the **Right to Education (RTE) Act**, which, while focused on primary schooling, created a necessary pipeline for inclusive growth in higher tiers of learning.

Furthermore, the paper examines the shift toward specialized support systems, including platforms for people with learning disabilities and the expansion of the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016**. By analyzing constitutional provisions like Articles 15 and 16, welfare schemes, and the evolution of the reservation system, the paper illustrates how policy has attempted to bridge the gap for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs).

Adopting a historical and policy analysis approach, this study utilizes qualitative techniques based on secondary sources, including government reports and academic journals. While acknowledging the crucial progress made, the paper critically examines the "decelerators" of inclusion: **institutional barriers** (such as

lack of physical and pedagogical infrastructure), the **digital divide** (widened by the shift to online learning), and persistent **social inequalities** that hinder true equity.

The paper concludes that while policy frameworks are robust, true inclusiveness requires a grassroots shift. This can be achieved by expanding resource accessibility, fostering a **positive classroom atmosphere**, and adopting a **student-centred approach** in teaching. By leveraging technology and creating creative, bias-free environments, Indian higher education can finally move from "enrolment" to "authentic inclusion."

Key terms: *Elite class, Reservations, Learning disabilities, Institutional barriers, Digital divide, Positive classroom atmosphere, National Education Policy, Social Equity*

1. Introduction to Higher Education in India

Higher education in India refers to tertiary learning pursued after 12 years of schooling, typically encompassing degrees and diplomas regulated by the University Grants Commission (UGC). Currently, the landscape is a mix of public and private ownership, with approximately 60% of institutions supported by the private sector.

Despite being a global hub for engineering and technology, systemic challenges persist. Statistics indicate that while investment is rising, 25% of India's population remains illiterate, and only 7% of students successfully graduate. The sector faces a significant quality gap, with a high percentage of instructors lacking advanced degrees and nearly a quarter of global teaching positions remaining vacant.

2. Historical Background: From Gurukulas to the Modern Era

2.1 The Ancient Era

The Gurukula system emphasized holistic learning through the Vedas, Upanishads, and philosophy. Nature served as the classroom, and the "Guru" held the highest social standing. Notably, this era showed evidence of gender equity, with scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi participating in intellectual debates.

2.2 The Medieval & Colonial Shift

The medieval period saw a transition toward rigid caste hierarchies. Education became a tool for the elite, while lower classes were systematically excluded. This exclusion was often brutal, with historical texts documenting the denial of learning to the "backward" classes.

The British Raj further transformed the landscape by introducing Westernized education for administrative convenience. The Wood's Despatch (1854), often called the "Magna Carta of English Education in India," led to the establishment of universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras based on British models.

2.3 The Modern and Contemporary Era

Post-independence, education was reorganized through bodies like the UGC and NAAC. The focus shifted toward research, digitalization, and global competitiveness. The rise of IITs, IIMs, and state universities has professionalized the workforce, though it has also led to a decline in enrollment in Fine Arts in favour of STEM fields.

3. Regulatory Frameworks for Inclusion

3.1 University Grants Commission (UGC, 1953)

The UGC maintains standards and provides financial assistance to ensure equity.

- Reservations: Enforces quotas for SC (15%), ST (7.5%), OBC (27%), and EWS (10%).
- Support Systems: Specific fellowships (e.g., Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship) and grants for students with disabilities and women's hostels.

3.2 National Education Policies (NEP)

- NEP 1968: Aimed to equalize education for marginalized groups and promote regional languages.
- NEP 1986: Introduced Operation Blackboard and promoted "Open Universities" to reach remote learners.
- NEP 2020: A transformative policy shifting from a "reservation-only" model to "structural inclusion." It introduced the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) and a multidisciplinary approach to reduce regional and digital disparities.

3.3 Legislative Milestones

- RTE Act (2009): While focused on primary education (ages 6–14), it created the necessary pipeline for inclusive higher education.
- RPwD Act (2016): Expanded the definition of disability from 7 to 21 categories, including learning disabilities and autism, mandating accessible infrastructure and age flexibility.

4. Challenges: The Decelerators of Inclusion

Despite robust policy frameworks, several "decelerators" hinder progress:

- Infrastructure Gaps: Many campuses remain physically inaccessible to students with locomotor disabilities.
- The Digital Divide: The rapid shift to digital learning has marginalized students in rural areas or low-income households who lack devices or connectivity.
- Identification Gaps: Learning disabilities are often identified too late, preventing students from accessing specific aids during their formative higher education years.
- Training Gaps: Educators often lack the specialized training required to handle diverse learning needs effectively.

5. The Path Forward and Conclusion

To achieve "authentic inclusion," India must move beyond mere enrollment numbers. Proposed solutions include:

- Integration of AI: Using Artificial Intelligence and assistive technologies to personalize learning for students with disabilities.
- NGO Collaboration: Partnering with the private sector and NGOs to spread awareness and provide grassroots funding.
- Inclusive Pedagogy: Reforming exam patterns and admission processes to be more flexible and student-centred.

Conclusion: The journey of inclusive education in India has evolved from an era of exclusion to a contemporary framework of constitutional mandates. However, true equity will only be achieved when policy is met with a cultural shift in the classroom—moving from a system of "access" to one of "belonging."

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