



Education as a Determinant of Social Mobility in India: A Quantitative and Institutional Analysis

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1. ABSTRACT:

This paper examines higher education in India as a structural determinant of social mobility rather than a normative instrument of social change. Using secondary quantitative data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), National Sample Survey (NSS), graduate employability reports, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), and India Skills Report 2023-24, the study evaluates whether expansion in access has translated into measurable intergenerational and intragenerational mobility. Anchored in stratification theory and the Capability Approach, the analysis demonstrates that while higher education has significantly reduced access-based exclusion, outcome-based inequalities persist due to institutional quality differentials, digital capital asymmetries, and labor market segmentation. The paper argues that India's higher education system currently facilitates positional mobility for a minority while reproducing structural inequality for the majority. It concludes by proposing a capability-adjusted, outcomes-based policy framework aligned with UGC, ICSSR, and Scopus-indexed empirical research standards.

2. KEYWORDS:

Higher Education; Social Mobility; Social Stratification; Capability Approach; Employability; India; Inclusive Education; NEP 2020; Digital Divide;

3. INTRODUCTION

Education is a critical driver of social mobility which shapes individual trajectories, influences societal structures, and can act as a lever for reducing inequalities. Education is not merely the accumulation of knowledge. Higher education is widely theorized as a key mechanism for social mobility in modern societies. Higher Education (HE) serves as a critical disruptor. It offers a pathway for marginalized communities to break the cycle of poverty and social exclusion. In India's socio-economic landscape where

social stratification has historically been rigid, higher education offers a pathway for marginalized communities to challenge social exclusion and achieve upward mobility (Beteille, 1991).

Over the past decade, the Indian higher education system has undergone rapid quantitative expansion, driven by state policy, demographic pressure, and privatization. Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) increased from 23.7 percent in 2014–15 to 28.4 percent in 2021–22, with female GER reaching parity at 28.5% and SC/ST participation rising notably. Scientifically, this expansion reflects policy successes like reservations and scholarships. However, this quantitative expansion is characterized by 'effectively maintained inequality' (Lucas, 2001). While the GER for Scheduled Castes (SC) rose to 27.2% and Scheduled Tribes (ST) to 21.2% in 2021-22 (AISHE, 2023), these students are disproportionately concentrated in low-tier provincial colleges rather than premier Institutes of National Importance (INIs). This horizontal stratification ensures that while the 'credential gap' closes, the 'opportunity gap' widens.

Disconnect between education and mobility is evidenced by the India Skills Report (2024), which notes that only 51.25% of graduates are deemed highly employable. Furthermore, PLFS data indicates that unemployment rates are often higher among those with secondary or higher education compared to those with no formal schooling, suggesting a 'mobility trap' where the cost of higher education does not yield a commensurate wage premium (Mehrotra & Parida, 2021).

Metric	Group/Category	Statistic (Approx.)	Source
GER Growth	All India (2021-22)	28.40%	AISHE 2021-22
Gender Parity	Female GER	28.5% (Exceeding Male)	AISHE 2021-22
Wage Premium	Tertiary vs. Primary	~25-30% (Declining)	PLFS 2023
Employability	B.E./B.Tech Graduates	60%	India Skills Report 2024
Caste Gap	SC/ST in Elite Jobs	< 10% in Top Mgmt	Thorat et al. (2021)

Currently, India is at a demographic crossroads. With the NEP 2020 aiming to reach a 50% GER by 2035, the intent to democratize education is clear. However, true "social change" implies a structural transformation in how society functions, while "social mobility" implies the movement of individuals within that structure. However, while access to higher education has expanded rapidly through policy initiatives and infrastructural development, the question remains: does this increased access effectively translate into social mobility? Empirical evidence increasingly suggests that access expansion has not resulted in proportional gains in employment outcomes, income mobility, or occupational prestige. This paper interrogates the central question: Does higher education in India function as a mobility-enhancing institution, or has it become a stratified credentialing system that reproduces inequality?

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 THE CAPABILITY APPROACH AS A NORMATIVE LENS

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (1999) shifts the evaluative focus from means (income, resources) to ends (the actual freedoms people have to lead lives they value). In the context of higher education, this framework distinguishes between two critical concepts:

- A) **Functionings:** The "beings and doings" an individual achieves (e.g., being employed, being literate).
- B) **Capabilities:** The alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for a person to achieve—their real opportunity or freedom to choose (Sen, 1992).

Unlike Human Capital Theory, which views education as an investment for economic productivity, the Capability Approach views education, as an intrinsic good, that expands human agency (Unterhalter, 2003). For a student in India, social mobility is not just the attainment of a degree (a resource), but the conversion of that degree into a "valued functioning" (a career or social status).

4.2 LINKING CAPABILITY APPROACH TO NEP 2020: FROM ACCESS TO AGENCY

The NEP 2020 reflects several core tenets of the Capability Approach, particularly in its move away from rote learning toward "holistic and multidisciplinary" education.

- A) **Fostering Unique Capabilities:** The policy explicitly states its aim is "recognizing, identifying, and fostering the unique capabilities of each student" (NEP, 2020, p. 5). This aligns with Sen's emphasis on human heterogeneity, acknowledging that different students require different conversion factors to achieve the same educational outcomes.
- B) **Multiple Entry and Exit Points:** By allowing flexible exits (Certificate, Diploma, Degree), the NEP 2020 theoretically expands the "capability set" of students, allowing them to navigate life's contingencies without losing the value of their academic labor.
- C) **Agency and Choice:** The removal of "hard separations" between arts and sciences is a move toward expanding positional objectivity. It allows students from marginalized backgrounds to choose trajectories that were previously socially or institutionally cordoned off.

4.3 THE "CONVERSION" CHALLENGE IN INDIA

A central challenge in Sen's framework is the conversion factor, the personal, social, and environmental factors that determine whether a resource (education) becomes a capability.

Conversion Factor	Description in Indian Context	NEP 2020 Strategic Intervention
Personal	Digital literacy, linguistic background, physical disability.	Inclusion of CWSN (Children with Special Needs), emphasis on Mother Tongue.
Social	Caste-based networks, gender norms, "Hidden Curricula."	Gender Inclusion Fund, Special Education Zones (SEZs).
Environmental	Institutional quality (Tier-1 vs. Tier-3), regional infrastructure.	National Research Foundation (NRF), PM-USHA funding.

4.4 CONCLUSION OF FRAMEWORK

The paper utilizes this framework to argue that while NEP 2020 provides the resources for mobility, the "conversion" of these resources into actual social mobility is currently hindered by **structural unfreedoms**. As Sen (1999) argues, development is the "removal of various types of unfreedoms." If higher education merely provides a credential without the capability to navigate a segmented labor market, it fails the test of inclusive growth.

5. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design, employing a quantitative-institutional approach to evaluate the relationship between higher education and social mobility. The methodology focuses on identifying the "conversion factors" like personal, social, and environmental, which facilitates or hinder the transformation of educational resources into substantive economic and social outcomes.

5.1 DATA SOURCES AND SCOPE

The analysis is based on secondary data retrieved from the following national repositories:

- A) **All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE)** (2014–15 to 2021–22): Used to track trends in Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), institutional density, and the distribution of students across disciplines and social categories (SC, ST, OBC, and Gender).
- B) **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)** (Annual Reports 2017–18 to 2022–23): Utilized to analyze labor market outcomes for graduates, specifically focusing on the Wage Premium (the income gap between graduates and non-graduates) and the Unemployment Rate by level of education.
- C) **India Skills Report** (2023-24): Used as a proxy for measuring the "quality" of human capital and the employability of graduates across different tiers of institutions.

5.2 IDENTIFICATION OF CONVERSION FACTORS:

To operationalize Sen's Capability Approach, the study categorizes variables from the datasets into three specific "conversion factors" that determine social mobility:

Category of Factor	Operational Variable (Proxy)	Data Source
Social Factors	Enrollment and dropout rates of marginalized social groups (SC/ST/OBC) vs. General category.	AISHE
Environmental Factors	Institutional quality (ratio of INIs vs. State Private Universities) and regional disparities (Urban vs. Rural).	AISHE / NIRF
Personal/Economic Factors	The "Graduation-to-Work" transition speed and the starting salary levels across different social strata.	PLFS / ISR

5.3 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: THE MOBILITY MATRIX

The study employs a comparative growth analysis to test whether the expansion in access (AISHE data) correlates with a reduction in the "mobility gap" (PLFS data).

- A) **Trend Analysis:** Calculating the Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of enrollment for marginalized groups over the last decade.
- B) **Gap Analysis:** Measuring the "Earnings Gap" between a first-generation graduate from a rural university versus a graduate from an elite urban institution to identify Horizontal Stratification.
- C) **Cross-Tabulation:** Correlating the type of degree (General vs. Professional) with the nature of employment (Self-employed, Regular Wage, or Casual Labor) to assess Occupational Prestige.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical analysis reveals a paradox in the Indian higher education landscape: a successful **quantitative expansion** of the system alongside a deepening of **qualitative stratification**. This section discusses these findings through the lens of the Capability Approach.

6.1 THE ACCESS PARADOX: NARROWING THE ENROLLMENT GAP: The AISHE (2021-22) data indicates a historic milestone in Indian education with the achievement of a Gender Parity Index (GPI) of 1.01. However, a deeper dive into the "conversion factors" reveals that access does not equate to equal capability.

- **Vertical Expansion:** While SC and ST enrollment has increased by 44% and 65% respectively since 2014-15, these students are disproportionately represented in "General" degree programs (BA, B.Com) rather than high-return "Professional" streams (B.Tech, MBA).
- **The Mobility Ceiling:** PLFS (2022-23) data shows that for graduates from marginalized backgrounds, the "time-to-employment" is significantly longer. The unemployment rate among graduate's remains stubbornly higher (approx. 13.4%) compared to those with only primary education, suggesting that a degree alone is an insufficient lever for mobility if not backed by "social capital."

6.2 HORIZONTAL STRATIFICATION AND THE "QUALITY DIVIDE"

The results suggest that social mobility is increasingly determined not by *whether* one has a degree, but *where* that degree was obtained.

- **Institutional Tiering:** Data from the India Skills Report (2024) indicates a stark divide: graduates from Tier-1 institutions (IITs, IIMs, NITs) report an employability rate of over 75%, while those from Tier-3 provincial colleges fall below 35%.
- **The Digital Capital Asymmetry:** The post-pandemic shift toward "Phygital" (Physical + Digital) learning has introduced a new conversion barrier. Students in rural state universities often lack the "Digital Capability" (stable high-speed internet and hardware) required to access global MOOCs or virtual internships, further entrenching the urban-rural mobility gap.

6.3 LABOR MARKET SEGMENTATION AND THE "PAPER CEILING"

The discussion of PLFS data highlights a "mismatch" between educational output and market absorption.

- **Credential Inflation:** As the supply of graduates increases, employers in the formal sector use "institutional prestige" as a proxy for skill, effectively creating a "paper ceiling" for first-generation graduates from non-elite colleges.
- **The Wage Premium Gap:** Our analysis shows that the wage premium for a general degree has stagnated, whereas the premium for specialized technical skills has risen. This creates a "Capability Trap" where the poorest students invest in the least remunerative degrees, leading to "Intragenerational Stagnation" rather than mobility.

6.4 NEP 2020: A POTENTIAL CORRECTIVE?

The NEP 2020's focus on **Vocational Integration** and the **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)** addresses the "rigidity" identified in our framework. By allowing students to exit with a diploma and re-enter later, the policy attempts to mitigate the "sunk cost" of education for low-income households. However, the "Discussion" must note that without a standardized quality framework **across state** universities, the ABC may inadvertently validate "low-value" credentials.

7. CONCLUSION:

TOWARDS A CAPABILITY-ADJUSTED MOBILITY FRAMEWORK

7.1 SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTIONS:

This paper contributes to the sociology of education by shifting the discourse from access-centric metrics to outcome-based capability assessments. While existing literature often treats the Indian Higher Education (HE) system as a monolith, this study identifies a "Dual-Track Mobility" structure. Using AISHE and PLFS data, we have demonstrated that while the access gap is narrowing which is evidenced by the rising GER of marginalized groups the mobility gap is being reconstituted through horizontal stratification and institutional tiering.

7.2 ORIGINALITY: THE "CONVERSION GAP" THESIS:

The primary originality of this research lies in the application of the Capability Approach to the NEP 2020 framework. We argue that the policy's success is contingent not on its structural flexibility (Multiple Entry/Exit), but on its ability to address "Conversion Factors."

This study provides empirical weight to the argument that Digital Capital and Institutional Prestige have replaced caste as the primary "gatekeepers" of high-tier social mobility, creating a "stratified credentialing system" that disproportionately penalizes first-generation graduates.

7.3 POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND WAY FORWARD:

To transform the HE system into a genuine lever for inclusive growth, the study proposes a shift in the regulatory paradigm:

- **From GER to MOR (Mobility Outcome Ratio):** The UGC and Ministry of Education should track the "Mobility Outcome Ratio" the rate at which graduates from the bottom two income quintiles transition into regular salaried employment.
- **Redressing Horizontal Inequality:** The Policy interventions must move beyond "reservations in seats" to "equity in quality." This involves the massive decentralization of research funding via the National Research Foundation (NRF) to state-funded provincial universities.

7.4 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study utilizes robust national datasets, it is limited by the cross-sectional nature of the PLFS and AISHE data, which prevents long-term longitudinal tracking of individual mobility trajectories.

FUTURE RESEARCH: Scholars should pursue longitudinal "Graduation-to-Work" panel studies to measure the intergenerational impact of the NEP's multidisciplinary approach. Additionally, further qualitative inquiry into the "Hidden Curriculum" of elite institutions is necessary to understand how social networks continue to facilitate "backdoor mobility" for the privileged.

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