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**WOMEN'S ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: AN
OVERVIEW**- Naghma Farooqui¹**Abstract**

Education is the yardstick by which the growth and development of a country are delineated, and it helps to discipline the mind, sharpen the intellect and refine the spirit. Education for women is the best way to improve the health, nutrition and economic status of a household. Although, there has been a phenomenal growth in the number of women enrolling in higher education in India since the country gained independence yet, several socio cultural and economic factors impediment to her growth. This paper explores the representation of women in higher education in India, their emergence as a strong force for social change, and the implications of this on society. It also discusses the role of state and status of women's participation in higher education, issues, constraints and challenges for women.

Introduction

Knowledge represents a distinguished characteristic of human beings with an enormous capacity to obtain and transfer knowledge from one generation to another. Higher education means education beyond the level of secondary education. Higher Education for women is important not only for equal education opportunities for sexes but also of equal substantial economic returns. It enhances women's status, health and educational income of families. It trains people to take up different economic roles in society and spurs technological innovation that drives economic growth. Higher education is the gateway to economic security and opportunity particularly for women in India. Women are part of socio-economic system, and they uphold rich

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, U.P, India

cultural and traditional values. Their progress is equated with the progress of the nation. Over the years, gender equality has emerged as a dominant concern in developmental discourse. Lately, there is significant policy pressure to include it in planned manner by evaluating indicators woven around gender equality. The Indian situation, ironically with respect to gender equality, presents a situation of sharp contrast between what is on paper and what reality exists on the ground. If one looks at the constitutional guarantees, a strong assertion exists for non discrimination and guaranteeing equal education.

Mapping the Growth of Higher Education in India

All advanced civilizations have needed higher education to train their ruling, priestly, military, and other service elites, but only in medieval Europe did an institution recognizable as a university arise: a school of higher learning combining teaching and scholarship and characterized by its corporate autonomy and academic freedom. The Confucian schools for the mandarin bureaucracy of imperial China, the Hindu '*Gurukulas*' and Buddhist '*Vihares*' for the priests and monks of medieval India, the madrasas for the mullahs and Quranic judges of Islam, the Aztec and Inca temple schools for the priestly astronomers of pre-Columbian America, the Tokugawa Han schools for Japanese samurai—all taught the high culture, received doctrine, literary and/or mathematical skills of their political or religious masters, with little room for questioning or analysis

Education in ancient India was highly advanced and deep rooted as evident from the centers of learning that existed in the Buddhist monasteries between 500 CE to 400 CE, important urban centers of learning were Taxila (in modern-day Pakistan) and Nalanda in Bihar, among others¹. These higher education institutions trained and imparted knowledge in logic, grammar, Buddhist literature in a methodical manner to elites and clergy classes with very little room for questioning or analysis.

Till the eighteenth century, India had three distinct traditions of advanced learning system, the Hindu gurukuls, the Buddhist viharas, and the Quranic madrasas. With the establishment British empire a network of schools to impart western education in English medium was set up.² The first such college to impart western education was founded in 1818 at

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Serampore near Calcutta. Over the next forty years, many such colleges were established in different parts of the country at Agra, Bombay, Madras, Nagpur, Patna, Calcutta, and Nagapattinam. In 1857, three federal universities examining the pattern of London University were set up at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The existing 27 colleges were affiliated to these three universities. Later, more universities were established. At the time of independence in 1947, there were 19 universities and several hundred affiliated colleges³. As evident there has been a remarkable growth in higher education in India since Independence both in terms of enrollment and infrastructure.

The overall number of universities has increased immensely from 25 in 1947 to 348 in 2005. The number of colleges has increased from 700 in 1947 to 17625 in 2005. The total enrolment increased from a meagre 0.1 million in 1947 to 10.48 million in 2005.⁴ The colleges that are affiliated to 131 universities constitute the bulk of the higher education system in India, which contribute around 89 per cent of the total enrolment. Given trends indicates formidable growth of institutions and enrolment in higher education in India.⁵

The Education system in India is hierarchically arranged. At the tertiary level is the University Grant Commission, which executes its standards, recommends and assists the government in policy implementations and collaboration between the Centre and the state. Accreditation for higher learning is overseen by autonomous institutions and established by the University Grants Commission.⁶ Apart from the several hundred state universities, there is a network of research institutions that provide opportunities for advanced learning and research. Universities in India have evolved in divergent streams with each stream monitored by an apex body. Most universities are administered by the states, however, at present there are 54 central universities out of which majority of them directly funded by University Grant Commission under the purview of Ministry of Education and remaining ones enjoy autonomous status. All states have at least one central university except Goa. The increased funding of the Central Universities gives them an edge over their state competitors.

Representation of Women in Higher Education Sector

Literacy characterizes the educational status of any community. Its rate is evaluated from

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the percentage of population educated among the total population of a nation. In the Indian context there exists a wide gender gap with respect to education. Although, systematic efforts were made from the beginning to have an inclusive education policy in the country. The Educational Panel of the Planning Commission in 1957 recommended that a suitable committee should be appointed to examine the education structure at elementary, secondary and adult stage. In “Towards Equality– Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India” it was argued that there was a need in the modern society to expand higher education to include women considerably because it was believed that the spread of higher education among women was still restricted, whether general or professional. It was emphasized that the proper policy would see that the talent of the women is fully utilized for social and national development. However, the deeply entrenched patriarchy system represents women’s identicalness and roll through her (subordinated) relationship to men. As a result, she is cast in a clearly defined Mould with expected roles and functions, even before she is born.⁷

Women as a group in India is in comparable, because of socio, religious and cultural factors therefore, their pattern of education is also impacted and determined by these interwoven circumstances. At the beginning the government approach in Independent India in the 1950s strongly advocated an idea of planned development in education sector. The first two Five Year Plans pointed out the problems of women's education and sought to link higher professional education with employment. The Report of the Committee on the Education of Women, 1959, made extensive recommendations for accelerating the gross enrollment ratio (GER) through the subsequent plans. But disparities in the education of men and women continued. These were amply substantiated by the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women, 1974. This led to a broader perspective and the Sixth Plan linked education to the participation of women in the development process.⁸

The new education policy (1964-1966) popularly known as Kothari Commission emphatically stressed on equal educational opportunities for women and emphasized for effective steps to achieve it. Similarly, the National Policy of Education (1986) and subsequent Five-Year Plans, policies, like National Perspective Plan (1988-2000) highlighted the need for extensive participation of women in higher education by minimizing gender imbalances in higher

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education sector. The continuous efforts resulted in an increase in women's access to higher education from 25.7 lakh in 1993-1994 to 42.6 lakh in 1999-2000 to 54.06 lakh in 2004-2005. In this regard, gender wise trends in total literacy rates in India between the years 1981 to 2001 indicates: (Table No-1)

TableNo -1Gender wise trends of literacy rate in India from1981-2001

Particulars	1981	1991	2001
Male	56.37	64.13	75.85
Female	29.75	39.29	54.16
Total	43.56	52.20	65.38
Divergence(Male and Female)	26.62	24.84	21.69

Source: Registrar General of India, Census of India, for relevant years

The past 70 years have witnessed remarkable achievements in the higher education sector, yet more is required. A closer analysis of higher education figures discloses the different socio-cultural and economic issues hampering the inclusive gender parity in higher education. In general, women's enrolments have improved.⁹ Yet, there are various issues to champion the cause of women's education the state efforts should be to transform women to potentiality understand and communicate, vivacity to argue and sharpen her creativity. Though there is an increase in the literacy rate, it provides us with a clue that there is still scope for further improvement. India is still lagging, behind the global female literacy level index of 80.33%. As per the Census, 2011, there is a gap of 16% between male and female literacy rates in India.¹⁰ Important issues associated with women's education at higher level includes fairness, quality, significance and access, through knowledge. The Government has initiated various policies and programme with the aim of sensitise, acknowledge gender equity and take steps to increase women enrollment in higher education. The Ministry of Education recently released the AISHE (All India Survey on Higher Education) 2019-20 report, according to which women in India now hold a 49% share in total enrolment in higher education.¹¹ However, a more important and pertinent concern is to go beyond numbers and examine the issues related to women's participation in higher education at micro level. Women's access to education not being uniform across different stages, professions or geographical spread. it is surprising that women record a

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lower presence across most institutions of higher education.¹²

Current Status of Higher Education

In the 21st century none can ignore the necessity and urgency of higher education for women all over the world. Women education has gained much wider acceptance, role and responsibility. According to the latest All India Survey of Higher Education Report (AISHE) (2019-2020) India's higher education landscape is a mix of progression and challenges. It has stretched to all parts of the country with the establishment of 1,043 universities, 42,343 colleges, and 11,779 stand-alone institutions making it one of the largest higher education sectors in the world. The number of institutions has expanded by more than 400 percent since 2001, with much of the growth taking place in the private sector.

According to 2019 report from the Brookings India, 'Reviving higher education in India has seen a fast growth in the higher education since 2001. There has been a dramatic rise in the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) and enrolment has increased fourfold. The Indian higher education system is now one of the largest in the world, with 51,649 institutions.¹³

Constitutional Guarantees and Role of State in Imparting Higher Education

Post Independence, Indian constitution granted principal authority for elementary education to the State governments, while the Central government was given power and responsibility for technical and higher education. However, after the 42nd Amendment Act in 1976 this provision was changed, making all education the joint responsibility of the Central and State governments under the concurrent list. The year 2001 was celebrated as women's empowerment year, which acknowledged women as agents of socio-economic change and progress in the country. Indian Government continues to support higher education for women through programmes like, and by capacity building for women managers in higher education. Similarly, Free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 6 and 14 was made a fundamental right under the 86th Amendment Act in 2002. Despite constitutional guarantees, the women education in India is far from 'free', inclusive and encompassing as the right to education claims to pledges. Although the government, through its various initiatives such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Indira Gandhi scholarship for single girl child construction of women

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hostels, establishment of equal opportunity cells (EOC) and Residential Coaching Academy for SC/ST/Minorities and Women in Universities and Colleges. Post-Doctoral Fellowship, 'PRAGATI' scholarship scheme for girls pursuing technical education etc... strives to ameliorate the Indian higher system.¹⁴ Government efforts have been to assist and promote gender equity in education by reducing the gender gap in access, retention and transition from one stage to another. Women today, are agent of change in the society. Although substantial progress has been achieved since India won its independence when less than 8% of females were literate, the gains have not been rapid enough to keep pace with population growth. There is still much to be desired in terms of higher education for women.

Barriers/Challenges to women's education

There are number of issues that are barriers to women's entry to higher education in India. Looking from problem gross enrollment ratio to the issue of drop out from the primary to senior secondary level, there appears to be both quantitative and qualitative factors that hamper the educational development of the women community. This section highlights some qualitative and quantitative hurdles to women's education. The qualitative factors are deeper and have multi dimension impact on women empowerment. Some sociological factors like gender stereotyping and gender categorization leave deep scar on the mental make upon women. On the others hand economic constraints and gender biasness towards male further complicates the issues concerning women involvement in higher studies. A consequence of gender profiling and stereotyping is that women tend to participate more in programs that relate to their domestic role. Colonialism has played a significant role in shaping South Asian region from gender perspective. Women today in this region are not homogeneous community rather class, sex and region shape the access to education. Whenever there is a scarcity of resources, women and girls often feel the negative impacts more strongly than men and boys.¹⁵

In institutions of higher learning, women are more inclined to enroll in courses traditionally considered more suitable for them such as arts and education, but less in courses related to science and technology. Investing in girls' education at a higher level is not considered profitable and beneficial by the family as they are to be married and are supposed to raise children and a family. This orthodox approach accompanied by customary decisions can be

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found both in poor as well as wealthy families.¹⁶ Unfortunately, this limitation further blocks women's access to education on the assumption of protection and safety and welfare. Similarly, many communities also strongly advocate gender-segregated education, such decrees further limit the options female students for higher studies. Furthermore, women-only schools and universities often receive less funding and resources than their all-male or co-ed counterparts. This is one way in which the allocation of limited resources, the influence of traditional gender norms, further prevents women at large to attain higher education. Women's access to higher education is further hurt by location and caste. Certain regions have far more female students than others, rural areas have yet to progress as and most women attending universities are from urban areas.¹⁷ Thus, numerous factors, from traditional, unimaginative and stereotyped thinking continue to hamper women access to higher education.

Today, women's involvement in higher education is expanding and enlarging at a fast pace in India but, gender gap, low enrolment is matter of serious concern even now, innumerable women are still out of mainstream education.¹⁸ Beside the above points certain national policies, Biased system of appointment and promotion, even quota system for public universities sometimes results in decreased enrolment opportunities for women.¹⁹

In totality, women's education in India when examined more closely, still needs massive upliftment to sustain the all-inclusive growth. Educational reforms exclusively for women to to enroll at higher education is necessary. The ongoing demand equal access of higher education to women must be necessitated with more pace and uniformity. Likewise, continuous financial support and quality education, especially in STEM areas, should be encouraged. With the adoption of the new education Policy 2020 the focus will not be only on higher education but also on creating enhanced opportunities for employment. Beside these, the growing reality of internationalization in higher education teaching, training and research, which deals with the mobility of both people and knowledge.²⁰ Poor approach towards women's education, ignoring sociological, psychological, anthropological significance associated towards women empowerment and literacy. Despite sensitization of empowering women through education, their enrolment in higher education is not very satisfactory thought here is a remarkable change in some states.

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Way Ahead

The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) suggests, an overall increase in female enrollment in higher education has been consistently increasing over the years from 2015-16 and 2019-20. The gross female enrollment has also enlarged by 18% from 1.60 crore in 2015-16 to 1.89 crore in 2019-20. Although enrolment of women in STEM fields is quite low as compared to male numbers.²¹

Enrolment in Higher Education from 2015-16 to 2019-20

Year	Enrolment			Growth (%) in enrolment over the previous year			% Female enrolment
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	
2015-16	15990058	18594723	34584781				46.2
2016-17	16725310	18980595	35705905	4.6	2.1	3.3	46.8
2017-18	17437703	19204675	36642378	4.3	1.2	2.5	47.6
2018-19	18189500	19209888	37399388	4.3	0.0	2.2	48.6
2019-20	18892612	19643747	38536359	3.9	2.3	3.0	49.0
Growth(%)inenrolmentduring2015-16to2019-20				18.2	5.6	11.3	

Source: Compiled from AISHE reports of different years

To make women participation in higher education more addressing pertinent issues such as Equity, Quality, Relevance and Access is need of the hour. The Indian Government has introduced policies and procedures with the goal of sensitizing gender parity and increased participation of women.²² The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, further strengthens the goals of holistic, multidisciplinary education to ensure equitable access to the highest quality of education for all learners, especially women.²³

Conclusion

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Some have labelled the 21st century as the Asian Century. Be that as it may, this region needs a far-sighted strategy to overcome its social, political and economic issues. Each member of the community must take steps to push forward the development by eliminating gender disparities. Efforts from grass root level can bring in great tide of changes to female ingress to higher education. The female enrolment in higher education sector is also increasing. Today, in India women from all sections of the society are marching ahead to capture their rightful places in the society. However, the rate of women participation is slow and gradual. The GER in rural areas is still low as compared urban women and men enrolment. Outdated myths about women's helplessness and lack of interest need to be removed. Hence it is essential to provide women with constant incentives of support, advice and security. Besides these, an affirmative action and constructive approach in their favour will ensure them with dignified life with health, education and employment. Effective implementation of goals defined in the NEP and related plans, can certainly have a positive outcome on women and recent changes and developments are the biggest hope for future.

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