

Disparities in Inclusion: The Higher Education Paradox in Urban India

Ishanee Chatterjee¹ , Dr. Sabiruddin Molla²

¹St. Xavier's College, Kolkata.

²Assistant Professor at St. Xavier's College, Kolkata.

Abstract

This chapter examines the multidimensional complexities that continue to shape the lived experiences of marginalized identities navigating through higher education in urban India. While diversity within universities is increasingly visible in the recent past, inclusion continues to be unevenly experienced. The presence of students from marginalized communities does not translate to equal participation or adequate representation within the institutional structures. The Indian education system and its inherent variance is often identified through the coexistence of differentiating ideologies, religions, castes, classes, genders, sexualities, orientations, disabilities and socio-economic inequity whilst enduring several discrepancies in the process towards absolute integration. The current accessibility provisions such as inclusive enrolments and multidisciplinary courses have potentially introduced these marginalized communities into mainstream higher education; however, acceptance and support systems are relatively conditional. This study further mentions the need for reforming existing policies whilst addressing internalized disparities that produce both subtle and overt barriers within the educational premises. Additionally, highlighting the inconsistencies that restricts

the gradual progress from inclusivity as a symbolic norm to a shared responsibility.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education; Marginalized Identities; Higher Education in India; Social Inequality; Urban Universities.*

Introduction

Inclusivity in higher education is predominantly discussed as an achieved ideal, one that is incorporated in policy frameworks as well as reinforced through institutional narratives of progress. However, in actuality, the everyday complexities of marginalized identities remain to be unacknowledged. In urban higher education, diversity has been increasingly visible in the past decade yet inclusion is far from being evenly experienced. Equitable educational opportunities allegedly emphasise on the passive relativity of any personal or social circumstance in achieving absolute inclusion (Mishra and Pettala, 2023). However, this variance between inclusivity as it is postulated and as it is lived, forms the central paradox of contemporary higher education.

Marginalized identities in institutions are mostly determined by the intersectionality of caste, class, gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, disability, religion, language, socio-economic status etc. Access to higher education for majority and minority communities have expanded through formal mechanisms including modified admission policies, merit frameworks as well as interdisciplinary courses. Despite these attempts, participation remains uneven and often restrictive. Inclusion can be effectively created and maintained when these efforts are supported by contextually relevant organizational practices that promote equitable participation and mutual understanding (Bernstein et al. 2020). Teaching and learning in this day, primarily centralises curriculum design, classroom interactions and academic

expectations that even in its subtlety continue to privilege dominant forms of knowledge and expression. This contrast eventually tends towards selective inter-group interactivity, reinforcing the existing hierarchies rather than making it more equitable. What is frequently perceived as progressive social cohesion, is in reality a space for symbolic inclusion and structural exclusion.

Formal academic structures almost neglect the lived experiences of marginalized students that are shaped by institutional culture, informal social hierarchies and interactions outside the classroom premises. Derogatory remarks, prejudices and unfamiliar support systems significantly influence students' experiences and emotional well-being. These aspects of exclusion play a critical role in determining the sustenance of individuals from marginalized identities within higher education spaces. In classrooms, ethno-cultural prejudices manifest through both implicit and explicit verbal and non-verbal behaviours, ranging from overt acts such as bullying and name-calling to subtler forms like stereotyping and structural exclusion (Brenick et al. 2019). While recent academic debates have increasingly acknowledged the importance of inclusivity, there still remains to be a requirement for meaningful change more than representational actions. This chapter attempts to examine the persistent disparities that continue to shape urban Indian higher education. It further mentions the need for reforming existing policies whilst addressing internalized disparities that produce both subtle and overt barriers within the educational premises. Lastly, it explores the possibilities for collective action and structural reform that move inclusion from a peripheral ideal to a lived reality.

Literature Review

Khadka et al. (2018) highlighted multiple narratives by scholars and faculty members from marginalized identities shaped by non-binary orientations, racial and ethnic minorities, mental health issues and disabilities, immigrants and financially disadvantaged communities. The narratives mention how socially dominant niches not only exist within university premises but also have a significant control over the larger community labelling other minorities as outsiders. Similarly, Heffernan (2023) argued that higher education institutions continued to privilege majority groups. While efforts have been made to increase marginalized intakes, navigating through the complexities of existent biases and rigid structures is still quite restrictive. Moreover, accessibility has not transformed equitable leadership roles and assigning permanent positions at this level of education. The study is analysed through Bourdieusian ways emphasizing that policy reform and social justice are integral to achieve absolute and functional inclusivity in the campus. McNamee et al. (2025) explored the structural barriers faced by rural students under the guise of expanding access to higher education. The study includes interviews conducted on eleven students who have emphasized on universities failing to develop equitable practices at the under graduate level. The study further argues on institutions to realize that only collective responsibility towards providing adequate facilities of inclusivity can help in actualizing integration.

Adejumo (2021) argued that diversity, inclusion, and belongingness had an interrelated yet complex association in the United States. According to the prevailing social order, Whites were considered the dominant group, whereas African Americans and other non-white ethnicities were placed toward the lower end of the social hierarchy. Consequently, this racial

hierarchy consistently obstructed social inclusion and the maintenance of equitable organizational climates. Veldhuis (2026) discussed the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ researchers who worked on issues concerning marginalized communities. These researchers often experienced discrimination, stigma, and the perception that their research was less objective or valuable compared with topics chosen by majority groups. This situation created a form of double marginalization in which both their identity and their research topics became sources of bias. Such prejudices often affected their career opportunities, well-being, and professional recognition.

Kim and Rhinehart (2026) examined how marginalized identities influenced mental health challenges among college students with psychological disorders. Using a national survey of 5,120 students, the study revealed that women, first-generation college students, and students with ADHD often experienced greater psychological difficulties. The study also showed that first-generation students were less likely to use campus mental health services. The findings therefore highlighted how intersecting identities intensified students' mental health struggles and shaped their willingness or ability to seek professional support. Leyton et al. (2026) explored how sexual orientation and gender identity influenced the experiences of STEM students in higher education. Using data from universities in India and the United Kingdom, the study found that students with marginalized identities often experienced stronger imposter feelings, including fear, self-doubt, and a sense of unworthiness. These students also reported lower well-being and a weaker sense of belonging. Zembylas (2025) discussed the decolonial era in higher education and proposed a framework that amalgamated the ideas of decolonialism and intersectionality to understand overlapping forms of oppressions such as race, gender, and class.

By critically analysing existing divides, the study indicated the persistence of colonial structures of knowledge and power within universities. The article argued that addressing inequalities in academic spaces required recognition of diverse knowledge systems and lived experiences. It further highlighted how integrated approaches could eventually challenge biases and encourage more equitable academic practices. Sharma (2023) discussed achieving social inclusion through social policies that addressed social inequalities and disparities, promoted active participation, empowered social rights, and inhibited social problems. The paper further emphasized the contribution of governing policies in combating public concerns related to rights and entitlements, along with specific inclusive policies that supported social cohesion and eventually advanced toward a more inclusive society.

Access and Participation

In the recent years, higher education has placed marginalized students in varied educational realms that have contributed in building expansive avenues towards enrolment, accessibility and recognition. However, this form of participation is not equitably recognised by most institutions that provide opportunities via minority quotas, scholarships and social engagement programs. Students from suburban and rural localities often struggle to navigate through universities that implicitly endorse linguistic ease, polished patterns of interaction and certain forms of attire as well. Recent debates underscore mere exclusion, while disregarding the student experiences of those who failed at obtaining seats in in these apparent reputed and socially-affluent institutions (Tobbell et al. 2021).

Challenges in accessibility and participation of marginalized identities are as follows:

1. Cultural and Structural Control: Regular interactivity within the classroom premises intensifies the pre-existing divides with approaches settled within privileged cultures. Traditional and region-specific knowledge and belief systems remain to be labelled as idealized, inaccurate and redundant. Most colleges have multiple students led organizations but measurable representation from minorities is considerably lesser as compared to those who share colloquial codes.

2. Implicit conventions of social integration: Informal exchanges beyond classroom premises are limited to social standards and economic autonomy whilst maintaining illusive acceptance in formal settings. Even while attempting to fit in, marginalised students most likely gain occasional access to these social niches as the existing members are predominantly classified as elitist or conceited.

3. Resource Constraints: Active participation in a technologically driven education system is primarily dependent on digital access and financial security to provide for personal devices. With limited resources across living conditions, part time work such as agents in quick commerce platforms, marginalized students experience varied difficulties to sustain urban education. Institutional support is excessively required to accommodate such students and provide adequate resources to maintain conducive spaces for academia.

Effective accessibility and participation require institutional reform through culture specific modifications via cross- ethnic activities and peer support personnel that acknowledge the variance and make provisions of sustained inclusion. Notable institutions are required to take added measures since the

student population is overly variegated and ensure equitable representation that contributes in developing an inherent sense of belongingness both in and outside the premises.

Knowledge and Representation

Curricula in most Higher Education institutions are formulated by the affiliated Universities that unintentionally include works originated from dominant theories of knowledge. Theories produced by differentiating identities is oftentimes communicated as ‘scholarly work by the socially oppressed’ or collaborative initiatives as ‘inclusive programs for the specially abled’ while still segregating and categorising their writings and experiences as secondary and sympathetic. Recent discussions address the significance of belongingness but the intersectional or non-linear pattern of academic frameworks is often undervalued (Amisi et al. 2024). This disproportionate representation is left unnoticed and in rare circumstances added as a supplementary portion at the end of a chapter that otherwise endorses majority mindsets and language preferences.

Inadequacies in knowledge representation are further visible through the following dimensions:

1. Prevalent norms of academic inquiry: Certain dialectical writing styles and language preferences are viewed as alternative forms of expression rather than mainstreaming their competence or argumentative styles. This segregation is further divided while placing marginalized works in regular curricula.

2. Discussions and Seminars: Topics of generic discussion in classrooms initiated by the faculty, seldom consider to elucidate on any work from the marginalized communities even in the form of examples. Since queer rights have been

making headlines in the recent years, special lectures are being presented but struggles of Intersectionalities within this community or other minorities are simply neglected.

Compartmentalizing diversity and further segregating scholarly works that oppose dominant patterns is an existing complexity in appropriate representation of marginalised studies. To address this imbalance, institutions require to initiate a critical interrogation of the pre- existent hierarchies within disciplines and building pedagogies that recognize plurality as integral rather than supplementary. At the institutional level, faculty and administrators further need to reflect on their personal social perspectives and assumptions that potentially influences academic dialogue and practices in the classroom.

Institutional Culture and Climate

An institution's culture and climate are assessed as central to how inclusion actually functions rather than being trivial within the premises. Institutions often articulate commitments to equality through codes of conduct and grievance cells, but in the present-day equality alone is quite insufficient to accommodate diversity effectively. The lived realities of students are shaped to a much greater extent by the implicit norms that regulate belongingness. Culture functions through shared experiences regarding behaviour, speech, confidence and participation, while on the other hand, climate reflects how these expectations are perceived by those positioned differently within the naturally existent social structures. The question, therefore, is not how institutions are prohibiting discrimination, but consequently, how the students are categorising those who naturally belong and those who are trying to fit in.

From one perspective, institutional norm is necessary for maintaining rules around participation and discipline that advocate for inclusion as neutral and fair. However, these norms unintentionally reflect few dominant social values. Abilities such as fluency in English, confidence in communication as well as adaptability to varying technological systems are shaped by prior social advantage. These characteristics are commonly treated as markers of merit and skill, where students who are adept at meeting such expectations benefit while others try to constantly acclimatise. In a recent case study on diversity and acceptance, facilitators and members from 'hegemonic groups' are not only ill-informed about inclusivity but also deflect certain inquiries on minorities participants in highly exclusive classrooms (Gonzales et al. 2021). Marginalized students quite often if not regularly, encounter cultures endorsing homogeneity. For instance, queer communities face subtle threats to identity or open hostility despite the presence of pride cells, students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds encounter silent exclusions in internships, expensive social outings outside the college premises or even restrictive assumptions over "exposure". Learners with disabilities are structurally marginalised thereby, experiencing a greater amount of emotional and social isolation.

Informal spaces such as peer groups, study circles, mentorships and hostel life are typically viewed as community building networks. Yet these spaces can further create divides via varying castes, classes, gender and sexual orientations, disabilities, religions and social hierarchies. Exclusion is seldom overt as it operates through selective inclusion and common social codes that signal who would "belong." Recent research shows that women in academia confront greater precarity while navigating 'hostile climates' and 'inner circles'

that persist in socially gatekeeping and undermining their capabilities (Welde and Stepnick, 2023). The potential for campuses to question dominant norms remains limited since such efforts are to be formally supported rather than being veiled into other norms. As a result, a visible gap between expressions of inclusion and habitual practices continue to create inequitable participation.

Intersectionality and Academic experiences

Intersectionality is considered as an integral component confined within marginalization which is perceived and experienced under multiple classifications. Students enter universities with varied social identities based on caste, class, gender, disability, religion, region, language and financial background. These identities intersect to shape one's academic journey in a multilayered and almost contradictory form as well. When inequality is viewed through a singular lens, it conveniently overlooks other lived realities. For instance, two women students may confront gender bias in the premise, but a first-generation rural Dalit student simultaneously navigates financial uncertainty, linguistic barriers and limited familiarity with the surroundings. Overlapping structures of this kind do not define one another but, exchange distinct forms of inclusivity and exclusivity.

Students from urban households have certain preferences while interacting in diverse classrooms and eventually develop a niche of their own. However, those who are 'left out' in this disparate environment develop smaller collectives that assist in tolerating cultural shocks and strengthen local bonds, popularly termed as a type of 'trauma bonding' in the present times. Operating inclusivity in lived realities is exceedingly complicated as compared to norms representing multiculturalism. Students

belonging from more privileged backgrounds within the reserved categories specifically those with access to urban schooling or proficiency in English, find it easier to fit into mainstream academic expectations than those from rural or less fortunate backgrounds. On the other hand, a disabled student from a low-income family may need financial help and specialized teaching personnel. Intersecting issues of this kind are considered too trivial primarily because these are not 'common' problems for the majority. Consequently, policies that focus on just one aspect usually fail to notice the multidimensional form of the existent and internalized prejudices. Intersectionality examined within real academic spaces, reveal how power often operates through indistinct forms that may appear neutral superficially but, in real time privileges dominant ways of speaking, writing and presenting oneself. Higher education institutions unknowingly endorse these characteristics as markers of competence and greater potential.

Inclusionary strategies and policies vary for different intersections in the larger social structure. A suggestive framework was designed to integrate multicultural strategies and Intersectionalities by the Council of Europe in 2021 addressing to view inclusion as a 'resource' rather than a means for neutralising social inequalities (Aksezer et al. 2023). Subsequently, in the Indian context a study on the lived experiences of students from Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu suggests, 'social capital' being paramount in contributing to holistic well-being and community engagement while navigating through Intersectionalities and inclusion (Das and Lalitha, 2023). Norms and regulations need to be utilitarian instead of being transformational on paper at this point. Students positioned at multiple marginalized intersections feel intimidated by added scrutiny and expectations of

being the sole representative of their community. Recurrent experiences shape one's confidence and overall academic performance. However, this multidimensional structuring does not effectively emphasise on disadvantage, it draws attention to adaptability, shared solidarities and the alternative ways of contributing to academic spaces. Additionally, intersectionality and varying educational experiences comprehend inequality and prioritise a moral responsibility for institutions. It entitles reflective teaching practices, interconnected policies and a differing concept of merit that acknowledges complexity instead of singular categories.

Affective inequalities and Support systems

All learners irrespective of any identity manoeuvre higher education whilst facing considerable amounts of difficulties that distort one's emotional well-being and stability. With a variegating system of education and multilayered structural changes, marginalized identities struggle exceedingly to manage daily apprehensiveness and anxiety while aiming to achieve considerable grades. An additional issue that marginalized identities face is a difference in the grades that they acquire in both formative and summative formats. Students that completed schooling from suburban or rural regions observe a significant variance in marking patterns of urban higher education. Despite their diligence, meritorious students often struggle to produce recognizable efforts that are equally accepted and appreciated like other classmates, developing uncertainty and chronic stress thereafter. This disparity tends to go unacknowledged and existing structural disadvantages continue to persist. The various expectations from students at this level are in actuality, largely socially constructed and not solely individualised.

Emotional and psychological inequalities for marginalized identities appear in the following ways:

1. Self-doubt and inadequacy: Interactions revolving around ‘insider and outsider’ peer groups, commonly known as imposter syndrome. Students often question their sense of belongingness in academic spaces that are shaped by dominant linguistic and cultural norms.

2. Burden of prejudice: Constant need for students to prove competence and appropriately represent their entire community.

3. Lack of relatable mentors: This intensifies feelings of isolation and limits informal academic guidance.

4. Implicit biases: Subtle exclusion in classroom and peer interactions that gradually weaken confidence and participation.

A study on group-based trajectories of 14,215 individuals showed a consistent hike in mental health problems faced by 52.8% of females and 0.6% of non-binary students as well as lowered levels of safety and contentment (Lereya et al. 2024). Presently, visualising idealistic or absolute inclusivity is utopian, but constructive reforms for holistic development and sensitivity for all students is required to attain functionality of norms. Faculty and support systems should be exceedingly attentive towards the behaviour of internalised peer groups that actually initiate discrimination implicitly even within monitored classroom premises. Understanding micro issues of exclusion is necessary to combat what is typically unattended while dealing with students greatly influenced by social media inaccuracies and mental health misconceptions.

Solidarity and Transformational possibilities

Higher education in India demands an increased commitment towards equity and shared belongingness while also defining frameworks for fundamental transformation. Authorities should ensure regular practices that foster participation and fairness as a shared responsibility for all the members in the institution. Despite institutions projecting images of acceptance, marginalized students continue to encounter subtle forms of exclusion and norms directed for adopting dominant academic cultures. Accessibility and isolation coexist in the same educational premise thereby, exposing a significant gap between visibility and meaningful participation. An intentional and functional policy reform is essential to incorporate both the existent positive components as well as develop new and adaptive systems of equitable harmony.

Strategies in transforming symbolic inclusivity to true inclusion are as follows:

1. Reframing recognition: While merit and competence are correlated with linguistic ease and urban cultural symbolism, equality alone does not allow power to transform discrimination any longer. Building sustainable norms through practical possibilities will eventually develop fairness and bridge the gap towards accepting plurality.

2. Fostering true acceptance: Developing orientation programs that focus on recognizing deficiencies in first generation learners is integral to expand the limits of actual inclusivity. Moreover, acknowledging their unique variance and designing cross cultural and cross ethnic activities fosters sensitivity and awareness amongst the students.

3. Prioritizing sensitized teaching and learning: Using unbiased terminologies and socially sensitised examples while teaching as well as patiently attending to problems faced by students from marginalized identities can build an environment that is adaptive and accepting. A specialised learner-centric pedagogy is required to dismantle the existing prejudices while forming a place for functional social awareness among the educators (Christodoulidi, 2024).

4. Strengthening the community: Mentorship programs, peer interactive circles and committees dedicated to resist any misconduct against diverse learners should be mainstreamed to promote shared responsibility and intergroup collaborations. Regular assessments and monitoring performance enhances transparency and ensures that commitments to inclusion are sustained.



Figure 1. Strategies for Transforming Symbolic Inclusivity to True Inclusion

These transformations are primarily essential for the present generation that is sensitive to questions on diverse identities, justice and mental well-being. The present learners do not perceive educational institutions from a limited viewpoint but in turn consider it as space where values of equality, dialogue and representation are actively negotiated by all

members. If institutions fail to endorse authentic inclusivity, they risk distancing an entire generation from coherence between principle and practice. Channelling equity, meaningful participation and collaborative engagements into formal norms within higher education is not to be considered optional any longer since it is essential for shaping socially responsible students who can understand and challenge inequality in the world around them.

Conclusion

Inclusivity of marginalized identities in higher education cannot be solely recognized through expanded access or tokenistic presence of diversity within institutions. This chapter attempted to highlight inclusion from a grounded perspective where symbolic representation does not immediately transform the internalised structures that shape participation, recognition, and belongingness. Prejudices persist through subtle practices embedded within knowledge systems, institutional cultures and everyday social interactivity. Institutional norms that superficially appear to endorse acceptance, often reflect historically dominant standards of language, behaviour and intellectual expression permitting inequality to surface even in formally monitored environments.

Equitable access and targeted support for students managing Intersectionalities is to be actualised through formal policy reform. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasises on socio-economically disadvantaged groups and intends to allocate funds specifically for gender inclusion, special education and bridge courses (Tripathi and Yadav, 2023). Developing in-house initiatives such as affinity groups recognises the difficulties learners are succumbing to in real classrooms and penalising acts of polarisation.

Teaching personnel should recognise ‘invisible labour’ that marginalised students provide in order to attain similar proficiencies like that of their other peers. Personalised instruction and programmes associated with Universal Learning Design is essential to ensure basic inclusion for first generation learners as well as learners with disabilities.

Addressing disparities in actual inclusion requires moving beyond recognition of diversity and transition to sustained structural transformation. Educational organizations require to launch or redesign frameworks on social pluralism while also addressing the misconceptions around potentialities bound to one’s region, religion, caste, class, gender, orientations or socio-economic background. Solidarity and support groups are to be mandated in policy not just as a symbolic duty but also to achieve inclusivity through a sense of shared responsibility. Developing and restructuring the existent norms into more fluid systems of acceptance and cooperation possesses the power to transform the present position of marginalization in Indian higher education.

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Ishanee Chatterjee

Ishanee Chatterjee completed her M.A. in Education in 2025 from St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata. Her research interests include cultural studies, inclusive education, and social change, with a focus on social dynamics and intergroup relations in education. She has presented papers at international seminars, and her book chapter titled "*The Dynamic Fabric of Culture: Diversity, Adaptation and Social Transformation*" has been accepted for publication.

Dr. Sabiruddin Molla

Dr. Sabiruddin Molla is an Assistant Professor at St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata. His research interests include the pedagogy of mathematics, mathematics anxiety, cultural studies, inclusive education, and social change, with a particular focus on social dynamics and intergroup relations in education.