

# Inequality in access to Higher Education in India Between the Poor and the Rich

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## Abstract

*The widening gaps between rich and poor are a growing source of worry for everyone. disparities in education, especially disparities at the university level in particular, are seen as particularly significant and cannot be ignored any more. Available research on higher education inequality in India focuses mostly on issues of gender and social class, with little attention paid to the role of family income. Here, we use NSSO data from 2019–20 and 2021–22 to try to get a better picture of the relationship between income disparity and college enrollment in India. Based on the data, it is clear that, over the last seven years, there has been a dramatic widening of the income gap between households with respect to their ability to pursue higher education. Although gender inequality has decreased generally, it is still relatively high when comparing the wealthy and the poor. There is also a large gap between rural and urban areas in terms of access to higher education. This empirical study aims to facilitate a more informed policy discourse on the topic of income inequality and access to higher education in India, one of the many interesting policy related issues that have arisen in recent debates on higher education in the country.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Inequality in education is a long-term trend. People's economic, political, and social standings have repercussions on their access to educational opportunities. People from more affluent backgrounds have more access to higher quality educational opportunities. Those in the disadvantaged group face a poorer standard of living as a result of the system, which further widens the gap. Conversely, those who invest in their own education stand to benefit economically and politically, creating conditions that are more conducive to their own kind. A building like this would have far-reaching negative consequences on the underprivileged neighborhood. If educational disparities can be eliminated, it is obvious that society as a whole will undergo radical transformation. However, political and economic drive is necessary to accomplish the very substantial educational gap.

In India, girls from rural regions and poorer socioeconomic origins face particularly severe gender imbalance in educational opportunities. India has made great strides over the last several decades toward its goal of universal school attendance and the implementation of laws to eliminate educational inequities, including those based on gender. Still, there are disparities in the level of education that people have. This research aims to explore the social settings connected with girls who may be left behind in school and the elements that contribute to educational gender inequity.

Inequalities in higher education between social groups - caste and religion - have been the focus of numerous studies. The research indicated that the percentage of people from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes who enroll in college has increased over time, but that it is still around half the percentage of the non-scheduled population. According to Azam and Blom (2019), enrollment rates for

the "other" backward classes are greater than those of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes but lower than those of students in the general category. Basant and Sen's (2014) analysis of NSSO data reaches the same conclusion: members of Hindu upper castes are more likely to continue their education than members of Muslim and "other" backward groups. According to Hasan and Mehta's (2016) research, the enrollment ratio of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in higher education is somewhat above their respective proportions of the overall population in urban regions, but this is not the case in rural areas. While social identification does important in rural India, it is shown that economic status is a superior predictor of college attendance in urban India after adjusting for completion rate in upper secondary education. According to Wankhede (2016), these groups' scholastic disadvantage stems from their social disadvantage, which in turn stems from their dependency on the higher castes for economic and social support.

India's development strategy places a premium on improving the quality of its educational system. India's Constitution guarantees all citizens, including children, the right to a free and compulsory education from the ages of 6 to 14. In order to fulfill this constitutional mandate, significant steps were taken beginning with the National Policy on Education. The introduction of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 gave fresh life to the policy conversation in this setting. In 2019, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act was passed in response to the growing need for free and mandatory primary schooling for all children.

However, India's educational system has not made any notable strides. More adults than ever before have been pronounced (functionally) read in the past decade, and yet more than a third of the population is still not educated. Class, caste, and gender inequalities have always played a role in the educational gaps that exist in our nation. In reality, policymakers now have a serious problem in addressing the issue of disadvantaged groups' uneven access to educational opportunities.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Borooah, V.K. (2017), Using information collected during the 71st round of the National Sample Survey (Education Survey: January-June 2014), this paper calculates the odds that an Indian citizen between the ages of 18 and 22 is enrolled in a graduate or post-graduate program, accounting for factors such as family income, marital status, education level, and geographic location (urban vs. rural). The report then looks at how different socioeconomic groups are affected by disparities in schooling. Inequality

decomposition is used to determine the relative importance of each of these variables in explaining differences in the social distribution of college enrollment rates. It examines the evolution of college access between the 64th and 71st National Student Surveys (July 2007–June 2008 and January–June 2014, respectively).

N.S. Sabharwal (2021), This research looks at how socioeconomic and regional disparities are manifesting themselves in the availability of higher education in contemporary India. The study found that the availability of higher education institutions in India has increased due to the expansion of higher education, and that access to higher education for disadvantaged social groups has been promoted through affirmative action policies. However, it has been accompanied by socioeconomic disparities in access to elite institutions, high-value academic topics like science and engineering, and learning results; and geographical inequalities in the availability of higher education possibilities. Inequalities in the availability of higher education in India are the result of an interplay between socioeconomic and geographical variables. The mechanism of private higher education institution construction and distribution across states is a reflection of economic dynamics that contribute to regional disparities in higher education development and socio-spatial diversity in enrollment. Students from low-income backgrounds, including those from SC/ST, OBC, and WBC, as well as women, face significant challenges when trying to gain admission to prestigious universities and study highly-regarded fields of study. Moreover, students from socially disadvantaged groups are further hampered in their academic performance and learning outcomes due to geographical, socioeconomic, and pre-college educational route handicaps, such as the use of a regional language as the medium of instruction. With the right set of public policies and methods, higher education may be a driving force in the development of more equitable societies.

Choudhury, P.K., Joshi, R. & Kumar, A. (2023), Access to high-quality early childhood care and education for all children in India between the ages of three and six is strongly encouraged under the country's National Education Policy 2020. This article examines geographical and socioeconomic disparities in access to early childhood education using data from the 75th cycle of the National Statistical Office's survey (2017-2018). We also look at how the income and education levels of families play a part in creating these gaps. We find large disparities in pre-primary education enrollment rates between rural and urban areas in India, with girls and children from historically marginalized social groups (scheduled castes and scheduled tribes) being less likely to enroll in early childhood programs in rural areas. We find that when we account for socioeconomic

factors and the level of education of the household's head, the difference between rural and urban areas narrows significantly. We also uncover disparities in early childhood education funding by socioeconomic status and gender in the home. These results stress the need of committing to policy changes that will make it easier for children from underprivileged backgrounds in India to enroll in and complete pre-primary school.

Motiram and Osberg (2016), By analyzing data from the 1999 Indian Time Use Survey conducted by the Central Statistical Organization of India, provide more context for the amount of free time that may be devoted to education. Girls of all ages and from all socioeconomic backgrounds (urban and rural) were found to bear a disproportionate amount of housework compared to males. Researchers discovered that both rural and urban girls spent more time on domestic chores as they got older, but that school-aged rural girls spent more time on them than their urban counterparts. Similarly, enrollment and attendance rates were lowest for rural girls, and the proportion of older rural girls who did not attend school increased steadily. Furthermore, rural females have the lowest average proportion of students who complete any homework. This supports the theory that the opportunity cost of sending females to school (as opposed to boys) is greater than that of sending boys to school, especially in rural areas.

Author: Reardon, Sean (2011), The literature on education studies the impact of students' personal histories and school environments on their educational development and success. The Coleman study from 1966 was one of the first in the United States to link kids' home lives to their academic performance. The accomplishment gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds in the United States widened further in the latter decades of the twentieth century, according to research published in 2011;. Although more people now have access to higher education in India than ever before, studies show that students' socioeconomic class still influences how well they do academically. Many students in India have challenges in elementary school because of persistent differences in academic achievement on the basis of gender, geography, and other socioeconomic variables. Children of low-income families and those who have never completed high school may also have a lower readiness to learn when they first join the classroom.

### **Inequality in Education**

In recent years, India's educational system has witnessed a dramatic development. The table below shows that the percentage of men and women with postsecondary degrees rose across all socioeconomic classes, but that the percentage is still rather low generally.

There are a lot of causes for these differences. We all know that the wealth of upper caste Hindus much outweighs that of dalits and adivasis. Children from dalit and adivasi backgrounds face additional challenges. It has been alleged that dalit youngsters have been subjected to prejudice at school. About eighty percent of dalit students at a college in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, Western India, said that they had been forced to sit outside the classroom throughout their elementary school years. A dalit educator in another research recounted, "We were instructed to sit apart. (The Probe Team, 1999:50) "Our instructors never touched our copy or slates. Schools are farther away from Dalit neighborhoods because of their location outside of the main village. One inhabitant of a hamlet in Tamil Nadu said, "None of the Scheduled Castes were even allowed to walk through the residential areas of the dominant castes or through the village's main street running through the residential areas of the dominant castes." To get to their huts, they had to make a lengthy trek around the village's outskirts (Nambissan and Sedwal, 2002:77). Many educators' actions are meant to shame pupils who identify as dalit. Teachers from higher castes have low expectations for their dalit students because they think they are stupid and uneducable.

In addition to having similarly low expectations, Adivasis also deal with a unique set of challenges. They live in remote areas, such as woodlands or steep terrain. Due to their low population density, tribal communities lack essential infrastructure like roads and schools. It is very uncommon for instructors, who mostly reside in bigger towns, to secretly shut the school during the monsoon, even if it is within walking distance for the students. Children from indigenous groups that face these obstacles often do so because of their location. Another significant barrier to indigenous education is the language barrier. Because most tribe members speak a regional dialect rather than the state's standard language, pupils from tribal backgrounds are often further alienated when their instructors are unable to effectively connect with them in their own tongue.

Muslim students face comparable difficulties. Urdu is the native language of a large number of Muslims, and yet only a small fraction of schools provide instruction in this language. Due to increased religious tensions and the prevalence of bullying and teasing, youngsters are more disengaged from school. Access to schools is less likely to be an issue for Muslim families since they are more likely to live in metropolitan areas, but prejudice by instructors and a hostile school climate may be significant barriers.

**Skill Premium has risen; education inequality accounts for 25-35% of total inequality**

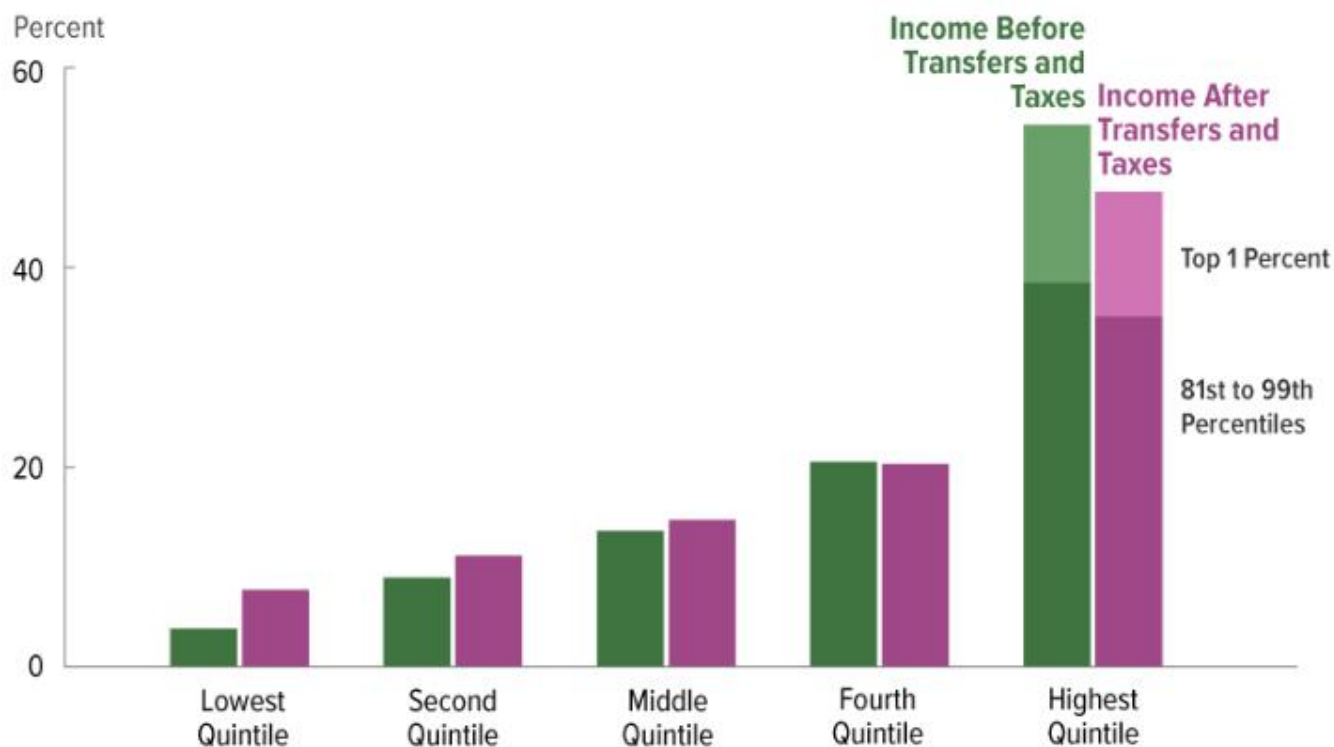


Fig.1: Income inequality decomposition by education attainment of household head

### Reasons

Because of quotas, talented students have to compete with a larger pool of applicants, which contributes to educational inequity. These arbitrary quota allocations serve no educational purpose and are instead driven by politics. Management, or "paid seats," further exacerbates educational disparities. A student may "buy their way in" to a school by paying for a guaranteed spot or admittance. But this makes it more difficult for those who really deserve it to get the education they need. Education provides a person with a springboard into the future. In response to the changing preferences of today's students, many different types of educational facilities are being offered, rather than expanding access for the economically disadvantaged. The number of IB schools in India has increased significantly recently. There is more bureaucracy involved in starting the government's educational programmes, and the government pays less attention to the class that can barely afford school. Even though technological teaching tools have been made available, there has been no discernible effect on the country's overall literacy rate.

### Trends and Pattern in Participation in Higher Education in India

#### Gross Attendance Ratio: 2019-20 and 2021-2022

Here, using data from the NSS's 64th and 71st waves, we analyze the gross attendance ratio and any disparities there

may be across demographics. The estimated gross attendance ratio (age group 18-23) in higher education in 2019-20 and 2021-2022 is shown in Table 1 below, broken down by gender, location, type of institution, and spending quintiles. The gross attendance percentage for Indian universities increased from 12.5% in 2019-20 to 24.5% in 2021-2022.

The percentage of attendees per family increases steadily and predictably along with rising economic status in our analysis of attendance rates by spending quintiles. Although the wealthiest and poorest quintiles have the highest and lowest attendance rates, respectively, every given quintile's ratio is greater than that of the quintile before it. In both 2019-20 and 2009-10, this is the case. Between 2007-08 and 2013-14, there was a large and growing disparity in the gross attendance ratio of college students based on the socioeconomic position of their families. Table 1 shows that the disparity between the gross attendance ratios of low-income and high-income students has grown from 29.5% in 2007-08 to 43.5% in 2013-14. There was a 5.3% rise (from 2.9% to 8.2%) in the gross attendance ratio for low-income families between 2019-20 and 2021-2022, whereas there was a 19.3% increase (from 32.3% to 51.6%) for high-income families. This supports the prior results of Tilak (2015) showing that disparity in the ability to pursue higher education based on a family's socioeconomic standing has grown significantly over the last seven years.

Table 1: Gross attendance ratio in Higher Education by Income Quintile, in Rural and Urban Areas and by Type of Education Institution, 2019-20 and 2021-2022

Quintile	Rural			Urban			Total			Institution Type			
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Person	Government	Private-Aided	Private-Unaided	Government & Private-Aided
<b>2021-2022</b>													
1	8.95	6.79	7.87	9.71	10.55	10.09	9.06	7.23	8.15	4.24	1.78	2.06	6.02
2	12.72	10.42	11.57	11.06	13.20	12.08	12.42	10.88	11.66	5.96	3.04	2.51	8.99
3	22.44	15.91	19.39	17.29	15.24	16.30	21.24	15.74	18.65	9.69	4.08	4.81	13.77
4	29.27	24.32	27.04	26.79	30.90	28.77	28.42	26.76	27.66	12.58	7.35	7.58	19.93
5	43.90	45.67	44.67	56.25	55.17	55.74	51.52	51.81	51.65	17.49	13.56	20.38	31.05
All	21.14	16.81	19.08	35.01	35.09	35.04	25.45	22.45	24.03	10.15	6.06	7.68	16.22
(2019-20)													
1	3.86	1.85	2.81	4.56	3.24	3.91	3.91	1.94	2.89	1.65	0.95	0.20	2.60
2	5.64	2.99	4.34	4.83	5.85	5.33	5.55	3.31	4.45	2.28	1.33	0.73	3.61
3	7.48	4.63	6.08	9.89	8.84	9.41	7.97	5.42	6.74	3.67	1.95	1.03	5.62
4	12.99	8.93	11.05	15.12	13.36	14.27	13.72	10.47	12.16	6.92	3.36	1.64	10.28
5	29.45	22.15	26.22	32.98	39.06	35.66	31.75	33.11	32.35	13.72	9.94	8.31	23.66
All	10.14	6.24	8.23	22.31	23.73	22.96	13.87	11.15	12.56	6.04	3.75	2.58	9.79

There are several intriguing facets to the pattern of gender disparity in access to higher education when the economic position of homes is taken into account. The gross attendance ratio of males in higher education has been greater than that of women in both 2019-20 and 2021-2022. The disparity between the male and female workforce ratio was 2.7% in 2019-20 and 3.0% in 2021-2022, a little rise. Worryingly, the gap between the wealthiest and poorest families has widened for both men and women, growing from a difference of 27.8 percentage points in 2007–08 to 42.5 percentage points in 2013–14. The gap between the sexes has grown from 31.5 percentage points to 44.5 percentage points during the same time frame among women. This data demonstrates that the gap between high-income and low-income families' college enrollment has widened over the last seven years for both sexes. Both the disparity and the rate of rise in inequality are greater for women than for males. In addition, the gender discrepancy in the attendance ratio differs not only by the location of the

families (rural vs. urban), but also by the socioeconomic condition of the households. For instance, in both 2019-20 and 2021-2022, more women from metropolitan regions had a higher gross attendance ratio than males. However, in rural regions, males have a greater attendance rate than women do, albeit the gender gap has narrowed from 5.3% to 4.3% between 2019-20 and 2021-2022.

Table 2 summarizes the level of inequality between various categories and the change, if any, that has occurred between 2019-20 and 2021-2022. There is a clear gender gap in college enrollment, but there is a far larger gap between rural and urban areas. The gap between the wealthiest and poorest segments of the population is wider than the gap between the government and private school sectors. There has been an increase in overall attendance, but the ratio for the top quintile of spenders is still more than six times that of the poorest quintile.

Table 2 Inequalities in Gross Attendance Ratio

	2019-20	2021-2022	Change
Urban/Rural	2.79	1.84	0.95
Male/Female	1.24	1.13	0.11
Govt/Private	3.79	2.11	1.68
Q5/Q1	11.21	6.34	4.87

The difficulty, for many students from low-income families, is not in enrolling in college, but in graduating (Conlin et al., 2007). Students from low-income backgrounds in India are disproportionately affected by the continuing achievement gap between college enrollment and completion. Students from low-income backgrounds have a greater challenge in finishing their degrees than students from more affluent backgrounds since the opportunity cost of higher education is greater for them. The percentage of students who start a specific course and finish it within the minimum or maximum number of years advised by the institution is a common measure of graduation or completion rates. However, we cannot determine completion or graduation rates using the current data. The proportion of adults who have completed postsecondary education is a better indicator of success.

**Higher Education Attainment**

Although the attendance ratio is widely used because data on it is readily available, it is not considered a highly reliable variable on the level of education development because not everyone who starts college finishes college for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to, dropping out, failing the final exam, or dying before graduating. Higher education attainment, measured as the proportion of the population with advanced degrees relative to the total

population, is a more appropriate metric to use. Higher education completion rates are a stock variable that are thought to more accurately represent the degree of educational progress since they measure the cumulative increase in human capital accumulation over time.

The educational attainment of a population reflects the inequality in its access to higher education. As a result, we once again discover a large gap in the proportion of the population with a college degree or above. The proportion of the adult population with a higher education is broken down by gender, area, and income quintile in Table 3. In 2013–14, over 9% of all adults in the nation had some kind of postsecondary education; this is up little in absolute terms from 6.3 % in 2007–08, but represents a 45 % rise in relative ones. The economic position of households has a significant impact on this ratio throughout both eras. In 2021-2022, these percentages were between 2% and 25% based on the quintile of consumers' income. In the 2019-20 fiscal year, these numbers are 0.9% and 20%, respectively. While the ratio climbed by just 25% within the wealthiest quintile, it more than doubled among the poor. The difference between the richest and poorest quintiles has shrunk, yet it is still quite large despite these efforts. In India, the top quintile earns a college degree at a rate of 25%, which is on par with that of other developed nations.

Table 3 Higher Education Attainment (Percentage of adult population (above 15 years of age) who acquired higher education, by Consumption Quintile, Region and Gender, 2019-20 and 2021-2022

Quintile	Rural			Urban			Total		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Person
<b>2021-2022</b>									
1	2.53	1.05	1.79	3.76	2.56	3.17	2.67	1.22	1.95
2	3.75	1.86	2.81	5.19	3.63	4.43	3.98	2.13	3.06
3	5.40	2.45	3.94	8.07	5.67	6.89	6.03	3.21	4.64
4	8.90	4.28	6.60	14.27	9.53	11.93	10.83	6.16	8.51
5	15.86	9.11	12.54	35.20	27.84	31.64	28.64	21.33	25.09
All	<b>6.19</b>	<b>3.07</b>	<b>4.64</b>	<b>21.80</b>	<b>16.50</b>	<b>19.21</b>	<b>11.21</b>	<b>7.28</b>	<b>9.27</b>

2019-20									
1	1.29	0.26	0.77	3.02	1.64	2.33	1.40	0.35	0.87
2	1.92	0.54	1.23	2.45	1.47	1.96	1.97	0.64	1.31
3	3.15	1.15	2.15	5.06	2.99	4.05	3.49	1.46	2.48
4	5.57	2.04	3.82	9.15	5.35	7.31	6.77	3.12	4.97
5	11.84	7.26	9.61	28.07	21.46	24.96	22.39	16.28	19.48
All	<b>3.95</b>	<b>1.65</b>	<b>2.80</b>	<b>17.75</b>	<b>12.68</b>	<b>15.32</b>	<b>7.95</b>	<b>4.67</b>	<b>6.33</b>

**PUBLIC PROVISIONING FOR EDUCATION: AN INSTRUMENT TO ADDRESS INEQUALITY**

A significant quantity of money is needed to provide for education, to ensure its availability and quality. Public provisioning for education has been recognized as a successful technique for guaranteeing inclusive education because of the central role that education plays in the growth of a society and the economy of a nation. The Kothari Commission report, published in 1966, was the first of its kind to examine the country's policies in light of the growing awareness of the need for increased public funding of education. It also attempted to put a number on the size

of the investment needed to reach the goal of universal primary and secondary school enrollment by 1986.

In 2012-2013, education spending in India accounted for almost 3 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). It has gone up over the past decade, albeit at a relatively slow rate. Current education expenditures accounts for 4 percent of GDP in 2019-20 BE (Figure 2), which includes spending by the Centre and the States' Education ministries as well as other agencies that spend on education. The Kothari Commission that a minimum of 6% of GDP be allocated to education by 2020; the current allocation of 4% falls well short of this goal.

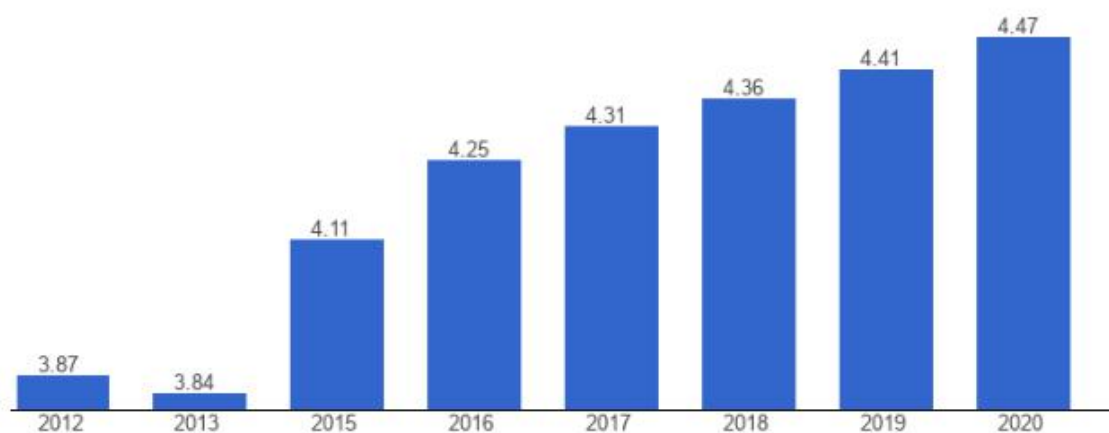


Fig.2: Public Expenditure on Education in India (as % of GDP)

**III. CONCLUSION**

Our research indicates substantial variance in the gross attendance ratio of college students based on the socioeconomic position of their families. The disparity between the wealthiest and the poorest households in terms of the gross attendance ratio increased from 29.5% in 2019–20 to 43.5% in 2021–22. This demonstrates a dramatic rise in disparity in higher education opportunities across socioeconomic groups in the previous seven years. Although gender disparities have narrowed, there is still a large enrollment difference between males in the highest

spending quintile in urban regions and women in the lowest spending quintile in rural areas (56% vs 7% in 2021-2022). We have looked at gender inequality across income quintiles as well as rural-urban disparities. The gender gap between men and women is negligible, with just a 3- to 4-point difference in enrolment and higher education achievement. Household investment in higher education is correlated with student enrollment. The average yearly family spending on higher education has increased dramatically (more than double) between 2019–20 and 2021–22. Higher education costs are nearly twice what they

are for rural families, since urban families spend much more on this area of their children's education.

In conclusion, this research has examined the pattern and trajectory of the disparity in higher education participation rates amongst economically distinct groups in India. This article has focused on a few of such elements. There has to be further investigation into the issues at play. Policy discourse that seeks to improve the educational status of the population and reduce inequalities in higher education may need to focus on economic criteria, rather than gender, region (or even caste), since it is not women in general, but women in the bottom economic strata, and it is not people in rural areas, but people belong to the bottom expenditure quintile in rural areas, who suffered the most. There is a trade-off between the greater difficulty of implementing development programs based on economic criteria and the benefit of making fewer "errors of commissions and omissions" owing to more trustworthy data on economic/income levels of the families.

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