



HIGHER EDUCATION AS A CATALYST FOR SDGS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses the changing role of the Indian higher education sector in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. The paper talks about the role of colleges and universities in India in facilitating social transformation through teaching, research, innovation, and community engagement within the framework of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The study is focused on SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). The paper adopts a review and descriptive research methodology with secondary sources to highlight the shift from rote learning to experiential, inclusive, and sustainability education. It also speaks to challenges like regional disparities in funding and access. To conclude, the paper explains higher education as an essential link between economic growth and social justice in India

Keywords: *SDGs, Higher Education, India, Social Impact, NEP 2020.*

INTRODUCTION :

The United Nations set the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as a global plan to reach inclusive and sustainable development by 2030. The 17 SDGs deal with problems that are related to each other, such as poverty, inequality, education, gender justice, environmental sustainability, and economic growth. Education is one of these things that is very important because it gives people the knowledge, skills, and values they need to make a fair and long-lasting society.

In India, higher education institutions (HEIs) play an important role in the country's development. India has one of the biggest higher education systems in the world, and every year, millions of students go to college and university there. These schools not only get students ready for jobs, but they also teach them about social responsibility, ethics, and being a good citizen. The Indian government responded to this by creating the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which focuses on whole-person

development, fairness, flexibility, learning across disciplines, and lifelong learning.

This paper examines the alignment of Indian higher education institutions with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focusing particularly on SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). It also looks at how NEP 2020 can help with this alignment and talks about what needs to be done in the future to make higher education a bigger part of sustainable development.

Justification and importance of the paper

Most people agree that higher education is a key factor in social mobility and national growth. In a country as diverse as India, education is very important for closing the gaps between rich and poor people. This study is important because it:

- Shows how Indian higher education institutions help the world reach its development goals

- Explains how NEP 2020 is important for reaching sustainable development
 - Shows how education links economic growth to social justice
 - Gives a clear and structured understanding of selected SDGs for academic use
- The study tackles some of the related problems that Indian society faces today by focusing on Quality Education, Gender Equality, and Reduced Inequalities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :

The primary aims of this study are:

- a. To comprehend the function of Indian higher education institutions in fulfilling the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- b. To look at how well the National Education Policy 2020 fits with the SDGs.
- c. To look at how Indian higher education is putting SDG 4, SDG 5, and SDG 10 into action.
- d. To find problems like differences between regions, problems with funding, and gaps in access.
- e. To show how important higher education is for encouraging social responsibility and growth that includes everyone.

METHODOLOGY FOR RESEARCH :

This study utilizes a qualitative and descriptive methodology. It relies solely on secondary data obtained from credible sources, including: Government policy documents, particularly NEP 2020; United Nations reports on Sustainable Development Goals; Academic journals, books, and research articles; and Reports issued by universities and educational institutions. The methodology emphasizes the examination of current policies, practices, and institutional initiatives to ascertain the role of Indian higher education in promoting sustainable development.

LITERATURE REVIEW :

Numerous scholars and global entities have underscored the significance of higher education in attaining sustainable development. UNESCO

recognizes education as a fundamental facilitator of all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially through the advocacy of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which incorporates sustainability principles into educational practices (UNESCO, 2017). Global studies show that universities help with sustainable development by changing their curricula, doing research across disciplines, coming up with new ideas, and getting involved in their communities (World Bank, 2020). Researchers contend that higher education has been instrumental in human capital development and economic advancement in India since independence (Tilak, 2018). Scholars, however, also point out ongoing problems like unequal access, differences in quality, and not enough public funding (Agarwal, 2019). Research on the National Education Policy 2020 indicates that the policy tackles these issues by prioritizing equity, adaptability, autonomy, and interdisciplinary education (Government of India, 2020). Research on gender and social inclusion in Indian higher education shows that even though more women and people from underrepresented groups are enrolling, there are still differences in academic leadership, STEM participation, and the quality of institutions across regions (UGC, 2021). These results emphasize the necessity for ongoing policy interventions and institutional reforms.

Many academics and international groups have stressed how important higher education is for sustainable development. UNESCO emphasizes education as a fundamental facilitator of all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Studies show that universities can help the environment by changing their curricula, doing research across disciplines, coming up with new ideas, and getting involved in their communities.

Indian scholars have noted that higher education has grown quickly since independence, which has helped build human capital and the economy. But problems like unequal access, differences in quality, and not enough funding still make things hard for the system. Studies on NEP 2020 show that the policy's goal is to solve these problems by encouraging fairness, adaptability, independence, and education in many fields. Literature indicates that although gender parity in enrollment has enhanced, inequalities remain in domains such as STEM education, academic leadership, and research output. Studies on social inclusion also show how reservation policies can help, but they also show how there are differences between regions and institutions.

A look at India's higher education system

India has one of the biggest and most varied higher education systems in the world (70,018 as of mid 2025). It includes central universities, state universities, private universities, deemed universities, colleges, and independent institutions. Over the years, the sector has grown quickly to meet the growing need for education.

Even though this growth has happened, there are still problems like uneven quality, not enough money for public institutions, and differences between regions. NEP 2020 wants to fix these problems by encouraging independence, education in many fields, digital learning, and policies that include everyone. People expect colleges and universities today to do more than just teach. They should also be involved in research, new ideas, community service, and long-term growth.

SDG 4: Quality Education and Indian Higher Education

SDG 4 is all about making sure that everyone has access to high-quality, fair, and inclusive education and encouraging lifelong learning. Indian higher education institutions are very

important to reaching this goal. One of the most important changes in NEP 2020 is the move away from rote memorization and toward learning through experience and skills. More and more universities are using:

- Learning through projects
- Internships and fieldwork
- Assignments that focus on research
- Courses that help students develop skills and prepare for jobs

These methods help students use what they learn in class to solve real-world problems and improve their ability to think critically. Teaching and learning that focuses on environmental, social, and economic issues is called education for sustainable development. A lot of Indian universities now teach things like ethics, social responsibility, climate change, and sustainability. Today education that is digital and open to everyone; digital platforms, online courses, and open educational resources have made it easier for more people to get an education. Online learning portals and blended learning models are examples of initiatives that support lifelong learning and flexibility.

Indian Higher Education and SDG 5: Gender Equality

For development to be long-lasting, men and women must be treated equally. Indian universities and colleges help SDG 5 by making sure that everyone has the same chances and access.

Women have been enrolling in higher education at a much higher rate over the years. Women from poor backgrounds have had an easier time getting into college thanks to scholarships, fee waivers, and reservation policies. A lot of organizations have set up like: Women's Development Cells; Internal Complaints Committees; Programs that make people more aware of gender issues; Programs for a safe campus. These steps help create a learning environment that is welcoming and supportive.

Even though things are getting better, there are still problems, like not enough women in STEM fields, research leadership, and academic administration. To achieve real gender equality, it is important to fill these gaps.

NEP 2020, Indian Higher Education and SDG 10: Lessening Inequalities

The goal of SDG 10 is to make societies more equal both within and between them. Higher education is an important way to encourage social inclusion. Indian higher education institutions help people who are on the outside by: Reservation policies; Scholarships and fellowships; Remedial coaching programs; Support for first-generation learners. One of the biggest problems is that not all regions have the same number of good educational institutions and funding. Rural and remote areas (North East India) often don't have enough infrastructure or teachers, which makes it harder for people to get to school and do well. Universities connect with people in their communities and help them become more socially aware and grow through extension activities (NSS) and outreach programs.

The National Education Policy 2020 sets up a strong framework for making Indian education fit with the goals of sustainable development. Some important features are:

- Fairness and inclusion as core values
- Curricula that are flexible and cover a wide range of subjects
- Focus on ethics, values, and social responsibility
- Support for research and new ideas etc.

The ways Higher Education helps achieve the SDGs; Indian higher education institutions can help the SDGs in four main ways:

- a. Curriculum and Pedagogy (SDG 4 - Quality Education): Moving beyond separate subjects to include social justice and sustainable development in all areas of study. This includes:
- b. Courses that cross disciplines like climate

science and policy, sustainable economics, gender studies, and public health.

- c. Experiential Learning: Projects in the field, social internships, and community-based research that link what you learn in class to what you see and do in real life.
- d. Critical Pedagogy: Teaching methods that make students question power structures, see their own privilege, and learn about wrongs done in the past.

With Research and Innovation (SDG 9 - Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) the higher education institutions (HEIs) are acting as centers for research that can help India meet its SDG goals; for example technological innovation like affordable clean energy and water purification, sustainable agriculture. By stressing more Social Science and Policy/Multidisciplinary research the institutes are working on poverty reduction, affirmative action, gender-based violence, and inclusive governance by bringing together scientists, sociologists, economists, and community stakeholders to solve complex related problems like urban waste management or rural distress. These are equally related to Community Engagement and Outreach (SDG 1 - No Poverty, SDG 10 - Reduced Inequalities): The University shares its resources and knowledge with the community around it. With Extension Programs like legal aid clinics, health camps, adult literacy drives, skill development workshops, NSS activities, Participatory Action Research, working with communities as equals to find problems and come up with solutions. The NEP 2020 deals with these issues in a smart way.

Higher education in India and the SDGs for gender equality and social justice

Higher education in India is very important for moving forward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those that have to do with gender equality (SDG 5) and social justice (SDG 10, which is about reducing

inequalities). There are many ways to look at the relationship:

Access and Inclusion:

India's higher education system has put more and more emphasis on making it easier for women and socially disadvantaged groups like Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) to get to school. These steps are important for making sure that everyone can go to college and for fixing past wrongs. Reservation quotas, scholarships, and targeted outreach programs are all examples of policy tools that try to break down structural barriers that have kept these groups out in the past. Also, programs that try to get more people to enroll in schools/colleges in rural and underserved areas help close the gap between different parts of the country. This makes sure that educational opportunities help achieve larger social justice goals.

Curriculum and Awareness:

Incorporating themes of gender equality, social justice, human rights, and diversity into higher education curricula cultivates critical consciousness among students. Gender studies, social justice theory, and ethics are all parts of academic programs that help people understand systemic inequalities and make them think about the rules and power structures in society. This educational involvement is essential for cultivating attitudes that promote gender equity and social inclusion beyond the academic setting. Also, interdisciplinary approaches that link these topics to areas like law, sociology, economics, and public policy give students the analytical tools they need to understand and deal with difficult social problems. Higher education institutions (HEIs) help make socially responsible citizens and future leaders who are committed to making big changes by including these points of view in their teaching and learning.

Setting up an institution:

A key way to promote gender equality and social justice in higher education is to make campuses safe, welcoming, and open to everyone. More and more colleges/universities are starting gender sensitization programs to fight stereotypes and encourage respectful interactions between students, faculty, and staff. There are ways to deal with discrimination and violence, such as grievance redressal cells, anti-sexual harassment committees, and gender resource centers. These structures not only protect groups that are at risk, but they also make institutions more accountable and promote cultural changes that make everyone feel welcome. Higher education institutions (HEIs) directly help meet the SDG 5 goals of ending violence and discrimination against women and marginalized groups by creating spaces where everyone feels safe and valued.

Innovation and Research:

Colleges and universities are important places for research that helps us learn more about gender differences, social justice issues, and policy solutions. Research in schools on things like violence against women, economic inequality, caste discrimination, and intersectionality gives us information that helps us make better decisions and fight for change. Collaborative research endeavors among government entities, non-governmental organizations, and community collectives augment the significance and influence of academic scholarship. New ideas in teaching, technology, and getting people involved in their communities that come from higher education institutions (HEIs) also help make education more inclusive and give people more power. Leadership and Economic Empowerment: Higher education greatly improves the chances of women and other underrepresented groups getting jobs and becoming leaders by giving them more advanced knowledge, skills, and

credentials. Access to good education helps these people do better in the job market, start their own businesses, and make decisions in a variety of fields. This empowerment helps to close the gap between rich and poor and encourage growth that includes everyone, which are two of the main goals of SDG 10. Programs for developing leaders, mentorship programs, and chances to network within higher education institutions (HEIs) help a wide range of leaders emerge who can affect policy and social change. More people from marginalized groups in professional and governance settings leads to more fair and just societies.

Problems of higher education:

Despite considerable advancements, substantial obstacles remain in achieving the full transformative potential of higher education for gender equality and social justice in India. There are still big differences between men and women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, where fewer women are enrolled and stay in colleges than in other fields. The lack of faculty and institutional leaders from marginalized communities limits the range of viewpoints and the ability to make decisions that include everyone. Socio-economic obstacles, such as poverty, premature matrimony, and caregiving duties, persist in hindering ongoing participation for numerous women and marginalized groups. Also, problems with infrastructure, the digital divide, and differences between regions make things even less fair. To fill these gaps, we need broad strategies that go beyond just access to include quality, relevance, and retention.

Marketisation of Education: The growing trend toward a neoliberal, job-oriented model of higher education can push social justice and critical interdisciplinary studies to the side as "non-remunerative." Again structural inequalities persisting on Campus: Despite policies, instances of caste discrimination, gender

inequality, and exclusionary cultures remain significant barriers. Lastly, lack of resources: Public universities often don't have enough money to do a lot of community outreach or provide a lot of help to students.

Recommendations: Towards a Transformative Agenda

A multi-pronged approach is needed to make higher education have a bigger effect on the SDGs related to gender equality and social justice. Policy changes should make sure that everyone has equal access and that colleges have inclusive curriculums and cultures. Targeted support programs, like scholarships, bridge courses, and counseling services, can help students who are at risk of dropping out and improve their academic performance. Inclusive pedagogy that values different experiences and encourages critical thinking about social issues will improve learning outcomes. Regular audits on gender and social equity are examples of institutional accountability mechanisms that can keep an eye on progress and make sure standards are met. When higher education institutions, civil society, and government work together, they can do more by sharing resources and working together to advocate for change. Using technology to make learning more accessible and tailored to each student could also help fix long-standing inequalities.

For Indian higher education to become a true engine for the SDGs and social justice, it needs to change in a big way. This includes:

- i. Reimagining the Purpose of HEIs: Acknowledging and rewarding their function in societal transformation, rather than merely the production of human capital.
- ii. Strengthening Affirmative Action: Going beyond admissions to make sure that campus life is welcoming, helpful, and free of discrimination.
- iii. Building partnerships between universities

and communities: Making structured, long-term partnerships where communities help make knowledge and solutions.

CONCLUSION:

A multifaceted, integrated approach is needed to make higher education's contribution to the SDGs on gender equality and social justice even bigger. Policy changes should not only make sure that everyone has equal access, but they should also require inclusive curricula and encourage cultures of respect and accountability in educational institutions. To lower dropout rates and help marginalized students do better in educational institutions, targeted support systems like scholarships, bridge courses, remedial programs, mentoring, and counseling services are very important. New ways of teaching that include inclusive methods, participatory learning, and critical pedagogy will make students more interested and likely to stay. Regular audits of institutions and assessments of gender equity can keep track of progress, find gaps, and make sure that equity standards are being met. Collaborative partnerships between higher education institutions (HEIs), government agencies, civil society, and international organizations can help them use their resources better, share best practices, and work together to advocate for change. Digital inclusion initiatives and technology-enabled learning platforms can also make it easier for people to get access, especially those who live far away or don't have many resources. Programs that help faculty and administrators learn about gender and social justice issues will make these ideas a part of how institutions are run and how they do business.

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