

**Higher Education and Tribal Women in India – Introspecting the Persisting Inequality in  
Access and Enrolment****K.M.Joshi**

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**Abstract**

The tribal population constitutes the second largest social group in India and accounts for about 9 % of the total population. In spite of strong externalities and greater returns to higher education for tribal women various intervention programmes have not been effective in addressing the access and participation issues. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for tribal population in higher education is 6.60%, and for males and females separately it is 8.55% and 4.70% respectively. Within tribal communities, there is also widespread disparity across various regions of India. Similarly the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for Indian tribal population in higher education is 0.55. The gender parity issue amongst the tribes in higher education enrolments has not received much attention. About 40% of the total enrolled tribal female students in higher education are pursuing their studies in the fields of arts and social sciences. The present paper discusses in brief the significance of higher education, and the current Indian higher education picture, and examines the access and enrolment scenario of Indian tribal women.

**Introduction**

The majority of developing countries have societies with clear inequalities and social problems. The common solution for these problems is higher education, which is considered to be the key source to handle these challenges. Progress in higher education through expanded enrolments and better quality can contribute to the growth, and help to reduce poverty, in these developing countries.

Individuals are interested in taking more education so that they can earn more and get better jobs, on average, with more education. For many, more education can be a foundation for social mobility. Similarly, the majority of the countries are intent on raising the average level of education of their population because they think that by doing so education will improve output, increase economic growth, raise the quality of jobs in the economy, and reduce poverty and inequality. The other benefits of education also include; the healthier individuals, a healthier population and better functioning of the society (Johnston, 2004; McMahon, 1999; Murray, 2009).

The contribution of education becomes more significant where a larger population is either socially or economically backward including the indigenous population (Joshi, 2010).

Some of the earliest works in the economics of education argued that a major rationale for enhancing education is to improve the competence of labour in the production process. Since highly educated workers are more literate and numerate, it becomes easier to train them to do more intricate tasks.

Nations with highly educated manpower are characterized by higher output per worker, but typically these nations also have more physical capital per worker. Exactly how education increases productivity, how imperative it is, and in what ways it is significant are difficult questions that economists have been unable to answer definitively. Controversy also surrounds the kind and level of education that contributes most to growth and better welfare —general schooling (primary, secondary or higher education), technical formal training, or on-the-job training. However, it has also been found that the average rate of return to human capital is higher than the physical capital in underdeveloped and poor countries (Psacharopoulos and Woodhall, 1997). Therefore, developing countries are making serious efforts to enhance the access to education at levels of schooling for their population in order to reduce poverty and inequality.

There are also specific studies that sound a note of caution on enhancing the supply at the level of higher education. One such study (Cain et al., 2009) concludes that ‘a strategy of expanding the supply of higher-educated individuals is unlikely to be effective in tackling the issue of inequality in a meaningful way—even if we were to assume that the extra college graduates could be obtained without a deterioration in the quality of the new college degrees. To the extent that increasing returns to college education are driven by the returns to particular occupations or industries—something that seems to be true not just for India but several other countries as well —increasing the share of college education in the population per se will not do much to raise incomes generally’.

In spite of this, it has been observed that with the increase in the level of education, the returns to education increase for both males and females (Kingdon and Unni, 2001), and similarly the deprived women are likely to have better returns at the upper levels of education.

Higher education is also found to be significantly associated with the human development index and gender development index. Educating females yields a higher rate of return in developing countries and relatively much higher amongst its backward population (Summers, 1992). The life expectancy and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, which are the main components of the

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human development index, are considerably influenced by higher education. Along with this even other measures of health are significantly related to higher education. Higher education facilitates in reducing infant mortality rates, as people with higher education are well aware of the need for preventive healthcare measures and availability of general healthcare facilities, which provides sound decision-making within households regarding healthcare. This is applicable for both the general population and deprived population (Ray and Roth, 1991; Hammond, 2002; OECD, 2006). Higher education can influence the health of the population in a different way as well, through provision of skilled medical manpower to the society, thereby improving the quality and quantity of manpower in the society (Tilak, 1994).

Higher education plays a significant role in the development of a society; it affects economic development, human development, gender equality, health, life expectancy, fertility, infant mortality, and poverty (Tilak, 2001; Joshi, 2006).

Women's education is important because it determines equal opportunity in education. This argument also incorporates the view that there are substantial social and economic returns to female education that are achieved by increasing women's productivity and income level, and this leads to better educated and healthier children as well as low fertility rates in women (Schultz, 1989; Herz et al., 1991; Subbarao and Raney, 1992; Summers, 1992). Wider gender disparities demonstrate *prima facie* that a large number of potential stakeholders are denied the opportunity to participate actively in productive activities and to contribute toward faster economic development.

Investments in higher education, particularly in developing countries, has high private rates of return as measured by associated wage increases, which reflect the existence of productive opportunities in the labor market and can be observed in terms of the relation between of education and GDP per capita (World Bank, 2000; Cohen and Soto, 2001). The idea that investment in education can generate positive externalities arising from human capital has been well accepted (Bassanini, Scarpetter and Hemmings, 2001).

In the case of India, it has been evinced that the returns to higher education are above average for socially and economically deprived population as well as women (Duraismy, 2000; Tilak, 1989). Furthermore, the returns to education for higher levels of education are evidently visible in terms of differentiated returns with regard to different levels of education (Vasudeva-Dutta, 2006).

In this paper we examine the status of tribal women's participation in higher education in India. In the beginning of the paper a general argument about the significance of higher education is

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presented. We then take a look at the general scenario of Indian higher education so that while discussing the tribal women we can do so within a broader context. The subsequent part discusses a brief background of Tribals of India in general and women in particular. In the next part we examine the access and enrolment status of tribal women across various disciplines of study. Finally a few policy notes are envisaged along with the conclusion.

### **Higher Education in India**

The Indian higher education system is the third largest in the world in terms of its enrolment size, after only China and the United States. The higher education system in India has grown rapidly since the country's independence. In 1980, there were 132 universities and 4738 colleges in the country enrolling around five percent in the eligible age group of higher education. Today, India has 17973 institutions of higher learning (348 universities and 17625 colleges) making it the largest higher education system in the world in terms of number of institutions. The number of institutions is more than four times that of United States and all of Europe. Higher education in China, having the highest enrolment in the world (nearly 23 million), is organized in only about 2,500 institutions. On the other hand, the average enrolment in Indian higher education is less than 600 students, whereas a higher education institution in the United States and Europe has about 3800 students, and in China it is about 8700 students. This makes the system of higher education in India, a highly fragmented system that is far more difficult to manage than any other higher education system in the world.

The access to and participation in Indian higher education has very different dimensions. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is low in comparison to other countries, including developing countries. The GER in higher education, which has risen from 0.7% in 1950-51 to 1.4% in 1960-61, and subsequently to 11.5% in early 2006, is still very low. The world average of GER in higher education is 23.2%, with an average of 54.6% for developed countries and 36.3% for countries in transition.

Within India, disparity of access also exists by gender and geographical location. Disaggregating the GER in higher education we find that the GER of males is 13.54% and that of females is 9.35%. Although, the overall demand for higher education in India is increasing, but there are wide variations in GER across states and union territories (UTs). The GER at the higher education level ranges from as low as 5.86% in Bihar to as high as 46.39% in Delhi. The GER is less than the national average (11.55%) in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Nagaland, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. Even if we increase enrolment rates by 5% during every five-year plan period, then it would still take more than a

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quarter century to come close to the level of developed countries (Choudhary, 2008). The total enrolment in higher education institutions in India is 143,23,566 and the total enrolment of tribals is 6,09,114. The enrolment of women in general is 54,91,818 and that of tribal women is 2,19,527. This shows that the participation share of the tribal population in total higher education enrolment is 4.25%, and that of tribal women is 1.5%. The GER for women is lower than their male counter parts in the majority of the states of India, visible in both general and deprived populations (Joshi, 2007).

The Government of India is striving to raise both the enrolment rate and access to higher education for all who deserve it, irrespective of class, caste, religion, gender or economic status. During the Tenth Five-Year Plan period, the enrolment rate in higher education increased from 6% to 10% and in the Eleventh Five-Year Plan projects to raise GER up to 15% . India stands at a critical juncture in history; this is a period when population dynamics have the potential to catapult it onto a trajectory of high growth and inclusive development. Over the next 15 years, India will add 150 million people to its workforce (age-group 20-59). This will set consumption, savings and investment patterns on a new trend line, providing millions of people the chance to earn a higher income, and ameliorate their standard of living and increased quality of life. In such a forthcoming environment, inclusive growth, equity, and human development will continue to present major challenges for India (Aggrawal, 2006). If a larger section of the Indian population is not equipped with appropriate qualitative higher education, it will be difficult to accomplish the goal of higher levels of human development. In particular, the tribal populations, and tribal women especially, represent this segment of the overall population. All segments of India's population will have to be provided an equal opportunity to access and participate in higher education irrespective of their sex, caste, and geographical location.

### **Tribals of India- Identity Scenario and Women**

The term 'Tribe' or 'Tribal' is not defined anywhere in the Constitution of India. However, according to the article 342 of the Constitution of India, the tribes or tribal communities that are notified by the President of India are known as Scheduled Tribes (STs). In India, the tribal population is generally referred as '*Adivasis*,' meaning indigenous people or original inhabitants of the country. The different tribes are not homogeneous groups. The tribal population can be categorized in four groups according to their economic activities; hunting-gathering group, agricultural group, irrigation-agricultural group and industrial wages earning group.

In India, the tribal population constitutes the second largest social group, and accounts for about 9% of (equivalent to 87 millions) the total population. The government of India has recognized

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701 tribal communities as Scheduled Tribes. Each tribal community has its distinct culture, social practices, religions, dialects, and occupations (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2009). Thus, all the tribal groups are heterogeneous, and their differences are a function of the environment in which they live. The tribes are scattered in all states and union territories of India except for the states of Haryana, Punjab, Delhi, and Chandigarh. The tribes are heavily concentrated in the northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland. However, the tribal population of these four states represents a small percentage of the total Indian tribal population.

Despite the protection given to tribal population in the Constitution of India (1950), it remains the most backward segment of the population on three most important indicators of development viz., health, education, and income. The status of the tribal population is low, and is often physically and socially isolated instead of being absorbed in the mainstream population. The tribes of India also suffer from what Amartya Sen calls the “constitutive relevance” of exclusion, which arises because of their inability to relate to others, and to take part in the life of the community, and thus, can indirectly impoverish (Sen, 2000).

Currently, the tribal population lags behind very much against the general population in literacy and educational attainment. This disparity is even more marked among scheduled tribe women, who have the lowest literacy rates in the country (Maharatna, 2005). The male-female gap in literacy and educational attainment among the scheduled tribes is significant although this is a common trend in the India’s population. The participation of the tribal women in higher education is low, which is similar to their low literacy and overall educational attainment. This discrepancy in human capital attainment between the mainstream population and the tribes is particularly marked among tribal women. This trend reflects the social and cultural encompass, and degrees of gender inequality in India.

However, traditional tribal societies are undergoing a rapid change with the mainstreaming policy of the Indian government. The process of becoming a part of the mainstream for the tribal population means a declining control on their resources, and erosion of their cultural heritage. The major issues affecting the tribes in India are resource displacement as well as displacement by large projects. The exploitation of forests for industrial purposes is manifestation of resource displacement caused by deforestation. This has led to decrease in access to forest resources for tribal communities.

With increasing globalization and privatization, the land rights of tribal areas are under even greater threat since these are the regions that have a high natural resource base, and they possess tremendous potential to meet multiple market demands. More than 40% of the persons displaced

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due to large development projects are from tribal population. The non-tribal peasants, traders, businessman and other categories of aliens have moved into the tribal land (Kumar & Joshi, 2008).

More importantly displacement has been accompanied by erosion of the identity of tribal communities, which is being subsumed within the dominant culture without improving the socio-economic patterns of living.

The tribals are more backward not only in comparison to the general population, but also in comparison to the other acknowledged backward social group known as Scheduled Caste. The tribals predominantly live in rural areas. The percentage of the rural tribal population below the poverty line is 47.2%. The tribal population is overwhelmingly illiterate. The literacy rate of the tribal population is 47.10%. This is lower than that of the general population, which is 64.84%. However, the literacy rate of tribal women is 34.76 %, the lowest amongst all the various population segments in India. This low level of participation of females is also visible in the subsequent levels of education. The problem is not simply the access to higher education for tribal women, but also the equity and quality in terms of existing higher education.

A comprehensive review of the health status of tribal women shows that both the female fertility rate and the infant mortality rate are higher than the national average in tribal communities. There is a positive correlation between illiteracy and ill health. The low educational status of tribal women is reflected in the literacy rate that is much lower than that of the general population, despite a fivefold general enrolment increase in recent years (Agrawal 2000).

Tribal women also have a lower literacy rate than the tribal men. The dropout rates amongst tribal population are higher than those for the non-tribal population at all the three levels of education. Unfortunately, the dropout rates for the tribal females are more prominent and visible than their male counterparts, and non-tribal females. High poverty rates and dependence on agriculture are the root causes for child labor force participation among many of the tribes in India. The opportunity cost of attending school is much higher for the tribal women as compared to men (Joshi, 2009).

The women in the tribal community, as in other communities, constitute half of the tribal population. The wellbeing of the tribal community, as that of any other community, depends largely on the status of their women. It has been observed that except for marriage rights, the tribal women have low status in comparison to tribal men. They do not have property rights except in a matrilineal society, which is a small proportion of the tribal population. Tribal women

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are paid relatively lesser wages than their male counterparts for the same work. Several taboos discriminating against tribal women exist in many tribal groups. In addition to this, the development projects have adversely affected the livelihoods of the tribal women. (D'Souza 1989).

The provision of education at all stages of schooling (including post-secondary) amongst the tribal women has always shown the highest social returns when compared to other segments of the population. Despite knowing the fact that the linkage amongst all the three levels of education can only be a source of impetus for growth and can deliver true socio-economic empowerment, this has never been taken into consideration. Unfortunately, the investment criteria in education are far from any precise regulation, and the current intra-education allocation reflects a competition amongst the various levels of education.

### **Tribal Women- Access and Enrolment in Higher Education**

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is a widely accepted measure used to understand the extent of participation in higher education (Agrawal, 2006). According to the data of Selected Educational Statistics of Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) (2008), the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is 11.5% in Indian higher education. Segregated by gender, we find it to be 13.54% for males and 9.35% for females. The Table-1 shows the GER of scheduled tribe students in higher education.

**Table - 1-Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of Scheduled Tribe Students in Higher Education (18-24 Years)**

States	Boys	Girls	Total
Andhra Pradesh	13.9	4.70	8.55
Arunachal Pradesh	11.15	7.07	9.05
Assam	7.91	3.98	5.89
Bihar	7.61	2.67	5.20
Chhattisgarh	5.47	2.74	4.07
Gujarat	8.92	5.60	7.26
Himanchal Pradesh	20.03	16.66	18.34
Jammu & Kashmir	8.09	7.83	7.97
Jharkhand	2.02	1.02	1.51
Kerala	9.97	13.34	11.78
Madhya Pradesh	11.35	6.32	8.81
Maharashtra	9.94	6.66	8.31
Manipur	12.16	10.67	11.41
Nagaland	6.92	3.90	5.48
Mizoram	7.40	6.90	7.15
Orissa	3.16	0.32	1.69
Rajasthan	8.53	2.72	5.70
Sikkim	9.53	10.11	9.82
Tamil Nadu	5.91	3.10	4.40
Uttar Pradesh	99.93	22.12	61.03
Uttrakhand	19.83	14.88	17.36
West Bengal	4.83	2.40	3.55
A & N Islands	4.45	4.45	4.45
<b>INDIA</b>	<b>8.55</b>	<b>4.70</b>	<b>6.60</b>

Source: Selected Educational Statistics, MHRD, 2008.

In India, the GER for tribal population at all levels of higher education is 6.60%. Segregated by gender, we find it to be 8.55% for males and 4.70% for females. The GER for tribal population is lower than even the second largest deprived group known as Scheduled Castes (SCs). The same is true for the tribal women, in comparison to the women of general or other deprived population of India (Thorat, 2006).

There are considerable variations between the males and females, and similarly there are also considerable inter-state variations also. It shows that access to higher education amongst tribal females is much lower as compared to their male counterparts and other categories of the Indian female population. Within tribal population there is also widespread disparity across various states/regions of India. The states where GER of tribals in higher education is higher than the national average (11.55%) are Uttarakhand (17.36%), Himanchal Pradesh (18.34%), Uttar Pradesh (61.03%), and Kerala (11.78%). However, these states also have noticeable disparity between males and females except for Kerala. In many states, the GER in higher education amongst the tribal population is far below the national average, along with the male-female disparity. The states with such characteristics include West Bengal (male- 4.83%, female-2.40%), Orissa (male-3.16%, female-0.32%), Jharkhand (male-2.02%, female-1.02%), Chattisgarh (male-5.47%, female-2.74%), Nagaland (male-6.92%, female-3.90%) and Tripura (male-4.60%, female-2.23%). This explicitly reveals that the gap between the male and female GER urgently needs to be addressed. Whilst we are aiming to achieve the knowledge economy objectives; a large section of tribal population still lags behind considerably, and within this population the women are the most affected.

The Gender Parity Index (GPI) is an appropriate measure to analyze this disparity between males and females. Gender Parity Index (GPI) is calculated by dividing girls' GER by boys' GER of a given level of education. It measures progress towards gender equity in education. When the GPI shows a value equal to 1 at any level of education, it connotes that there is no gender disparity at that level of education. The GPI for Indian tribal students in higher education is found to be 0.55. The GPI for tribal students in many states reveals a very gloomy picture. The GPI is very low in states like Bihar (0.35), Andhra Pradesh (0.36), Orissa (0.10), Rajasthan (0.32) and West Bengal (0.50). It reflects discriminatory treatment being extended to females. But States like Goa (1.30) and Kerala (1.34) reflect equity achieved status.

Another important issue that requires immediate attention is the transition rate between the higher secondary and the higher education. Unfortunately, no precise and reliable data is available although it is very clear that the transition rate must be low amongst tribals.

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According to SES of MHRD (2008); 6,09,114 tribal students have enrolled in higher education institutions, which is 4.25% of the total enrolment (aggregate of tribal and non-tribal population). Amongst the total tribal students enrolled; 3,89,587 (63.96%) are males and 2,19,527 (36.04 %) are females. About 40 % of the total enrolled tribal female students in higher education are pursuing their studies in the field of social sciences and arts. Nearly 34.5% of the tribal women are pursuing Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), with further 4.7% pursuing Master of Arts (M.A.) degree. Similarly, in the commerce faculty, of the total number of enrolled tribal female students in higher education, about 8.4% are pursuing Bachelor of Commerce degree (B.Com.) and 1.9% are pursuing Master of Commerce degree (M.Com.). In science faculty, of the total tribal female students in higher education, about 8.52 % are pursuing Bachelor of Science programme (B.Sc.) whilst further 0.82 % are pursuing Master of Science (M.Sc.) degree.

Around 1.85 % of the total enrolled female tribal students in higher education are pursuing undergraduate course in Education (B.Ed) and Physical Education. Similarly, only 0.35% of tribal women are pursuing Ph.D.- programme amongst the total enrolled students of this background.

When considering the technical and professional courses in terms of the total enrolment of tribal female students in higher education in India; around 6.81% are studying Bachelor of Engineering/Bachelor of Architecture course and 1.9% are enrolled in polytechnics. If we look at the Gender Parity Index (GPI) in engineering faculty, it shows a biased and non-preferential attitude of females towards this programme. This attitude is also reflected in the case of non-tribal female students. However, a change in this attitude is reflected by the increase of female participation.

Around 3.81% of the total enrolled female tribal students in higher education are pursuing courses in the faculty of medicine (including Dentistry, Nursing, Ayurvedic, Unani and Homeopathy). Further 13.81% are enrolled in various courses of open universities.

When we compare the male and female enrolment amongst the tribal candidates across the non-technical courses, two notable points stand out. First, there is a difference in terms of male and female enrolment at the undergraduate level. However, at the postgraduate level, there is less difference in the male-female enrolment numbers. The results show tribal females are going further in their education, a trend visible in other segments of the Indian population too. Second, the enrolment of both males and females is higher in the faculty of arts and social sciences. The reason for this higher enrolment is the low cost of course completion, lenient attendance norms and a higher passing rate. Even the non-regular attendance could partially compensate for the opportunity cost of studying. This is particular true for females.

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Along with limited access to education, the issue of dropout amongst the tribal women in higher education needs to be addressed. The high costs of providing education along with the opportunity costs (the need to work in fields, home, and other productive activities) contribute to the high dropout rates associated with post-secondary education, including boarding, lodging, books and learning materials. These impose a financial burden on low-income tribal families. It has been observed that females are of more help to their families when it comes to domestic chores and fieldwork. Irrespective of level of education females in the general population and tribal groups are expected even at a very early age to help with domestic chores more than boys at a very early age (Vasavi, 2002). It has been found that a strong relationship between monetary returns associated with education and schooling decisions exists. For girls, the relationship is positive and in most cases highly statistically significant though the cost of attending school still acts as a barrier to schooling for poor females (Kingdon and Theopold, 2008). The same is true of the poor tribal females.

While the benefits of providing higher education to the tribal women for the welfare of society in general and their families in particular are well understood, education's role in reducing gender inequality and benefiting women themselves is less clearly reflected in the state policies. The state has to recognize that education is a critical component of the strategies to empower women, especially poor and rural women (Patel, 1998).

It is well documented that higher education enhances women's well-being, strengthens their voice in household decisions, improves their opportunities to participate in community affairs and the labor market, and gives them greater autonomy to determine the conditions of their lives. The empirical literature suggests that higher education is a necessary investment for achieving gender equality and improving the lives of tribal women. Access to higher education is also likely to develop positive self-image, self-respect, self-confidence; as well as - poise, independent thinking, and leadership.(Maslak and Singhal, 2008).

Especially in rural areas, access to higher education is constrained by poverty, lack of resources, high opportunity cost, inadequate infrastructure, and low emphasis on education. An important question to ask is, how effective would access to higher education be for tribal women in rural areas? One measure of that effectiveness would be the subsequent opportunities that were offered as a result of the education acquired. Higher education is the only mean to reduce the overwhelming dependence of the tribal community on agriculture in rural areas. In order to facilitate their participation in the non-farm sector, policies of educational and skill improvement are particularly necessary (Thorat & Mahamallik, 2005).

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**Conclusion and Policy Notes**

Despite constitutional protection and assurances, even after more than five decades after independence, the status of tribal women is lower than tribal men, and lower than all other segments of women in the general population. Tribal women are faced with over-work, the invasion of sexually exploitative market forces in tribal society, illiteracy, sub-human physical living conditions, high fertility, and high malnutrition.

The low educational status of tribal women is reflected in their lower literacy rate, lower enrolment rate, and high dropouts at all levels of education. In India, for example, the literacy rate of the rural tribal female is the lowest of all segments of the population. There is gender bias in the literacy of tribal population as in other groups. Although there has been a seven-fold increase in the literacy of tribal females, it still remains much lower than the national average for females. Despite the persistence of gender disparity in higher education in most of the tribal regions in India, planning measures have rarely mentioned gender disparity as an issue, or introduced policies to overcome it. Along with this, there has been lack of coherent policy regarding women's access to education in general and to higher education in particular. It is logical to think that the quality and type of education received at the primary and secondary level will affect post-secondary educational enrolment. The irrelevancy and poor quality of educational materials affect the enrolment of girls' at the primary and secondary levels. Therefore, in the majority of the tribal regions where quality of basic education is particularly low for girls, improvement of basic educational opportunities may ultimately increase women's access to higher education.

The specific interventions introduced need to be assessed against the backdrop of the specific constraints to women's participation in tribal region. The important questions are: What factors inhibit gender parity at the higher education level? Which interventions (if any) have been introduced to overcome these identified constraints? Which are examples of successful interventions? Are regional tribal variations posing constraints or working as effective interventions?

The constraints on female participation amongst the tribal population in higher education vary across the regions. However, there are certain common patterns in constraints that affect women's participation in post-secondary education. One of the foremost constraints for limited participation in higher education is because of the small pool of tribal students completing secondary school. It is necessary to raise female enrolments at the secondary level for increasing their participation in higher education. Various socio-economic barriers and opportunity costs

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are the other significant constraints affecting the participation of tribal women in higher education.

The most acclaimed policy (by politicians) for enhancing the access for tribal population is the reservation policy, which is often termed as *Quota*. The central government has made a provision of 7% reservation in educational institutions and jobs for the tribal population. The percentage of this reservation varies across different states. The reservation has been fixed as per the share of tribal population in total population of each state. Has this been an effective affirmative action? The answer is no in terms of generating effectiveness for the tribal population.

Reservations or quotas can be methods for promoting affirmative action but are not affirmative action *per se*. Affirmative action is different from a reservation or quota in sense that it is open-ended and without any fixed number as in reservation (Gupta, 2005).

Both central and state governments have introduced many schemes for the tribal population to increase access to higher education. However, these schemes failed to accomplish its objectives. All these policies need to be evaluated to comprehend its accomplishment status.

Provision of effective financial incentives, such as financial aid and free tuition, transportation and accommodation, are widely suggested interventions. However, the direct and opportunity costs of higher education as well as lack of opportunity, serves as a deterrent to tribal female participation and has to be recognized. Higher education in India is already subsidized yet this is not sufficient. Therefore the scholarships or other financial assistance as a means to increase female participation in higher education must be substantial. Provision for financial assistance is likely to be most effective in areas where the scarce resources of poor families affect the parents' abilities to send girls to participate in higher education.

Disparities in educational attainments and participation of tribal women are related to sub-castes and geographical location. In addition to these, other influencing indicators include the following: income, gender, region and place of residence. Therefore, we need to develop a meaningful and comprehensive framework, exclusively for women, which would account for the multi-dimensionality of differences that still persists amongst the tribes. A deprivation index could be used to provide weighted scores for tribal women, and cumulative score could be used to supplement the financial assistance.

Considering the access disparities between the male and female tribal students in higher education, the government will have to frame exclusive policies for encouraging the female participation in higher education. Keeping in view the externalities and greater returns to higher

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education, it is imperative to evolve effective intervention programmes. Both government and non-governmental agencies will have to be active for enhancing the access and enrolment for the largest impoverished and marginalized gender group of Indian population.

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