

Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Women in Higher Education in India and The Fight for Democratization

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Dear Higher Education,

The Indian higher education system is reeling under a crisis. One that has never looked as grim as it does today.

In 2014, the major right-wing political party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), came to power in India. The BJP has significant ideological and institutional links to the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), a hyper-nationalist, Hindu paramilitary organization. The impetus of the organization is to spread the “Hindu Discipline” and ultimately create a Hindu Nation in India. The organization is historically associated with anti-muslim, anti-women, and casteist movements. The organization has a self-professed vision of creating second-class citizens for various social groups, especially women in its determination to create a predominantly Hindu State. In 2019, the BJP was re-elected with a super majority, with overwhelming financial and ideological support from the corporate sector. Electoral power in India, as in the rest of the world today, is determined by financial support from the corporate sector. According to the Association of Democratic Reform reports, in the year 2017, the BJP received 705 crores (out of 900) in corporate donations, and 90% of the corporate donations, 850 crores, in 2022-23. The figures are important to understand the embeddedness of corporate power in right-wing ideology. This has been particularly detrimental to higher educational spaces.

Since 2014, several higher educational spaces have been under attack by the BJP-RSS regime for promoting “anti-national” ideologies. Any efforts to create a democratic and free academic space have been scrutinized and termed as contradictory to State ideology. Apart from student and faculty activists being stifled, arrested under the draconian UAPA law¹, and or suspended for resisting the systemic closure of public universities, fee hikes, student suicides, neo-liberal policies, and so on (Thapliya 89) even our classrooms are no longer safe spaces. India’s academic freedom index has been on a sharp decline since 2014. Institutional autonomy, academic and cultural freedom of expression, and institutional integrity were some identified spaces where academic freedom was curtailed the most (AFI Update 7). Moreover, the lack of a legal framework to protect the academic freedom of students and faculty was emphasized. (ibid). Not only did India see one of its lowest educational budgets in the year 2022-23, with an allocation of a mere 2.9% of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but the existing funds for educational schemes for Minorities remain unspent (Mohammed). Fund cuts, cancellation of scholarships and fellowships, closure of public universities, contract-based faculty positions, and arbitrary suspension of students and faculty have all contributed to an insecure, fragmented, and crisis-ridden university space. The Covid-19 pandemic worsened the situation. The enrollment ratio of women drastically declined due to a variety of factors like early marriage, forced employment, inaccessibility to digital

¹ The Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, amended in 2019, is a draconian law that allows the arrest of any citizen under the suspicion of terrorist activities, without any judicial process. In the BJP regime, from 2015-2020, 8371 individuals have been arrested without trial.

devices, and privileging the education of the male child due to poverty (Chaudhary). The country also witnessed a grave increase in the dropout rate of students with a secondary school dropout rate as high as 17%.

The enactment of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is significant to this crisis. The latest policy document encourages “self-financed” courses which entail higher fees, and digital education, without considering the digital divide in the country, and the concept of “multiple exits” which allow students to “voluntarily” drop out at any year of the course, thus negating social, economic, and political factors that force students to drop out of college. These measures are not only extremely exclusionary to marginalized castes, the lower classes, and women (AIFRTE 14) but also dilute scientific learning and thinking by restricting public pedagogic spaces that can nurture discourse, experimentation, and free thinking. I argue that it is imperative to place the question of women in higher education in India, with this context in the background.

I was barely 18 when I moved from Bangalore to the capital city, for my undergraduate bachelor’s degree in English Honors at Hindu College, Delhi University. Up until then, I lived in the same city, went to the same school, and was cemented inside an Urban “apolitical” bubble that was devoid of any understanding of the socio-political environment outside of myself. Understandably, it came as a shock to me when I saw a banner outside of Delhi University that read “*Hum Bharat Ki Mata Nahi Banenge*”² (We will not become the Mother of India). The banner was being erected by members of a women’s movement who were preparing for a night-long march across campus to reclaim the night and protest the imposed curfew on women students at Delhi University. The group sang and danced to the lyrics, “*The desire for nights where the moon and the star are not glimpsed through barbed wires, where the sky is not forbidden through rods, through gates and locks.*” I was mesmerized by this imagination. It showed the possibilities for a freer, and democratic campus.

By using the slogan of *Bharat Mata*, they not only wanted to reiterate their dissent against the masculinist “protection” of women as *Bharat Mata*, rooted in conservative right-wing politics but also create a community for women to theorize, resist, and hold discussions in the university about feminist movements and the possibilities of negotiation for a more democratic campus. It created a narrative that approached the question of women’s safety, freedom, and rights in the university outside of conservative, protectionist, and surveillance mechanisms. As anticipated, these women were harassed, trolled, and even threatened with violence for their “anti-national” protests and were threatened time and again by right-wing student groups. However, this is the case for every progressive student movement today in India.

I decided to join them, and undoubtedly, despite all their shortcomings, a new world opened to me. This was as much a part of my education as the classroom was. All spaces of the institution contribute towards its pedagogy. As somebody invested in the future of a more accessible, free, and progressive higher education system, I want to argue for the relevance of democratic spaces for women in higher education, and the importance of collectivization to identify, theorize, and resist injustice and discrimination. I want to make two simple points in this chapter: The importance of emphasizing democratic higher educational institutes by reflecting on the experiences of women students that challenge the current political landscape in India and secondly, the contextualization of higher education in India beyond the concept of representation and the “leaky pipeline.”

² The figure of the *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) originated in Bengali Literature in the late 19th Century. The imagery has since become a personification of nationalism in India. The image of Mother India is depicted by a goddess in a red or saffron saree holding the national flag. The goddess preserves the culture and purity of the country, like the body of a woman as a site of honour and purity – something that is always at threat of being conquered. Symbolizing countries as “female” refers to their ability to be conquered, and is inherently sexist in its portrayal.

Higher Education and Women in India: Beyond Representation and the Leaky Pipeline:

The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) Report 2020-21 found that women's enrollment in higher education is almost at parity with men, comprising 49% of the total enrollment. While the pandemic affected the enrollment ratio of women students in the country, Indian universities have never experienced the contemporary volume of female student admissions. While positive in theory, there are of course a myriad of complexities that follow this data like the disappearance of women in employment after college, the conception of educational degrees as modern dowries, and the cultural barriers that restrict women from migrating away from home to study in the university of their choice, to name a few. The issue of representation of women in educational degrees and the problem of the "leaky pipeline" which refers to the absence of women in higher leadership positions has been well documented and analyzed in Indian and global feminist academia (Blickenstaff 369; Coley, Gressel and Dhillon; Yousaf and Schmiede 3). Researchers have pointed out how women are left out or underrepresented in decision-making, STEM fields, faculty positions, research grants, vice-chancellor, and dean positions, and so on. They have argued for gender sensitization, affirmative action policies, career guidance and counseling for girls, etc. However, what remains understudied is how these women negotiate for democratic spaces once they reach the university and how networks of power in neo-liberal higher education operate to "keep them in check."

With the neoliberal turn in the Indian economy, the promise of a publicly funded education to achieve equality and improve quality of life weakened. The epistemology of the university witnessed a paradigm shift, where creating perfect neo-liberal subjects (Foucault x) to compete in the world economy was prioritized. However, the reliance on education to imagine a better future remained, and with it, the battle for the re-negotiation of education as a greater public good. Surajit Mazumder (22-23) argues that the excessive expansion of higher education has created a diverse social composition, closing the gap between castes, classes, and genders. However, the public expenditure on education is negligible and further reducing. He situates neoliberalism as the backdrop for the increasing unrest amongst students who are faced with the complexities of the neoliberal higher educational space. On the one hand, they are reminded time and again that their education is a luxury and not a right, with extreme financial burdens on their families. This creates a more submissive, insecure, and conformist student base. However, with the increasing diversity on the other hand, they have no choice but to resist the neoliberal policies like fee hikes, canceling of stipends/fellowships, self-financed courses, scrapping of affirmative action policies, and so on, of the higher education system as it is no longer "out there but within institutional spaces" (Ibid, p. 26). This is especially true for women in higher educational spaces today.

The educated woman is a threat. This statement has been historically consistent, with some changes in context. In the contemporary imagination, the assertive educated women who negotiate for democratic spaces are received with the most severe political backlash. The recent Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) protests in 2020 in New Delhi are the perfect example that not only demonstrates how marginalized women negotiate democratic spaces in the university and outside but also how they threaten the status quo of neoliberal higher education.

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was proposed in December 2019 which outlined the granting of citizenship in India based on religion, for persecuted minorities in neighboring countries. The Act deliberately omitted "Muslims" from the list of people eligible for citizenship in the country while mentioning Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and Jain. Additionally, it also aimed to identify "illegal migrants," while enabling only non-Muslims to regain lost citizenship. The legislation was received by widespread protests across the country, with universities at the forefront of the resistance. What is remarkable about the CAA protests is that it was predominantly Muslim women who came to the streets and fought for their rights. The CAA demonstrations were the longest women-led civic movement in Indian History (Mustafa 2020), resulting in a 101-day sit-in by Muslim Women in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh. Along with their resistance against CAA, the women also remarked how universities were not safe spaces for their Muslim daughters (Kadiwal 10).

Jamia Milia Islamia University (JMIU) became the center for the CAA protests. After several protest demonstrations by the students of JMIU in the streets of Delhi, the Delhi Police broke into the campus on December 15th, 2019, and physically assaulted students and attacked them with batons and tear gas. The powerful image of Muslim women outside of JMIU resisting police brutality during the protest demonstrations was a viral sensation in the Indian media. It questioned the narrative of minority women as submissive and conformist

At the same time, it also presented the significance of public pedagogy and a democratic institution as a right. Their slogans, songs, and resistance against the right-wing neoliberal government, are unforgettable in the discourse of Higher Education in India. The political backlash against the threat of the educated woman followed soon after. In December 2021, a Government Pre-University College in Udupi, Karnataka³ imposed an arbitrary hijab ban on Muslim students on the college campus. In the name of uniformity, the college stated that women would no longer be allowed to wear a hijab inside of campus. The arbitrary rule spread to other districts and universities in Karnataka, where far-right groups not only forced women to take off their hijab when they were on campus but also wore saffron scarves in some instances (the symbol of Hindutva) to declare who was in power. The High Court of Karnataka upheld the hijab ban in March 2022 and claimed that the hijab is not an essential religious practice in Islam.

A report published by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) on the Hijab Ban estimated that 1010 Muslim women students dropped out of universities after the arbitrary hijab ban in Karnataka (2023). It is no coincidence that the hijab row took place within a year of the anti-CAA protest demonstrations by Muslim women on university campuses and the streets. The political backlash responds to the threat of the educated woman.

I refer to this elaborate example to make two points: the women's question in higher education stems beyond their enrollment and their absence in some positions and or academic fields. It is an important academic exercise to study the life worlds of women in higher education and how they resist power and authority to carve a democratic space to not only theorize, imagine, and exercise academic freedom, but also merely exist in a safe space and receive a quality education. The recent mass-scale protests at IIT-BHU⁴ and Indraprastha University, Delhi⁵ against sexual assault and demand for redressal mechanisms is an example of how women strive to merely exist in a safe higher educational space. Secondly, it is relevant to understand the structures of power that women threaten when they occupy spaces in higher education and assert their right to equality and basic human rights. Especially in the contemporary political fabric, questions around women's rights and far-right governance become crucial. It is important to ask, who occupies these structures of power and what are the social, political, and economic fabric of the institutions that support these structures? I believe that these are incredibly relevant endeavors for the academic community.

*Sincerely,
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³ Karnataka is a State in the Southern part of India with the ruling BJP government at the time of the hijab ban.

⁴ Mass scale protests led by women students erupted at the Indian Institute of Technology Banaras Hindu University after a female student was molested and held at gunpoint in November 2023.

⁵ Women students of Indraprastha University in Delhi took the streets in March 2023, after several women students were molested by men who broke into the university during a college fest by climbing the university walls

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