



Higher Education in Maharashtra: More Promises to Keep and Many Miles to Go

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ABSTRACT

Maharashtra has one of the largest higher education systems in India and a rich legacy of educational and social reform. However, despite its strong institutional base, several challenges continue to affect its overall performance. This paper examines the status of higher education in Maharashtra using data from the AISHE 2020–21 report and compares the state's performance with Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana. The study analyses key indicators, including Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), college density, gender participation, enrolment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and institutional capacity. The findings reveal that Maharashtra lags behind several southern states in college density, women's participation, GER, and effective utilization of educational infrastructure. The paper also identifies concerns related to declining enrolment in rural institutions, limited participation of disadvantaged groups, and employability challenges. Based on these observations, it suggests measures such as expanding access to higher education, strengthening open and distance learning, improving institutional utilization, supporting disadvantaged communities, and adopting policy reforms to enhance equity, quality, and overall educational outcomes.

KEYWORDS: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), Educational Access, Higher Education Policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The State of Maharashtra stands second in terms of number of universities and colleges next to Uttar Pradesh as per the AISHE Report for 2020-21. Sincere thanks to the long line of socio-political leaders of Maharashtra in the 19th and 20th century who realized that education is the most effective tool of social transformation and ceaselessly worked for it. As the result of their efforts the state higher education has many reasons to be proud of.

2. CONTRIBUTION OF THE PAPER

1. Provides a comprehensive comparative assessment of Maharashtra's higher education system against leading southern Indian states using AISHE 2020–21 data, identifying critical gaps in enrolment, equity, institutional utilization, and educational access.

2. Proposes practical and policy-oriented recommendations to improve Gross Enrolment Ratio, strengthen inclusion of women and disadvantaged communities, optimize existing educational infrastructure, and enhance the quality and effectiveness of higher education in Maharashtra.

Higher Education in the State

As per the said AISHE report, the State has 71 (6.37%) universities (inclusive of all types) out of 1113 in the country, and 4,532 (10.34%) colleges out of 43,796 in the country. The state has 34 colleges per one lakh eligible population (falling in the age group of 18 to 23) against the national average of 31 colleges.

In the year 2020-21, the student enrolment in higher education in the state was 45,46,149 which are 10.98% of the total enrolment in the country. Of these, 37,36,253 students were enrolled in regular mode and 8,09,896 in distance mode. Of the total enrolment in the state, 34,93,976 (76.85%) are enrolled in UG courses and rest in other post graduate, certificate and diploma courses.

Of these, 10,87,805 (23.92%) are enrolled in 71 universities and their units, 31,09,780 (68.40%) were enrolled in 4531 colleges and 3,48,564 (7.66%) in 2110 standalone institutes in the state. The average enrolment per university is 15,321, per college 672 and per stand-alone institute 151 students. The GER of higher education of the state is 34.92% against 27.3% of the country.

Points of Concern

Despite these facts, there are many parameters set by AISHE, where Maharashtra lags behind other states. For example, in terms of density of colleges, the states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu have 62, 49 and 40 colleges respectively per lakh eligible population whereas Maharashtra has only 34 colleges. In case of GER also, many states outdo Maharashtra's GER (34.9), like Tamil Nadu (46.9), Uttarakhand (45.7), Kerala (43.2), Sikkim (39.9) Telangana (39.1) Himachal Pradesh (38.7) Andhra Pradesh (37.2), and Karnataka (36).

In spite of Maharashtra's glorious legacy of social workers like Balshastri Jambhekar, the Tarkhadkar brothers, Gopal Hari Deshmukh, Pandit Vishnu Parasuram Shastri, Sir, R G Bhandarkar, Narayan Mahadev Parmanand, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar, K. T. Telang, Pandita Ramabai, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Rajrishi Sahahu Maharaj, Dr B R Ambedkar and Dhondo Keshav Karve, most of whom focused on women education and their issues, the GER of the women in the state higher education is not as much high as is expected. Out of the total student enrolment of 45,46,149 in the state, 24,91,897 are male and 20,54,252 (45.18%) are female. The GER for females in all categories is highest in Chandigarh with 66.1. In Tamil Nadu the female GER is 50.18% in Karnataka 49.86%.

There are only 4912 foreign students in the state, Karnataka and Punjab with 8137 and 6557 occupy the first two positions. In Pupil Teacher Ratio also, many states like Karnataka, Andhra, Telangana even Odisha are better placed.

Comparison with Other Southern States in India

In the present paper, it is attempted to see why the states like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana are ahead of Maharashtra in terms of density of college, GER in general and GER in women. Attempt is made here to draw comparison of Maharashtra with these states because all these states are from south India and they share some common social background. Other States/UTs are excluded here because Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Sikkim are small states and Chandigarh, and Pondicherry, are union territories.

The first thing to see will be the eligible (population falling in the age group between 18 to 23 years) population in these states.

Table No. 1 Eligible Population (18 to 23 years) 2020-21*

Sl. No.	State	All categories			SC			ST			Age group (18 to 23)
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
1	Andhra Pradesh	2758000	2585200	5343200	505568	482811	988379	142010	149915	291925	44 27 000
2	Karnataka	3512600	3273800	6786400	622656	595770	1218426	253260	238408	491668	56 24 400
3	Kerala	1624200	1537800	3126000	147230	139108	286338	24680	24800	49480	26 31 600
4	Tamil Nadu	3660800	3447000	7107800	793370	765524	1558894	40660	40321	80391	58 93 000
5	Telangana	2072600	1950000	4022600	336966	316547	653513	185788	1787513	364539	93477
6	Maharashtra	6878600	6137600	13016200	838070	772706	1610776	599663	600462	1200125	10788200

Now, one has to see the status of GER in terms of gender and social categories in these states along with Maharashtra.

Table No. 2 GER in Terms of Gender and Social Categories

Sl. No.	States	All categories			SC			ST		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1	Andhra Pradesh	38.3	36.0	37.2	34.0	33.2	33.6	34.1	29.6	31.8
2	Karnataka	34.8	37.2	36.0	25.3	25.9	25.6	23.2	23.6	23.4
3	Kerala	34.5	52.3	43.2	23.4	44.6	33.7	23.1	35.1	29.1
4	Tamil Nadu	45.4	48.6	46.9	34.7	38.9	36.8	42.9	38.2	40.6
5	Telangana	37.4	40.9	39.1	31.8	39.3	35.4	34.2	33.3	33.7
6	Maharashtra	36.2	33.5	34.9	34.6	33.1	33.9	18.6	14.4	16.5

The table points to the fact that the GER of SCs in Maharashtra is lower than Tamil Nadu and Telangana and that of STs is lowest among all these states. Quite interestingly, the GER of SC females in all these states except that

in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra is higher than the GER of male students the state like Kerala and Karnataka have higher female GER in ST category than their male counterparts. **The state of Maharashtra has to work hard in this area to compete or outdo the other states in comparison.**

The state wise GER of other groups like OBCs, Persons with Disability, Muslims, other Minorities and EWSs is not available in AISHE report for 2020-21; however, the enrolment in number is available.

Table No. 3 Enrolment of OBC, Muslims and Other Minority Groups

Sl. No.	States	OBC			Muslims			Other Minorities		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1	Andhra Pradesh	463929	386063	849992	28338	23313	51651	5727	4301	10028
2	Karnataka	565089	573864	1138953	72487	65871	138358	36086	45593	81679
3	Kerala	270266	426085	696351	68170	102759	170929	51334	63552	114886
4	Tamil Nadu	963357	972604	1935961	65103	49869	114972	76594	85648	162242
5	Telangana	328401	335695	664096	65893	63061	128954	3769	5896	9665
6	Maharashtra	723073	583566	1306639	79148	71656	150804	42054	39620	81674

Table No. 3.1 Enrolment of Persons with Disability and Economically Weaker Sections

Sl. No.	States	Persons with Disabilities			EWS		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1	Andhra Pradesh	1659	957	2616	15650	14068	29718
2	Karnataka	2665	1830	4495	15920	35128	51048
3	Kerala	2103	1888	3991	6189	10363	16552
4	Tamil Nadu	2831	2038	4869	20557	18667	39224
5	Telangana	1761	1343	3104	7201	7214	14415
6	Maharashtra	3949	2214	6163	299 53	21698	51651

Here the comparison of GER in these groups is not possible as no census of these categories is available. The enrolment figures of these groups may mislead against the given eligible population of these groups in these states. Maharashtra is the largest state in size and population and financial resources among the states held here in comparison.

Table No. 4. Colleges, their Density and Average Enrolment

Sl. No.	State	No. Of Colleges	No. of Colleges per Lakh Population	Average Enrolment			
				All Colleges	Govt. Colleges	Private Unaided Colleges	Private Aided Colleges
1	Andhra Pradesh	2601	49	541	604	519	851
2	Karnataka	4223	62	392	688	291	679

3	Kerala	1448	50	531	510	422	1241
4	Tamil Nadu	2667	40	838	1250	634	1851
5	Telangana	2062	53	556	685	540	643
6	Maharashtra	4532	34	672	570	436	1293

It is evident here that all the states understudy has more colleges per lakh eligible population than in the state of Maharashtra. All states except Kerala have more enrolment in govt colleges than in Maharashtra; it means the govt colleges in the state are not utilizing their resources for higher enrolment while private aided colleges in the state are working better than other states except Tamil Nadu where every such college is having 1851 as average enrolment. Even the private unaided colleges in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Telangana are performing better than the colleges in the Maharashtra state. Tamil Nadu outdoes Maharashtra in all terms.

Table No. 5 Enrolment in the Universities

Sl. No.	State	No. Of Universities	Grand Total Enrolment			Average Enrolment
			Male	Female	Total	
1	Andhra Pradesh	45	209150	161584	370734	8238
2	Karnataka	72	232402	206400	438802	6094
3	Kerala	23	188031	259644	447675	19464
4	Tamil Nadu	59	426080	378304	804384	13633
5	Telangana	31	127814	101638	229452	7401
6	Maharashtra	71	632741	455064	1087805	15321

It is clear here that universities in Kerala have more average enrolment than in Maharashtra.

Table No. 6 Enrolment in the Stand-Alone Institutions

Sl. No.	State	Number of Stand-Alone Institutions	Enrolment in Number of Stand-Alone Institutions			Average per institution Enrolment
			Male	Female	Total	
1	Andhra Pradesh	654	65711	52617	118328	170
2	Karnataka	1230	120248	90183	210431	132
3	Kerala	369	45678	29651	75329	200
4	Tamil Nadu	891	229719	36185	265904	297
5	Telangana	448	49172	40417	89589	196
6	Maharashtra	2110	195829	129846	325675	151

Here again, one finds that despite having largest number of standalone institutions in Maharashtra, the average per institution enrolment second lowest.

All these figures of enrolment in all universities, colleges and stand-alone institutions show that these institutions do not have much enrolment as compared to others states in comparison. It means that these infrastructural resources are not used to their full as used in other states.

Few Other Concerns

These issues apart, the aided colleges those running traditional courses like Arts, Commerce, and Science in the rural areas are facing acute issue of falling enrolment and that of presence of the students in the college and classrooms. The picture in the engineering colleges in rural areas and that of education colleges in the last decade is not far different. However, it is matter of inquiry that on the one hand the enrolment in the higher education in the state seems to be growing but the same is not seen in the traditional colleges. In the wake of the NEP2020, implementing the CBCS pattern in the rural colleges with limited number of faculties has worsened the matter. CBCS pattern appears to have become another ritual in these colleges where no other technical exposure is available.

Some Measures to Address the GER and Other Issues in Maharashtra

a. Density of College

Given the huge population of the state, perhaps second to UP only, there is an urgent need opening more colleges and institutes of higher education. To increase the GER of girls, there should be a UG college at the distance of 15 KMs. The best option would be that every higher secondary school (known as junior college) is sanctioned a UG college. It will offer continuity in the classes and would definitely increase GER of the state.

b. Special Concession to Girl Students to Pursue Higher Education

As explained earlier, the state lacks behind of all these southern states in terms of enrolment of girls belonging to all sections of the society. All the girls (and boys also) pursuing higher education till PhD be given free travel pass in state run transport services (and in trains also). Apart from the facilities and scholarships, free-ships, there is a need of incentivizing the girls for higher education. Instead of the 50% concession to all women being implemented in the state, this scheme would work as a booster dose to higher education of the girls in the state. Education is an empowerment tool and it needs state support instead of popular support schemes to live life to all randomly.

c. Focus on GER

There is an urgent need to focus on single faculty colleges in the state (the exact number of single faculty colleges in the state is not mentioned in the AISHER report). The infrastructure available with required additions can be used to enroll more students of other faculties positively increasing the GER of higher education of the state.

The issue of colleges with less enrolment needs to be addressed on individual basis. The root causes like want of transport facility, lack of interest, concerns of parents and absence of awareness about education (in case of girl students) need to be solved.

Recent reports in the newspaper have some facts to the notice that there are many stand- alone institutes in the states particularly teacher training institutes (popularly known as D Ed. colleges) and polytechnics were facing issue of less or no admissions there. These are likely to be closed down. Same was reported in case of engineering

colleges in the state. Such dysfunctional and low performing institutes (polytechnics / Education/ Nursing colleges with less enrolment) be given permission to run multi-disciplinary course using the infrastructure there. It is reported that there are 2110 stand-alone institutes, perhaps highest number in the southern states but having second lowest enrolment there. The same can be done with the Engineering colleges which are likely to be closed down. This, if done, will definitely increase GER of the state.

d. Addressing the Minority Groups and Tribal Groups

Though number of Muslim minority learners higher than the other states in comparison, it would appear very small when it is seen against the huge population of the Muslims in the state. It is evident that there is no census of the Muslims in the state though there are some areas, better say Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies densely populated by the Muslims. There are no special schemes for the Muslims in the state. The state cannot afford to keep such a large chunk of its population away from higher education. Instead of starting Urdu medium schools in Muslim areas (Interestingly, Urdu is not language of the Muslims, it was the language of the bygone Nizam State of Hyderabad before 1948), there is need of starting schools and colleges in Marathi / Hindi and English medium for generating employment for them.

The same is true in case of the scheduled tribes. There are some belts identified as tribal areas in the state, however, there is need of more concentrated efforts for developing awareness among them to bring them to higher education. Financial provisions in all schemes will not be sufficient. Some educated boys and girls in every village belonging to the same identified communities need to be recognized as Shiksha Mitra or Shiksha Doot and assigned job on incentive basis of finding and enrolling the youths of minority and tribal communities in higher education.

e. Exploring the ODL mode

ODL has emerged as the cost effective and viable mode of learning in the recent years. It is recorded earlier that only 20% of the total enrolment in the state is in distance mode. It needs to be increased. There is worrying dropout at the school level. There doesn't seem to be much awareness about the availability of opportunity offered by the NIOS (National Institute of Open Schooling). It needs to be encouraged to work more effectively in the state to address the dropout issue at the school level. The innovative scheme of Shiksha Mitra or Shiksha Doot will do wonderful job in finding and enrolling such dropout youths through NIOS and then to higher education.

As suggested above every junior college (higher secondary school) be allowed to run UG classes in regular mode as well as in distance and open mode by offering the required basic training to the teaching staff working there.

f. Special Institute for PwDs in the State

Again, the state does not have an exact data of the persons with disability in the state, therefore, one does not find any specific scheme for such persons to encourage and support them in higher education apart from the scholarships and ramps in the building. This sizeable section of population does not find enough space in higher education in Maharashtra. A state level residential institute (like that of Shakuntala Mishra National Rehabilitation

University established by Divyangjan Sashaktikaran Vibhag Uttar Pradesh, Government of Uttar Pradesh in 2008) for all types PwDs in the state is immediately required to increase their GER and participation in state employment.

g. Employability Issue

The plan of starting UG colleges in those low performing stand-alone institutes (polytechnics) and engineering and technology colleges will do wonders if implemented properly. These institutes have their infrastructure which will help in mainstreaming the technical/vocational/ skill education in the traditional courses. They will work as skill development colleges with Industrial companies having involved in giving vocational/ skill education as per their needs for generation of employment.

h. Financial Issues

All the governments both at the centre and at the state level seem to have taken recourse to temporary teaching positions. The centrally funded institutes appoint the teaching faculties as guest faculties or contractual faculties. In the state of Maharashtra in higher education, there is quite humiliating practice of appointing teaching faculties on Clock Hour Basis (CHB). The most often given excuse reported is the scarcity of financial resources. Quite ironically, this adversely affects only jobs on regular basis. The funds spent on the advertisements are quite surprising and contradicting their excuses. However, to meet these financial crises, some cost-effective solutions can be suggested.

- a. New cadre of teaching posts- Learning Facilitators (instead of regular assistant professors) may be created with same eligibility observing reservation policy. After the successful completion of a fixed tenure, their services may be regularized. It was done by many Zilla Parishad in the name of Vasti Shala Shikshak at the school.
- b. Instead of giving aid to colleges as some malpractices seem to have penetrated there, block grants per student may be given to these Learning Facilitators through Zilla Parishad (as it represents the people) to run such colleges to make this scheme cost effective on the line of residential schools meant for SC/ST/OBC and others.
- c. Corporate houses may be appealed to develop infrastructure required for these learning centres. There was a scheme in pipe line for Zilla Parishad run primary schools that they will be adopted by the corporate houses under the sugar-coated name of their corporate social responsibility. The state govt may introduce some tax for such schemes on the corporate houses and develop infrastructure for education in the state.

If these suggestions are given serious attention and proper mechanism is developed, the state higher education may outdo the other states in the south India and live by the legacy of the makers of progressive Maharashtra - Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Rajrishi Sahahu Maharaj, Dr B R Ambedkar, Karmveer Bhaurao Patil and Dhondo Keshav Karve.

* The data of this year (2020-21) is considered as the base data.



3. RESEARCH INTEGRITY STATEMENT

The authors declare that the manuscript is original, complies with the journal's plagiarism and AI usage requirements, has not been published or submitted elsewhere, and that all applicable ethical guidelines have been followed in conducting, reporting, and publishing the research.

4. REFERENCES

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