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Managed inclusion and the politics of erasure: Gender governance in higher education under neoliberal authoritarianism

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ABSTRACT

This article conceptualizes *managed inclusion* as a form of gender governance in higher education that absorbs feminist and anti-caste critique into frameworks of visibility, moral regulation, and procedural compliance. Drawing on interviews across ten Indian universities, it develops a typology of symbolic, technocratic, and transformative inclusion and argues that equity is mobilized less as a commitment to justice than as a strategy of reputational management and epistemic containment. Visibility is granted without authority, equity is proceduralized without redistribution, and dissent is domesticated through institutional decorum. The analysis is situated within what Giroux theorizes as neoliberal fascism, a conjuncture sustained by three interlocking fundamentalisms: market fundamentalism, religious moralism, and manufactured ignorance, which together enable authoritarian rule and suppress critical thought. The article suggests that India's National Education Policy 2020 exemplifies a broader global shift in which inclusion is reconfigured as a technology of erasure rather than a vehicle for justice. Gender equity is recast through performance metrics and nationalist virtue, while subaltern knowledges are rendered illegible. It concludes by reclaiming inclusion as political praxis grounded in epistemic dissent, collective struggle, and the dismantling of caste-patriarchal power.

KEYWORDS

Higher education policy;
higher education reforms;
India; NEP 2020;
knowledge; pedagogy;
epistemic justice; social
justice

Introduction

Institutional discourses of gender equity in higher education have long been critiqued for reproducing structural hierarchies under the guise of reform (Ahmed, 2012; Rege, 2006). These critiques show how inclusion, when divorced from redistribution and epistemic transformation, operates not as a vehicle for justice but as a mode of containment (cf. hooks, 2000a). Building on and extending this analysis, this article introduces the concept of managed inclusion to theorize how feminist and anti-caste demands are absorbed into institutional frameworks structured by caste hierarchy, neoliberal rationality, and Hindu nationalist authoritarianism.

Managed inclusion, as developed here, operates not merely through the co-optation of dissent but through a politics of epistemic erasure: the displacement of dissident knowledges (cf. Chomsky, 2019, p. 56) into procedural compliance, audit regimes, and reputational performances. Inclusion becomes a mechanism of control providing metrics without redistribution, and participation without dissent. Rather than policy drift or bureaucratic inertia, managed inclusion is a historically specific mode of governance that neutralizes critique and secures institutional legitimacy.

The article develops a typology of symbolic, technocratic, and transformative inclusion to analyze how gender inclusion is mobilized, contained, and occasionally resisted. Symbolic inclusion, as Ahmed (2012) argues, offers representational visibility without structural change. Technocratic inclusion translates demands for justice into audits and compliance routines. Transformative inclusion, by contrast, centers redistribution, epistemic plurality, and collective refusal. It foregrounds those historically excluded from institutional authority, including Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and working-class women, and frames dissent as a generative force for institutional change. This typology is elaborated through

a conjunctural analysis of gender governance under India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, where inclusion is increasingly reconfigured as a strategy of regulation rather than justice.

Rather than treating NEP 2020 as a discrete policy intervention, the article situates it within a broader conjuncture of authoritarian neoliberal governance. As Hall reminds us, “a conjuncture is a period when different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions... fuze in a ruptural unity” (Hall in Hall & Massey, 2012, p. 57). A conjuncture, in this sense, does not resolve crisis but produces new forms of ideological coherence and institutional control. Managed inclusion, then, is read here as a conjunctural project, emerging from the fusion of neoliberal rationality, state moralism, and nationalist development agendas.

Empirically, the article draws on interviews conducted between 2021 and 2023 with institutional actors across 10 public universities in 5 Indian states. These narratives ground the analysis within the lived dynamics of gender inclusion under NEP 2020. Although the policy reconfigures education across all sectors, this article focuses specifically on higher education, where gender equity is increasingly shaped by datafication and moral regulation (cf. Government of India, 2020; UGC (University Grants Commission), 2020). Inclusion is articulated through the language of empowerment, yet structurally aligned with employability, skills training, and institutional branding.

This configuration marks not a rupture from neoliberal governance but its intensification. Gender justice is no longer merely co-opted through market-friendly discourses – what Fraser (2019) terms progressive neoliberalism, a formation in which emancipatory demands are assimilated into elite-led accumulation. Instead, it is more aggressively disciplined through moral regulation, securitization, and nationalist virtue. This shift aligns with what Giroux (2022a) theorizes as neoliberal fascism: a conjuncture defined by the fusion of market fundamentalism, religious moralism, and manufactured ignorance – an ideological apparatus that suppresses historical memory and discredits critical thought. If progressive neoliberalism absorbs critique to stabilize consent, neoliberal fascism disciplines it through moralism and ideological closure. In this conjuncture, inclusion is not abandoned but refunctioned: it becomes a strategy of erasure, masquerading as institutional virtue.

In India, these dynamics are sharpened by Hindu nationalist governance (Lall & Anand, 2022; Shah, 2024), which rearticulates gender equity through moralized ideals of domesticity, productivity, and national virtue. The outcome is technocratic equity: a governance mode in which marginalized bodies are made visible only through institutional loyalty, while structural dissent is rendered illegible.

Methodology

This article develops a conceptual framework for understanding managed inclusion and technocratic equity in Indian higher education. It draws on interviews as situated empirical narratives that deepen a critical, conjunctural reading of gender governance under neoliberal and authoritarian restructuring. As Hart (2024, p. 136) reminds us, “Conjunctural analysis is not simply a ‘method’ that can be divorced from theory and politics.” Rather than claiming neutrality, this approach shows how contradictions are reorganized to consolidate power and foreclose transformative possibility. As discussed earlier, this study draws on conjunctural thinking (Hall, 1988; Hall et al. [1978] 2017; Hall & Massey, 2012), treating crises as moments when political, social, and economic tensions are temporarily reassembled into hegemonic arrangements that stabilize inequality without resolving underlying conflicts. This framework highlights how institutional equity discourse absorbs critique while enabling the erasure of marginalized knowledges, thereby reinscribing caste hierarchies, neoliberal logics, and Hindu nationalist moralities.

Fieldwork was conducted between 2021 and 2023 across ten public universities in five Indian states, as part of a larger multimethod research project on gender equality in Indian higher education. Although a broader study examines access, retention, and institutional cultures in relation to women students and faculty, this article focuses on interviews with institutional actors involved in gender governance, curriculum development, and the implementation of equity-related initiatives.

The analysis explores how gender inclusion is translated into institutional discourses of reform, accountability, and performance, shaped by intersecting structures of caste, religion, class, and regional marginality. Twenty-nine participants included university vice-chancellors, principals, faculty, Internal

Committee (IC) coordinators, NGO representatives, and Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) members, selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure representational diversity across caste, gender, institutional role, and region.

The sample encompassed a cross-section of central, state, women's, and minority-serving universities across North, South, East, West, and Northeast India. States were selected to reflect India's educational and sociopolitical heterogeneity, including differences in literacy, enrollment, governance, and caste-religious demographics. This diversity enables an analysis of how gender inclusion is unevenly enacted across institutional contexts.

Interviews were conducted in English, Hindi, and regional languages according to participant preference. Identifying details have been anonymized, with institutional affiliations coded (for example, X1, Y1, and Z1). Conversations explored participants' experiences with policy frameworks, leadership cultures, equity initiatives, surveillance regimes, and curricular politics.

The fieldwork took place in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, which exacerbated existing inequalities in Indian higher education. As institutions recalibrated, the burdens of closure, digital exclusion, and pedagogical neglect fell disproportionately on marginalized communities, particularly women and first-generation learners. This conjunctural moment amplified the urgency of critically interrogating how gender inclusion is framed, managed, and deferred within institutional life.

Data were analyzed thematically, informed by feminist, anti-caste, and postcolonial theory, rejecting extractive and positivist models of neutrality. Themes such as symbolic visibility, procedural containment, moral governance, and epistemic erasure emerged inductively through iterative engagement with participants' narratives. This analytic approach views knowledge production as partial, relational, and politically accountable (Haraway, 1988; Rege, 2006; Smith, 1999).

Emergent themes were situated within broader theoretical frameworks, including neoliberal governance (Brown, 2015), progressive neoliberalism (Fraser, 2019), nonperformativity (Ahmed, 2012), and epistemic injustice (Connell, 2007; Rege, 2006). The typology of symbolic, technocratic, and transformative inclusion was developed inductively from participants' experiences, capturing the disconnect between institutional discourse and lived realities. It is offered as an interpretive frame for understanding how inclusion stabilizes, erases, and, at times, contests institutional authority.

The global grammar of illiberal inclusion

The governance of gender equity in Indian higher education reflects broader mutations in global political rationalities. Across geopolitical contexts, from postcolonial states to liberal democracies, gender inclusion is increasingly appropriated not as a demand for justice but as a mechanism of control. The techniques of co-optation vary, yet they converge into what this article terms a global grammar of illiberal inclusion: a political rationality in which equity is stripped of its redistributive force and repurposed to affirm institutional legitimacy, nationalist virtue, and market competitiveness.

This reconfiguration represents not a rupture from neoliberal governance but its intensification and hardening. Across diverse national contexts, including India, Hungary, and Turkey, gender equity has been folded into developmentalist statecraft, bolstering national productivity and cultural moralism. In India, NEP 2020 invokes empowerment while enacting epistemic erasure, systematically sidelining the knowledges of women from marginalized caste, class, and religious backgrounds (Peerzada et al., Patil, 2023; Singh, 2023). In Hungary, the 2018 ban on gender studies aligned higher education with labor market imperatives and nationalist cultural agendas (Barát, 2022; Zsubori, 2018). In Turkey, Erdoğan's reforms entrench patriarchal family norms while marginalizing feminist organizing (Zihnioğlu & Kourou, 2025). Despite differing histories, these examples reveal a shared formation: gender inclusion is tolerated only when it reinforces nationalist imaginaries and suppresses dissent.

Elsewhere, gender equity discourse is rebranded as ideological extremism and reframed as a threat to civic cohesion and economic stability. In the United States, the Trump-era rollback of DEI initiatives and reproductive rights weaponised inclusion as a specter of radicalism, particularly targeting racialised and LGBTQ+ communities (Amnesty International, 2024; Chao-Fong, 2025). In Argentina,

Milei's administration dismantled the Ministry of Women, denouncing feminism as fiscally irresponsible (James, 2024). In Italy, Meloni's government invokes "traditional values" to dismantle anti-discrimination protections (De Giorgi et al., 2023). Here, inclusion is not merely neutralized but actively vilified, its political charge recoded as cultural excess.

In France, Greece, and India, gender inclusion is tethered to moral legibility and institutional decorum. Femonationalist discourses in France instrumentalize gender equality to legitimise anti-Muslim policies (Farris, 2012; Möser, 2022). Greece's conservative statecraft reframes inclusion through familialist narratives while dismantling equality frameworks (Bempeza, 2025). Similarly, India's *Beti Bachao* campaign sacralizes women's visibility but only through ideals of respectability, domesticity, and nationalist virtue (Chhachhi, 2020). Meanwhile, femicide and gendered violence persist at catastrophic levels. Over 7,000 women were killed in India in gender-related violence in 2022 alone (National Crime Records Bureau [NCRB], 2023), exposing the disjuncture between symbolic inclusion and material abandonment.

Despite these differences, gender governance converges around containment. Whether articulated through nationalism, securitized moral panic, or racialized surveillance, equity is permitted only when it consolidates institutional power. Inclusion becomes a reputational artifact – audited, exhibited, and curated for legitimacy – rather than a demand for justice.

This convergence reflects what Patnaik (2021) calls the political necessity of neofascism under neoliberalism: "As trickle-down economics lost its credibility, a new prop was needed... It came in the form of neofascism." Rights are redefined as privileges (cf. Alfonseca, 2025), and inclusion becomes a tactic of reputational management. In the United States, the *Dobbs v. Jackson* ruling institutionalized reproductive surveillance, disproportionately targeting racialized and working-class women (Global Justice Center et al., 2024; Kaufman et al., 2022). Equity discourse is rescripted through securitization: visibility is granted only when compliant with moral and economic scripts, as radical feminist critique is erased.

Across Latin America, Europe, and South Asia, the gap between symbolic equity and structural violence reveals a transnational grammar of necropolitical governance. In Latin America, femicide rates reflect not only governance failure but necropolitical abandonment: eleven women are murdered daily in gender-related violence (NU CEPAL, 2024), with over 51,000 women and girls killed globally in 2023 (UN Women, 2024). In France and Greece, serial femicides have sparked outrage but triggered minimal structural reform (Louloudi et al., 2023; UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime), 2024). Meanwhile, masculinist influencers such as Andrew Tate cultivate transnational misogynist publics, reframing feminism as ideological deviance (Adams, 2025; Wescott et al., 2024). As UN Secretary-General António Guterres (2025) warns, "Instead of mainstreaming equal rights, we are seeing the mainstreaming of misogyny."

Educational institutions are not immune: universities increasingly recast gender equity as a reputational risk and cultural threat rather than a democratic obligation (D'Angelo et al., 2024; McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023). This conjuncture exemplifies the global grammar of illiberal inclusion: a political rationality that appropriates diversity as a tool to discipline dissent. Feminist, anti-caste, and anti-racist critiques are disarmed and reconstituted through metrics, bureaucratic routines, and moral regulation. Equity becomes an emblem of modernity, emptied of its radical content and redeployed to stabilize power.

This global trajectory does not mark the decline of neoliberal governance, but its mutation into increasingly authoritarian forms. As Brown (2015) notes, neoliberal reason converts justice claims into performance demands. Fraser (2019) further theorizes this process through progressive neoliberalism, showing how emancipatory discourses are folded into elite-led accumulation. As democratic exhaustion deepens, such strategies become increasingly coercive.

As previously discussed, Giroux's (2022a) concept of neoliberal fascism captures this intensification as a fusion of market logic, moral authoritarianism, and state violence. Inclusion is not merely co-opted but weaponized, securing institutional legitimacy, enforcing hierarchies, and suppressing dissent. Although Bruff (2014) names this formation authoritarian neoliberalism, and Hall (2011) links market rationality to coercive statecraft, neoliberal fascism signals a more virulent configuration: one that shifts from audit culture to necropolitical control.

These dynamics materialize in Indian higher education, where inclusion is managed through surveillance, metrics, and moral discourse. As Giroux (2019) argues, neoliberal educational regimes erode

critical education and suppress democratic possibility, repositioning education as a site of conformity rather than contestation.

This conjunctural moment requires a reading attentive to rupture and continuity (cf. Hall, 1988, 2013). The shift from equity-as-symbol to equity-as-instrument is not linear, but a rearticulation of liberal promises within emergent authoritarian-neoliberal regimes. Authoritarian neoliberalism thus names not an aberration but a project: one that fuses market rationality with disciplinary power to render inclusion calculable, moralized, and politically inert.

Technocratic equity and moral governance: Gender inclusion under NEP 2020

The discourse on gender equity in Indian higher education increasingly reflects the contradictions of governance under neoliberal authoritarianism. Gender inclusion is positioned both as a developmental imperative and a moral symbol of modernization, tethered to market efficiency, human capital formation, and institutional branding (cf. Elias, 2013; Repo, 2016; Somji & Marcus, 2024). Under NEP 2020, gender equity is reframed not as a justice-based commitment but as an instrument of national competitiveness and institutional reform (cf. Government of India & Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Empowerment is reduced to metrics of enrollment and employability, displacing commitments to redistribution and epistemic transformation.

This shift exemplifies technocratic equity: a governance mode that proceduralizes justice through audits, rankings, and symbolic inclusion while leaving core structures of inequality intact. Unlike symbolic inclusion, which grants presence without power, technocratic equity disciplines dissent through data-driven routines and moral governance. As developed in this article, technocratic inclusion is the institutional expression of this logic, where justice is enacted through performance indicators and critique is absorbed into managerial compliance. Patnaik (2021) argues, “The sovereignty of the people... is replaced by the sovereignty of global finance,” constraining domestic policy to neoliberal mandates. Brown (2015) similarly describes neoliberal reason as a rationality that recasts justice claims into technical or economic problems:

Neoliberalism aims simultaneously at deregulation and control. It seeks to privatise every public enterprise, yet valorises public-private partnerships that imbue the market with ethical potential and social responsibility and the public realm with market metrics. (Brown, 2015, p. 49)

NEP 2020 clearly illustrates Fraser’s (2019) notion of progressive neoliberalism, a formation in which emancipatory discourses are selectively co-opted to legitimize capitalist accumulation and stabilize elite rule. Demands for recognition, such as gender ratios or employability, are embraced, while demands for redistribution, such as caste justice or epistemic plurality, are systematically marginalized. As Rege (2006) and Connell (2007) argue, Indian institutions valorize elite women and upper-caste femininities as marginalized groups remain excluded from epistemic authority and institutional power.

Such exclusions are not incidental but constitute a systematic erasure of anti-caste, feminist, and subaltern knowledges, even as institutions perform commitments to diversity. Feminist critique is not denied but neutralized through datafication. As Ahmed (2012, p. 3) observes, “Saying that race is ‘too difficult’ is how racism gets reproduced.” Caste and gender, too, are framed as “difficult”, enabling institutions to defer structural transformation. Diversity discourse, as Ahmed cautions, often enhances reputational capital without dismantling exclusion. Global frameworks, from the Bologna Process to UNESCO’s Education 2030 Agenda, illustrate how gender equity is institutionalized through audit cultures that reduce justice to performance metrics (cf. Böök & Senden, 2023; Klenk et al., 2022).

This logic similarly shapes higher education policy in the Global South. In BRICS contexts (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), gender inclusion is tethered to national development strategies and labor market imperatives (Moreira & Stallivieri, 2021; Ricceri, 2019; Sergeeva & Pandey, 2022). The BRICS Policy on Women’s Economic Empowerment makes this alignment explicit:

The BRICS members’ comprehensive multi-year strategies are complemented by focused initiatives with participation of the private sector, targeting distinct issues impeding women’s participation in the economy... (BRICS, 2021, p. 6)

In India, this model is further inflected by Hindu nationalist governance, which reimagines inclusion as a moral and cultural project (cf. Masher, 2022; Stanley, 2024). NEP 2020s vision of education, framed as inclusive, is anchored in epistemic nationalism that privileges homogenized Hindu cultural imaginaries while excluding subaltern epistemologies (cf. Peerzada et al.,). The exclusion of anti-caste feminist thinkers such as Savitribai Phule and B. R. Ambedkar from policy frameworks is not incidental but constitutes an active process of epistemic erasure, replacing radical knowledge traditions with nationalist moral orders (cf. Ghosh, 2020). As Giroux (2022b) argues, we are witnessing a shift toward what he calls “gangster capitalism,” a political condition in which neoliberalism mutates into a form of rule sustained by lawlessness, impunity, and systemic disposability. Under NEP 2020, gender inclusion thus becomes a mechanism of discipline, not disruption.

Within Modi’s regime, gender inclusion is rendered conditional upon moral conformity. Initiatives such as *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* exemplify this shift: women are celebrated as national symbols, but only through ideals of daughterhood, respectability, and domestic virtue (Chhachhi, 2020). As Chhachhi explains:

Not only does this campaign reinforce the role of the father as protector, which then segues into a gendered discourse of safety, surveillance and restriction... but more significantly it constructs and reinforces Modi as the “father figure” – a benevolent patriarch. (Chhachhi, 2020, p. 68)

This moral governance reproduces the dynamics critiqued by McRobbie (2009) in her analysis of glass-ceiling feminism, where inclusion elevates elite women while reinforcing exclusions for marginalized communities. McRobbie demonstrates how post-feminist celebrations of individual success mask the persistence of structural inequality, repositioning systemic exclusions as matters of personal failure or cultural deficiency. In this configuration, inclusion becomes not a challenge to power but a strategy of state discipline.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) promotes gender sensitization programs, scholarships, and audit frameworks through its *Saksham Report* (UGC 2013), equity guidelines, and accreditation protocols. Yet, these initiatives function primarily as tools for institutional compliance and branding, with limited engagement with epistemic plurality or transformative justice.

This containment is not only institutional but embodied. Marginalized women are conditionally recognized, made visible through metrics but governed by moral expectations. Surveillance becomes the price of recognition. Butler (2009) conceptualizes this process through the lens of grievability: some lives are publicly mourned and protected, while others are rendered uncountable and disposable. Within Indian higher education, differential grievability ensures that marginalized women become legible only when they conform to institutional norms, performing an embodied erasure of political agency.

These logics converge within the governance of inclusion under NEP 2020, where market rationality, moral discipline, and epistemic regulation are fused. Institutions selectively adopt global equity templates while filtering feminist and anti-caste critique through managerial frameworks. Following Ahmed’s (2012) critique of nonperformative diversity, equity discourse is retooled to convert critique into institutional capital. Gender inclusion is thus used not to confront caste, patriarchy, or class inequality, but to validate institutional modernity and national strength. Participation expands, but only within structures designed to preserve power. Marginalized women are admitted not as epistemic agents but as symbols of legitimacy; seen but not heard, counted but not empowered.

As Giroux (2025a) observes: “We are now living through a globalized necropolitics in which the meaning of ‘citizen,’ once tethered to democratic representation and civic belonging, has been hollowed out. What remains is a brutal calculus of disposability, a politics of unbeing.” Building on Mbembe’s (2003) theorization of necropolitics, gender inclusion under NEP 2020 operates as a governance strategy that designates certain lives as disposable, structured through selective recognition, institutional legibility, and conditional value. Necropolitical governance thus enacts a double erasure: it renders marginalized lives visible only to the extent that their political claims are hollowed out.

Symbolic inclusion and the gendered limits of leadership

Despite growing female participation in Indian academia, leadership and governance structures within higher education institutions remain overwhelmingly dominated by men. Although women's numerical presence has expanded, institutional cultures often constrain their authority, rendering inclusion symbolic: valuable for optics but limited in political reach. Leadership becomes performance, presence is celebrated, but power is withheld.

At Y1 University, SM, the Vice Chancellor, reflected on how these limits materialize:

Even when women enter leadership positions, they often struggle to exercise authority in the same way as men. There's a different expectation – they are expected to be collaborative, approachable, less assertive. A male Vice-Chancellor's decisions are rarely questioned, but a woman in the same role faces scrutiny at every step.

This reflects what Ahmed (2012) describes as non-performative inclusion: women are welcomed into leadership only to the extent that they conform to gendered norms of respectability, deference, and restraint, reinforcing a symbolic visibility that affirms presence without enabling power.

A similar pattern emerged at Z1 University, where CM, the Vice Principal, observed:

It's something to celebrate—"we have a female Vice-Chancellor"—but when it comes to the real decisions, the same old networks of influence are at play. Women in leadership still have to navigate the same power structures that existed before them.

These narratives expose how inclusion becomes ceremonial, bound by affective and behavioral scripts. Women are rendered legible but denied institutional authorship. Symbolic inclusion here functions as a mode of epistemic containment.

This constraint is not only gendered but caste-bound. At X1 University, NG, Principal of the Women's College, highlighted how caste privilege structures access to leadership:

The women who reach the top tend to be from dominant-caste backgrounds, with strong networks and institutional backing. If you are from a marginalized caste, even if you are qualified, your authority will always be questioned in ways it wouldn't be for others.

NG's reflection foregrounds how epistemic legitimacy remains tethered to caste privilege. Institutions may celebrate female leadership, but such roles are disproportionately accessible to those who already embody dominant norms of credibility and decorum. As Rege (1998) argues, caste operates not only as a social hierarchy but as a regime of knowledge, governing who is authorized to lead, speak, and be heard within institutional life.

Even when women attain senior positions, they must strategically negotiate visibility. SM, reflecting on her own experience, articulated the continuous effort required: "You have to grab your share... They do not dare to snap you then." Such tactics illustrate how symbolic inclusion may be leveraged tactically, but only through sustained emotional and institutional labor to secure legitimacy within male-dominated networks.

The question of aspiration versus constraint emerged powerfully in SM's account: "Is it because of our dreams or because of social constraints?" Despite increased enrollment, many women remain siloed into teaching and support roles, rarely ascending into decision-making spaces. These exclusions are often rationalized through discourses of institutional neutrality but in practice reproduce caste-gender hierarchies. Even inclusion committees and leadership initiatives reflect these biases, where "suitable" candidates are those perceived as governable. Women from marginalized caste, class and religious backgrounds are often absent, not due to lack of merit, but because their presence disrupts the caste-gender habitus of the university.

Inclusion is encouraged when it affirms institutional image; discouraged when it threatens institutional legitimacy. Nationalist discourses of women-led development recast empowerment as the celebration of docile leadership rather than the redistribution of institutional power. Even when inclusion appears aspirational, it remains tethered to discipline and containment. SM, a Vice-Chancellor from a historically marginalized community, reflected poignantly: "If I can become VC, any of you

can. But literacy is not education. Education is bigger than that.” This intervention ruptures the narrative of empowerment as accessibility. SM refuses tokenism and reclaims leadership as an epistemic and political space, confronting institutions that perform inclusion while erasing critique.

Ultimately, gender inclusion in leadership remains shaped by symbolic and technocratic imperatives. Institutional presence may be granted, but critical agency is suppressed. Without dismantling the regimes that tether authority to caste, gender, and respectability, inclusion remains a performance: visible but depoliticized, sanctioned but epistemically hollow.

Intersectionality, epistemic authority, and the limits of gender metrics

Efforts toward gender equality in Indian higher education often rely on universalized narratives of progress that obscure the structural exclusions faced by Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and working-class women (Mohanty, 2003). Gender is not a discrete or stable category of oppression; it is constituted through intersecting formations of caste, class, religion, and regional marginality. As Crenshaw (1989, p. 140) argues, “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism,” and frameworks that fail to account for such multiplicity inevitably reproduce the conditions they claim to redress. Within institutional imaginaries, the figure of the upper or middle caste Hindu woman is often privileged, positioned as both aspirational and governable, while more precarious subjectivities are rendered illegible.

As hooks (2000b, p. 5) argues in the context of reformist feminism, such configurations enable elite women to collude with existing systems of power. “By accepting and indeed colluding with the subordination of working-class and poor women, they not only ally themselves with the existing patriarchy and its concomitant sexism, they give themselves the right to lead a double life.” Rege (1998) critiques the dominant appropriation of feminist discourse and insists that Dalit women’s assertions are not merely about naming difference but about epistemic reconstitution. As she writes:

The assertion of dalit women’s voices is not just an issue of naming their difference. ‘Naming of difference’ leads to a narrow identitarian politics – rather this assertion is read as a centring of the discourse on caste and gender and is viewed as suggesting a dalit feminist standpoint (Rege, 1998, pp. WS39–40).

Such forms of managed inclusion institutionalize recognition without redistribution and visibility without authority.

This erasure is not merely numerical but epistemic: institutions marginalize subaltern voices not only from leadership structures, but from the very conditions of knowledge production. Justice, in this context, requires more than participation; it demands the redistribution of epistemic authority. At X1 University, NG, Principal of the Women’s College, reflected on how caste privilege continues to structure access to leadership:

The women who reach the top tend to be from dominant-caste backgrounds, with strong networks and institutional backing. If you are from a marginalised caste, your authority will always be questioned in ways it wouldn’t be for others.

Participation may expand, but legitimacy remains tethered to dominant norms of caste and civility. At Z1 University, CM reflected on institutional responses to gender issues following the 2012 Delhi gang rape, known as the Nirbhaya case (cf. Nayika, 2024), a pivotal moment that ignited national conversations on violence against women. Yet the initiatives that followed, CM noted, largely aestheticised inclusion:

Every year, there were about 4–5 programmes that were conducted on women’s health... and also... some girls’ stuff, you know, ladies “specifically,” like needlework, embroidery.

Rather than addressing structures of exclusion, gender inclusion was channeled into cultural performances aligned with caste-coded ideals of femininity.

The absence of disaggregated metrics further entrenches these exclusions. At X1, NG noted that although affordability enabled Muslim students’ enrollment, their marginality persisted: “They come

because it is affordable, but they stay outside the mainstream.” Gender is counted, but caste, religion, and regional exclusion are rendered invisible within the institutional gaze.

At Y1 University, SM underscored how tribal and Adivasi women face ongoing barriers within professional fields: “Even when families support girls’ education, they still hesitate when it comes to professional courses.” Such hesitancy reflects deeper institutional signals about whose aspirations, and whose knowledge, are deemed legitimate. Rege (1998) foregrounds caste’s role in structuring epistemic authority, showing how it shapes not only access to education but also the recognition of who is authorized to know. Building on this, Spivak’s (1988) theorization of subalternity reveals that exclusion does not simply mean being unheard, but being structurally foreclosed from epistemic recognition. Subaltern women may be present within institutions but remain disqualified from the spaces of knowledge production and authority.

These exclusions are embedded within the technocratic frameworks of India’s NEP 2020, which, while presented as progressive, displaces epistemic justice into administratively measurable outputs such as labor productivity and employability. Such practices constitute a politics of managed presence: marginalized women are made visible in enrollment figures and diversity reports but are excluded from epistemic authority. They are counted but not consulted, recognized only when they conform to norms of civility, professionalization, and governability. As hooks (2000a) warns, when inclusion occurs without structural transformation, it risks functioning as a strategy of co-optation and containment. Institutions adopt the language of reform while preserving the hierarchies they purport to dismantle.

Surveillance, docility, and the gendered logic of safety

Despite institutional commitments to empowerment, Indian higher education continues to regulate women’s presence through surveillance, spatial restriction, and behavioral control. Framed as “safety,” these measures operate less as protection than as infrastructures of containment. Curfews, dress codes, biometric attendance, and moral audits produce environments where inclusion is conditional, premised on docility, compliance, and institutional loyalty. This mode of governance reflects what Foucault (1977) theorizes as panopticism: a power that disciplines through visibility, data extraction, and self-monitoring rather than overt repression. In Indian institutions, digital infrastructures such as CCTV, biometrics, and movement logs compose a regime of technocratic safety, where vulnerability is quantified rather than dismantled. Women are governed as data subjects, not political agents.

At Y1 University, SM, the Vice Chancellor, captured this contradiction:

Hostel curfews, dress codes, restrictions on movement – these rules exist because we assume women are always vulnerable. But this vulnerability is created by the institution itself.

This insight reflects what Giroux (2022b) characterizes as a slow-motion descent into 21st-century fascism, where education disciplines rather than emancipates. Vulnerability is not inherent; it is institutionally manufactured. Safety becomes an ideological alibi for the surveillance and suppression of autonomy.

At X1 University, NG, head of the Women’s College, similarly noted:

Female students can’t be seen with male students after 6pm, and we have to justify any exceptions. It’s as if their presence is a problem that must be managed.

Such policies construct women’s mobility as disruption, requiring preemptive management. As Chakravarti (1993) argues, *Brahminical patriarchy* extends respectability primarily to dominant-caste women, stabilizing institutional order through surveillance. Subaltern women become hyper-visible but remain structurally excluded from legitimacy.

Control extends beyond physical space into speech. At Z1 University, CM observed:

Men dominate classroom discussions, and when women speak, they are expected to be polite, to “soften” their arguments, not to sound too radical.

Speech, like mobility, is policed. Feminist and anti-caste critiques become institutionally acceptable only when domesticated into civility or procedural discourse.

These disciplinary mechanisms are amplified by broader state projects such as *Digital India* (Government of India, 2025; Sinha, 2024), where biometric governance is celebrated as administrative efficiency. Under Modi's nationalist discourse, women are framed as bearers of honor and virtue; their empowerment recast through technologies of monitoring and scripts of respectability. This constitutes a governance by surveillance, where autonomy is tolerated only when it does not destabilize institutional norms. Inclusion is granted, but only under conditions of manageability. Giroux (2025b) notes that authoritarian education systems defuse dissent by reshaping critique into forms of managed expression, draining it of political force. This mode of depoliticization is increasingly visible in India's biometric education infrastructures, where inclusion is conditional on conformity and discipline.

The violence of surveillance is particularly acute for marginalized women, whose visibility is always caste-marked, classed, and racialized. Drawing on Mbembe's (2003) theorization of *necropolitics*, and extending insights from Povinelli (2011) and Biehl (2005), these regimes enact a form of epistemic and political erasure: lives are made visible only through conformity, while dissent is marked as disposable. Patnaik (2021) similarly identifies how contemporary neofascism reframes control as national virtue, a pattern vividly reflected in gender safety discourses.

Reimagining safety thus demands the dismantling of caste-patriarchal infrastructures that criminalize autonomy, not their digitization. Safety cannot be measured by surveillance systems; it can only be realized through the redistribution of power and the structural transformation of institutions. Until such accountability is achieved, gender inclusion will remain a managed performance: a choreography of containment masked as care. What emerges is not protection, but a systematic governance of visibility and erasure, an aestheticized reform that consolidates inequality. To critically trace and disrupt these formations, the article develops a typology distinguishing *symbolic*, *technocratic*, and *transformative* modes of inclusion, elaborated in the following section.

Symbolic, technocratic, and transformative inclusion

This section develops a conceptual grammar of inclusion, grounded in a conjunctural analysis of gender governance and illustrated through interviews conducted across ten Indian universities. Under contemporary conditions, equity is increasingly mobilized not as redistribution but as governance: a system that manages visibility, contains dissent, and renders critique administratively legible. This typology distinguishes three interrelated modes of inclusion – symbolic, technocratic, and transformative – each shaped by distinct logics of institutional power. These modalities are summarised in Table 1.

Symbolic inclusion refers to visibility without structural transformation. It materializes in the public celebration of women in leadership, the establishment of equity cells, and the hosting of diversity events, while deeper hierarchies remain unchallenged. This mode affirms institutional authority by displacing structural demands, rendering exclusions epistemically invisible. It often privileges dominant caste women whose comportment aligns with institutional norms of civility and decorum, making other subjectivities legible only through performances of docility. Authority becomes conditional, and dissent is narrativized as ingratitude or deviance (cf. Ahmed, 2012; Foucault, 1980; Spivak, 1988).

Technocratic inclusion, by contrast, recodes gender equity as a matter of compliance and data governance. Gender is rendered measurable, tracked through enrollment statistics and compliance mechanisms. Feminist and anti-caste demands are absorbed into bureaucratic routines, professionalization workshops, and diversity indicators without unsettling the foundations of exclusion. Surveillance technologies further entrench this logic: biometric systems, behavior protocols, and algorithmic monitoring render marginalized bodies visible primarily through modes of institutional control. Autonomy is tolerated only when it serves reputation, market value, or state-sanctioned norms.

Transformative inclusion resists containment within metrics or symbolic gestures. It reclaims inclusion as structural reconstitution and epistemic disruption. It centers those historically excluded from curricular design, leadership, and epistemic legitimacy, specifically women structurally marginalized

Table 1. Modalities of gender inclusion in Indian higher education.

Inclusion type	Logic of governance	Operational features	Institutional outcome	Empirical illustration
Symbolic	Representational optics	Token leadership appointments, celebration of presence	Visibility without structural authority	A woman Vice-Chancellor noted that while her position is often showcased, “real decisions are still shaped by the same old networks.” (Z1)
Technocratic	Audit-driven equity	Compliance regimes, data dashboards, professionalization workshops, trivialized equity programs	Procedural containment of equity demands	An equity cell coordinator described annual events: “Women’s health, needlework, embroidery—nothing that challenges the system.” (Z1)
Transformative	Structural justice and dissent	Redistribution, epistemic plurality, refusal of governability	Reconstitution of institutional norms	As the Vice-Chancellor from a historically marginalized community told her students: “If I can become VC, any of you can. But literacy is not education. Education is bigger than that.”

by caste, religion, and class. It treats critique not as a threat to be neutralized but as a generative force for institutional change. Transformative inclusion demands a reorganization of epistemic priorities: not just who participates, but whose knowledge defines the institution. As Hall (2007) reminds us, “there is no closure yet written into [history]... the present remains open to the play of contingency.” That contingency must be claimed through epistemologies that refuse incorporation into institutional decorum.

Transformative inclusion does not emerge through policy mandates but through political demand. It calls for dismantling the caste-patriarchal logics of merit, respectability, and knowledge production that structure Indian higher education. As Giroux (2022a, 2022b) argues, critical pedagogy entails a refusal to accept ignorance, cruelty, and disposability as the foundations of educational life. In this sense, inclusion is reclaimed not as institutional compliance but as collective refusal and radical reimagination.

Transformative inclusion arises through practices of rupture: curricular insurgencies, student mobilization, informal solidarities, and unsanctioned epistemic labor. These practices often remain invisible to audit cultures, yet they carry political force precisely because they refuse capture by managerial systems.

This typology is not exhaustive, but diagnostic. It clarifies how gender inclusion is structured, constrained, and, at times, reimagined within neoliberal and authoritarian regimes. Symbolic inclusion foregrounds visibility; technocratic inclusion proceduralizes dissent. Both stabilize institutional legitimacy by absorbing or displacing critique. As Giroux (2004, pp. 49–50) argues, neoliberal institutions often disarm dissent by commodifying it, transforming critique into managed forms that reinforce, rather than unsettle, dominant structures. Transformative inclusion interrupts this logic: it fractures the epistemic erasures of managed inclusion and opens insurgent spaces for redistribution, dissent, and plurality.

Conclusion: Inclusion as containment, erasure, and contestation

This article shows how gender inclusion in Indian higher education is governed through converging rationalities of neoliberalism, moral order, and caste-patriarchal power. Rather than dismantling structural inequalities, inclusion is increasingly mobilized to aestheticize reform, manage dissent, and secure legitimacy. What appears as progress often signals a recalibration of control. The typology developed here – symbolic, technocratic, and transformative inclusion – offers not a classificatory schema but a diagnostic lens: inclusion operates simultaneously as promise and regulation, recognition, and refusal.

The current political moment is not unique to India. Across varied contexts, inclusion has been refunctioned as a mechanism of authoritarian legitimation: absorbing feminist and anti-caste critiques while hollowing out their redistributive force. Within this wider formation, what Giroux (2022a) terms neoliberal fascism becomes increasingly visible. Inclusion is permitted only when it affirms civility, productivity, and institutional decorum. Visibility, once a demand for justice, is now co-opted to secure power.

Clarifying the distinction between technocratic equity and technocratic inclusion is critical. The former refers to a rationality of governance; the latter to its institutional expression. Together, they stabilize authority by reducing equity to compliance regimes and institutional metrics, stripping it of political force.

This shift carries profound knowledge related consequences. As inclusion becomes governable, reduced to audits and managerial abstractions, the possibilities for plural epistemologies and structural dissent are foreclosed. Erasure occurs not through censorship but through the absorption of critique into administrative scripts. Whose presence becomes conditional? Whose absence is recoded as institutional success? These are not failures of implementation but expressions of a deeper disavowal of justice itself.

Situating managed inclusion within this political configuration shows how feminist and anti-caste critiques are not only suppressed but repurposed within institutional architectures shaped by market logic, moral discipline, and caste hierarchy. At its core, this is a conflict of knowledges. Neoliberal governance, whether technocratic or authoritarian, is structurally incompatible with redistribution. As Friedman (1962) unapologetically affirmed, economic freedom, anchored in market imperatives, takes precedence over social justice. Within this framework, gender inclusion is embraced only when it consolidates order and rejected when it demands structural change.

Moreover, gender cannot be disentangled from broader struggles against caste domination, racial capitalism, colonial epistemologies, and environmental extraction. These are not parallel injustices but structurally entangled formations. What they demand is not more refined strategies of inclusion, but a reconstitution of the very terms on which inclusion is imagined and enacted.

As Giroux (2022a, 2022b, pp. 48–54) argues, neoliberal fascism is sustained through three interlocking fundamentalisms: a market fundamentalism that commodifies all aspects of life; a religious fundamentalism that moralizes inequality; and a regime of manufactured ignorance and militarized illiteracy that discredits critical thought and erases historical memory. In Indian higher education, these logics converge as caste, neoliberalism, and Hindu nationalism reshape gender inclusion into a strategy of reputational control and institutional legitimacy.

Although this analysis insists on critique, it also identifies moments of insurgent possibility. Radical inclusion does not originate in policy but in praxis, through acts of refusal, collective dissent, and knowledge-based disobedience. Countersyllabi, student mobilization, and community engaged pedagogies resist capture by metrics and embody a politics of radical reimagination. As Rege (1998) reminds us, transformative struggles must begin from Dalit feminist standpoints that confront caste and gender as fused structures of domination. Without such grounding, equity risks becoming an instrument of institutional branding rather than a force for change.

Even as institutions attempt to contain critique, their architectures remain permeable. Across Indian universities and beyond, there are moments that are partial and often unrecognized, when dominant knowledge systems are fractured. These moments disrupt the fictions of coherence and remind us that institutional power is always contested and never complete.

Although this analysis is grounded in the Indian context, the dynamics it traces reverberate across global higher education. Inclusion is increasingly managed, not to realize justice, but to depoliticize dissent and stabilize hierarchy. Yet, even under neoliberal fascism, spaces of refusal endure. These are often small, insurgent, and politically significant. The political technologies of inclusion cannot extinguish the possibilities of radical reimagination.

As Angela Davis (2011, p. 14) reminds us, “Radical simply means grasping things at the root.” Giroux (2021) similarly insists that historical consciousness is a political imperative, essential to confronting systems of domination and their enduring legacies. In the Indian context, this includes the afterlives of colonialism, patriarchy, and caste. Contesting managed inclusion demands more

than procedural reform. It requires memory, solidarity, and insurgent pedagogy. Justice is not a matter of enumeration or prestige. It is a struggle for knowledge plurality, material redistribution, and political autonomy. The future of inclusion lies not in its domestication but in its radical reclamation – as insurgent pedagogy, epistemic reconstitution, and a politics of unfinished emancipation.

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