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First Generation Learners and Higher Educational Aspirations in India: A Systematic Comprehension and Future Research Direction

Abstract:

Purpose:

This systematic review critically examines the empirical literature on educational aspirations of first-generation learners in higher education, with a focused lens on India. It aims to illuminate both structural barriers and unique strengths shaping these students' experiences, responding to gaps in research about aspirations beyond secondary schooling and within diverse Indian regional contexts.

Design/methodology/approach:

Following PRISMA guidelines, a comprehensive search was conducted across Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, screening 612 records from 1953 to 2025. After rigorous title, abstract, and full-text screening, 82 studies were synthesised through thematic analysis. The review integrates global conceptualisations of aspiration, international higher education perspectives, and Indian empirical studies to frame the experiences of first-generation learners.

Findings:

The review reveals that aspirations are multifaceted, shaped by social, cultural, and institutional factors. Research highlights intersecting inequalities of caste, class, gender, and region that mediate educational outcomes. However, Indian higher education research predominantly focuses on elite institutions and quantitative metrics, neglecting qualitative, intersectional, and regionally diverse voices, especially from eastern India.

Originality/value:

By foregrounding aspirations alongside systemic barriers, this review challenges deficit models of first-generation learners. It identifies critical research gaps, advocating for nuanced qualitative and intersectional scholarship focused on underrepresented regions and state universities in India to inform equitable policy and practice in higher education.

Keywords: First-generation, aspiration, higher, education, India, eastern region, systematic review, PRISMA, thematic,gaps, futuristic, intersectional,

1. Introduction

The transition to college represents a unique set of challenges for all students, but these are often magnified for first-generation learners (FGLs), i.e. individuals whose parents have not completed post-secondary education. In the absence of parental guidance, first-generation learners must navigate higher education without direct support. Studies from the United States and the United Kingdom show that such students are disproportionately drawn from marginalized socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds and exhibit lower grades and higher attrition rates compared to continuing-generation peers (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Giroux, 1983; Bourdieu andPasseron, 1990). A comprehensive inquiry into first-generation learners must therefore attend not only to their barriers but also to the unique strengths that shape their experiences.

Foregrounding educational aspirations provides one way to move beyond a deficit-oriented paradigm. Family backgrounds, while often constraining, can also motivate and mediate students' trajectories. Placing aspirations at the centre of analysis enables us to examine how structural barriers, institutional cultures, familial and friendship networks, and individual agency intersect in higher education. Here, aspirations are understood as students' hopes or desires regarding degree completion and subsequent educational attainment (Khattab *et al.,* 2022). Although aspiration has gained conceptual traction in the past decade as a lens through which new imaginaries of education are refracted (Brooks, Gupta, and Jayadev, 2021), the focus has been predominantly on primary and secondary schooling, where higher education is framed as the solution to inequality (Gutman and Schoon, 2021). This orientation has resulted in less critical attention to hierarchies of aspiration within higher education itself, especially in relation to the lived experiences of first-generation learners, who often confront covert discrimination that undermines the very spirit that enabled them to enter university.

Despite the expanding international literature, there remains a dearth of empirical studies on first-generation learners in the Global South, particularly India. Following the Education Commission under R. Radhakrishnan, universities in India were classified into Central, State, Deemed-to-be, and Private institutions (1948–49). Since then, the system has grown rapidly but remains highly regulated and marked by infrastructural deficits. Over the last decade, owing to subaltern movements and affirmative action (Varghese, 2015), large numbers of

63 first-generation learners have entered higher education. Yet these students remain
64 disproportionately vulnerable to caste- and gender-based inequalities, lack of cultural and
65 social capital, regional deprivation, and religious discrimination (Deshpande, 2012).

66 A further challenge in India is the absence of definitional consensus on who qualifies as a
67 first-generation learner. This study defines a first-generation learner as a student who is the
68 first in their family to attend college, with neither parents nor older siblings having received
69 higher education. Existing scholarship in India has largely focused on barriers such as
70 financial constraints, limited academic support, and social exclusion. Some interventions,
71 such as the First-Generation Graduate Scholarship Scheme in Tamil Nadu (Government of
72 Tamil Nadu, 2024), have sought to address these concerns. However, there has been little
73 systematic exploration of how family backgrounds might also foster resilience or motivation.
74 Nor do extensive secondary datasets exist to build robust, evidence-based policies.These
75 developments underscore the urgent need for holistic research on first-generation learners in
76 India, one that critically examines aspirations alongside structural barriers and institutional
77 inequalities, and situates first-generation learner's agency within their broader socio-cultural
78 contexts.

79
80 **2. Objectives**

81 The objective of this systematic review is to critically examine the empirical literature on
82 educational aspirations of first-generation learners in higher education globally, with a
83 particular emphasis on how these aspirations take shape within India. This review is
84 grounded in peer-reviewed studies and book chapters, while blogs and other non-empirical
85 resources have been removed, even though the contribution of such non-peer-reviewed
86 resources to the study of first-generation learners is acknowledged. The following broad
87 objectives will guide this research.

88 • Firstly, to undertake a systematic synthesis of extant global literature in education
89 research examining student aspirations in higher education and the experiences of
90 first-generation students, while highlighting the critical lack of research specifically
91 focused on the aspirations of first-generation students.
92

93 • Secondly, to identify research gaps, with a clear emphasis on the need for more
94 research into the lived experiences of first-generation students within India, and with
95 particular focus on addressing regional disparities that shape and differentiate these
96 experiences within Indian higher education.

97

3. Methods

99 Systematic methods are deployed for data retrieval and analysis. The methods are explained
100 thoroughly through the database selection, the keywords utilised, the inclusion and exclusion
101 criteria for retrieving the studies, and finally data extraction and analysis processes.

3.1. Search Strategy

103 The authors began by conducting a comprehensive search across nationally and
104 internationally recognized academic databases to identify potentially relevant studies. This
105 process was guided by a carefully developed search strategy that employed a combination of
106 relevant keywords and Boolean operators to optimize the retrieval of pertinent literature. This
107 section specifies the type of databases and keywords used for the identification stage. It also
108 lists the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during the screening stage. For this study, the
109 resources used were *Google Scholar*, *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, and *Education Resources*
110 *Information Centre*. Thereafter, a combination of several keywords such as *education*, *higher*
111 *education*, *aspiration*, *futuristic*, *college*, *university*, *first-generation*, *students*, *India*,
112 *sociology*, *youth*, and *capital* were used.

3.1. Eligibility Criteria

114

115 With respect to the timeline, studies published from the year *1953 to 2025* have been
116 included in this review and it includes *journal articles*, *working papers, book chapters,*
117 *commentaries, conference proceeding*s. Both *global* research papers as well as papers with a
118 special focus on *South Asia*, particularly *India*, has been utilized for the review. The language
119 in which these documents have been published is *English*. Table 1 outlines the specific
120 inclusion and exclusion criteria applied for study selection, offering transparency into the
121 decision-making process. Insert Table 1 here.

122

3.2. Data Extraction and Analysis

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) model has been followed for data extraction process (Page *et al.,* 2020). A total of six-hundred and twelve records were initially identified after searching multiple databases using the eligibility criteria. After removing seventy-two duplicate entries, five-hundred and forty records remained for screening.During the first screening stage, the title and abstract ofthree-hundred and fifty records were excluded as they did not meet the review objectives. Specially, exclusions were made of articles if there was a mismatch in educational level i.e. if the studies focussed exclusively on vocational training and professional contexts, or if there was conceptual irrelevance i.e. if the studies were focussed on faculty or administrative perspectives, or curriculum reform exclusively. After this, 190 articles were considered eligible for full-text assessment and they were assessed in detail. Of these, 108 articles were excluded, for not complying with the required objectives. At this stage, exclusions were made if there were data limitations and evidence quality issues i.e. if the studies did not have adequate methodological or empirical detail to be included. Finally, 82 studies were included in the qualitative synthesis.Figure 1 represents the PRISMA flow chart. Insert Figure 1 here.

Thematic analysis of eighty-two papers was conducted using the six-step reflexive process (Braun and Clark, 2006). The stages include familiarization with the dataset; generating initial codes from the content, locating themes, reviewing and refining the themes, labelling themes, and synthesising papers arranged according to the themes. Figure 2 represents the iterative process of analyses in detail. Insert Figure 2 here.

The process within the scope of this study began by taking educational aspirations as a broad entry point, which was then divided into three pathways: conceptualizing aspirations within sociology, exploring research on aspirations within global higher education, and examining aspirations within Indian education. These branches capture foundational theories, international perspectives, and localized contexts, capturing a comprehensive picture of educational aspirations from multiple vantage points. All branches converge on the analyses of first-generation learners, which is the central group selected for a more in-depth literature review. The review then proceeds to critically assess the experiences of first-generation learners within the global and Indian education systems. Figure 3 illustrates how this approach enables a nuanced interpretation of challenges encountered by first-generation learners. Insert Figure 3 here.

155
4. Results

158
4.1. Conceptualizing Aspirations in Sociology

The concept of aspirations has long been of interest to sociologists, psychologists, and economists seeking to understand how individuals imagine and pursue future trajectories. The Oxford English Dictionary defines aspiration as "a hope or ambition of achieving something," yet scholarship has highlighted the conceptual complexity of this notion. La Ferrara (2019) distinguishes aspirations from expectations, noting that individuals may hope to achieve certain goals without realistically anticipating their attainment. Aspirations, therefore, can reflect ambitions that extend beyond what seems feasible given one's social or material conditions. Similarly, Wydyck (2018) separates aspirations from the broader concept of hope. While hope without agency may denote mere optimism, aspirational hope entails a stronger sense of agency, aligning personal ambition with an orientation to action. Despite these distinctions, some sociological scholarship collapses the differences between aspirations and expectations, treating them interchangeably in empirical research. For instance, Morgan (2010) defines aspirations as stable orientations composed of beliefs about one's future educational and occupational trajectory, as well as one's eventual class position.

Early empirical research on aspirations emerged in the mid-twentieth century, much of it focused on the relationship between social origins and occupational mobility. Kahl's (1953) study, "Educational and Occupational Aspirations of Common Man Boys," conceived as part of Talcott Parsons' Mobility Project, demonstrated the centrality of parental attitudes in shaping young men's college and career ambitions. Parents were shown to instill either a desire to "get by" or to "get ahead," reflecting the intergenerational transmission of aspiration levels. Building on this, Haller (1982) argued that aspirations are formed through imitation, self-reflection, and adoption. Once established, they acquire inertia and translate into corresponding behaviors. This work directly influenced the Wisconsin model of status attainment (Sewell, 1969), which formalized the role of educational aspirations in predicting occupational outcomes among American youth.

The status attainment model, however, attracted sustained criticism. Bourdieu (1973) contended that the model treated aspirations as causally linked to outcomes without adequately considering the structural inequalities that determine both. From this perspective, aspirations cannot be seen as purely individual preferences but as conditioned by opportunity

188   structures and material constraints. Subsequent research in sociology has therefore
189   emphasized the socially embedded nature of aspirations, framing them as both enabled and
190   constrained by class, culture, and institutional arrangements (St. Clair and Benjamin, 2008;
191   Morrison, Gutman and Ackerman, 2008). This shift marked an important move away from
192   individualistic models toward more critical accounts of aspiration as socially stratified.

193   Appadurai's concept of the "capacity to aspire" (2004) represents a significant intervention in
194   this debate. He conceptualizes aspiration as a navigational capacity that is unequally
195   distributed across social groups. Privileged groups, by virtue of access to material, social, and
196   symbolic resources, are better equipped with the cultural "maps" that guide them toward
197   successful futures. In contrast, marginalized groups face "aspirational deficits," lacking both
198   opportunities and pathways to articulate or pursue future goals. Appadurai's framework
199   situates aspiration squarely within issues of power, capital, and inequality, underscoring that
200   the ability to aspire is not simply an individual trait but a socially conditioned capacity. This
201   perspective has been influential in subsequent studies of educational and occupational
202   aspirations globally, offering a way to theorize the structural barriers that limit life chances
203   (Ray, 2006; Huijsmans, 2021).

204   Building on this critical tradition, Zipin et al. (2015) extend the conceptualization of
205   aspirations by proposing three interwoven "logics of aspiring." Drawing from Bourdieu's
206   notions of habitus and doxa (1973), Raymond Williams' concept of "structure of feeling"
207   (1977), and Appadurai's framework, they identify doxic aspirations shaped by dominant
208   societal narratives, habituated aspirations rooted in embodied histories and biographical
209   legacies, and emergent aspirations that gesture toward potential alternative futures.
210   Importantly, emergent aspirations are not merely abstract ideals but lived capacities that
211   surface through collective practices and cultural resources. Through a participatory research
212   design involving ethnographic engagement with students, teachers, families, and
213   communities, Zipin et al. demonstrated how young people could be capacitated to recognize
214   and situate these different logics of aspiration. Their work underscores the potential for
215   education to become a space where socially constrained aspirations are critically examined
216   and re-imagined.

217   While earlier models stressed individual ambition and parental influence, later approaches
218   underscore how aspirations are shaped by structural inequalities, opportunity structures, and
219   cultural resources. Contemporary frameworks, particularly those developed by Appadurai

220 (2004) and Zipin*et al.* (2015), highlight the importance of agency and power, reframing
221 aspirations as culturally mediated capacities that can either reinforce or challenge social
222 reproduction.

223

224 *4.2.Aspirations in Global Higher Education*

225 In the context of education, aspirations have long attracted young people seeking to improve
226 their life chances. Both in academia and education policy, aspiration has become ubiquitous
227 (Gale and Parker, 2011; Harrison and Waller, 2015). Much of this research has focused on
228 school children, where interventions are directed at raising aspirations for future employment
229 and participation in further education (Schorner, 2024; Abram, 2018; Allen, 2016). The
230 prevailing assumption is that higher education serves as both the evaluative metric and the
231 intended outcome of aspiring forward. However, within higher education scholarship itself,
232 aspiration remains underexplored as a construct shaping university experiences and graduate
233 trajectories. This section surveys global research before narrowing to the Indian context.

234 Glass (2003), using the U.S. National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988, examined
235 aspirations and college choice across urban, suburban, and rural students. Findings showed
236 that while urban students initially lagged behind suburban peers in accessing higher
237 education, enrollment rates later converged. Rural students, however, displayed persistently
238 lower aspirations and enrollment. Such results highlight enduring geographic disparities in
239 aspiration and access.

240 Sellar and Gale (2011) analyzed policy reforms in Australian higher education, arguing for
241 moving beyond deficit-centered approaches. They emphasized that widening participation
242 must be accompanied by amplifying diverse student voices post-enrollment to ensure
243 equitable capacities for success.

244 Similarly, Burke (2015), drawing on a Bourdieusian lens, critiqued the linear assumption of
245 meritocracy in the UK context. Examining students with comparable educational capital, he
246 showed how class shapes aspirations, expectations, and preparedness for labor market entry.
247 Graduate trajectories, therefore, cannot be divorced from broader inequalities and forms of
248 capital.

249 Research beyond the Global North has increasingly foregrounded aspiration within
250 marginalized contexts. Cuhadar*et al.* (2025) studied forty Syrian refugee women in Turkish
251 universities, showing how higher education fosters professional development, rights
252 awareness, and future-oriented hope. Despite inclusive state policies, low enrolment and
253 labour force participation persisted. Using Sen's capability approach (1999), the study
254 demonstrated that raising aspirations is central to empowerment and human rights.

255 Suto (2025) investigated immobility aspirations among minority and majority students in
256 Hungary, surveying 2,210 students across Central Europe. Results indicated that decisions to
257 remain were shaped by socio-demographic factors, peer networks, and institutional elements
258 such as locally oriented programs and university reputation.The COVID-19 pandemic
259 reshaped aspiration globally. Winter *et al.* (2025), through qualitative surveys of U.S.
260 undergraduates, found a shift toward health-related professions, though this was accompanied
261 by rising indecision and declining healthcare career intentions. Aspirations thus reflected both
262 new opportunities and deepened uncertainty.

263 In China, Mulvey and Li (2025) explored how socio-spatial background and place attachment
264 intersect with higher education aspirations. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, their
265 study of forty graduate students showed how inequalities are reproduced through stigma
266 against rural origins. Rural students internalized disadvantage, making aspiration formation
267 itself stratified within elite universities.

268 Together, these studies reveal how aspirations in higher education are not merely individual
269 desires but are deeply embedded in structural, spatial, and cultural contexts. While schools
270 remain the predominant focus, research across diverse geographies demonstrates that
271 aspirations within universities shape student experiences and outcomes in powerful ways.

4.3.Aspirations in Indian Higher Education

273 Now coming to India, Patel (2004) raises fundamental questions about the moral economy of
274 aspirations within the university. What do students hope to achieve through higher education
275 in India and how do institutions interpret these hopes? These concerns are central to her
276 essay, where she distinguishes undergraduate and post-graduate education at the pedagogical
277 level. Traditionally, post-graduate education was a space of advanced inquiry, fostering
278 intellectual rigor, methodological advancement, and research aptitude. However, with neo-
279 liberal policies and the state's withdrawal of financial responsibility, aspirations rooted in

280   intellectual transformation have shifted toward credentialism and managerial technocracy.
281   Patel also notes that pay scale equivalence between undergraduate and post-graduate
282   professors diminishes academic differentiation, burdening teachers with more teaching rather
283   than research or curriculum development.

284   Beteille (2008) provides a nuanced analysis of higher education in India, combining national
285   literacy, enrolment data, and decades of teaching experience at institutions such as the
286   University of Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru University. He notes that aspirations for upward
287   mobility have rapidly grown among middle and lower sections of society, yet the school
288   system's flawed and unequal preparatory base creates pressure on universities to expand at
289   the cost of academic integrity. Beteille defends academic selectivity in admissions and
290   appointments, distinguishing it from reservations, arguing that pushing marginalized students
291   into university without foundational skills is a misdirected response to inequality.

292   Chanana (2007) views educational aspirations through a gendered lens, arguing that for the
293   nascent body of women students in India during the 1990s, aspirations were contingent upon
294   structural constraints and cultural expectations. Despite increasing enrollment, access remains
295   uneven, especially for marginalized women. Chanana critiques over-reliance on enrollment
296   data, which obscures deeper push and pull factors such as social expectations, institutional
297   bias, and privatization. She advocates collecting disaggregated data and conducting micro-
298   studies to formulate gender-sensitive policies.

299   Deshpande (2006, 2009) observes that higher education is a battleground between inclusion
300   and excellence. Positive discrimination for marginalized groups, especially OBCs, has
301   generated ideological fault lines between social justice and meritocracy. His engagement with
302   marginalized youth shows that aspirations should be understood through "exclusive
303   inequalities," where formally merit-based institutions exhibit social bias. Focusing on Dalit
304   and OBC students, he argues that competitive examinations reinforce the rhetoric of merit as
305   a neutral index, obscuring privilege. Even with large-scale participation, higher education as
306   a vehicle for mobility remains largely aspirational. Expansion of affirmative action among
307   intermediate castes has provoked anxiety among dominant castes, showing how institutions
308   reproduce caste capital and create a double bind for aspirations: necessary for social mobility
309   yet deeply mediated by social conditions.

310 Neelakandan and Patil (2012) demonstrate that caste continues to structure higher education
311 and aspiration. They examine Dalit students, constitutionally entitled to affirmative action,
312 yet facing everyday caste discrimination. Using policy texts, constitutional documents, and
313 Dalit movement archives, they show that quotas allow classroom entry but caste hegemony
314 regulates peer interactions and engagement, resulting in symbolic violence and tokenistic
315 inclusion.

316 Gilbertson (2018) explores how neoliberal ideologies shape aspirations in urban India,
317 intersecting with class and education. Based on a longitudinal study in Hyderabad, she finds
318 that neoliberalism frames aspirations as markers of ambition and self-improvement,
319 promoting individual risk-taking. Middle- and upper-class families are flexible in endorsing
320 non-traditional career aspirations, whereas non-elite students and families are criticized for
321 valuing rigorous study and soft skills to secure better jobs. Education emerges as a site
322 shaping aspirations, emphasizing competition, meritocracy, and consumerist ideals.

323 Desai (2022), through ethnography with young women in New Delhi, examines the
324 emotional costs of aspirational demands in neo-liberal India. When aspirations clash with
325 socio-economic realities, participants experience an "emotional limbo," revealing the strain
326 embedded in well-meaning educational initiatives.

327 A.R. Vasavi (2022) critiques the higher education system for failing to inculcate a democratic
328 learning model that facilitates social change. She uses a rural man's experience in Karnataka
329 to illustrate that mass higher education has nominally extended to marginalized communities,
330 yet fails to provide safe, equitable spaces. Even with reservations, students experience
331 stigmatization, e.g., being labelled "Government Brahmin," undermining affirmative action.
332 Vasavi highlights the transition from student life to the labour market, where marginalized
333 youth face diminished recruitment opportunities, contrasting with structurally advantaged
334 upper-caste youth (Weeks, 2010; Jodhkaand Newman, 2007). She proposes "socially
335 transformative learning" to develop critical thinking and social capabilities, broadening
336 marginalized youth's concept of career success beyond corporate employment.

337 Priyam (2024) explores youth cultures and Indian public universities, empirically focusing on
338 Banaras Hindu University, a site of social mobility for rural and small-town youth. The study
339 shows students negotiate layered temporalities, escaping rural rhythms toward urban
340 locations and government jobs. Beyond utilitarian employment aims, students emphasize

341 egalitarianism and quality education, with collective peer networks enabling them to
342 transcend patriarchal norms, bureaucratic hurdles, and caste rigidity.

343 Ajagar and Yadav (2024) examine how university culture influences educational aspirations
344 among tribal college students in Odisha. Using surveys, interviews, and focus groups with
345 120 students, they find that clan systems, ad-hoc appointments, and market-oriented cultures
346 positively correlate with aspirations, while hierarchical cultures negatively affect them.
347 Learning environments, interpersonal relationships, leadership roles, motivation, and
348 communication in scholastic and co-scholastic activities further enhance aspirations.

4.4.First Generation Learners in Global Education

350 Global research on first-generation college students (FGCS) has highlighted the interplay of
351 social, cultural, and institutional factors shaping their academic experiences. Wildhagen
352 (2025) critically examines the first-generation student category within the context of neo-
353 liberal higher education, where values such as meritocracy and diversity dominate. While the
354 label raises awareness and mobilizes support, it risks depoliticizing structural inequities
355 rooted in socio-economic and identity-based differences. The study emphasizes the need for
356 critical reflection on how first-generation student identity is constructed and leveraged in
357 policy and academic discourse, advocating for structural interventions rather than symbolic
358 recognition of diversity.

359 Yacoub *et al.* (2025) explore the academic and career trajectories of first-generation science
360 graduates internationally, documenting challenges from undergraduate studies to late-career
361 research. Limited access to social and cultural capital networks and pervasive feelings of
362 isolation are identified as core barriers, with compounded disadvantage for students with
363 additional marginalized identities. The authors stress the importance of sustained, intentional
364 inclusion practices, including mentoring, guidance, and institutional support, throughout the
365 educational and professional lifespan, to improve retention and foster a sense of belonging.

366 Sudbrock *et al.* (2024) focus on social capital disparities among first-generation students in
367 the United States, distinguishing between those whose parents had no college experience
368 (FGS-none) and those with some college experience (FGS-some). Using survey data and
369 principal component analysis, the study found that lower family- and peer-based social
370 capital among FGS-none students negatively impacted retention, even when overall social

371   capital did not differ across groups. This underscores the importance of nuanced support

372   strategies that recognize subgroup differences within the first-generation population.

373   Mental health outcomes are a further concern for first-generation learners. Rockwell and

374   Kimel (2025) synthesized sixty-two studies and found that first-generation students

375   experience higher anxiety, depression, and stress, particularly when familial interdependence

376   norms conflict with the independent culture of higher education. Outside these culturally

377   specific domains, mental health differences largely disappear, highlighting the need for

378   context-sensitive, targeted mental health interventions.

379   Academic success factors for first-generation students are also well-documented. Roy *et al.*

380   (2025) conducted a systematic review of U.S. colleges, identifying pre-college preparation,

381   family support, financial aid, and campus engagement as key predictors of persistence and

382   degree completion. The study emphasizes culturally responsive interventions, institutional

383   policies, and programming that address unique barriers, supporting holistic development and

384   equitable resource allocation.

385   Li and Zhang (2022) extend this scholarship to China, where first-generation students

386   predominantly come from rural backgrounds, limiting access to academic resources and

387   parental guidance. Although national inclusion policies have expanded access, elite

388   universities remain under-representative. The study adapts Bourdieu's forms of capital to

389   include familial capital as a key determinant of educational outcomes. Personal resilience,

390   school-based resources, and mentorship by staff with similar backgrounds help students

391   navigate systemic deficits. The authors also highlight internal variation among first-

392   generation students, particularly rural versus urban, advocating for targeted mentoring and

393   culturally sensitive support to address these disparities.

4.5. First Generation Learners in Indian Education

395   In keeping with India's basic education model that aims for basic literacy and numeracy for

396   every child, many programs and research projects have been rolled out to ensure that school

397   children who may be classified as first generation learners have obtained both physical access

398   as well as improved resources and infrastructure when it comes to education. Malkani and

399   Rose (2022) explore the opportunities and challenges faced by first-generation students from

400   scheduled tribes and scheduled castes within a rural community in the western state of

401   Maharashtra. Employing child-centric research design, the study attempted to develop ten

402   case studies which each focus on the individual and shared experience of first-generation
403   students. Most students in the study reported to have attended Zilla Parishad schools that
404   were government funded, and at the time of the research were also enrolled in a school that
405   was run with support from a non-governmental organization (NGO). Apart from these
406   antecedents, the students also reported personal circumstances arising out of social and
407   political inequity as a major hindrance to their education.

409   In a longitudinal survey, Pal and Sinha (2025) used a Probability Unit(PROBIT) model
410   commonly used in education research for a period of three decades to understand the nature
411   and extent of learning gaps between school enrolled first-generation students and others. The
412   findings revealed that an ever-widening learning gap existed between the two sets of students
413   and within the learning trajectory of first-generation learners, measures such as accessible
414   school libraries, smaller class sizes and the prominence of female teachers have an overall
415   positive impact. As such, the recommendation from this study was to increase the number of
416   schools and lower the class sizes.

418   Samanta and Soule (2025) highlight that interactive tools which present information through
419   graphics, animation, and audio often have a greater propensity to enhance learning among
420   first-generation students. Particularly the study investigated the potential of an interactive
421   learning prototype to improve engagement, retention and learning outcomes among first-
422   generation students enrolled in the fourth grade of a school in India. Fifty-eight students were
423   divided into two groups, the experimental group and the control group, who were then taught
424   Environmental Science and Mathematics. The experimental group was taught through an
425   interactive website, and the control group was taught using traditional classroom methods.
426   The study revealed that the experimental group received higher average test scores in both
427   subjects, indicating that first-generation learners preferred interactive tools.

429   Research on first-generation learners has predominantly focused on school-level experiences,
430   often overlooking the unique challenges faced by first-generation college students. Much of
431   the existing literature examines the barriers and opportunities faced by first-generation
432   learners in secondary education, highlighting issues such as limited parental involvement,
433   financial constraints, and cultural mismatches between home and school environments.
434   However, transitioning to higher education presents distinct challenges that remain
435   underexplored in academic discourse. For first-generation undergraduate students, the

436 transition to college involves navigating unfamiliar academic, social, and institutional
437 landscapes without familial precedent. While school-level studies often emphasize access and
438 preparation, research must account for persistence, retention, and success in higher education.
439 Recent studies suggest that such students face compounded challenges, including academic
440 under-preparedness, feelings of isolation, and difficulty accessing institutional resources.
441 However, these studies are sparse compared to the extensive body of work on school-level
442 students.

443 Dost and Froer (2021) identify the phenomenon of 'forward movement' among first-
444 generation Adivasi students in rural Chhattisgarh on the cusp of higher education. Based on
445 ethnographic fieldwork, they show that education, despite limited job prospects, continues to
446 attract high parental investment as a route to a desired future. For families engaged in manual
447 labor, higher education symbolized distance from exploitative informal work. Girls initially
448 expressed aspirations to continue studies but, in practice, many were unable to pursue higher
449 education, instead entering domestic work or marriage. The study highlights how aspirations
450 are not fixed but continually framed and reframed within relational contexts of peers and
451 parents, challenging the notion of aspirations as predetermined.

452 Mathew and Lukose (2020) examine how neoliberal capital reshapes aspirations among
453 marginalized students in New Delhi. Through ethnographic research in schools and
454 universities, they show that aspiration becomes a "speculative project" tied to consumerist
455 pleasures. Students adopt strategies of affective labour (emotional work in service sectors,
456 English training) and aesthetic labour (grooming, fitness) to fashion aspirational selves.
457 These "pedagogies of aspiration" reveal higher education as a key site where marginalized
458 students are simultaneously included via affirmative action and excluded through persistent
459 discrimination, underscoring the contradictions of aspiration-making in neoliberal India.

460 Moving away from how aspirations are structured among the middle class, Devi and Ray's
461 research takes us to the higher educational and career aspirations of Dalit youth in a lower-
462 income locality in the capital city of Delhi (2022). Despite the entry of these young people in
463 higher-educational institutions, the scholars outline a segregation of Dalit youth in low-
464 quality distance education courses that focus on the social sciences. The scholars attempt a
465 granular examination of the various constraints and motivations that lead Dalit youth to be
466 segregated non-elite educational institutions. The scholars argue that *'mahaul'* or the spatial,
467 socio-cultural and historical characteristics of a low-income neighborhood led to the

468 educational exclusion of Dalit students in higher education even though it is in a metropolitan
469 city like Delhi which has no dearth of prestigious educational institutions (2022). In trying to
470 argue that Dalit students are lacking not because of individual traits but due to their socio-
471 cultural background and lifeworld, the scholars reframe the definition of aspiration and relate
472 it to *'majboori'* or compulsion, which forces Dalit students to curtail their desire for
473 education at elite higher educational institutions.

474

475 Ganai's study (2019) explores the personality traits of first -generation learners with their
476 non-first-generation counterparts at the college level. Drawing on a purposive sample of six
477 hundred students, comprising three hundred first generation learners and three hundred non-
478 first-generation learners at the University of Kashmir, the research employed a sixteen
479 Personality Factor Questionnaire as the principal tool of data collection. The findings of the
480 study revealed distinct differences in personality attributes between the two groups. Non-
481 first-generation learners were found to be more outgoing, emotionally stable, intellectually
482 inclined, dominant, bold, sensitive, perceptive, and liberal in orientation. Conversely, first-
483 generation learners tended to exhibit traits of reservation, shyness, security-seeking
484 behaviour, conservatism, relative disregard for social convention, and a more relaxed
485 disposition. These result point towards the significant impact of familial educational
486 backgrounds on the personality traits of students, suggesting that social, and cultural capital
487 plays an important role in shaping learner's self-presentation and adaptability within higher
488 educational contexts.

489

490 The First-Generation Graduate Scholarship in Tamil Nadu, India, a targeted initiative that
491 waives tuition fees for first-generation students enrolled in institute of technical education is
492 the subject of Annadurai and Sahoo's paper (2024). Drawing on a large-scale household
493 survey data, the authors used Difference-in Differences (DiD) methods, as well as synthetic
494 DiD methods, to rigorously evaluate the program's causal effects. Results indicate significant
495 improvement in educational outcomes across multiple educational outcomes: increased
496 enrolment rates, more strategic choice of academic stream, and higher graduation rates in
497 technical disciplines. Not only that, the study recorded that these gains translated into
498 significant labour market outcomes, such as a higher likelihood of regular employment,
499 changes in occupational trajectories, and enhanced household well-being. Gender disparities
500 also emerged wherein male students benefitted more from the scholarship compared to their
501 female peers. The study also noted that the program had a few unintended consequences such

502 as alleviating tuition burdens but increasing dependence on education loans to cover

503 associated expenses.

504

505 Wadhwa's study underscored that Indian higher education was undergoing rapid expansion

506 and this led to the inclusion of students from a wide spectrum of caste, class, ethnic, regional,

507 religious, and linguistic backgrounds who were historically excluded. The study notes that

508 this diversification has led to the transformation of social composition of campuses, growing

509 number of whom are first-generation learners entering into universities. Despite these trends

510 existing literature in the Indian context rarely focuses on first-generation learners at an

511 exclusive level, and rather further general ideas around widening participation, improving

512 access, or increasing equality of participation by changing university provisions. The study

513 by Wadhwa attempted to correct this epistemic blind-spot by conducting a mixed methods

514 study on first-generation students across colleges in India. This study uses the Factors

515 Influencing the Pursuit of Higher Education (FIPHE) questionnaire to point out that both

516 groups of first and non-first-generation students obtain a career, but their motivations are

517 starkly different. Forst first-generation learners, there is a stronger need to escape from their

518 current conditions, and narratives around education do not resonate with ones that were

519 retrieved from young people in high- or middle-income groups. Non-first-generation students

520 tended to be more self-assured and knowledgeable and were easily able to make connections

521 between past desires and future plans. As a consequence of this imbalance, first-generation

522 students were more likely than their non-first-generation students to cite being financially

523 well-to-do as an important factor for their enrolment in higher education. Wadhwa (2024)

524 finally made some significant policy recommendations, such as the adoption of parental

525 education level as an important criterion for reservations, going beyond just caste, religion,

526 and gender. Another important observation in this notes that within the broad category of

527 first-generation learners, those who are able to break the intergenerational cycle are primarily

528 males, living in urban areas. This indicates the female students and those in rural areas who

529 are first-generation learners are even more unlikely to break the cycle. Thus, approaching

530 issues of access to higher education from the lens of generation is crucial to enhance

531 capabilities of the youth.

532

533 In North-East India, specifically, at the North-Eastern Hill University in Meghalaya,

534 Renschler (2025) notes that the rapid expansion of higher education among long-standing

535 intergroup tensions, has opened new educational pathways for non-traditional, largely first-

generation students. Predominantly, these students find access into higher education through the support of affirmative action. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork Renschler demonstrates how first-generation students' entry into higher education is deeply connected to a desire for spatial mobility, leaving the space of home and attending university, travelling for workshops, and also participating in research, both within India and abroad. This study argues three key points as regards to first-generation students, educational opportunities are influenced by life histories, first-generation students actively seek out strategies to navigate unfamiliar education environments at the college or university level, and lastly, through repeated acts of mobility that take them away from their origin points, first-generation learners enhance their capacity to act and form fresh aspirations for personal and professional growth. Table 2 provides an overview of the studies on first-generation learners in India, which will enable the establishment of clear research gaps that this study will try to fulfil. Insert Table 2 here.

5. Discussion: Research Gaps and Directions for Future Research

This thematic review, based on an analysis of 82 studies showed how existing research is distributed across five thematic domains, namely aspirations in sociology, aspirations in global education, aspirations in Indian higher education, first-generation learners in global contexts, and first-generation learners in India. However, there is also a need to highlight critical gaps in the study of first-generation learners' aspirations in Indian higher education. These gaps suggest directions for future research that can generate more nuanced and context-sensitive insights, bridging both theoretical and empirical silences identified through this review.

5.1. Gap in the level of focus

Current research on Indian education continues to prioritise primary and secondary schooling, reflecting policy imperatives such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Ministry of Education, 2024). While attention to higher education has grown over the past two decades, much of it concentrates on central universities and elite institutions like the IITs. This focus, though valuable, risks marginalising the study of state-level universities, which enrol diverse student populations and play a vital role in India's socio-economic development and global competitiveness. Future research should therefore shift attention to these institutions, examining the complexities of student experiences, institutional practices, and the socio-

568 economic contexts that shape them. Such work would provide a more balanced understanding

569 of higher education in India and inform evidence-based policy reforms aimed at improving

570 equity and access at the state level.

571 *5.2. Lack of qualitative depth and intersectionality*

572 Most studies in higher education rely heavily on quantitative indicators, including enrolment

573 figures and infrastructural measures such as the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER). While these

574 metrics are important, they overlook the lived experiences, motivations, and aspirations of

575 students. Additionally, existing research often examines single dimensions of marginality,

576 such as caste, gender, or economic disadvantage, in isolation. Future scholarship should adopt

577 qualitative and intersectional approaches to capture the multiple, interacting forms of

578 disadvantage that students experience. In particular, attention to variables like parental

579 education, in combination with caste, class, gender, and region, can illuminate how structural

580 inequalities shape educational aspirations and trajectories. Such research would deepen

581 understanding of the nuanced ways in which first-generation learners navigate higher

582 education.

583 *5.3. Regional disparities in research*

584 The literature on first-generation learners in India shows significant regional gaps. Existing

585 studies focus on Maharashtra, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Jammu and Kashmir, and the

586 North East, while the eastern region—especially West Bengal and Bihar, which contribute

587 large cohorts of first-generation learners—remains underrepresented. Research from West

588 Bengal (Samant and Seoul, 2025) is largely limited to school-level ICT interventions, and

589 Bihar is absent from the literature entirely, despite its high out-migration and complex caste-

590 class hierarchies (Panagariya and Rao, 2014). Future studies should therefore prioritise these

591 eastern states, exploring both the socio-cultural and institutional factors that shape students'

592 higher education experiences. Comparative research across these contexts can generate

593 insights into how regional differences influence access, participation, and aspirations, thereby

594 filling a critical gap in understanding first-generation learners in India.

595 **6. Conclusion**

596 This review synthesised 82 studies on educational aspirations of first-generation learners

597 (FGLs) in higher education, with emphasis on India. It highlights key policy imperatives:

598 moving beyond access to ensure persistence and success; recognising parental education as a

599 critical equity marker; prioritising investments in state universities that serve the majority of

600 FGLs; and tailoring interventions to regional contexts. By framing aspirations as both

601 conceptual and empirical entry points, the review shifts attention from barriers to the ways

602 young people imagine and pursue futures. Aspiration-sensitive, intersectional policies can

603 reorient Indian higher education toward equity, recognition, and opportunity.

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