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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FIRST GENERATION LEARNERS AND HIGHER EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS IN INDIA: A SYSTEMATIC COMPREHENSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

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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 aspirations in India. 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.

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Introduction:-

The transition to college represents a unique set of challenges for all students, but these are often magnified for first-generation learners, 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 and Passeron, 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 paradigms. 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 first-generation learners have entered higher education. Yet these students remain disproportionately vulnerable to caste- and gender-based inequalities, lack of cultural and social capital, regional deprivation, and religious discrimination (Deshpande, 2012). A further challenge in India is the absence of definitional consensus on who qualifies as a first-generation learner.

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

Objectives:-

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

- Firstly, to undertake a systematic synthesis of extant global literature in education research examining student aspirations in higher education and the experiences of first-generation students, while highlighting the critical lack of research specifically focused on the aspirations of first-generation students.
- Secondly, to identify research gaps, with a clear emphasis on the need for more research into the lived experiences of first-generation students within India, and with particular focus on addressing regional disparities that shape and differentiate these experiences within Indian higher education.

Methods:-

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

Search Strategy:-

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

Eligibility Criteria:-

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

Criteria	Specification
Source/Database	Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC
Keywords	("education" OR "schooling") AND ("higher education" OR "tertiary education" OR "college" OR "university") AND ("aspiration*" OR "expectation*") AND ("futuristic" OR "future orientation") AND ("first-generation" OR "first in family") AND ("India" OR "South Asia") AND "sociology" AND "youth" AND "capital"
Timeline	1953 to 2025 (to capture historical and contemporary trends in scholarship)
Type of Document	Journal articles, working papers, book chapters, commentaries, conference proceedings,
Region	Global; India prioritized for analyses
Language	English
Boolean Operators	AND with use of OR for synonyms and truncation for variants, e.g., aspiration

Table 1: Eligibility Criteria for Literature Review

Source: Compiled by authors

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 of three-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, one-hundred and ninety articles were considered eligible for full-text assessment and they were assessed in detail. Of these, one-hundred and eight 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, eighty-two studies were included in the qualitative synthesis. Figure 1 represents the PRISMA flow chart.

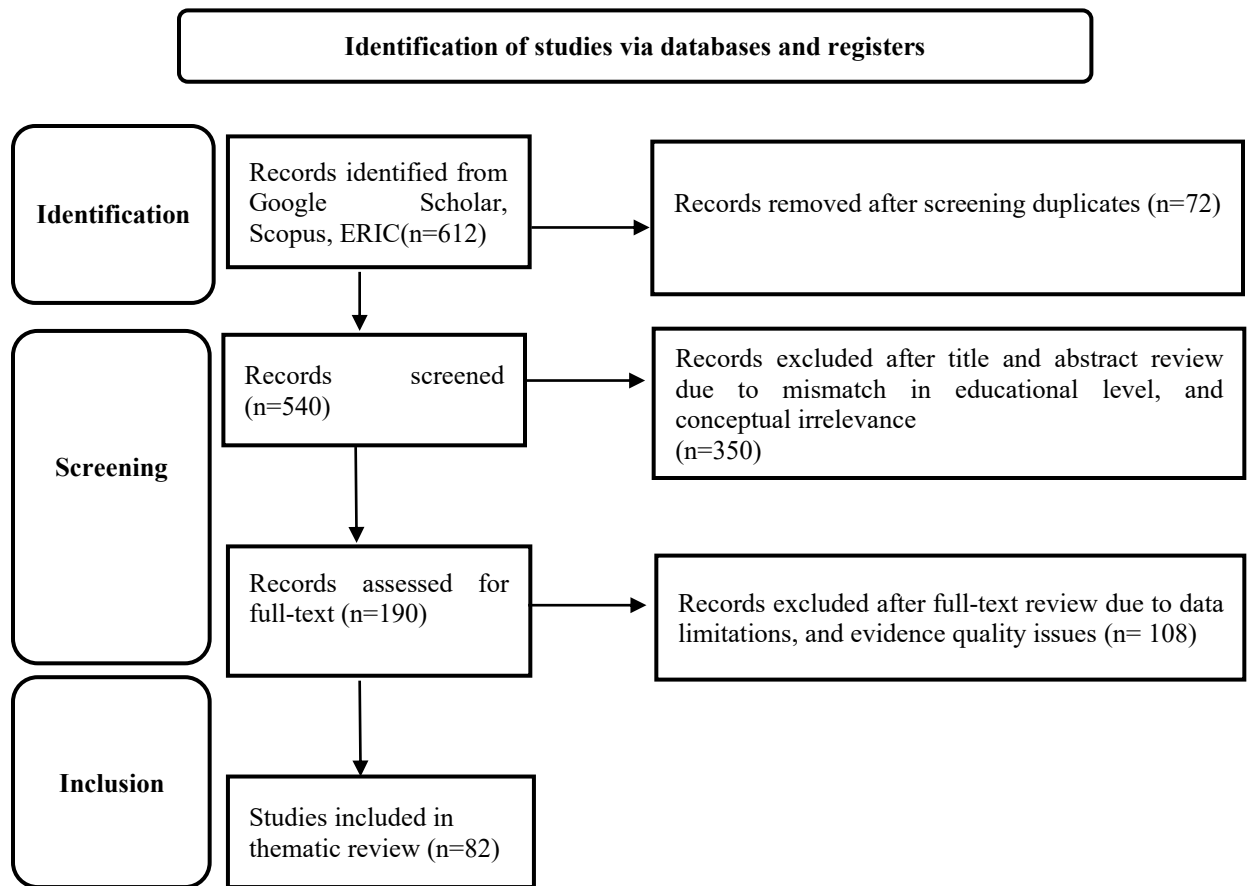


Figure 1. Screening documents for full-text review

Source: Generated by authors; adapted from PRISMA (Page et al., 2020)

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.

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.

Results:-

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

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

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

While earlier models stressed individual ambition and parental influence, later approaches underscore how aspirations are shaped by structural inequalities, opportunity structures, and cultural resources. Contemporary frameworks, particularly those developed by Appadurai (2004) and Zipinet al. (2015), highlight the importance of agency and power, reframing aspirations as culturally mediated capacities that can either reinforce or challenge social reproduction.

Aspirations in Global Higher Education:-

In the context of education, aspirations have long attracted young people seeking to improve their life chances. Both in academia and education policy, aspiration has become ubiquitous (Gale and Parker, 2011; Harrison and Waller, 2015). Much of this research has focused on school children, where interventions are directed at raising aspirations

for future employment and participation in further education (Schorner, 2024; Abram, 2018; Allen, 2016). The prevailing assumption is that higher education serves as both the evaluative metric and the intended outcome of aspiring forward. However, within higher education scholarship itself, aspiration remains underexplored as a construct shaping university experiences and graduate trajectories. This section surveys global research before narrowing to the Indian context.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aspirations in Indian Higher Education:-

Now coming to India, Patel (2004) raises fundamental questions about the moral economy of aspirations within the university. What do students hope to achieve through higher education in India and how do institutions interpret these hopes? These concerns are central to her essay, where she distinguishes undergraduate and post-graduate education at the pedagogical level. Traditionally, post-graduate education was a space of advanced inquiry, fostering intellectual rigor, methodological advancement, and research aptitude. However, with neo-liberal policies and the state's withdrawal of financial responsibility, aspirations rooted in intellectual transformation have shifted toward credentialism and managerial technocracy. Patel also notes that pay scale equivalence between undergraduate and post-graduate professors diminishes academic differentiation, burdening teachers with more teaching rather than research or curriculum development.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Priyam (2024) explores youth cultures and Indian public universities, empirically focusing on Banaras Hindu University, a site of social mobility for rural and small-town youth. The study shows students negotiate layered temporalities, escaping rural rhythms toward urban locations and government jobs. Beyond utilitarian employment aims, students emphasize egalitarianism and quality education, with collective peer networks enabling them to transcend patriarchal norms, bureaucratic hurdles, and caste rigidity.

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

First Generation Learners in Global Education:-

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

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

Sudbrock et al. (2024) focus on social capital disparities among first-generation students in the United States, distinguishing between those whose parents had no college experience (FGS-none) and those with some college experience (FGS-some). Using survey data and principal component analysis, the study found that lower family- and peer-based social capital among FGS-none students negatively impacted retention, even when overall social capital did not differ across groups. This underscores the importance of nuanced support strategies that recognize subgroup differences within the first-generation population.

Mental health outcomes are a further concern for first-generation learners. Rockwell and Kimel (2025) synthesized sixty-two studies and found that first-generation students experience higher anxiety, depression, and stress, particularly when familial interdependence norms conflict with the independent culture of higher education. Outside these culturally specific domains, mental health differences largely disappear, highlighting the need for context-sensitive, targeted mental health interventions.

Academic success factors for first-generation students are also well-documented. Roy et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review of U.S. colleges, identifying pre-college preparation, family support, financial aid, and campus engagement as key predictors of persistence and degree completion. The study emphasizes culturally responsive interventions, institutional policies, and programming that address unique barriers, supporting holistic development and equitable resource allocation.

Li and Zhang (2022) extend this scholarship to China, where first-generation students predominantly come from rural backgrounds, limiting access to academic resources and parental guidance. Although national inclusion policies have expanded access, elite universities remain under-representative. The study adapts Bourdieu's forms of capital to include familial capital as a key determinant of educational outcomes. Personal resilience, school-based resources, and mentorship by staff with similar backgrounds help students navigate systemic deficits. The authors also highlight internal variation among first-generation students, particularly rural versus urban, advocating for targeted mentoring and culturally sensitive support to address these disparities.

First Generation Learners in Indian Education:-

In keeping with India's basic education model that aims for basic literacy and numeracy for every child, many programs and research projects have been rolled out to ensure that school children who may be classified as first generation learners have obtained both physical access as well as improved resources and infrastructure when it comes to education. Malkani and Rose (2022) explore the opportunities and challenges faced by first-generation students from scheduled tribes and scheduled castes within a rural community in the western state of Maharashtra.

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

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

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

Research on first-generation learners has predominantly focused on school-level experiences, often overlooking the unique challenges faced by first-generation college students. Much of the existing literature examines the barriers and opportunities faced by first-generation learners in secondary education, highlighting issues such as limited parental involvement, financial constraints, and cultural mismatches between home and school environments. However, transitioning to higher education presents distinct challenges that remain underexplored in academic discourse. For first-generation undergraduate students, the transition to college involves navigating unfamiliar academic, social, and institutional landscapes without familial precedent. While school-level studies often emphasize access and preparation, research must account for persistence, retention, and success in higher education. Recent studies suggest that such students face compounded challenges, including academic under-preparedness, feelings of isolation, and difficulty accessing institutional resources. However, these studies are sparse compared to the extensive body of work on school-level students.

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

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

Moving away from how aspirations are structured among the middle class, Devi and Ray’s research (2022) takes us to the higher educational and career aspirations of Dalit youth in a lower-income locality in the capital city of Delhi. Despite the entry of these young people in higher-educational institutions, the scholars outline a segregation of Dalit youth in low-quality distance education courses that focus on the social sciences. The scholars attempt a granular examination of the various constraints and motivations that lead Dalit youth to be segregated non-elite educational

institutions. The scholars argue that ‘mahaul’ or the spatial, socio-cultural and historical characteristics of a low-income neighborhood led to the educational exclusion of Dalit students in higher education even though it is in a metropolitan city like Delhi which has no dearth of prestigious educational institutions (2022). In trying to argue that Dalit students are lacking not because of individual traits but due to their socio-cultural background and lifeworld, the scholars reframe the definition of aspiration and relate it to ‘majboori’ or compulsion, which forces Dalit students to curtail their desire for education at elite higher educational institutions.

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

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

Wadhwa’s study (2024) underscored that Indian higher education was undergoing rapid expansion and this led to the inclusion of students from a wide spectrum of caste, class, ethnic, regional, religious, and linguistic backgrounds who were historically excluded. The study notes that this diversification has led to the transformation of social composition of campuses, growing number of whom are first-generation learners entering into universities. Despite these trends existing literature in the Indian context rarely focuses on first-generation learners at an exclusive level, and rather further general ideas around widening participation, improving access, or increasing equality of participation by changing university provisions. This study attempted to correct this epistemic blind-spot by conducting a mixed methods study on first-generation students across colleges in India. This study uses the Factors Influencing the Pursuit of Higher Education (FIPHE) questionnaire to point out that both groups of first and non-first-generation students obtain a career, but their motivations are starkly different. Forst first-generation learners, there is a stronger need to escape from their current conditions, and narratives around education do not resonate with ones that were retrieved from young people in high- or middle-income groups. Non-first-generation students tended to be more self-assured and knowledgeable and were easily able to make connections between past desires and future plans. As a consequence of this imbalance, first-generation students were more likely than their non-first-generation students to cite being financially well-to-do as an important factor for their enrolment in higher education. Wadhwa (2024) finally made some significant policy recommendations, such as the adoption of parental education level as an important criterion for reservations, going beyond just caste, religion, and gender. Another important observation in this notes that within the broad category of first-generation learners, those who are able to break the intergenerational cycle are primarily males, living in urban areas. This indicates the female students and those in rural areas who are first-generation learners are even more unlikely to break the cycle. Thus, approaching issues of access to higher education from the lens of generation is crucial to enhance capabilities of the youth.

In North-East India, specifically, at the North-Eastern Hill University in Meghalaya, Renschler (2025) notes that the rapid expansion of higher education among long-standing 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.

Discussion:-

This thematic review, based on an analysis of eighty-two 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.

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-economic contexts that shape them. Such work would provide a more balanced understanding of higher education in India and inform evidence-based policy reforms aimed at improving equity and access at the state level.

Lack of qualitative depth and intersectionality:

Most studies in higher education rely heavily on quantitative indicators, including enrolment figures and infrastructural measures such as the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER). While these metrics are important, they overlook the lived experiences, motivations, and aspirations of students. Additionally, existing research often examines single dimensions of marginality, such as caste, gender, or economic disadvantage, in isolation. Future scholarship should adopt qualitative and intersectional approaches to capture the multiple, interacting forms of disadvantage that students experience. In particular, attention to variables like parental education, in combination with caste, class, gender, and region, can illuminate how structural inequalities shape educational aspirations and trajectories. Such research would deepen understanding of the nuanced ways in which first-generation learners navigate higher education.

Regional disparities in research:

The literature on first-generation learners in India shows significant regional gaps. Existing studies focus on Maharashtra, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Jammu and Kashmir, and the North East, while the eastern region—especially West Bengal and Bihar, which contribute large cohorts of first-generation learners—remains underrepresented. Research from West Bengal (Samant and Seoul, 2025) is largely limited to school-level ICT interventions, and Bihar is absent from the literature entirely, despite its high out-migration and complex caste-class hierarchies (Panagariya and Rao, 2014). Future studies should therefore prioritise these eastern states, exploring both the socio-cultural and institutional factors that shape students' higher education experiences. Comparative research across these contexts can generate insights into how regional differences influence access, participation, and aspirations, thereby filling a critical gap in understanding first-generation learners in India.

Conclusion:-

This review synthesised eighty-two studies on educational aspirations of first-generation learners in higher education, with emphasis on India. It highlights key policy imperatives: moving beyond access to ensure persistence and success; recognising parental education as a critical equity marker; prioritising investments in state universities that serve the majority of first-generation learners; and tailoring interventions to regional contexts. By framing

aspirations as both conceptual and empirical entry points, the review shifts attention from barriers to the ways young people imagine and pursue futures. Aspiration-sensitive, intersectional policies can reorient Indian higher education toward equity, recognition, and opportunity.

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