



## **Intersectionality and Women Academics in Indian Higher Education**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Globally, women's representation in higher education has increased rapidly, leading to a dramatic rise in female labor force participation. In India, despite achieving gender parity in access to higher education, progress in closing gender gaps in the labor force remains unsatisfactory. Similar to enrollments in higher education, the percentage of women who pursue careers in higher education as faculty also reflects gender parity within faculty compositions. Women's representation in senior academic positions, however, is negligible, with less than 10% of institutions led by women and fewer than 30% holding professor positions. This study explores the experiences of three female academicians working in public higher education institutes in Delhi, India. Through an intersectional lens, it delves into the complex challenges arising from the interaction of multiple societal identities among Indian women academicians. The analysis highlights the obstacles women face at different stages of their careers, from enrollment and recruitment to career progression in higher education. The study finds that women's motivation and self-belief are crucial in navigating these challenges. Additionally, a conducive environment, supportive leadership, and flexible work schedules are pivotal in facilitating women's advancement in academia. This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on Indian women in academia, emphasizing intersectional identity and lived experiences.*

**Keywords:** *academia, higher education, India, intersectionality narratives, women.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Globally, women today enjoy access to higher education that their mothers and grandmothers could only dream about. Over the past few decades, women's higher education attainment has rapidly increased worldwide. The representation of women in higher education has tripled globally between 1995 and 2018 (UNESCO, 2020). Since the beginning of the twentieth century, in the USA and several developed countries, women have benefitted from educational attainment, leading to a dramatic increase in female labor force participation in their countries (Goldin & Katz, 2000; Greenwood et al., 2005). Similarly, in the twenty-first century developing world, many women have benefited from their country's improved education system by transitioning increasingly into the labor force, such as in Myanmar 41%, Malaysia 52% and China 68% (ILO,2024).

Contrary to the experiences of western and other developing countries with similar socioeconomic transitions and greater access to higher education, India's progress in closing gender gaps in the labor force has been unsatisfactory (Klasen et al., 2021). On the eve of independence, women made up less than 10% of total higher education students, and by the 2019–20 academic year, that percentage had jumped to 49% (Ministry of Education, 2021). However, according to the National Periodic Labor Force Participation Survey (PLFS) (2020–21), only 23.5% of women, compared to 72% of men with similar higher education degrees, participated in the labor force (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation,2022). Hence, India presents a unique case of women's rising enrolment in higher education, but inadequate labor force participation among highly educated women.

Similar to the higher education enrollment rate, the percentage of women who continue their careers in higher education as faculty represents gender parity within faculty compositions. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the data reveals their negligible representation in senior academic positions. According to a study by Banker and Banker (2017), only 54 out of 810 Indian institutions are headed by females. Similar to leadership positions, a stark gender disparity is revealed at professor and equivalent positions, with only 28% of women compared to 72% of men occupying this position. Notably, little has changed over the past five years, as the percentage of women in these roles is consistently low. In 2016–17, the figure stood at 26%, witnessing a marginal two percent rise to 28% by 2021 (Ministry of Education, 2021). As Indian higher education institutions become more gender diverse, with a rising number of women enrolling, the underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions is a concern.

To understand the underrepresentation of women in senior academic positions, we must explore how gender works with other structures of discrimination and oppression, such as skin color, caste, ethnicity, religion, and class, against women in higher education workspaces. These intersectional considerations are crucial as they contribute to the "recovery" of marginalized voices of women (Dhawan, 2019). By acknowledging and understanding how various forms of discrimination overlap and intersect, we might gain insights into the complex and multifaceted challenges women academicians face in Indian academia.

The term intersectionality has been recently imported into Indian academia. The application of an intersectional theoretical framework within studies of Indian higher education is still in its early stages of development (Gaikwad & Pandey, 2022; Dhawan et al., 2023).

This paper seeks to explore how the intersection of gender and other identities of Indian women associated with their caste, religion, class, and demography impact their experiences in academia. The existing studies in Indian higher education lack the application of intersectionality in the exploration of the experiences of women in academia (Gaikwad & Pandey, 2022; Bhattacharya et al., 2018; Gandhi & Sen, 2021; Mythili, 2017). This study aims to address this vacuum in scholarship by adopting intersectionality theory as the theoretical foundation to understand how multiple social identities interact and intersect to impact women's experiences in Indian academia.

This study presents the narratives of three female faculties presently working in the Indian higher education sector at different stages of their academic careers, belonging to different social backgrounds and regions of the country. This study explores the lived experiences of Indian women academicians, shedding light on the obstacles they encounter in academia at every stage, from their enrolment recruitment to career progression. Through an intersectional lens, this study aims to reveal the diverse and intricate barriers women face in Indian academia. From a policy standpoint, it is crucial to recognize that research grounded locally can produce interventions beneficial to women in diverse geographical and cultural contexts.

This paper begins by providing an overview of women's position in Indian higher education. It then delves into the existing literature on barriers to women academics in India, particularly exploring the complexities arising from their overlapping identities. The next section is methodology, followed by the presentation of narratives from three female faculty members, namely Suman, Asha, and Mona. The paper culminates with a section on discussion and concluding remarks that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Indian women in academia.

## **THE INDIAN SOCIAL CONTEXT**

India as a country is diverse, with twenty-eight states, each with distinct languages and cultural practices. However, diversity is uniquely

interconnected with disparities between different social groups based on their gender, caste, ethnicity, and religion. Social structures and disparities are inherent to every country, with India historically structured by a stratified social order, with the caste system serving as the foundational element of India's social structure.

The Indian Caste System has been a prominent aspect that differentiates people in India based on various dimensions such as class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language. This hierarchical classification system involves the categorization of people into four varnas based on their occupations, thereby shaping their access to wealth, power, and privilege. At the top of this hierarchy are the Brahmins (priests and scholars), followed by the Kshatriyas (political rulers and soldiers), the Vaishyas (merchants), and the Shudras (laborers, peasants, artisans, and servants). Notably, individuals engaged in occupations deemed "unclean," such as scavenging and skinning dead animals, are categorized as untouchables, constituting outcastes who are excluded from the graded caste system (Deshpande, 2010). In the post-independence era, the Constitution of India extended safeguarding measures for historically disadvantaged populations in India.

The terms Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) have been used to officially designate groups of historically disadvantaged people in India (Rani, 2018). The Constitution of India adopted the "schedule caste" definition offered by the British in the Government of India Act 1935, which defines "scheduled castes" as "castes, races, tribes, or specific segments or subsets within castes that, in the judgment of His Majesty in Council, appear to correspond to the categories of individuals previously referred to as "the depressed classes" (Article 341; Article 342; GOI, 1950).

Similarly, the definition for "Scheduled Tribes" has been preserved from the 1931 Census, where they were referred to as "backward tribes" residing in the "excluded" and "partially excluded" regions. Articles 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution outlaw any discrimination based on caste, religion, race, or place of birth. Despite the legal proscription of caste-based divisions, their influence persists, exerting an impact on both tangible social interactions and the envisioned system of values.

Furthermore, there exist differences based on skin color, ethnic, linguistic, regional, religious, and class distinctions within Indian society, further compounded by immense urban-rural differences (Jacobson, 2004). Discrimination based on skin color is practiced unapologetically in Indian society through the construction of beauty standards and superior social status. In Indian society, the roots of discrimination based on skin color can be understood as having pre-colonial and post-colonial consequences. Indian society is historically stratified based on caste hierarchies where light skin color is associated with upper caste members and dark skin color with untouchables (Ayyar & Khandare, 2012). Moreover, the history of colonialism and the Mughal conquerors from Central Asia contributed to the

white presence in India, which led to a preference for a light complexion over dark skin (Haq, 2013). Therefore, a complex web of interconnected experiences is developed through the intersecting nexus of color, caste, religion, and gender, along with coercive practices in daily life.

Different groups have different notions of gender discrimination and gender power relationships. Gender-based discrimination does not conform to a uniform pattern or approach across all contexts, since women are not a homogenous category (Menon, 2015). Therefore, the experiences of women from various groups are different from one another, stemming from the intersecting dynamics of their diverse identities. Hence, it is critical to deconstruct the multi-dimensionality of Indian women's identities that are otherwise considered homogenous.

These hierarchal power structures—religious, linguistic, regional, ethnic, and other differences—continue to maintain gender differences and alter gender power relations in Indian society. These gender-based differentiations extend from society to organizations, including academic institutions (Vasavada, 2012). In India, certain professions, such as teaching, have traditionally attracted women. Despite this, within the higher education sector itself, the glass ceiling is real.

### ***Women in Indian Higher education***

The All-India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) 2021 conducted by the Ministry of Education, Government of India, portrays a relatively balanced representation of gender in faculty compositions, with men comprising 56 percent and women constituting 43 percent (Ministry of Education, 2021). A closer examination of the data, however, reveals that women are predominantly concentrated in lower-ranking academic positions. Men hold 72% of professor or equivalent positions, whereas women hold only 28%. Unsurprisingly, 43 percent of lecturer and assistant professor positions are occupied by women in Indian higher education. Caste-based differences are also evident in the representation of faculty members, with only 9 percent belonging to the Scheduled Caste and 2.5 percent belonging to the Scheduled Tribe. Another fascinating statistic is that women hold 66.5 percent of demonstrator/tutor positions, which are frequently contract-based and temporary. The data indicates that women have been concentrated at the lower rungs of the academic ladder, and very few women reach managerial and leadership positions.

In Indian universities, men hold a disproportionately large share of decision-making positions, including membership in executive, academic, and administrative bodies. Despite women historically favoring the education sector as their career choice, only a modest 5 percent of women currently assume leadership roles in the higher education sector (Gandhi & Sen, 2021). Although women have significantly entered higher education, the attainment of authoritative and leadership positions remains notably limited.

Consequently, women in Indian higher education contend with a dual experience of both inclusion and exclusion.

Within the broader scholarly discourse, Aiston and Yang (2017) characterize the existing body of literature addressing the underrepresentation of women in higher-level academic positions as the 'absent women discourse'. The existing literature brings out various obstacles to women's progress in academia, such as the glass ceiling (Sharma & Kaur, 2019), everyday sexism (Stainback et al., 2011), gender inequality (Ali & Rasheed, 2021), male-dominated networks (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016), social roles (Morley & Crossouard, 2015), double burden, and stereotyping at work (Dominici et al., 2009; Chanana, 2022). Nevertheless, the present understanding of barriers to women's advancement in academia is primarily based on research conducted in Western contexts. While previous studies on Indian women in academia, albeit limited, have reflected on the prevalence of stereotypical ideas about women's roles, the inclination for masculine hegemony, and patriarchal attitudes in Indian society (Bhattacharya et al., 2018; Gandhi & Sen, 2021; Mythili, 2017), it is imperative to recognize that simply pluralizing the term "patriarchy" falls short of providing a comprehensive understanding.

In the Indian context, limited studies have attempted to explore the underlying causes of *why women academics continue to be disproportionately underrepresented*. The following section emphasizes various occupational and personal challenges faced by women in academia.

### ***What pushes women back?***

Hall and Sandler (1982) coined the term "chilly climate" to describe patterns of inequitable internal institutional factors such as inequitable distribution of work responsibilities, unwelcoming departments, biases in recruitment processes, and policies that neglect them because of their gender. Various studies on women's experiences in academia identify a "chilly climate" in universities, which leads them to progress either very slowly or infrequently to top positions (Ramsay, 1995; Mukherjee, 2000; Joyner & Preston, 1998; Chanana, 2003). And others have mentioned the glass ceiling that women encounter when progressing academically (David & Woodward, 1998; Cotter et al., 2001; Sharma & Kaur, 2019). In comparison to men, women face various obstacles to progress in academia.

In response to concerns about the under-representation of women in senior academic roles in higher education in South Asia, Morley and Crossouard (2015) conducted a study using available statistics data in six South Asian countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The study identified a number of complex factors contributing to this issue, including sociocultural norms, expectations placed on women, a lack of training, and the professional development of women in higher education. It was found that socio-cultural beliefs that women are preoccupied with domestic responsibilities reinforce stereotypes of women as unsuitable for leadership roles. Similar results were reported in a study conducted in

India by Khandelwal (2002), where men tend to take more noticeable and challenging roles whereas women take supportive roles in the workplace. Despite the passage of decades, the traditional gender roles of men as breadwinners and women as caretakers continue to remain strong in India's social and professional setups (Gandhi & Sen, 2021). These deeply ingrained gender stereotypes pose significant challenges to the advancement of women in academia.

Even as women climb the academic ladder, gender stereotypes continue to pose significant challenges. Leadership studies on Indian women highlight a bias toward masculine hegemony and stereotypes regarding women's roles, depicting them as secondary within organizations (Bhattacharya et al., 2018; Gandhi & Sen, 2021; Mythili, 2017). Furthermore, resistance to accepting female leaders, differential treatment towards women during selection for leadership roles, patriarchal organizational structures, and socio-cultural factors all serve as obstacles for Indian women leaders (Gaikwad & Pandey, 2022). Therefore, being a woman at the top is perceived as double-demanding, given the lack of support and acceptance from colleagues and pervasive gender stereotypes.

While existing research acknowledges the challenges, gender stereotypes, and disparities in academic positions, the role of leadership support in creating a supportive environment in academia has often been overlooked. Supportive leadership has the potential to establish a welcoming institutional climate that genuinely supports all faculty across gender and social backgrounds, fostering diversity and inclusion at campuses (Buch et al., 2011; Kelly et al., 2018; Aboramadan & Dahleez, 2022; Marchiondo et al., 2023). Academic leaders can play an integral role in acknowledging systemic discrimination rooted in the intersectional identities of women academicians and other forms of oppression present on campuses. They can potentially dismantle systems of inequalities at the individual, departmental, college, and institutional levels, thereby limiting the barriers women academics encounter.

While statistics and literature offer a broad overview of gender inequality, they fall short of explaining a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by women academicians through an exploration of their experiences. Within higher education, the patriarchal organizational culture often manifests in the processes that reflect and perpetuate traditional gender norms and power structures, typically favoring men over women (Townley, 1993; Zhao, 2008; Abalkhail, 2017; Gandhi & Sen, 2021). Studies suggest further that this patriarchal nature of universities creates organizational, structural, and policy hurdles hindering women's success, resulting in lower recruitment and delayed promotions in higher education (Bird, 2011; Savigny, 2014; Agarwala, 2015; Bagilhole & White, 2011). There is a plethora of research on obstacles to women's advancement in academia; nevertheless, the intersectional experiences of Indian women academics have

received less empirical attention. This study attempts to build a deeper understanding of the challenges experienced by women using an intersectional lens.

Chanana (2022) offers an example from India to illustrate how university processes perpetuate gender disparities by denying equal opportunities, impeding women's progress in academia. . In her study, she highlights how women's family duties are neglected while scheduling meetings, in contrast to the considerations made during the hiring process at academic institutions. The research further highlights how selection committees often ask gender-specific, socially-oriented questions to female candidates, a practice rarely applied to their male counterparts. For example, questions like "*If you are posted outstation, who will look after the children? Have you taken your husband's permission?*" indicates the bias. These internal practices significantly contribute to gender disparities within universities and shape the positioning of women within academia.

Traditional norms and societal expectations compound the challenges that women face in academia. With the dual pressures of domestic and professional responsibilities, a constraint is formed on how women perceive themselves. This creates gendered socialization limitations such as less professional mobility, limited mentorship, career breaks, and a lack of networking opportunities (Schipani et al., 2009; Von Alberti-Alhtaybat & Aazam, 2018; Chanana, 2003; Venkat et al., 2023). While various studies have emphasized the factors that impact women's progress in academia, a comprehensive exploration of these factors from socio-cultural and identity perspectives remains significantly under-researched. The identified gender-specific traits and explanations necessitate investigation through the multiple identities of Indian women, considering factors such as their caste, class, demography, etc. The following section delves deeper into the complexities of overlapping identities shaping the experiences of women in academia.

### ***The Overlapping Identities***

In "Mapping the Margins," Crenshaw (1990) introduces intersectionality theory as a framework to examine the situation of being at the intersection of various inequalities. The notion has been described in diverse terms, ranging from an analytical tool (Collins, 1998) to a buzzword (Davis, 2008), a concept (Crenshaw, 1989), a perspective (Shields, 2008), and even a paradigm (Hancock, 2007). According to this approach, gender-based inequalities are exasperated by various factors such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and more. Crenshaw primarily focused on the challenges faced by women of color in recognizing their marginalization in both feminist and anti-racism discourses. By incorporating the notion of intersectionality, which takes into account the multiple grounds of identity, she aimed to examine how the social world is constructed, especially for women of color.

Similarly, Indian society is immensely multi-layered, marked by divisions based on gender, skin color, class, caste, religion, ethnicity,



language, and demographics (Gaikwad et al., 2022). As the national-level data (Ministry of Education, 2021) highlights the under-representation of women in senior academic roles, similarly, the caste differences<sup>1</sup> in faculty positions are also underlined in the national-level data. The share of faculty belonging to Schedule Caste (SC) is only 9%, followed by 2.5% from Schedule Tribe (ST) and 32% from Other Backward Classes (OBC). This data on Indian higher education, despite affirmative action mandating reservations for these disadvantageous groups in faculty positions (Varghese et al., 2019), highlights that these groups still fall short of adequate reservation. The intersection of their overlapping identities, which are traditionally underrepresented, can result in unique experiences and disadvantages exclusive to each distinct identity. Therefore, without taking into account the intersectional identities that build perceptions within institutions, researchers may fail to gain a complete understanding of faculty experiences.

Sabharwal, Henderson, and Joseph (2020) used quantitative and qualitative data from a large-scale national study of social inequalities in higher education in India and focused on faculty participation in conferences and professional development activities. The study reported that women from marginalized groups not only experienced discrimination based on their caste but also encountered exclusion based on their gender. This phenomenon of “double discrimination” significantly increased disadvantages for these women. Various disadvantages were uncovered during the interviews conducted for the study, such as unfair distribution of work, unfavorable working conditions, a lack of support from senior colleagues, and a sense of isolation and exclusion within the institutions. The women faculty members were found to experience a threefold burden stemming from their gender, caste, and class identities.

A significant challenge for researchers and higher education institutes lies in identifying these overlapping identities and finding ways to recognize and respect them. Encouraging inclusive environments extends beyond policymaking and is based on a critical synthesis of documented enablers and barriers. Instead, a deeper intersectional examination is essential for revealing the substantial gaps in the body of knowledge concerning the experiences of female faculty in Indian academia.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study used the feminist methodology of telling the narrated stories of the embodied experiences of Indian women in academia. The feminist methodology emerged in response to the limitations of traditional methodology in adequately capturing the experiences of women marginalized in academic research (Naples, 2007). The feminist methodology can be described by its dual dimension: firstly, the construction of new knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> For caste differences, refer to section "The Indian Social Context" on page 4.

derived from women's lives, and secondly, the production of social change. By centering on women's experiences, it reveals many differences as well as similarities in their experiences of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion (Harding, 1987). It is particularly relevant for the study, as it avoids stereotyping and universalizing "women" in a homogenous category, facilitating a deeper understanding of women's subjectivities in academia.

The qualitative approach of narrative inquiry was used to gather data for the study. Narrative inquiry is a way to study human lives and experiences embedded in them as a source of knowledge and understanding for others to study (Clandinin, 2016). The importance of using narratives as data has been extensively discussed in feminist literature (Bloom, 1998; Chase, 1995; DeVaul, 1999). The narratives serve as primary data through which we can explore how different power relations and dominant ideologies are upheld, perpetuated, or challenged within the discourses of the narratives. The narratives illustrate how women navigate their "exceptional" gender roles in their everyday experiences, at work, at home, and over the course of a lifetime (Bloom, 1998).

In the Indian context, Rege (1998; 2006) has used narratives as a tool to highlight the struggles and experiences of marginalized women, informing the discourse on caste and gender. Rege (1998; 2006) significantly contributed a new alternative tool of narratives, an area not much explored in Indian academia, through which she spotted the excluded women, scheduled castes, or *advivasis*<sup>2</sup> scheduled tribals' voices and perspectives, which earlier remained on the periphery of the cognitive structure of Indian academia.

The narratives in this study are drawn from a larger ongoing thesis study examining the experiences of female faculty in Indian higher education (Khanna, 2024). The ongoing data collection for the study aims for semi-structured interviews with 30 Indian female faculty. The participants in the larger study include female faculties across disciplines and academic positions in central and state universities in the Delhi/NCR region of India. This study includes a non-probability, purposive sampling technique (Guest et al., 2006). While selecting the sample, it was taken into consideration that the sampled population was representative of caste, ethnicity, geography, language, and class.

A detailed literature review was done to develop the questionnaire for the semi-structured interview, focusing on an educational journey, career history, enablers, and challenges experienced by women in their academic journey. The interview questions were left open-ended to capture any potential unexpected themes that may emerge. The semi-structured interviews lasted about 30–90 minutes. The in-depth interviews were conducted in the English language. The interviews were recorded with the written consent of

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<sup>2</sup> Adivasi is a Sanskrit word that refers to *Adi* (ancient) and *Vasi* (residents). It is commonly used to refer to tribal communities across the country.

the participants. The respondents are referred to by pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The analysis of interview transcriptions draws from the work *Writing Caste/Writing Gender-Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (Rege, 2006). In her book, she unravels that a large part of feminist discourse in India consists of autobiographies authored by women from privileged castes and classes. Through her work, she draws attention to the life narratives that encapsulate the struggles, oppression, and humiliation faced by Dalit women. Furthermore, she identifies how caste, class, and gender work together to oppress women in everyday life (Govinda, 2022). Rege (2006) significantly contributes to reimagining knowledge, pedagogies, political struggles, and higher educational practices from a Dalit feminist standpoint.

Similarly, in the American context, Crenshaw (1989) introduced the term intersectionality in *Mapping the Margins* to refer to the experiences of Black American women, drawing attention to multiple intersections of inequality based on gender, class, and color. However, the context of the United States has its own unique historical and social dynamics related to race, slavery or forced labor, and immigration. Crenshaw's analytical framework falls short of capturing the intersectional complexity of caste, class, tribe, ethnicity, religion, and gender in the Indian context. The analysis of a caste-based society like India involves underlining the gendered nature of caste and class oppressions and addressing the long-lived histories of struggle. Hence, this study utilizes Rege's feminist research, as it emphasizes the issues of power and hierarchy structured by caste, class, and gender in the Indian context. The idea that the complexities of reality are multifaceted makes it necessary to understand them in the relevant contexts. Pieterse (as cited in Mukherjee, 2019) argued:

While theories react to other theories and often emphasize differences rather than complementarities, the complexities encountered in reality are such that we usually need several analytics in combination (p.1).

Although both Crenshaw (1989; 1990) and Rege (1998;2006) delved into the issue of intersectionality, they applied distinct parameters, each relevant to their specific contexts. Crenshaw utilized racism, capitalism, and patriarchy, while Rege focused on caste, class, religion, tribes, and languages, which align more closely with the Indian context. Hence, the analysis of this study draws on Rege's feminist research. This will avoid the incomplete interpretation and limited understanding of data, therefore offering a deeper insight into the distinctive challenges encountered by Indian women academicians, who occupy a unique position within India's social hierarchy.

### ***Participants***

The narratives of three Indian female faculty working in central universities were selected to explore experiences and analyze the intersectional identities, such as caste, scheduled tribes, skin color and

religion of female faculty in Indian higher education. Out of 30 narratives of women gathered as part of the doctoral thesis research, three narratives were selected to write this paper because they represented diversity among Indian women academics in terms of challenges concerning their caste, religion, and geography at different stages of their academic careers and the innovative ways through which they navigated through these challenges.

## RESULTS

### **Narratives of Women in Academia**

#### ***Suman:***

The first narrative is of Suman, who hails from a rural area of eastern Uttar Pradesh, India, where she was academically nurtured during her schooling and higher education. She grew up in a middle-income household within a joint family. Currently serving as an assistant professor in the social science department at a central university in New Delhi, Suman brings a decade of teaching experience in higher education and credits her academic achievements to her parents' expectations and support. She does, however, recall the societal expectation, shared by her parents and extended family, for her to marry after completing her undergraduate degree. It mirrors the findings of various studies that validate women's higher education attainment to have greater links with their marriage prospects than workforce participation in India (Klasen & Pieters, 2012; 2015; Chatterjee et al., 2018).

Despite the prevailing mindset, no one could impede her from pursuing her education after graduation. She continued to pass entrance exams and gain admission into highly reputed higher education institutes within the state due to her intellectual curiosity. Suman's experience adds valuable insights to the body of knowledge that excelling in highly competitive exams and demonstrating her aptitude enabled her to pursue higher education beyond graduation.

Furthermore, she always dreamed of studying at Delhi's prestigious higher education institutes, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University or Delhi University, to pursue her Ph.D. She was unable to fill out application forms for these institutes because her parents would not allow her to stay far away from her home. The restrictions on her geographical mobility limited her options for accessing higher education. Furthermore, she was concerned about the questions that might be raised by society and extended family members. In Indian society, women's decision-making is complex, as their power of choice and action is limited (Ghosh et al., 2015). The decision-making process is influenced by a complex interplay of socio-cultural factors. Within the Indian family and kinship networks, women often need to take into account others' expectations and meet responsibilities towards them (Kachuk & Rege, 2003). Women's decision-making spaces and authority are significantly constrained at various levels, including the community, extended family, and household. She reflected on a period during her post-

graduate studies when she and her parents had to confront these questions. She shared:

During my post-graduate classes, I had to travel far from my village by public transport because of the long distance of my department from my home, because of which my extended family members questioned not only my security but also my virginity.

Additionally, it was not only social barriers that she faced but also financial challenges during her higher education journey. Her brothers were growing academically strong and were studying medicine to become future doctors. Coming from a middle-class family with a rural background, the family struggled with persistent financial constraints, particularly given the high costs of medical education. Due to the similar ages of the siblings, Suman described how she was on the verge of dropping out of her post-graduate degree due to a financial crisis. She shared:

I was pursuing my post-graduate degree when I witnessed my father going through an acute financial crisis. I was supposed to give up my education because my parents' financial support had to go to my brothers.

Once she got admission to a Ph.D. program, it was clear that her goal was to teach at a higher education institute. She got married during her PhD, and her husband resided in Delhi. Unlike her peers in Ph.D., she was not free to apply for academic positions anywhere in India due to sociocultural barriers and security issues as a woman. Once again, restrictions on her geographical mobility reduced her pool of opportunities in the job market. She could only apply in eastern Uttar Pradesh or Delhi, near where her husband resided. She thought her struggles were over once she succeeded in getting a job at one of her dream universities in her preferred city, but little did she know it was only the beginning of her struggles.

When she began working at her dream university, she realized that her research techniques and teaching pedagogies were not adequate as per the university standards. She explained further:

I had an education in Eastern Uttar Pradesh; I had a very different perspective on research, which was very normal for someone coming from a similar economic and rural background as mine. My approach to research was entirely different from the one being undertaken at the department.

Despite this, during these professionally difficult times at the department, she had no support or guidance from the senior faculty or other colleagues at the department. Similar to the findings of the study conducted by Sabharwal et al. (2019), there exists a feeling of isolation and a lack of support from senior faculties toward faculty who come from different social backgrounds. She further mentioned that she faced challenges at different levels, defining those challenges as follows:

The first challenge that came as soon as I joined the department was choosing what subject I would teach. I started preparing myself to teach the subject in which I did my Ph.D. and passed my National Eligibility Exam (NET, JRF). However, I discovered many others who have been part of the department for a much longer time than me (mostly men) were engaged in teaching that subject. I soon realized that there was not enough space for me. When I insisted, the others claimed the curriculum to be much different from what I studied during my higher education (in eastern Uttar Pradesh).

Here, Suman reveals her feelings of isolation and loneliness, which correspond to a sense of denial of equal access to space. Nevertheless, Suman's intellectual curiosity and hard work paved her path toward navigating through challenges in academia. Describing her strategy, she said:

That phase of my academic journey was like a dark forest; I was unsure if I would ever be able to come out of it. I started an in-depth study of the curriculum and available resources. Instead of calling this phase of my academic journey difficult or worse, I like to refer to it as the evolution phase of my academic journey. It took me one full year, all alone, but I was able to manage.

Suman's narrative demonstrates how she was able to overcome the obstacles because of her optimistic approach, strong sense of self, and commitment. Suman's narrative sets her apart because she shattered the glass ceiling, proving that her gender and social background, belonging to a rural part of India often associated with underdevelopment, do not dictate her competence or ambition in academia. Nevertheless, engaging herself in research, expanding her knowledge base, and keeping her self-confidence high demonstrated her academic excellence and innovative strategy to progress in academia. Suman's journey also emphasizes the nuanced interplay between her gender and regional identity, highlighting the need to pay attention to the complex intersections of various factors that influence individual experiences, especially for women academics.

### *Asha:*

The next narrative is of Asha, who is presently leading a public university in India and belongs to a tribal community in India. She has more than three decades of teaching and administrative experience in academia. She grew up in a middle-income household and was nurtured in an academic and religious environment with a value system that prioritized the principles of promoting social justice. Since childhood, she has had a strong aspiration to pursue a career in higher education as a teacher, driven by her commitment to addressing the needs of society. After completing her schooling, she began applying to higher education institutes. She was surprised to be denied admission to a renowned community college, and she suspected that her gender played a role in the decision.

Despite the existence of Article 15 in the Indian Constitution (1949), which explicitly forbids discrimination based on sex, caste, race, or religion, the refusal of admission based on gender highlights how Indian educational policies are formulated within a narrow framework in which gender concerns find little meaningful space in final policy implementation (Chanana, 2011). She recollects:

I wanted to study mathematics at a prestigious college in my state; nevertheless, I was denied admission because they permitted admission only to boys in that particular college in mathematics.

Soon after her denial of admission to the prestigious college in the state because of her gender, Asha's parents advised her to look for more options outside their state. The availability of higher education institutions in India was limited during that period, the late 1980s. The only good options were Delhi and southern India. While caste-based hierarchies within the Indian context have received much attention, it is necessary to acknowledge that hierarchies and discrimination persist beyond the caste-based system (Srinivas, 2003; Desai & Dubey, 2012; Jodhka, 2017). The experiences of the tribal population significantly differ from those of the scheduled-caste population. The tribal indigenous population of India faces even lower status compared to those placed at the bottom rung of the caste-based hierarchy. This additional layer of hierarchy and discrimination stems from their isolation and social detachment from the broader mainstream population (Mitra, 2006).

Asha's approach to selecting a college reflects the deeply entrenched hierarchy based on tribal affiliation and skin color<sup>3</sup> embedded in Indian society. Indians exhibit diverse skin tones and facial features that often correspond to the geographical regions they originate from. For instance, Indians from the northern regions tend to have lighter skin, whereas those in Southern India, often have darker skin tones. Most Indians practice discrimination based on individual's skin tone with caste, religion, class, region and gender also playing a significant role (Mishra, 2015). It extends to systematically operate in Higher education institutes, as Asha describes:

My social background can be identified in Northern India because of my features and dark skin. and I assumed that probably I would not to be subjected to discrimination based on my appearance coming from a tribal background, therefore, I preferred Southern India, because of my complexion and features I assumed that I will be identified under a general label of north Indian

However, things were not as simple as she assumed. As soon as she joined higher education, she was exposed to an environment of discrimination and social hierarchical systems in everyday conversation on campus. To

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<sup>3</sup> For discrimination based on skin color, refer to section "The Indian Social Context" on page 4.

overcome the questions about her background, she resorted to sports. Asha started playing for her college hockey team. She wanted to subsume her social background identity of a dark-skinned tribal woman. Therefore, she adopted the identity of a player to avoid questions about her background. She shared that being in athletics was to find one's identity besides my name and caste-based identity.

By subsuming her identity through sports, Asha found an alternative space where personal achievements and capabilities can define her identity rather than societal stereotypes associated with one's caste, ethnicity, or gender. For her, sports provided a bridge to empower herself by fostering self-confidence and a sense of achievement. She viewed it as a platform to showcase her skills and abilities, contributing to a more empowered self-identity. Sports were a means through which she navigated and negotiated her multiple identities, creating a nuanced sense of self within the higher education environment.

After completing her higher education, she joined a teaching position at a university. Along with teaching and research, she was always active in the membership of various committees and administrative tasks. Throughout her three-decade-long career, she achieved the pinnacle of success by attaining the highest position within a university. She attributed her success to the inclusive environment of the institute, which ensured the representation of all groups, and the support provided by colleagues and senior faculty. This included flexible timing, guidance, academic freedom, and various other forms of training and mentoring. In addition to the inclusive work environment, she had a supportive family where her husband shared equal domestic responsibilities. She mentioned:

I have been blessed to have an environment that did not put me in a spot all alone. I had the support of my family throughout in terms of sharing domestic responsibilities, whether it was my husband or my children.

The support at home and inclusion at work enabled Asha to succeed and progress in academia. However, reaching the highest position came with its challenges because of her intersectional identity as a tribal woman. In India, tribal communities are enormously diverse and heterogeneous with regard to their language, demographic traits, modes of livelihood, cultural exposure, and practices. Although they exhibit considerable diversity among themselves, they all have one point in common: they differ from the dominant community in the region. Such people have always been seen as aliens and outsiders (Xaxa, 2004). The expectations and consequent tensions generated by such positions affect women more than men. The annual report from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India (2023) reveals substantial disparities between Indian Tribal men and women regarding literacy, workforce engagement, and health status. Thus, tribal women's challenges encompass not only the discrimination associated with their tribal identity but



also their gender. This highlights a distinctive interplay of overlapping identities within tribal communities in India, emphasizing the depth and complexity of intersectionality concerning women belonging to these communities.

Reflecting on her appointment as the leader of the university, Asha recounted two key expectations conveyed by students, subordinates, and colleagues. She clarified that the first expectation was articulated as “we have lots of expectations from you,” while the second was expressed with the sentiment “you are like our mother.”

The first expectation is rooted in her social background, and the second is based on her gender. Ensuring social justice in higher education is a universal responsibility for leaders, irrespective of tribe, caste, class, or gender. Expectations for her were linked to her social background and gender, suggesting she should champion social justice based on these factors. This contradicts the universal principle that all leaders, irrespective of personal attributes, share responsibility for social justice. Similarly, the perception of a motherly figure is problematic. Many studies have emphasized how women leaders are often expected to adopt a mothering role by different groups, including students, colleagues, senior management, and society in general (Crisp, 2020). The leadership position of the institute should not be limited to gender stereotypes. These unfair expectations hinder female academics' progress (Crisp, 2020). Just like their male counterparts, women should be evaluated based on their qualifications and skills rather than gender stereotypes.

Finally, Asha’s narrative presents various incidences of caste-based discrimination in higher education and her innovative approaches to dealing with these biases. The inclusive and supportive workplace and domestic environment enabled her to progress in academia. Nevertheless, despite attaining the highest position in academia, she still had to confront unjust expectations stemming from her intersectional identity as a woman belonging to a tribal background. Asha’s narrative adds a new perspective on the study of women’s leadership in academia. It provides valuable insights into the unprecedented challenges faced by women leaders to gain acceptance from colleagues and students, irrespective of their social background and gender.

### ***Mona:***

Finally, Mona’s narrative is different because it adds a religious and geographical dimension to women’s identity in India. It is commonly assumed that all Sikhs are the same, but there are diverse beliefs and practices within the Sikh community, which vary according to geographical location. Punjab, India, is the birthplace of Sikhism, where the culture is deeply ingrained in the everyday lives of people in the state. Mona’s belongs to an educated Sikh family in Delhi.

In states such as Delhi, Sikhs often encounter a cosmopolitan and diverse environment that influences their language, cultural beliefs, and

practices. Therefore, while Sikhs share a common religious foundation, the expression of their identity can vary significantly across geographical locations. Mona presently works as a professor at the Central University in Delhi, India. She completed her graduation and post-graduation in Delhi. She always had an academically supportive environment at home. She was very keen to join the workforce after completing her degree. As soon as she completed her post-graduation, she joined a special education school as a teacher. And later, she appeared for a lecturer's position in the state of Punjab. Despite having little expectation after the interview, she was offered the job.

Due to their conservative beliefs, Mona's father opposed her moving from Delhi to Punjab. Furthermore, Mona's father never permitted his daughters to participate in school or college trips. Nevertheless, the support from her mother and the availability of a working women's hostel on the campus enabled Mona to convince her father. She recalled how difficult it was to convince her father; she said:

My father would not allow me to join this job because we had no relatives or friends there, and I had never moved out of home without my family members accompanying me. However, my mother rebelled at home and convinced my father to let me join the job.

She joined a newly established department at the university, where she found herself as the sole woman with expertise in the relevant discipline. Other colleagues were shifted from different social science departments to the newly established department. However, Mona's acceptance into the department was not easy because she belonged to a different state and a distinct group of Sikhs; her Punjabi accent and slight differences in cultural practices made her easily identifiable as an outsider. She explained further:

People from different states were not easily accepted into the Institute. I was a woman from a Sikh background, but others at the Institute were Jatt Sikhs, who were different from the Sikh group to which I belonged. Along with that, I was a woman of substance<sup>4</sup>, which made my acceptance more difficult in the department.

The male-female competition was always there. However, the competition was not healthy. Mona recounted two incidents. The initial incident occurred shortly after she joined the department. She said:

In the beginning, I was given the wrong syllabus and wrong reports from seniors about me. In the timetable, I was deliberately given only the first and last class. However, I took my complaint to the Vice-Chancellor, and he understood how I was being harassed in the department. He supported me and talked to my Head of Department about the same. The issues were resolved after that.

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<sup>4</sup>Mona was vocal in academic and administrative discussions, and she didn't shy away from expressing her opinions.

Throughout this period, the Vice-Chancellor and administration were supportive. But, soon after the Vice-Chancellor changed, the work environment in the department quickly reverted to being chaotic. During the early 1990s, computers were newly introduced in Indian universities, and the state government provided each department with a single computer. The computer was placed in the department office for everyone to use. Mona was always curious to learn new skills, and soon she excelled in creating PowerPoint presentations and typing her class lessons, research work, and more on the department computer. However, her senior male colleague would often engage in gossip with others, criticizing Mona for constantly using the computer and wasting her time. The reaction from Mona's colleague highlights Agarwalas' (2018) point that some men find it difficult to swallow if a female academician is doing well. Mona could always sense the ego and insecurity in him when senior faculty or students appreciated her.

During this period, she was also completing her Ph.D., and she went on study leave for fieldwork. Upon her return, Mona's world was shattered when she discovered that during her absence, someone had deleted 80% of her data from the department computer and had password-protected it. Fortunately, Mona had managed to save a portion of her data on floppy disks before her departure, but it was not a complete backup. She recalled her harrowing experience:

I was so scared that I started crying as soon as I found someone had deleted my data (class slides, Ph.D. data, research work, etc.). My other colleagues suggested I take this matter to the new Vice-Chancellor. I went straight to the Vice-Chancellor while I was crying through the lobby without waiting for him to finish his meeting with a professor from the physics department. With God's grace, he listened to me patiently, and after some inquiry, my senior male colleague was reported to have done this out of jealousy. The Vice-Chancellor suspended my senior male colleague right away and called the IT team, and the physics professor who was in the office at that time helped to recover my data.

These two incidents echo Westring et al.'s (2012) identification of a key area of supportive leadership that plays an important role in establishing an institutional culture that is conducive to women's academic access. In both incidents, the Vice-Chancellors took Mona's complaints seriously and took action. An important line of research also suggests that inclusive leadership requires intentional effort and a commitment to creating an inclusive culture (Schiltman & Davies, 2023). Despite experiencing a lack of acceptance within the department due to her intersectional identity as a woman from a different religious group and state, the leader's commitment to creating an inclusive culture was evident in both incidents described in Mona's narrative.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has aimed to emphasize women's lived experiences in Indian academia with an intersectional lens. The narratives highlight the intersectional identity of women academics based on their caste, geography, and religion. These narratives present diverse experiences of women at different stages of their careers: Suman (assistant professor), Mona (professor), and Asha (leader of the university). It reflects the experiences of women at different stages of academic progress.

A core finding of this study is that women experience challenges at every stage of their lives, from enrolling in higher education to recruitment, and later at every step of progressing up the academic ladder. The intersectional identities of women contribute to the gendered challenges that they face in academia.

The restrictions on geographical mobility were found to acutely limit women's opportunities for career advancement. Various studies have highlighted restrictions on women's mobility due to husbands' careers, children's education, or social-cultural barriers as a challenge (Rosenfeld & Jones, 1987; Clarke et al., 2013; Momeni et al., 2022; Prozesky & Beaudry, 2019). Nevertheless, this study emphasizes the adverse consequences of such restrictions, as they hinder the progress of women in ascending the academic career ladder.

Undoubtedly, the feeling of isolation within the institute because of their gender (being a woman) and intersectional identity is challenging for women. All three narratives have also highlighted the feeling of isolation and the internal struggles regarding their identities, encompassing womanhood, social backgrounds, religion, and being an academician.

Studies such as Venkat et al. (2023) and Sabharwal et al. (2019) have also found faculty members from disadvantaged social groups excluded from social connections, which leads to isolation and deprivation. However, these studies have not emphasized how the feeling of isolation can be overcome.

The narratives presented in the paper reflect on how their self-confidence, motivation, and belief in themselves enabled them to overcome the feeling of isolation and separation. Unsurprisingly, supportive leadership also prevented female academicians from dropping out and continuing to progress in higher education. The conducive work environment, support from senior faculty, flexible timings, and democratic representation of all groups in the institutional committees were found to be other enabling factors that provided female academicians various opportunities to learn the skills and training in administrative work to progress to leadership positions in academia.

The overarching theme of the study was expectations from women based on their gender and social background. The narratives highlight that women were expected to act in a certain way professionally. If they failed to do so, they were not well accepted at the institute. For instance, Asha's

narrative illustrates how, even after reaching the highest step of the academic ladder, the expectations of her leadership were rooted in her gender and social background rather than her capabilities and skills. Women as leaders are expected to have traits such as kindness, empathy, interpersonal sensitivity, and nurturing (Kubu, 2018). Therefore, even though the institutes' leadership norms may be gender neutral, the expectations shared by peers, subordinates, and students often confuse the managerial role with the gender role of women leaders. Similarly, it is the responsibility of all leaders, regardless of their own social background, to ensure social justice in institutes.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study underscores the intersectional challenges faced by women in Indian academia at various stages of their careers, exploring the narratives of Suman (assistant professor), Mona (professor), and Asha (Vice-Chancellor). The findings reveal that women encounter obstacles from enrolment in higher education as a student to career progression in higher education as a professional. Women face a variety of gendered challenges based on differences in their intersectional identities. A significant overarching theme is the imposition of traditional gender and social background-based expectations on women in academia. Even at leadership levels, expectations are rooted in gendered stereotypes rather than skills.

The challenges women academicians face due to gender and intersectional identity are recurring, as emphasized by the narratives. While previous studies acknowledge these challenges, our findings highlight that self-confidence, motivation, and supportive leadership play pivotal roles in overcoming them. Female academicians are also able to benefit from a conducive work environment, senior faculty support, flexible work schedules, and inclusive institutional policies and practices, according to the study.

This paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge on women in academia, with a specific focus on the diversity of challenges faced by Indian women because of their intersectional identities. This study shares strategies on how women navigate through these challenges. It adds empirical evidence to the existing body of knowledge about women academicians in Indian higher education.

In the future, the empirical findings of this study can serve as an initial step toward exploring women's experiences working in Indian higher education from an intersectional perspective. Furthermore, this study is based on a sample collected from one state in India, leaving huge scope for primary research to gather narratives of Indian women academics across the country from an intersectional perspective.

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