Reexamining the Admission Quota System in Bangladesh's Higher Education: Trends, Gaps, and Policy Implications

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Content

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Background & Context

- **2024 Quota Reform Protest:** Triggered by reinstatement of 30% job quota for descendants of freedom fighters.

- **June 2024 High Court Ruling:** Overturned the 2018 abolition of the quota system for the job quota.

- **August 2024 Outcome:** Nationwide student-led movement contributed to political upheaval and regime change.

Types of Quota: 11 Categories Across Major Public Universities

1. Ward Quota For children of university officers and employees	**2. Quota for Individuals with Disabilities**	**3. Freedom Fighter Quota** For children and grandchildren of freedom fighters
4. Athlete Quota For students with recognized sports achievements	**5. Quota for Underprivileged Ethnic Minorities** Indigenous or tribal communities	**6. Quota for Non-Indigenous Students in Hilly Areas** Bangalee students living in hilly areas
7. Foreign Student Quota	**8. Dalit Quota** For students from Dalit communities	**9. Tea Worker Quota** For children of tea garden laborers
10. For students from sprots institutions	**11. Vice Chancellor's Quota** Part of broader institutional discourse	

Ward Quota Controversy at Jahangirnagar University

Inequitable System

Reserves seats for children, spouses, and siblings of university staff who only need to **pass the admission test**, while general applicants face intense competition. Limited to 4 per department but still undermines meritocracy.

Abolished Quotas

Vice Chancellor's quota (20 discretionary admissions) and **freedom fighters' grandchildren quota** were recently abolished following student protests.

Student Response & University Action

Students protested for ward quota reform, demanding *merit-based selection* and limiting admissions to one per department. University redefined ward quota on December 26. Dhaka University clarified that ward quota students must pass entrance exams and meet departmental criteria, admitting 24-30 students annually despite many more applicants.

Conflict Between Interest Groups

Many support quotas for **underprivileged communities**, while others argue certain categories like ward quota are *outdated and warrant abolition* or rational reform.

Lack of Uniformity

Complete ward quota removal seems ideal in principle, but **staff advocacy for retention** creates conflicting demands. University authorities must navigate through *dialogue and consensus*.

Documented Cases of Malpractice

Case 1: Medical College Admissions (2024-25)

- **Total MBBS seats: 5,380** across 57 government medical colleges
- **FF quota allocation: 269** seats reserved
- **Merit-based admissions:** Only 76 candidates (28%) qualified on merit
- **Quota-only admissions:** 193 candidates (72%) admitted solely due to quota eligibility
- **Result: 70%** of FF quota recipients failed to meet standard merit criteria

Case 2: Rajshahi University (2019-20)

- **Administrative manipulation:** Passing marks lowered from 40 to 30 for dependent quota candidates
- **Purpose:** Ensure all reserved seats were filled despite poor performance
- **Outcome:** Widespread criticism for compromising academic standards

Case 3: Recent University Protests (2025)

- **Jahangirnagar University:** Students staged hunger strike; ward quota subsequently abolished
- **Rajshahi University:** Complete abolition of heir quota on January 2, 2025
- **System-wide issue: 11 different types** of quotas across public universities

The Inadequacy of 1% Indigenous Quota: A Token Gesture?

Before 2024 Reform

- **Indigenous quota:** 5% of government positions
- **Coverage:** All government job grades
- **Abolished in 2018,** briefly reinstated
- **Reality:** Even with 5%, 90% of seats remained unfilled

After 2024 Reform

- **Indigenous quota:** Only 1% of government positions
- **Reduction:** 4% decrease from previous allocation
- **Impact:** Fewer opportunities for 50+ ethnic groups
- **Reality:** Even fewer seats available now

50+	1%	90%
Indigenous Groups in Bangladesh	Current Quota Allocation	Previous Unfilled Quota Seats

Structural Problems Identified

Fixed Percentage Rigidity

- Quotas allocated without considering actual eligible candidates per year
- Results in unfilled seats requiring controversial adjustments
- Undermines merit-based selection principles

Generational Extension Issues

- Freedom fighter quota extends to grandchildren
- Creates "illogical dependent quota" criticized by stakeholders
- Perpetuates advantages across multiple generations

Transparency & Accountability Gaps

- Room for irregularities due to lack of oversight
- Student protests highlight persistent fairness concerns
- Need for comprehensive reform recognized by university forums

Constitutional vs. Practical Reality

Constitutional Promise

- **Article 29(1):** "Equality of opportunity for all citizens"
- **Article 29(3)(a):** "Special provisions for backward sections"
- **Intent:** Ensure adequate representation

Current Reality

- **1% quota** for 50+ diverse ethnic groups
- **Token representation** without meaningful impact
- **Continued marginalization** despite constitutional provisions

Research Question

- To what extent has the quota system influenced equitable access to higher education in Bangladesh, particularly in terms of enrollment trends among targeted demographic groups?

- What are the limitations and gaps in the national higher education enrollment datasets in Bangladesh, and how do these affect the ability to evaluate the impact of the quota system and other equity policies?

Theoretical Framework

Nancy Fraser's Theory of Social Justice (2008)

Three Dimensions of Justice:

- Redistribution – Fair allocation of resources

- Recognition – Respect for diverse identities

- Representation – Voice in decision-making;

Critical Policy Analysis Framework (Ball, 1993)

This framework helps uncover how policy is shaped by power, how it constructs social categories, and how its meaning and effects are actively contested. This is used for analyzing the quota system's complex political and institutional dynamics.

Data Sources and Methods

Primary Sources:

- University Grants Commission (UGC) Reports
- BANBEIS Reports (2014–2023)
- Existing reports: Indigenous and Dalit community
- Government Policy documents
- Newspaper reports on the issue of Admission Quota and July Movement

Methods:
- Meta-analysis of UGC and BANBEIS reported statistics
- Descriptive trend analysis
- Cross-tabulation of demographic and institutional patterns
- Qualitative synthesis of documentation gaps

Findings

What are the limitations and gaps in the national higher education enrollment datasets in Bangladesh?

Research Objective: Analyze HE enrollment trends among quota-targeted groups, specifically indigenous communities

Reality: Complete absence of disaggregated data from official government sources

Official Data Source Gaps

- **University Grants Commission (UGC) Bangladesh:** No indigenous-specific enrollment datasets in annual reports
- **BANBEIS (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information & Statistics):** No disaggregated data by indigenous identity
- **Public University Records:** No separate tracking of indigenous quota beneficiaries

Scale of the Missing Population

- Indigenous communities represent approximately **1.8% of Bangladesh's population**
- **45+ distinct indigenous groups** including Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo
- Dalit community: **3.5-5.5 million population** with complete data invisibility

How do these affect the ability to evaluate the impact of the quota system and other equity policies?

Structural Problems in Data Collection

- No standardized indigenous identification system in higher education databases

- Data collected at admission is not systematically aggregated or reported centrally

- Individual universities manage quota systems independently without centralized data sharing

Critical Implications

- **Policy Effectiveness:** Cannot assess quota policy success or compliance

- **Research Limitations:** Prevents evidence-based studies on educational equity

- **Institutional Accountability:** Universities cannot track diversity progress

# Data Absence as Systematic Exclusion: Fraser's Three-Dimensional Analysis

Key Observation: Missing Indigenous student data ≠ research limitation → Evidence of institutional exclusion

Three Reinforcing Dimensions of Injustice (Fraser, 2008):

•**Recognition:** Statistical invisibility = institutional misrecognition

•**Representation:** No voice in determining what gets measured

•**Redistribution:** Cannot document resource gaps or make reallocation claims

The System: Data infrastructure designed by/for majority → renders Indigenous experiences "invisible" in policy discourse → protects existing inequitable distributions

Major Changes in Public University Enrollment (2005–2022)

Major Shifts in Enrollment & University Growth (2005–2022)
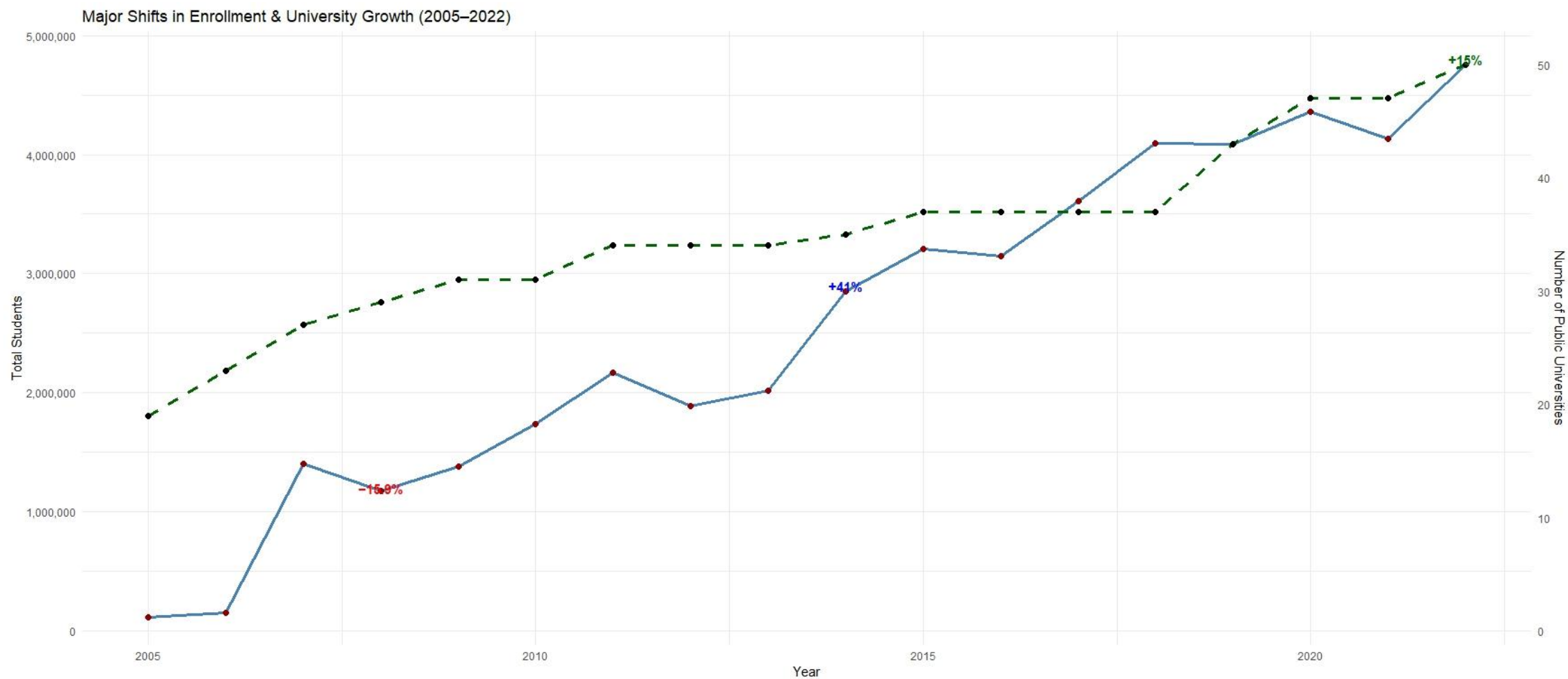
Source: BANBEIS / UGC Reports

Use of Monte Carlo Simulation for Estimating Indigenous Enrollment

Objective of the Analysis:

The analysis aims to estimate the number of indigenous students enrolled in the first year of public universities in various years. This is done in the context of:
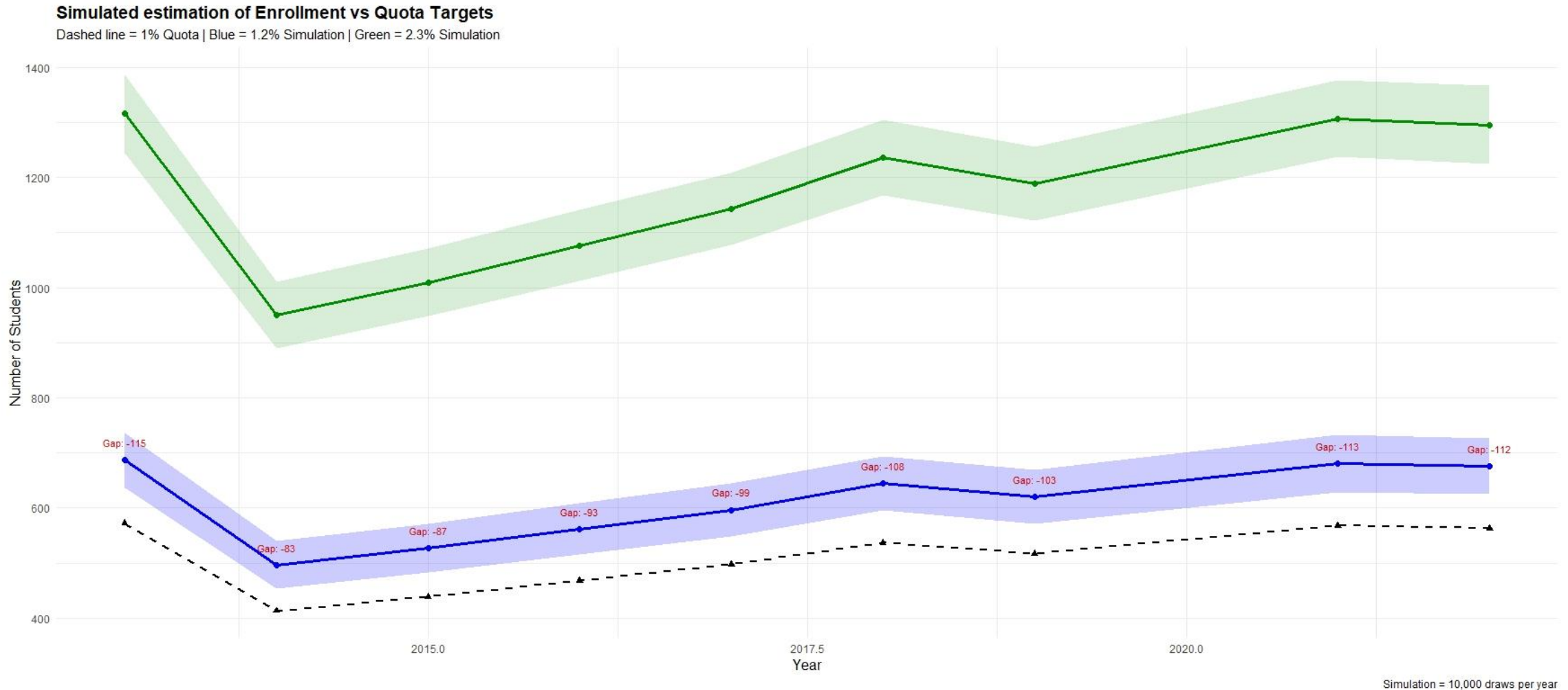
- A government quota policy that allocates 1% of first-year seats to indigenous students.
- The estimated national population share of indigenous youth (2.3%) vs. the actual representation in higher education (often lower due to structural barriers).
- The uncertainty around actual adherence to the quota and access constraints.

Why Monte Carlo Simulation Was Used:

1. Uncertainty and Variability

2. Probabilistic Modeling

3. Policy Comparison

4. Data Limitations

Should we increase the quota percentage for Indigenous youth?

Simulated estimation of Enrollment vs Quota Targets
Dashed line = 1% Quota | Blue = 1.2% Simulation | Green = 2.3% Simulation

Simulation = 10,000 draws per year

Concluding Remarks

- Further exploration on how to implement mandatory 'Quata-targeted Group" identity fields in all HE databases

- Establish separate UGC-led monitoring system for the educational attainment of those targeted groups

- Separate annual enrollment and progression documentation

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Thank You

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