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# Disability, Gender and Educational Inequality in India: An Intersectional Review of Access, Participation and Inclusive Education

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***Abstract:*** ***Education is a fundamental human right, yet learners with disabilities in India continue to face barriers linked to inaccessible environments, inadequate support, stigma and exclusionary practices. These barriers are not experienced uniformly: gender interacts with disability and with caste, class, age, language and rural–urban location to shape access, participation, retention, achievement and progression. This critical narrative review examines disability, gender and educational inequality in India through an intersectional lens. It synthesises foundational intersectionality and feminist disability scholarship, India-focused empirical research, national data and relevant policy instruments. It considers barriers across school education, higher education and transition to work. The review argues that enrolment alone is insufficient; meaningful inclusion requires accessibility, reasonable accommodation, gender-responsive pedagogy, assistive technology, safeguarding, family engagement and institutional accountability. It identifies gaps in disaggregated evidence and proposes priorities for research, policy and practice. Equitable education requires addressing interacting structural barriers rather than treating gender and disability separately.***

***Keywords: Disability, gender, educational inequality, intersectionality, inclusive education, girls with disabilities etc.***

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education is recognised as a human right and a foundation for individual agency, social participation and economic opportunity. An equitable education system must address not only whether a learner is formally admitted to school or college, but also whether the learner can participate, access the curriculum, receive appropriate support, progress academically and complete the course of study. For persons with disabilities, these conditions are affected by physical, communication, attitudinal, curricular and institutional barriers. The World Health Organization and World Bank (2011) describe how barriers in everyday environments and services contribute to unequal outcomes for persons with disabilities, including lower educational attainment.

Gender adds another dimension to this picture. Girls and women with disabilities may encounter gendered expectations about mobility, safety, care work, marriage, family roles and the perceived value of their education. Disability-related stigma can compound these expectations. The resulting disadvantage is not simply the sum of two separate experiences being a girl and being disabled but may take distinctive forms that are missed when gender and disability are examined independently. Ghai (2002) argues that disabled women have often been marginalised within both mainstream feminist discourse and disability movements in India.

Intersectionality offers a framework for analysing these overlapping and mutually shaping systems of power. Crenshaw (1989) developed the concept to show how single-axis approaches can fail to recognise the experiences of people located at the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination. In education, this perspective directs attention to how disability interacts with gender, caste, class, language, religion, age and place of residence. Liasidou and Gregoriou (2024) similarly show that disability has not always been sufficiently incorporated into intersectional education research.

The Indian context requires particular attention because educational opportunities are shaped by substantial social, economic and geographical diversity. Ghosh et al. (2022), using Indian survey data, found that among persons with disabilities, being female was associated with additional disadvantages in school enrolment and educational attainment. This evidence supports the need for policies and institutional practices that explicitly acknowledge women and girls with disabilities rather than assuming that general disability or gender initiatives will automatically reach them.

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## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE REVIEW

1) Examine how disability and gender intersect to shape educational inequality in India.
2) Identify social, economic, cultural, geographical and institutional barriers affecting access, participation, retention and progression.
3) Consider how educational experiences may differ across disability categories and social locations.
4) Review relevant Indian legislation, education policy and international human-rights instruments.
5) Identify research gaps and propose directions for gender-responsive and disability-inclusive education.

## III. REVIEW METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a critical narrative review approach. It synthesises selected peer-reviewed scholarship, foundational theoretical texts, national datasets, legislation, policy documents and reports from international organisations. The review is organised thematically around intersectionality, educational access, classroom participation, institutional conditions, higher education and policy responses.

The literature base was identified through searches of scholarly discovery platforms and publisher or institutional repositories, including Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus-indexed publication records where available, UNESCO, UNICEF, the United Nations, the Government of India and the National Statistical Office. Search concepts included combinations of the terms disability, gender, intersectionality, girls with disabilities, educational inequality, inclusive education, women with disabilities, caste, poverty and India. Foundational work was included where it provides the conceptual basis for the analysis; more recent literature and policy sources were used to examine contemporary debates.

This is a critical narrative synthesis, not a completed systematic review. The article does not claim exhaustive database coverage, a PRISMA screening process or a statistically pooled effect. A journal submission that seeks to describe the work as systematic or scoping research would require a reproducible search strategy, database-specific search strings, documented screening decisions and a transparent account of included studies.

## IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INTERSECTIONALITY AND DISABILITY

### A. *Intersectionality*

Intersectionality examines how social identities and systems of power operate together. It challenges approaches that treat categories such as gender, disability or caste as separate and internally uniform. Crenshaw (1989) demonstrates that a person may experience forms of discrimination that are not adequately captured by analysing one category at a time. Applied to education, intersectionality asks whose experiences are represented in policy, whose needs are overlooked, and how institutional arrangements may advantage some learners while excluding others.

The framework should not be reduced to a checklist of identities. Rather, it examines how social structures—such as patriarchy, ableism, caste hierarchy and economic inequality—interact in specific contexts. For example, a girl with a hearing impairment in a remote area may encounter communication barriers, limited availability of sign-language support, transport difficulties and gendered restrictions on mobility. The combination and relative importance of these barriers will vary by family, locality, school and individual circumstances.

### B. *Feminist Disability Studies*

Feminist disability studies brings disability into analysis of gender, embodiment, power and social organisation. Garland-Thomson (2002, 2005) argues for transforming feminist theory by taking disability seriously, while Thomas (1999) examines the social relations through which disability is experienced. These perspectives help move analysis away from an individual-deficit explanation and towards the social and institutional conditions that restrict participation.

In the Indian context, Ghai (2002) is especially important because she draws attention to the position of disabled women within both feminist and disability movements. Her work supports an approach in which disabled women are recognised not merely as recipients of services but as knowledge-holders and participants in decisions affecting their lives.

## V. DISABILITY, GENDER AND THE INDIAN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

India's educational and disability policy landscape includes constitutional commitments to equality, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and the National Education Policy, 2020 (Government of India, 2009; Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020).

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These instruments provide a framework for access, non-discrimination and support. Nevertheless, legislation and policy commitments must be translated into accessible schools, trained personnel, adequate resources and effective accountability.

National datasets are important but require careful interpretation. The National Statistical Office's NSS 76th Round report (2019) presents information on disability, including educational status, based on a survey conducted from July to December 2018. Census of India Table C-29 provides disability-related educational information by sex, disability type and rural–urban residence for 2011 (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). These sources can support analysis of broad patterns, but they differ in reference period, definitions and survey design. They should not be treated as directly comparable, nor should either be mistaken for a current administrative count of all learners with disabilities.

The UNESCO State of the Education Report for India 2019: Children with Disabilities documents progress and continuing challenges in realising the right to education for children with disabilities. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) further emphasises that exclusion is produced by intersecting barriers and that inclusion requires systems to respond to learner diversity. Together, these sources support the need to examine both formal access and the conditions that enable meaningful participation.

## VI. MAJOR DIMENSIONS OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

### *A. Access, Admission and Enrolment*

Access begins before admission. Families may face uncertainty about available services, school readiness, transport, costs, disability certification, assistive devices or the availability of a suitable communication and learning environment. In some settings, gender norms may affect decisions about girls' mobility and schooling. Girls with disabilities may therefore face barriers that arise at the intersection of household resources, local infrastructure and gendered expectations. Disability is also associated with multidimensional poverty and lower educational attainment in developing-country evidence, reinforcing the need to consider material disadvantage alongside access barriers (Mitra et al., 2013).

Ghosh et al. (2022) provide India-specific empirical evidence that gender is associated with additional educational disadvantage among persons with disabilities. This finding is a reason to examine enrolment and attainment by both sex and disability status, while also investigating how caste, income, location and disability type shape the pattern.

### *B. Classroom Participation and Learning*

Admission does not guarantee participation. Learners may be physically present but unable to access spoken instruction, print materials, digital content, classroom discussion or assessment. For deaf and hard-of-hearing students, communication access may involve Indian Sign Language, captioning, interpreters, appropriate acoustics and teachers able to communicate effectively. For learners with visual impairment, Braille, large print, screen-reader-compatible documents and accessible diagrams may be needed. Students with intellectual disabilities or autism may require differentiated instruction, predictable routines, accessible communication and individually planned support. Gender-responsive inclusion also requires equal opportunities to speak, lead, participate in sports and cultural activities, access counselling and make decisions about learning. Teachers should avoid assumptions that girls with disabilities are less capable, less interested in academic progression or necessarily dependent on family members.

### *C. Retention, Achievement and Progression*

Retention is influenced by the quality and continuity of support. Repeated experiences of inaccessible teaching, bullying, low expectations, lack of reasonable accommodation or unaffordable travel can increase the risk of disengagement. Academic achievement should therefore be understood in relation to the opportunities and resources available to the learner, not simply as an individual outcome detached from school conditions. The transition from primary to secondary education, from school to higher education, and from education to vocational training or employment can create additional points of exclusion. Girls and women with disabilities may need accessible career guidance, support for independent mobility, accessible hostels and laboratories, flexible assessment arrangements and information about scholarships and entitlements.

### *D. Safety, Sanitation and Menstrual Health*

Safety and dignity are necessary conditions for educational participation. Inaccessible toilets, unsafe transport, harassment, inadequate lighting and the absence of confidential complaint mechanisms can undermine attendance and retention. Adolescent girls with disabilities may also face additional barriers in managing menstruation where water, sanitation, privacy, accessible facilities or appropriate assistance are unavailable.

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UNICEF's (2021) report on children with disabilities discusses the relationship between inaccessible menstrual hygiene arrangements and participation in everyday activities. These concerns should be addressed through accessible facilities, safeguarding procedures and respectful, age-appropriate health education.

### *E. Digital and Assistive Technology Inequality*

Digital platforms can expand access through captions, screen readers, adjustable text, speech-to-text, sign-language resources and flexible learning formats. They can also reproduce exclusion when websites, learning management systems, documents or assessments are inaccessible, or when learners cannot afford suitable devices and connectivity. Assistive technology should therefore be selected with the learner, aligned with educational goals and supported by training, maintenance and accessible content.

## VII. VARIATION ACROSS DISABILITY GROUPS

An intersectional review should avoid treating persons with disabilities as a homogeneous group. The barriers experienced by girls and women vary according to the nature of the impairment, communication preferences, support requirements, age, family context and educational setting. For learners with hearing impairment, access to language and communication is central; for learners with visual impairment, access to information and visual content is critical; for learners with locomotor disabilities, transport and the built environment may be prominent; and for learners with intellectual disabilities or autism, individualised support, accessible communication and flexible pedagogy may be important.

These are illustrative considerations rather than fixed descriptions of individuals. The same disability category can include diverse strengths, identities and support preferences. Educational decisions should be based on consultation with the learner and, where appropriate, family members, while respecting the learner's autonomy, age and communication needs.

## VIII. FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCES

### *A. Family and Caregivers*

Family attitudes, expectations and resources can influence school choice, attendance, transition and access to assistive devices. Encouragement and practical support may strengthen participation, whereas stigma, overprotection, financial pressure or limited awareness of rights may constrain opportunities. Family engagement should be respectful and should not replace the learner's own voice or decision-making.

### *B. Teachers and School Leadership*

Teachers influence classroom participation through expectations, communication, assessment and the allocation of learning opportunities. Teacher education should develop competence in inclusive pedagogy, disability rights, gender responsiveness, accessible communication, differentiated instruction and reasonable accommodation. School leaders should monitor whether supports are actually available and whether learners can participate in the full life of the institution.

### *C. Community and Local Services*

Local transport, health and rehabilitation services, community organisations, disability rights groups and women-led organisations can influence access to education. Coordination between schools, families and local services is particularly important where learners require assistive technology, personal support, accessible transport or transition planning.

## IX. LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

### *A. United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) provides the international human-rights framework. Article 6 recognises the multiple discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities and calls for measures to ensure their full development, advancement and empowerment. Article 24 recognises the right to inclusive education. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' General Comment No. 3 (2016) elaborates the rights of women and girls with disabilities, while General Comment No. 4 (2016) explains the right to inclusive education.

### *B. Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016*

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 gives effect to the UNCRPD in India. Section 4 addresses women and children with disabilities. Sections 16 and 17 set out duties of educational institutions and measures to promote and facilitate inclusive

education. These provisions are relevant to non-discriminatory admission, accessibility, reasonable accommodation, appropriate communication and educational support. Implementation requires institutions to move beyond formal compliance and assess the actual participation and progression of learners.

### *C. National Education Policy, 2020*

The National Education Policy, 2020 emphasises equitable and inclusive education and identifies Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups. Its provisions include attention to gender inclusion, children with disabilities, accessible infrastructure, appropriate teaching-learning materials, assistive devices and teacher preparation. The policy provides an opportunity to connect gender-responsive planning with disability-specific support. This connection should be explicit in implementation, monitoring and resource allocation rather than assumed to occur automatically.

### *D. International Education and Development Frameworks*

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) helped advance the principle that ordinary schools should accommodate all children. UNESCO's inclusion reports and the Sustainable Development Goals reinforce the importance of equitable, quality education. UN Women (2017) calls for disability to be integrated into gender-equality work and for data gaps concerning women and girls with disabilities to be addressed. The Asian Development Bank's (2024) guidelines provide practical guidance for incorporating the needs and voices of women and girls with disabilities into programmes and services.

## X. STRATEGIES FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE AND DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

*1)* Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Plan flexible ways for learners to engage with content, access information and demonstrate learning. UDL should complement, not replace, individual reasonable accommodation.
*2)* Gender-responsive pedagogy. Challenge stereotypes, distribute classroom responsibilities fairly, ensure equal leadership opportunities and create safe routes for reporting discrimination or harassment.
*3)* Accessible infrastructure and transport. Audit classrooms, laboratories, libraries, hostels, toilets, playgrounds and transport arrangements with the participation of learners with different disabilities.
*4)* Communication and learning access. Provide accessible textbooks and digital content, Braille or large print where required, captions, sign-language support, accessible assessment and appropriate assistive technology.
*5)* Teacher preparation and leadership. Include disability rights, intersectionality, gender sensitisation and inclusive teaching strategies in pre-service and continuing professional development.
*6)* Family and community partnership. Offer rights-based information and counselling while respecting the autonomy, preferences and developing decision-making capacity of girls and women with disabilities.
*7)* Safeguarding and health support. Ensure accessible complaints processes, protection from harassment, accessible sanitation and respectful menstrual health education.
*8)* Data and accountability. Monitor admission, attendance, retention, achievement and transition using appropriately disaggregated data, while protecting privacy and avoiding deficit-based labelling.

## XI. RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

First, more Indian research is needed that examines disability and gender together and also considers caste, socioeconomic position, age and rural–urban location. Studies that analyse one dimension at a time may conceal differences within the broad category of persons with disabilities.

Second, current public datasets are not always sufficiently detailed to describe school participation by gender, disability type, level of education and other social characteristics. Researchers should make careful use of Census and NSS data, explain differences in definitions and reference periods, and avoid drawing causal conclusions from descriptive statistics.

Third, the experiences of girls and women with different disabilities require greater attention. More qualitative research can document how learners describe barriers, negotiate support and make educational decisions. Such work should use accessible research methods, informed consent and safeguards that support communication and autonomy.

Fourth, higher education, vocational training and transitions to employment deserve further study. Research should examine admission, accessible accommodation, digital learning, campus mobility, harassment prevention, scholarships, career guidance and completion.

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Fifth, intervention research should assess the effectiveness and implementation of gender-responsive inclusive practices. This includes teacher development, assistive technology, accessible transport, family engagement and institutional safeguarding. Evaluations should measure meaningful participation and learner-defined outcomes, not only enrolment.

Finally, disabled girls and women should be involved as researchers, advisors and decision-makers. Participatory research can reduce the risk of speaking about people without including their perspectives and can help institutions identify barriers that administrative data may not reveal.

## XII. DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed indicates that educational inequality is produced through the interaction of social norms, material resources, institutional arrangements and policy implementation. Disability and gender are not independent variables that operate in isolation. The consequences of their intersection vary by the learner's social location and by the accessibility and responsiveness of the educational setting. This supports the central argument of intersectionality: single-category explanations can obscure the experiences of people who face overlapping forms of disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989; Liasidou & Gregoriou, 2024).

Indian evidence is particularly important. Ghosh et al. (2022) identify additional educational disadvantage associated with gender among persons with disabilities. The NSS report and Census C-29 tables offer useful national sources for describing educational status, though their different methods and time periods must be recognised. UNESCO's India report (2019) and the Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) provide a broader system-level perspective on access, quality and exclusion. Together, these sources suggest that policy monitoring must look beyond enrolment and examine whether support is timely, appropriate and sustained. A UNICEF (2026) multi-country synthesis likewise highlights the importance of sustained system reform, adequate resourcing and attention to the experiences of learners, families and educators.

The policy framework is substantial, but its effect depends on implementation. The UNCRPD, the RPwD Act, 2016 and NEP 2020 provide legal and policy foundations for equality and inclusion. However, a gender-neutral disability programme may overlook barriers that disproportionately affect girls, while a general gender programme may fail to address communication, mobility or learning access for women with disabilities. An intersectional approach therefore requires both disability-responsive and gender-responsive planning, supported by adequate resources and accountability.

The central implication is that educational equality should not be equated with identical treatment. Equitable education requires identifying barriers and providing supports that enable learners to participate on an equal basis. It also requires recognising girls and women with disabilities as active participants in decisions about education, services and institutional change.

## XIII. CONCLUSION

Disability, gender and educational inequality are interconnected dimensions of social disadvantage that shape educational opportunities in India. Girls and women with disabilities may encounter barriers arising from the interaction of disability-related inaccessibility, gender stereotypes, poverty, caste-based disadvantage, geographical isolation and institutional practices. These barriers can affect access, classroom participation, retention, achievement and progression to higher education and employment.

The review shows that legal and policy commitments—including the UNCRPD, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and the National Education Policy, 2020—provide an important foundation. Yet meaningful inclusion requires practical action: accessible infrastructure and content, reasonable accommodation, gender-responsive pedagogy, communication support, assistive technology, safeguarding, family and community engagement, and transparent institutional monitoring.

An intersectional approach shifts attention from perceived individual limitations to the structural conditions that create exclusion. It also highlights the importance of reliable disaggregated data and the participation of girls and women with disabilities in research and decision-making. Ultimately, an equitable education system must ensure not only admission but also dignity, participation, learning, achievement, autonomy and meaningful educational progression for every learner.

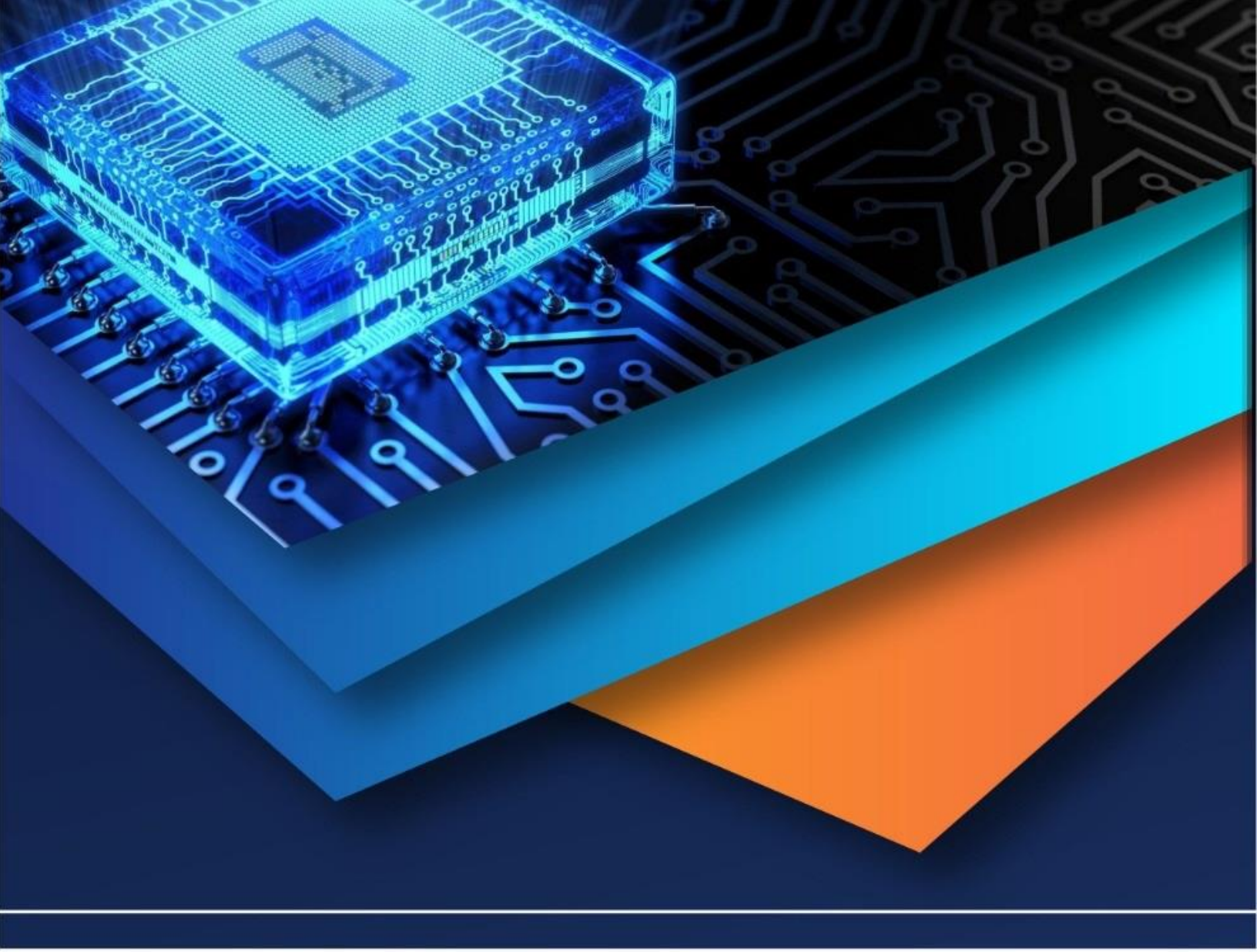
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