

University Education in 21st-Century India: Marginalised Students and Critical Challenges

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Abstract: At the outset, primary and secondary schooling remain open to some degree of monitoring by teachers and parents, yet tertiary education stands in a very different place. Universities now bear the primary responsibility for higher education in India, and over the last few decades, this sphere has moved sharply towards privatisation and corporate control. Socially, economically and geographically marginalised students have felt the blow most keenly. Their chances of entry and their ability to bear the costs have both narrowed in the age of globalisation. One can say even less with comfort about equity, equality and academic standards within the university sector. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the scope of higher education shrank further. Prestigious institutions and high-end programmes are increasingly becoming preserves of affluent and elite groups in India. Online modes of teaching demanded smartphones, stable internet access and costly technical equipment. Many young people from deprived backgrounds could not step over this digital threshold. This paper maps a cluster of pressing difficulties that demand redress. State institutions have begun to respond, and some initiatives now aim to open doors for students on the margins, even if the question of quality still looms large. In line with the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, and through domestic efforts linked to the National Education Policy 2020, the country has started to reshape higher education. The University Grants Commission is also passing through a period of institutional change, as policymakers attempt to cure long-standing deformities in universities and push them towards more accountable and inclusive practice.

Keywords: twenty-first century, university education, NEP 2020, UGC mechanism, marginalised students, critical challenges

Main Objectives

This paper sets out to explore the main obstacles that confront university education in India in the twenty-first century. The strain on universities has grown in the era of globalisation, and their predicament has become far more visible. Targets in education and broader social concerns now revolve around four linked themes—access, equity, equality and quality. Marginalised students

face the sharpest impact in each of these areas and stand at the centre of the present discussion.

The paper traces how global institutions and foreign providers step into the domestic sphere and how this movement reshapes the regulatory work of bodies such as the University Grants Commission. It takes up a series of critical challenges and dwells at length on the growing shift towards online education. This shift has altered the educational outcomes of students from weaker

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social locations, often in ways that reinforce exclusion.

The discussion connects these developments with international commitments under the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and with the roll-out of the National Education Policy 2020. It then considers the responsibilities of the state and of other stakeholders and suggests practical pathways that can guide more grounded reform. The larger aim is to sketch roadmaps rather than present neat blueprints, and thereby keep attention on real conditions in universities and on the lived struggles of their most vulnerable students.

Methodology

The paper rests on historical and descriptive analysis. It draws mainly on secondary material from both online and offline sources that lie in the public domain. These materials include official reports, academic studies, policy documents and media accounts. In addition, the study uses extended personal observation of higher education in India. Unstructured interviews with a group of experienced educationists also inform the discussion and add a qualitative texture to the arguments.

Introduction

Education functions as an investment in human capabilities that can drive technological innovation and economic expansion. A society can move towards multi-dimensional development only when it raises the educational level of its people. In the period after industrialisation, advanced capitalist economies began to draw a large share of national income from services rather than from agriculture or manufacturing. This shift rests on skills training and knowledge-based work, which in turn brings a new prominence to higher education.

University education carries several core functions. It cultivates new knowledge. It trains qualified personnel for public life and for a wide array of occupations. It offers services to communities and contributes to the making of public policy. For centuries, universities mainly acted as custodians of knowledge and as sites for professional training. That older role has not vanished. It has spread into new domains.

Higher education now speaks at once to the person, the economy, the state and the wider world. Expectations cluster around two poles. On one side lies the demand that universities help young people grow into responsible citizens. On the other stands a hope that the same institutions can strengthen communal bonds, reduce inequality and push forward knowledge that helps to tackle public problems. At different moments, universities have opened themselves to social, economic and political needs in varying ways. Yet the speed and breadth of change in the present century bear little resemblance to anything they have faced earlier.

The march of globalisation has shaken national boundaries in the name of better connectivity, while new technologies have unsettled the very processes through which knowledge takes shape and travels, especially in the global South. The rise of a knowledge-centred economy has pressed universities towards international orientations since the 1990s. Under the so-called new economics of education, as in the work of Schultz (1961) and Becker (1963), public and private investment in education has been guided above all by expectations of profit.

Economic demands have placed further strain on universities. Employers now look for graduates who are ready to step straight into jobs. Governments have responded by

asking universities to stress employability in their curricula. Many institutions in wealthier countries have tried to match their programmes with global expectations in a relatively smooth way. Indian universities face a harsher task. They must respond to global norms while still working with local priorities that call for equity, inclusion and linguistic and cultural rootedness. The tension between those imperatives runs through this paper.

Global Scenario

The Humboldtian model of higher education grew around a wide-ranging vision of study and research that belonged together within the same institutional home (Humboldt & Humboldt, n.d.). An estimate for 2021 suggests that global enrolment in higher education reached roughly 220 million students, more than double the figure two decades earlier, and projections point towards about 380 million by the end of the present decade.

Higher levels of tertiary education can support growth in gross domestic product, yet this economic gain appears only when systems expand both inclusively and with strong academic standards. Access without depth does not lead very far, and high standards that exclude many social groups carry their own injustice. Patterns within the global South are far from uniform. East Asia and the Pacific, along with Latin America and the Caribbean, have witnessed sweeping advances in access and finance for higher education. In contrast, South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa often present a bleaker picture, with weaker public investment and much lower participation.

Some countries in northern Europe still treat higher education as a public good in the fullest sense. Public funding covers fees, and these states devote a substantial

share of their national income to education. Many observers link such policies with high levels of innovation and with relatively peaceful social orders. India stands in sharper contrast. Public spending on education remains under 3.3 per cent of gross domestic product, and only a fraction of that amount reaches universities. The gap between declared ambitions and budgetary commitment remains striking.

Two international institutions exert the greatest influence on current debates about higher education—UNESCO and the World Bank. Their stances differ in important ways, yet both focus attention on the pressures and choices that universities now face. The Delors Commission report for UNESCO framed education as a central route out of poverty and exclusion and proposed four pillars for any humane system of learning—learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be (Delors Commission, 1996). University education, in this view, stands within a broad humanistic and social vision.

The World Bank moves from a more economic angle. It warns that developing countries may fall out of the knowledge economy if they fail to expand the skills of their populations. For such states, broadening the higher education sector becomes a precondition for any serious move towards a knowledge-centred growth path. At the same time, many universities in poorer regions lag in meeting these demands. The World Bank sets out priorities that revolve around wider and more equal access, teaching and research that stay relevant to changing labour markets, stronger management and finance and greater institutional innovation. Both UNESCO and the World Bank place knowledge and economic performance at the heart of their vision. Their work implies that universities can play a central role in ending extreme poverty and in building more secure societies.

The Sustainable Development Goals sharpen this international agenda. At a historic United Nations summit, world leaders adopted seventeen goals under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2016. National governments were urged to claim ownership and develop domestic strategies that matched those commitments. The goals carry no legal force, yet several states have started to shape policy around them. Goal 4 concerns education and contains ten targets. Target 4.4 calls for a rise in the number of young people and adults who possess relevant skills, including technical and vocational abilities that can support employment and entrepreneurship.

The Group of Twenty has further strengthened attention to these issues. During the G20 summit hosted in India in 2023, discussions centred on the Sustainable Development Goals and on global responsibilities linked to higher education and its reach among marginalised students in India. A series of memoranda of understanding among G20 countries opened prospects for collaboration in this field (Pathi et al., 2023). Efforts have begun within Indian universities to match those commitments and translate them into practice.

Indian Context

Mahatma Gandhi held that socially relevant knowledge demands praxis, and that such praxis rests on critically minded citizens who emerge in large numbers from institutions of higher learning. When more students from a wide social span move into universities, the chances for social development increase. Policy makers in India have long spoken of broad access to high-quality education for the young (Macaulay, 1833), and commissions have kept this goal in view.

The Education Commission of 1968 raised urgent concerns about quality. The Kasturirangan Committee report on education returned to the same theme with renewed force. The vision of Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who chaired the University Education Commission of 1948–1949, was strikingly holistic. He argued that the purpose of education went beyond the transfer of information and that universities should help to shape people in a fuller moral and intellectual sense. The commission report urged universities to conserve and advance learning and, at the same time, to raise the personal quality of students and staff and orient them towards the good life (Radhakrishnan Commission, 1948–1949).

This ethical and civic dimension of higher education matters even more in an age dense with information. A graduate who can process data yet lacks the capacity to reason with moral clarity or contribute thoughtfully to public life does not stand ready for the challenges of the twenty-first century. Data without judgment can even worsen harm.

The onrush of globalisation has altered the position of education in India. The union government often appeared indifferent to higher education and turned more authority over to the states, which gained wider control over regulation and promotion of universities. Neither level of government showed steady commitment to strengthening higher education. Public spending has remained weak, and limited funds often flowed to primary schooling. Universities and colleges then fell under the watch of bureaucrats who had scant interest in long-term academic development. Students from affluent families remain ready to capture opportunities in prestigious programmes. Marginalised groups, in contrast, still stand at the gate.

Structural adjustment policies and the stabilisation package linked to the economic reforms of 1991 produced a further turn. Education came to resemble a commodity with a steep price tag. When schooling turned into a market good, private institutions expanded quickly while the state experienced pressure to retreat from regulation and from meaningful support for public universities.

The Ambani-Birla Committee report of April 2000 pushed this logic further and suggested that higher education could follow market forces with minimal restraint. The government opened higher education to the World Trade Organization under the General Agreement on Trade in Services in 2005. During the second United Progressive Alliance regime, ministers drafted a series of bills that sought to dismantle long-standing bodies such as the University Grants Commission, the Medical Council of India, the All India Council for Technical Education and the National Council for Teacher Education. The Higher Education and Research Bill occupied a central place in that agenda. The government eventually failed to carry these bills through Parliament, yet the larger pattern of erosion within the sector continued, and later regimes made their own contribution to this decline.

Policy now seeks to honour commitments to global capital. Many in government aim to narrow the space for independent thought and critical inquiry and to turn education into a profitable line of business for corporate groups. These pressures make higher education expensive and restrict it to limited circles. The poor are pushed into a reserve army of unqualified labour. Constitutional guarantees for disadvantaged communities, including reservations, then lose much of their real weight. Places may exist on paper, but the economic barriers block

entry or push students out before they can finish their degrees.

NEP 2020

India formulated its first National Education Policy in 1968 and a second in 1986, when the government invited private investment into higher education. The National Education Policy 2020 attempts a far-reaching redesign of university education. It envisages a fresh system that responds to the aspirations of twenty-first-century learning and links with Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The policy proposes large multidisciplinary institutions of higher education in every district by 2030. It aims to raise the gross enrolment ratio from 26.3 per cent in 2018 to 50 per cent by 2035 in both higher and vocational education, including through online courses (National Education Policy [NEP], 2020, section 10.6). The details call for wide reorganisation of teaching, programme structures and regulatory practices.

A central element in NEP 2020 is the planned creation of an umbrella body called the Higher Education Council of India. This council would work through four vertical units with distinct responsibilities—regulation through the National Higher Education Regulatory Council, accreditation through the National Accreditation Council, funding through the Higher Education Grants Council and academic standard setting through the General Education Council. The policy further notes that top-ranked Indian universities will receive support to open campuses abroad and that up to one hundred foreign universities of high standing will receive encouragement to establish campuses in India (Rampal, 2024).

The policy proclaims several aims. It seeks to raise educational standards, promote integrative modes of learning, widen fairness

and access and support creative approaches to teaching and research. It calls on institutions to exercise greater autonomy in order to strengthen governance and reshape curricula. The text also urges stronger use of technology in both teaching and study. Digital tools, in this picture, should help to modernise higher education and make it more accessible. India also looks towards cross-border partnerships as a means to improve research and raise the academic standing of its universities. The promise is ambitious, yet the tension between these aims and the position of marginalised students runs through the debate.

Parameters of Quality Education

Quality Concerns

Over roughly three decades, permanent recruitment of university teachers has slowed down to a crawl. Vacancies often remain unfilled or pass into the hands of part-time and guest teachers. Many universities appoint faculty on short-term contracts or keep them in ad hoc positions. Such arrangements bind academics to the bureaucracy and reduce their freedom. The marginalisation of university teachers gradually hollows out the institution.

Buildings, offices and bureaucratic routines matter far less than the intellectual work that teachers and students pursue together. When academics feel demoralised and cut off from meaningful decision-making, academic standards fall. This decline does not arise from any lack of talent or commitment among teachers. It takes shape through poor conditions of work and a climate that treats academic labour as a disposable resource.

Improved job security would allow universities to move away from excessive dependence on temporary staff. Longer contracts and tenure-track positions can help. Greater public and philanthropic funding can

strengthen facilities and libraries and allow institutions to build laboratories and other academic resources. Thoughtful programmes for career development, as well as transparent routes for promotion, can support teachers who wish to improve their research and teaching. Decentralised and responsive systems of administration can reduce delays and leave less scope for arbitrary decisions.

Access to education has widened over the years. Yet academic quality often remains troubling. Surveys at school level show weak learning outcomes for large numbers of children. Within higher education, many institutions fall far short of desirable standards, apart from a small circle of better-resourced universities. Rapid technological advancement and the opening of the economy magnify this concern. The government has responded through a set of schemes intended to raise standards in higher education (Kumar, 2020), but the effect remains uneven across states and institutions.

A strong sense of commitment among teachers can transform this situation. Policymakers and administrators must nurture that commitment through adequate resources and institutional freedom. Heavy administrative duties that fall on teachers need to be reduced through efficient processes and modern information systems. Hiring teaching assistants and junior faculty can help to share the teaching load, particularly when class sizes grow very large. Regular review of pay structures, with attention to inflation and performance, can improve conditions. Standardised salary scales across institutions can also reduce inequalities within the sector.

Research Facilities

Universities carry a special responsibility for research, in contrast with most colleges which focus mainly on teaching. Healthy

teaching in higher education depends on lively research. A strong research environment calls for several steps. Funding agencies can expand research grants and open more channels for academic projects. National and international collaboration can widen access to equipment, data and ideas. Flexible teaching schedules and options for remote handling of administrative tasks can help teachers who strive to balance research, teaching and personal life. Without sustained engagement in research, academic quality in universities will remain shallow.

Use of Technology

India continues to face serious gaps in technological development. Technology can act as a useful ally in education, yet it cannot replace the work of teachers. When technology displaces academics, long-term harm follows. The number of online courses has grown, smart boards and projectors have moved into more classrooms, and Power-Point presentations now occupy a central place in many lectures. All these shifts alter the relationship between teacher and student and reshape the role of the teacher.

Digital media encourages multitasking and shortens attention spans. Students may move between screens and messages while a lecture continues in the background. Teachers need to adapt to this new environment without losing the human depth of teaching. Technology can bring fresh possibilities, yet it can also drain the slow, reflective habits that deep learning requires. The challenge lies in finding a balance, not in treating online tools as magical solutions.

Online Education

Information and communication technology has expanded at great speed, and interest in online programmes has surged in many parts of the world. Migration of

skilled youth has also increased, and digital platforms have grown more visible. Online education has reached a point where it no longer appears strange as a concept. Different countries, though, experience this mode of learning in sharply different ways.

In developed countries, students often move easily into online programmes. In India the situation looks more complex. Open educational resources host a large volume of courses, yet student enrolment remains quite limited. Many young people still prefer traditional courses and face-to-face teaching. Online options, distance education and other non-conventional formats draw less attention, especially among those who seek stable recognition in the labour market.

Developing countries like India have not yet embraced online education with the same intensity as advanced Western societies. Several factors shape this reluctance. The COVID-19 pandemic did open some space for online teaching within regular institutions (Kumar, 2020). Teachers and students experimented with new tools, and awareness of digital platforms increased. Many observers recognised the fresh relevance of online education during lockdowns and other disruptions.

Yet the suitability of online education within a traditional system like that of India remains a subject of active debate. Few object in principle to the use of technology. The real questions concern practicality and fairness. Internet connectivity is uneven, equipment remains expensive, and digital literacy varies widely. Technological advances have eased some difficulties, from new learning platforms to the growing presence of artificial intelligence in teaching contexts. Patterns of access and use, however, still fall along lines of income, region and caste.



Education now appears on many digital platforms, yet participation from deprived groups remains modest. The cost of equipment shuts many marginalised students out. Online learning often proves less effective for both students and teachers when connectivity fails or when home environments are not conducive to study. Many parents voice strong dissatisfaction with online schooling and speak of mental fatigue, distraction and the pull of entertainment content. The tendency of many platforms to draw students into activities unrelated to study has increased concern. Parents and teachers fear that the allure of screens may quietly displace serious learning.

Concerns of the Marginalised

Marginalised Students

Indian society still carries deep patterns of marginalisation and traditional hierarchy. In such a context, online education has far-reaching implications. Many teachers and students remained lukewarm towards online education even during the height of the pandemic. Regular classroom teaching still dominates and continues to shape people's imagination. It often goes under the labels traditional or conventional, and for good reason.

Face-to-face teaching grants several advantages. The interaction between teacher and student stands at the centre of this mode. Dialogue in the classroom allows doubt, humour, hesitation and insight to move freely. Marginalised students often benefit from this human connection, even though they may still struggle with fees and other costs. When campuses reopened after pandemic lockdowns, many students and teachers felt a strong sense of relief. That response tells its own story.

At the same time, many young people from deprived backgrounds have turned to online

and distance modes. Regular university education often remains beyond their reach because of distance, income or social constraints. Open and distance education systems have stepped into this space, with both strengths and limitations. These programmes cater to millions of learners and offer degrees and diplomas, yet employers and recruiters frequently treat them as second-tier qualifications. Eligibility rules and job prospects still tend to favour those who complete full-time courses in conventional institutions.

The University Grants Commission and other agencies have started to push online courses more strongly. Short and medium-term programmes appear more feasible under present conditions. Long full-time courses that run entirely online over several years raise sharper concerns. Many universities still lack sufficient computers, software and internet facilities to support very large numbers of students. Remote regions, including hill areas in the North-East, face particular hardship, with erratic electricity supply and limited mobile connectivity.

Many faculty members have shown willingness to upload lectures and conduct classes through digital platforms. Large groups of students, however, still struggle to access those materials. They may share devices with other family members, face data costs that strain their finances or live in houses that do not have steady power. These constraints shape daily educational experience for marginalised communities and cannot be wished away.

Financial Issues

Privatisation in higher education tends to favour programmes that lead quickly to corporate jobs. Students turn into customers. Teachers turn into service providers. This shift hits poor and economically backward

communities hardest, because they lack the means to buy education in a commercial market. The likely outcomes include a sharper social divide and deeper economic inequality. Marginalised groups risk greater exclusion from mainstream opportunities and from social mobility.

Budget cuts in research institutions worsen this situation. The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research offers a telling example. The Ministry of Science and Technology has asked CSIR to start self-financing projects and submit monthly reports on the progress of research (Council of Scientific and Industrial Research [CSIR], n.d.). Commercial pressures of this kind can distort research agendas and reduce attention to basic science.

The recent move by the National Democratic Alliance government to scrap the non-NET fellowship for research students points in a similar direction. This fellowship has long acted as a crucial source of support for post-graduate students whose families cannot bear the costs of extended study. Withdrawal of such support favours elite groups and erects fresh barriers before disadvantaged communities. In the long run, this step may discourage many talented students from entering university or pursuing research. The damage may linger for decades.

Critical Challenges

Indian universities now stand at a crossroads. Issues of access, equity, academic quality and institutional accountability occupy the centre of public debate. Many institutions still fall short of their potential. They have not yet generated the kind of liberating knowledge that responds to the essential needs of people in a complex society. Funding bodies, both governmental and non-governmental, often control the direction, design and outcomes of research.

Administrators of higher education frequently hold little academic training. They neither teach nor conduct research. They tend instead to speak in abstract language about quality and process while distancing themselves from classroom realities. This situation calls for radical transformation within higher education. Without such a turn, universities cannot play their critical role in the lives of people and in the future of the country.

Students from economically and socially disadvantaged rural backgrounds usually choose state-run universities at central and state levels. These institutions offer lower fees and hostel facilities, which matter greatly for poor families. Yet many such universities appear to have forgotten the core reasons for their existence. They neglect hostels, delay scholarships and fall behind in basic maintenance. The burden then falls directly on students who already stand on fragile ground.

Despite constitutional guarantees and decades of reservation policies, higher education continues to reproduce hierarchies of caste, gender, disability, region and class. Many students pass through school and college without the skills they need to face changing job markets. As systems expand to meet growing global demand, institutions must wrestle with two demands that can pull in opposite directions. One is the pressure to send out graduates who are economically productive in narrow terms. The other is the responsibility to form thoughtful citizens who can question injustice and support democratic life.

In the Indian context, this tension becomes sharper. Local priorities such as language, rural development and social justice often clash with pressures that arise from global markets and rankings. A full and meaningful university education would have to

speak to both these spheres. Defining such an education remains one of the hardest challenges that confronts policy makers and educators in the country today.

Recent attacks on universities across the world worsen this situation. In India, a new wave of marketisation, commodification and privatisation has washed over higher education. At the same time, there has been a concerted effort to push the humanities, social sciences and liberal arts towards the margins. Policymakers often claim that these areas lack employability. University authorities use that claim to justify the closure of departments and programmes (Kumar, 2020).

These assaults do not surface by chance. They flow from a desire to mould education to the requirements of capitalism and to suppress critical thought. Similar trends appear elsewhere. The US President Donald Trump repeatedly directed criticism at universities such as Columbia and Harvard. In India, institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia, the University of Hyderabad and Jadavpur University have faced political and administrative pressure. Universities across Europe and other regions report parallel threats. The rising number of attacks on higher education signals a deeper unease within ruling groups. Many in power fear spaces that nurture inquiry, protest and independent debate. Their hostility towards universities reveals this fear in sharp outline. It is a troubling sign.

Amid these storms, some grounds for hope remain. Teachers and students continue to push back. Courts sometimes act as safeguards. Public debate still flares when universities face blatant interference. Yet these forces of resistance need support through thoughtful policy and stronger alliances across campuses. Without such backing, the

erosion of higher education may well accelerate.

Conclusion

Over the years, India's university system has made some advances and still carries large burdens. Teachers play a central role in academic life and in preparing future professionals and leaders. Initiatives in both teaching and research can begin to tackle the problems outlined above and help to raise standards.

Reform in higher education requires movement on many fronts—better institutions, more responsive regulation and greater support for educators. Policymakers, universities and other stakeholders must work together if they wish to build stronger institutions and improve conditions for teachers. A wide-ranging approach can lift academic standards and open real opportunities for marginalised students to share in quality university education in the years ahead. Without such efforts, commitments to equity and justice will remain words on paper rather than lived realities.

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