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### The evolution of higher education in India: Present and future perspectives

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#### Abstract

Education is one of the significant instrumental factors to the development of a country. It should be transformed to the needs of the time and changing scenario of the world. It provides an opportunity to critically reflect upon the social, economic, cultural, moral and spiritual issues facing humanity. "Higher Education" delves into its evolution, regulatory frameworks, institutional structures, and contemporary challenges, focusing on the Indian context. The study highlights the transformative role of higher education in shaping intellectual and social values, as articulated by visionaries like Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. The historical narrative traces education from the ancient Gurukul system and iconic institutions like Nalanda to reforms introduced during colonial and post-independence eras, including the contributions of significant commissions. The key metrics such as Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), Gender Parity Index (GPI), and Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) to assess progress and gaps in the system. Despite achievements, challenges like insufficient funding, faculty shortages, outdated curricula, political interference, and poor research infrastructure persist. The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions holistic reforms, emphasizing multidisciplinary approaches, academic flexibility, and increased enrolment to achieve global standards. It also stresses integrating technology, vocational education, and fostering research through initiatives like the Academic Bank of Credits and the National Research Foundation.

**Keywords:** Academic evolution, GER, GPI, higher education, national development

#### Introduction

Higher education is a crucial pillar in the development of any society, serving as the foundation for cultivating a skilled and knowledgeable workforce. It not only prepares individuals for professional careers but also instills values, critical thinking and the ability to address complex social and economic challenges. Higher education in India is a vast and diverse system comprising universities, colleges and institutes of national importance. It includes public, private, central and state universities offering undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral programs across various disciplines like arts, science, engineering, medicine, agriculture and management. Key regulatory bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) oversee the quality and standards of education.

Higher education serves as the cornerstone for economic growth, social development, and personal empowerment. As Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar articulated in 1927, universities provide access to education not just for the intellectually capable but also for those constrained by economic and social challenges. This sentiment underscores the transformative role of higher education as the "mother of all professions." Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a key figure in India's education system, emphasized the importance of cultivating

compassion and democratic values alongside technical proficiency, resonating with UNESCO's goals for higher education. UNESCO outlines that higher education should equip students with the skills to know, live together, act, and develop holistically.

The evolution of higher education in India reflects its rich cultural and intellectual heritage. It originated with the Gurukul system during the Vedic and Upanishadic periods, where students received holistic education under the guidance of a guru. Institutions like Takshashila, Nalanda, and Vikramshila marked significant milestones in ancient Indian education, serving as global centers for learning, culture, and intellectual discourse. Takshashila specialized in religious teachings and attracted scholars worldwide until its destruction in the 5th century. Nalanda flourished as a major educational hub until the 12th century, while Vikramshila contributed to the development of Tibetan culture (Hussain and Mondal 2019) <sup>[6]</sup>. The colonial period saw significant shifts, starting with the Charter Act of 1813, which introduced state funding for education. Lord Macaulay's Minute in 1835 favoured English-medium education, emphasizing a curriculum to create an elite class familiar with Western knowledge.

Post-independence, the Indian higher education system underwent transformative changes guided by commissions

like the Radhakrishnan Commission (1948-49), Mudaliar Commission (1952-53), and Kothari Commission (1964-66). These reforms aimed at universalizing access, integrating technical and vocational education, and improving quality through measures like the 10+2+3 structure and setting 6% of GDP as the target expenditure for education. Modern developments, particularly the New Education Policy 2020, emphasize multidisciplinary institutions, research innovation, and greater enrolment to meet the growing needs of society while drawing from India's historic legacy of knowledge dissemination (Bell 2019) [2]. Education enhances skills, knowledge, and employability, enabling individuals to access better job opportunities and higher income. It also fosters entrepreneurship, empowering people to create and sustain their own businesses (Devi and Sharma 2023 & Sharma *et al.*, 2017) [4, 11, 13].

## Methodology

The methodology for research is based on secondary data involves identifying reliable and relevant sources such as government reports, academic articles, and industry publications etc. Data is collected, organized and analysed to address the research objectives.

## Results and discussion

### Expansion of Higher Education

Table 1 provides a quantitative overview of the growth, distribution, and participation levels within India's higher education system. It captures critical metrics like the number of universities, colleges and student enrolment. The number of universities and colleges has expanded from 20 & 500 at the time of independence to 1,168 and 46,207 by 2021-22 whereas, student enrolment extended from 2.1 lakh to 4.33 crore from 1947-2022 (AISHE 2021-22) [7].

**Table 1:** Expansion of higher education system in India since independence

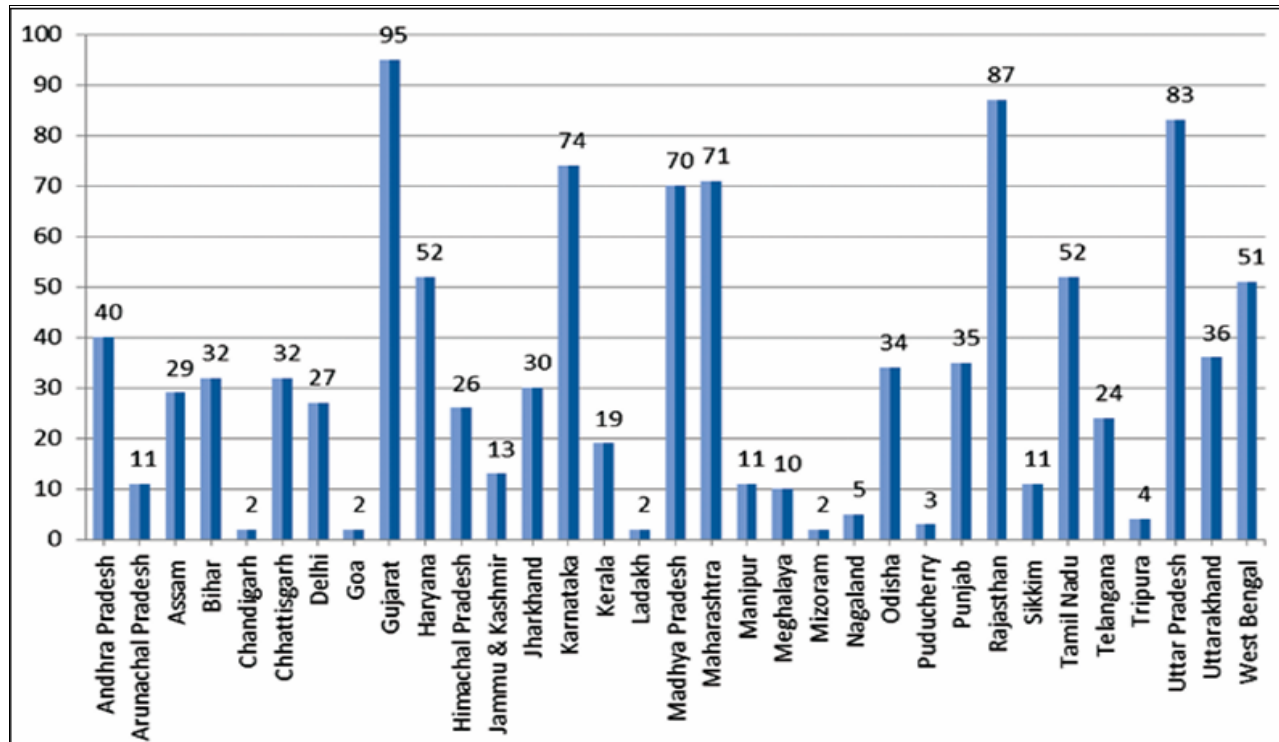
	At the time of independence	2021-22
Universities	20	1,168
Colleges	500	46,207
Students Enrolment	2.1 lakh	4.33 crore

Source: AISHE Report 2021-22

### Number of universities

Figure 1 represents the number of universities in various states across India for the academic year 2022-23. It indicates that Gujarat leads with 95 universities, followed by Rajasthan with 87 and Uttar Pradesh with 83 universities

(UGC Annual Report 2022-2023) [10]. This reflects a significant increase from the previous academic year which underscores the ongoing expansion and development of the higher education sector in India.



**Fig 1:** State wise number of universities (2022-23)

### Number of central universities

Figure 2 represents the number of central universities in various states across India. It indicates that Delhi lead up with 7 central universities, followed by Uttar Pradesh with 6

and Bihar with 4 central universities and several states including Haryana, Jharkhand, Odisha have only 1 central university (Economic Survey 2023-2024) [5].

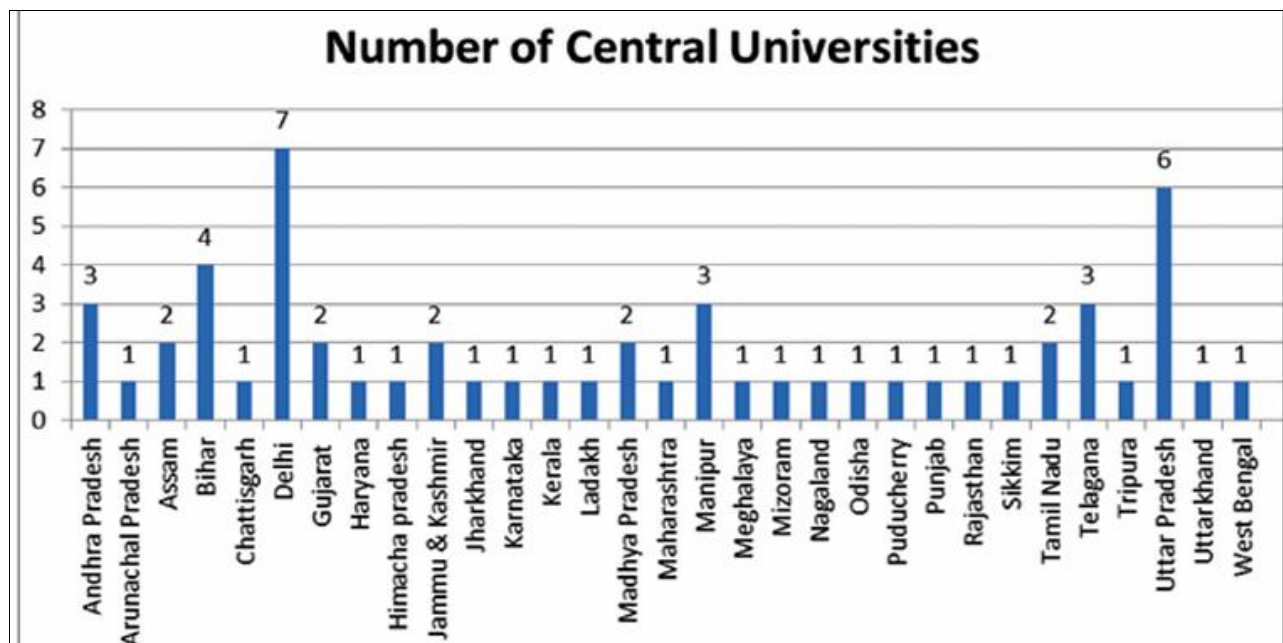


Fig 2: State-wise Number of Central Universities as on 31.03.2023

### Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education System

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is an education statistic used to measure the total enrolment in a specific level of education (such as primary, secondary or higher education) as a percentage of the total population in the corresponding age group. It is an important indicator of educational participation and accessibility. Table 2 indicates that the Gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education of India for academic year 2021-22, and it was observed that India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for higher education stood at 27.1%, indicating that approximately 27 out of every 100 individuals in the eligible age group (18-23 years) were enrolled in higher education institutions. for the year 2021-22 is 28.4% which have been slightly increased from the year 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15 i.e., 21.50%, 23% and 24% respectively (AISHE 2021-22)<sup>[7]</sup>.

Table 2: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education

Year	GER (%)
2012-13	21.50
2013-14	23.00
2014-15	24.00
2015-16	24.50
2016-17	25.20
2017-18	25.80
2018-19	26.30
2019-20	27.1
2020-21	27.3
2021-22	28.4

Source: AISHE Report 2021-22

### Gender Parity Index

Gender Parity Index (GPI) is a socio-economic index usually designed to measure the relative access to education of males and females. A GPI less than one indicates that gender parity favours males while a GPI greater than one indicates gender parity that favours females and currently, in India, Gender Parity Index (GPI) for academic year 2021-22 has been calculated as 1.01 (AISHE

2021-2022)<sup>[7]</sup>.

### Pupil Teacher Ratio

The pupil-teacher ratio is crucial in education as it impacts the quality of learning. The pupil-teacher ratio measures the number of students per teacher in a school or educational system. A lower ratio indicates more individualized attention and better learning outcomes, while a higher ratio often reflects overcrowded classrooms. It's a key indicator of educational quality and varies widely by country, region, and funding levels. According to AISHE report, 2021-2022, if the institute is research centric, the ratio should be lower than 15:1 and if it is teaching centric it should be 20:1 and if it is mix of both teaching and research centric, the ratio should be 15:1 and at present Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) in universities and colleges is found as 20:1 which is reflecting the necessity of interventions to ensure equitable access to quality education.

### Ranking of Indian universities

Table 3 indicates the relative performance and global standing of Indian higher education institutions in comparison to universities worldwide, based on metrics such as teaching quality, research output, and infrastructure. According to The Times Higher Education, 2024, The Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bangalore is ranked in the category of 201–250 whereas, Anna University and Jamia Millia Islamia ranked in the category of 501–600.

Table 3: Ranking of Indian Universities:

World University Ranking 2021	University	State
201-250	Indian Institute of Science	Bangalore, Karnataka
501-600	Anna University	Chennai, Tamil Nadu
501-600	Jamia Millia Islamia	Jamia Nagar, Delhi

Source: [www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings)

### The Vision of New Education Policy (NEP 2020)

The NEP 2020 presents a transformative vision for Indian higher education:

- The main thrust of this policy regarding higher education is to end the fragmentation of higher education by transforming higher education institutions into large multidisciplinary universities, colleges, and Higher Education Institutions (HEI) clusters.
- By 2040, HEIs shall aim to become multidisciplinary institutions and shall aim to have larger student enrolments.
- The aim will be to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education from 26.3% (2018) to 50% by 2035.
- The present complex nomenclature of HEIs in the country such as 'deemed to be university', 'affiliating university', 'affiliating technical university', 'unitary university' shall be replaced simply by 'university' on fulfilling the criteria as per norms.
- The undergraduate degree will be of either 3 or 4-year duration, with multiple exit options, with appropriate certifications, e.g., a certificate after completing 1 year, diploma after 2 years of study, Bachelor's degree after a 3-year programme and 4-year programme will lead to a 'degree with Research'.
- An Academic Bank of Credit (ABC) shall be established which would digitally store the academic credits earned.
- The 12th Five-Year Plan (2012–2017) estimated that only a very small percentage of the Indian workforce in the age group of 19–24 (less than 5%) received formal vocational education whereas in countries such as the USA the number is 52%, in Germany 75%, and South Korea it is as high as 96%. These numbers only underline the urgency of the need to hasten the spread of vocational education in India.
- The NEP will provide world's top 100 universities will be facilitated to operate in the country.
- National Research Foundation will be established which will provide a reliable base of merit-based but equitable peer-reviewed research funding, helping to develop a culture of research in the country.
- The regulatory system of higher education will ensure that the distinct functions of regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standard setting will be performed by the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI).

### Problems of higher education in India

1. **Funding Shortages:** Many institutions face inadequate infrastructure and resources.
2. **Quality Concerns:** A significant portion of institutions lack global recognition, and outdated curricula persist.
3. **Political Interference:** Governance is often influenced by political interests, affecting academic and administrative efficiency (Sheikh 2017)<sup>[9]</sup>.
4. **Faculty Shortage:** Faculty shortage and the inability of the state educational system to attract and retain well qualified teachers have been posing challenges to quality education for many years. Large numbers of NET/PhD candidates are unemployed even there are lot

of vacancies in higher education, these deserving candidates are then applying in other departments which is a biggest blow to the higher education system.

5. **Unemployment:** High population demands outpace job creation, leading to a 9.2% unemployment rate in mid-2024 (CMIE 2024).
6. **Low Enrolment:** The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of India in higher education is only 28.4% which is quite low as compared to the developed as well as, other developing countries. With the increase of enrolments at school level, the supply of higher education institutes is insufficient to meet the growing demand in the country.
7. **Infrastructure Deficiency:** Poor infrastructure is another challenge to the higher education system of India particularly the institutes run by the public sector suffer from poor physical facilities and infrastructure.
8. **Accreditation Issues:** As of 2010, fewer than 25% of institutions were NAAC-accredited.
9. **Research Gaps:** Most of the research scholars are without fellowships or not getting their fellowships on time which directly or indirectly affects their research. Moreover, Indian higher education institutions are poorly connected to research centres. So, this is another area of challenges to the higher education in India (Sharma *et al.*, 2019 and Sharma *et al.*, 2023)<sup>[12, 11]</sup>

### Conclusion

India's higher education system, while vast and diverse, faces several challenges that hinder its full potential. The key issues include disparities in access, with rural and economically disadvantaged students often struggling to gain quality education, inadequate infrastructure and low GER and PTR in many institutions and a shortage of skilled faculties. These challenges also contribute to mismatch between educational outcomes and industry demands. However, India has tremendous opportunities for growth in this sector. The government's initiatives, such as the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), the National Accreditation and Assessment Council (NAAC) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020<sup>[8]</sup>, aim to raise educational standards and promote inclusivity. Technological advancements and the growing popularity of online learning are opening new avenues for reaching a broader student base, making education more accessible. Moreover, India's rich demographic dividend presents a unique opportunity to build a skilled workforce to meet global demands. Increased investment in research, innovation, and industry-academic partnerships can drive economic growth. If the government and educational institutions collaborate to address these challenges while leveraging the existing opportunities, India's higher education system can achieve global recognition and contribute significantly to national development.

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