

# The Boon-Bane Paradox of Indian Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

This study takes a closer look at the paradox within India's higher education system, a system that empowers millions of young people while, at the same time, deepening inequality. Drawing on national reports and data from 2014 to 2024, including AISHE, PLFS, NEP 2020, and World Bank sources, it uses a qualitative, policy-based approach to understand how education can be both an opportunity and a barrier. Guided by the Human Capital Theory, Capability Approach, and Credentialism Theory, the study finds that although recent reforms have widened access, improved gender balance, and strengthened global engagement, they have also created new challenges such as skill gaps, commercialization, and rising mental health concerns. The evidence suggests that rapid expansion has not been matched by equal attention to quality and student well-being. To move forward, India's higher education system must become more learner-centered, inclusive, and capability-focused, balancing employability with ethics and ambition with emotional well-being. Such change is vital to transform education from a race for credentials into a true foundation for human development.

## KEYWORDS

Capability Approach, Credentialism, Educational Inequality, Employability, Policy Reform

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## 1. Introduction

The nature of higher education in India has undergone a massive change in recent decades where the growth has been rapid in terms of institutions, change in policies, and the assimilation of digitalization. The system is a representation of the aspiration of the nation to become a knowledge-based economy given the fact that it has more than 1,100 universities and millions of students enrolled. However, behind this advancement is a constant paradox, although higher education has been identified as a means of empowerment and mobility, it has also proven to be a cause of inequality, lack of employment and mental tension. Although enrolments have been on record and there is an overall gender parity, qualitative differences still exist and limit the dream of education fulfilling its transformational role. University expansion has not

been accompanied by an increase in the quality of teaching, employability or emotional well-being. This disequilibrium arises as it shows the issue of India having growth without incorporation; a framework that generates degrees more rapidly than the ability.

Current studies are dominated by the focus on policy formation and institutional expansion and extension of access but tend to underestimate the human aspect of education the ability to use knowledge, agency, and be able to maintain mental health. Thus, very little is known about the way structural inequalities and emotional issues converge into the Indian system of higher education. This research fills this gap since it dwells on the boon-bane paradox of Indian higher education. The study tries to provide answers to three guiding questions, like; what makes higher education an empowerment and an exclusion, what are the structural and psychological influences that form the sources of this paradox among Indian youth and what are the theoretical frameworks that can be used to explain these contradictions.

To address these questions, this paper uses three supplementary theories, namely Human Capital Theory, which associates education with productivity and development; the Capability Approach, which considers education as a gateway to human liberty and inclusion; and Credentialism Theory, which condemns the rise in using degrees as a status symbol instead of as a competence measure. The combination of these views makes this study add a balanced, theory-based model that relates employability and ethics, innovation and inclusion, and ambition and emotional well-being. By so doing, it remakes India as a higher education not only as an economic drive but also as a social ecosystem that needs to strike a balance between growth and human development.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Employability Gap in Higher Education**

In India, higher education has expanded rapidly, yet this growth has not translated into guaranteed employment for graduates. Studies point to an increasing mismatch between university curricula and the skills required by the labour market (Agarwal and Choudhury, 2022; Tomlinson, 2017). While enrolment continues to rise, most graduates still lack practical competencies, reflecting an overemphasis on theoretical learning and minimal collaboration between universities and industry (Brown, Lauder, and Cheung, 2020). This gap highlights the challenge of aligning educational output with the evolving demands of the economy.

### **2.2 Privatization and Inequality**

More than three-fourths of India's higher education institutions are privately managed. While this privatization has widened access, it has also deepened inequality through tuition-based entry and market-driven objectives. According to Marginson (2016) and Tilak (2020), privatization enhances institutional efficiency but often undermines social equity, resulting in a divide between elite and mass education. This trend reflects a broader paradox in India's educational reforms, where expanding access has not necessarily translated into fairness or inclusivity.

## 2.3 Academic Pressure and Mental Health of Students

Beyond economic inequality, the crisis in India's higher education also manifests in psychological distress. Lipson et al. (2022) and Stallman (2010) have documented a global increase in student anxiety and depression, which in India is intensified by competitive examinations and uncertainty in the job market (Singh and Gupta, 2023). Banerjee and Dey (2022) note that chronic academic stress and the stigma surrounding mental health remain major obstacles to student well-being. Similar stress patterns are observed among educators, where burnout and workload imbalance significantly affect motivation and well-being (Moktan, 2024). Comparative studies from Western contexts (Hunt and Eisenberg, 2020) suggest that integrated wellness frameworks improve student learning and retention, an area still underdeveloped in India. The literature therefore identifies mental health not as a peripheral concern but as a key measure of educational quality, emphasizing the need for supportive learning environments and empathetic pedagogy.

## 2.4 Comparative Views in the Global South

Similar patterns of unequal expansion are visible across the Global South. Tikly and Barrett (2021) argue that developing nations face the dual challenge of achieving global competitiveness while ensuring social inclusion and justice. Reports from UNESCO (2021) and the World Bank (2022) show that countries investing in research capacity and digital infrastructure tend to achieve more equitable educational outcomes. In this broader context, India confronts a strategic dilemma: whether to prioritize international rankings or equitable access. These comparative insights reveal that higher education in the Global South is both transformative and tension-filled, underscoring the importance of balanced and context-sensitive policy integration.

# 3. Methodology

## 3.1 Research Design

This study employs a policy-based qualitative research design grounded in conceptual synthesis. It explores the paradox of India's higher education system, its simultaneous potential for empowerment and exclusion, through the theoretical lenses of Human Capital Theory, the Capability Approach, and Credentialism Theory. Instead of collecting primary data, the analysis draws from secondary sources and applies a structured thematic and policy analysis framework to interpret the findings within broader educational and socio-economic contexts.

## 3.2 Data Selection and Sources

Data were collected from credible national and international sources covering the period 2014-2024, which aligns with India's recent higher education reform era. A purposive sampling approach guided data selection based on four criteria:

1. Relevance to access, employability, inequality, and student well-being

2. Credibility of sources (government publications or Scopus/WoS-indexed studies)
3. Temporal scope focused on post-2014 reforms such as NEP 2020 and Skill India
4. Availability of measurable or interpretive data suitable for thematic synthesis.

Key data sources include the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE, 2023), Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), National Education Policy (NEP, 2020), World Bank Education Reports, and the UNESCO Science Report (2021). These materials collectively provide a broad evidence base for policy and trend evaluation.

### 3.3 Analytical Methods

The data were examined with the help of three mutually supporting methods. Thematic Coding to determine common patterns of access, employability, and innovation; Policy Analysis Matrix to compare the purposes and results of NEP 2020, Skill India, and Startup India projects; and Trend Analysis to explore longitudinal changes in enrolment, gender parity and graduate unemployment. These approaches made it possible to strike a balance between statistical and theoretical results of the boon-bane paradox of higher education in India.

### 3.4 Reliability, Validity, and Limitations

All data were drawn from standardized institutional sources to ensure reliability and transparency. Cross-verification across multiple datasets minimized interpretation bias. As a qualitative synthesis, the study focuses on interpretive depth rather than causal inference. While variations in survey methodology may affect comparability, these do not compromise the validity of the policy-level insights.

**Table 1:** *Theoretical Frameworks Explaining the Dual Nature of Indian Higher Education*

Theory	Boon (Positive Contribution)	Bane (Limitation / Critique)
Human Capital Theory	Education enhances productivity, innovation, and economic growth	Skills mismatch, low employability due to over-supply of graduates
Capability Approach	Expands agency, gender parity, and inclusion; views education as human freedom	Unequal access, weak institutional support, and limited capability conversion
Credentialism Theory	Degrees provide social prestige and mobility	Degree inflation, commercialization, stress, and inequality

### 3.5 The Dual Nature of Indian Higher Education: Growth and Contradictions

India's higher education system reflects a paradoxical evolution, serving both as a driver of opportunity and a source of inequality. Over the last decade, large-scale institutional expansion, policy reforms such as NEP 2020, and digital initiatives like Skill India and Digital India have widened access and improved gender parity. Yet, this progress remains uneven, exposing deep structural and human contradictions.

#### 3.5.1 Growth as a Catalyst for Empowerment

The expansion of higher education has strengthened India's human capital and supported social mobility. The proliferation of universities and vocational programs has cultivated a skilled, knowledge-

oriented workforce that aligns with national development goals. Initiatives such as Startup India and Skill India have fostered entrepreneurship and innovation, enabling young people to participate in the global digital economy. Affirmative policies have enhanced women's participation, yet balancing work, study, and emotional well-being remains a challenge (Pareek, 2024). Simultaneously, gender-sensitive policies and affirmative action have improved inclusivity, women now account for nearly half of all enrolments (AISHE, 2023). These developments prove a clear "boon" effect: education as an instrument of empowerment, innovation, and social transformation.

### ***3.5.2 Contradictions Limiting Transformation***

Despite significant expansion, the qualitative benefits of higher education remain limited. Persistent employability gaps, privatization-driven inequality, and mental health concerns reveal systemic weaknesses. While digital initiatives like Digital India have expanded online access, effective pedagogical integration remains inconsistent (Rajesh, 2025). The excessive focus on credentials over competence has produced a surplus of degree holders with limited practical skills, reinforcing Human Capital Theory's warning about education-market misalignment.

Privatization, though it has expanded capacity, has also commercialized learning and stratified access, creating a two-tier system of elite and mass institutions. Equally troubling are the digital and psychological divides. Many students from rural or low-income backgrounds remain marginalized by weak infrastructure and language barriers, affirming the Capability Approach insight that access alone does not ensure empowerment. Rising academic pressure and inadequate counseling further illustrate Credentialism Theory's critique that education has become a competition for status rather than a process of development.

### ***3.5.3 The Boon-Bane Nexus***

The dual nature of India's higher education system lies in this tension between opportunity and inequality. While the sector has democratized access and contributed to national progress, it also deepens disparities and emotional stress when expansion outpaced ethical, pedagogical, and psychological integration. True progress depends not only on enrolment growth but on the system's capacity to nurture capability, creativity, and empathy alongside employability. This balance between structural growth and human development defines the continuing boon-bane nexus of higher education in India.

## **4. Results**

India's higher education system has achieved remarkable quantitative growth, yet qualitative progress remains uneven. Reforms such as NEP 2020, Skill India, and Digital India have expanded

Participation, but enduring inequalities persist beneath the surface. The analysis shows that the central paradox of Indian higher education lies in the gap between expansion and human capability. Graduate unemployment continues to rise because academic curricula do not keep pace with market needs, reflecting

Human Capital Theory's warning about oversupply and under-skilling. At the same time, privatization and commercialization have created a two-tier system in which elite institutions prosper while mass colleges treat education as a commodity, a pattern consistent with Credentialism Theory.

Digital initiatives have improved access for many learners, yet the digital divide still excludes students from rural areas and first-generation backgrounds. This supports the Capability Approach view that equality of access does not automatically lead to equality of empowerment. The growing mental health crisis further illustrates how credential-driven competition erodes student well-being and the human purpose of education. Overall, the findings suggest that India's higher education paradox arises not from a lack of policy intent but from expansion without meaningful integration. Growth has been rapid, but it often overlooks the social, ethical, and emotional dimensions that make education truly transformative.

**Table 2:** *Analytical Overview of Key Trends, Causes, and Theoretical Insights in Indian Higher Education*

Dimension	Observed Trend	Underlying Cause	Theoretical Interpretation
Employability	Graduate unemployment despite expansion	Curriculum-market mismatch	Human Capital Theory: over-supply, under-skilling
Inequality	Stratification between elite & mass universities	Tuition-driven privatization	Credentialism: education as positional capital
Digital Divide	Rural students underrepresented in e-learning	Infrastructure & capability deficit	Capability Approach: inequality of freedoms
Mental Health	Increasing stress & suicides	Competitive, rank-based culture	Credentialism + Capability: coercive achievement norms
Policy Gaps	Limited coordination & poor implementation	Fragmented governance	Structural misalignment between intent & execution

India's higher education expansion has been a boon in scale but a bane in substance. Policies have successfully widened participation, yet they have not ensured genuine inclusion, employability, or student well-being. Bridging these gaps requires a more balanced approach, one that connects employability with ethics, innovation with equity, and ambition with emotional sustainability. Only such an integrated model can transform expansion into meaningful development.

## 5. Discussion

India's higher education system reflects a distinct boon-bane paradox. It has successfully expanded access and promoted innovation, yet it continues to reinforce inequality and psychological strain. As highlighted by Moktan (2024), educator burnout mirrors broader systemic pressures that affect both teaching quality and student outcomes, underscoring the need for capability-based reform.

From the perspective of Human Capital Theory, this expansion has raised enrolment and literacy levels but has not translated into sufficient employment opportunities due to a persistent mismatch between skills and market needs. The overproduction of degrees without practical training has led to widespread underemployment, a trend also observed in countries like South Africa and Brazil (Pillay, 2021). In India's case, educational growth has produced quantity without corresponding economic absorption.

The Capability Approach reveals further inequalities in educational freedoms. Although access has improved, many rural, low-income, and first-generation learners remain limited by digital divides and institutional constraints. Mental health challenges compound these disadvantages, preventing students from transforming education into genuine empowerment. This supports Sen's (2017) view that real development requires both agency and well-being, not merely attendance or certification.

Credentialism Theory sheds light on the psychological and social pressures embedded in the system. Degrees have increasingly become symbols of prestige rather than proof of competence, fostering stress, anxiety, and the commercialization of learning (Collins, 2019; Marginson, 2016). Similar patterns of rapid expansion coupled with inequality and credential inflation appear in China and South Africa. Yet, India's scale and demographic diversity intensify these tensions, making reform especially complex and urgent.

Overall, the analysis suggests that meaningful higher education reform in India requires a shift from a credential-based to a capability-driven model, one that connects employability with ethics, innovation with inclusion, and ambition with emotional well-being. By aligning human capital with human capability, India can begin to transform its higher education system from one centered on degrees to one grounded in genuine human development.

## **Conclusion**

India's higher education system stands at a crossroads between promise and paradox. While reforms have expanded access, improved gender equity, and accelerated digital learning, enduring gaps in employability, inclusion, and mental well-being show that growth has outpaced quality. The key challenge lies not in expansion alone but in integration, connecting education with capability, ethics, and emotional sustainability. Drawing on the Human Capital, Capability, and Credentialism frameworks, this study emphasizes the need for a capability-oriented transformation that links skills with values and ambition with empathy. Meaningful reform will require strong coordination among policy bodies, ministries, and higher education regulators to ensure coherence and long-term sustainability. Only by moving beyond credentials toward capabilities can India's higher education system evolve into a genuine catalyst for human, social, and ethical development.

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## **Disclosure statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

## Declaration

This manuscript is original and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. Any use of AI tools was limited to language editing and formatting assistance; no AI was used in developing the research ideas, analysis, or findings.

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