

## Poverty in Academic Institutions: An Analysis of Structural Deficits, Sociological Implications and Reform Pathways in The Indian Context

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This paper conducts a deep analytical study of poverty, as it takes place in and through Indian educational institutions. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that synthesises sociological, educational economic and public policy analysis, the research analyses the role of structural resource allocation, pedagogic, and governance shortfalls in reproducing socioeconomic inequality for students, teachers, and employees. The study synthesises insights from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) publications and district-level educational audits to map critical structural deficiencies. The paper also considers the sociological consequences of poverty - such as the perpetuation of caste-based hierarchy, gender inequity, and rural-urban educational inequality. Using a critical approach that builds on Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, and Amartya Sen's capability analysis, the paper diagnoses the problem and suggests a multi-faceted reform agenda. The research points to the fact that poverty in Indian education is systemic, requiring structural reforms in finance, governance, curriculum, and social policy. Reforms include participatory budgeting, recasting of need-based scholarships, democratising of digital technologies, and accountability measures based on equity indicators.

**Keywords:** Poverty, higher education, structural deficiencies, social inequality, India, education policy, Bourdieu, capability approach, caste, equity.

### Introduction

Education has long been touted as the great leveller - an institutional means by which people of all backgrounds, irrespective of birth circumstances, can escape the socioeconomic determinism of their class origins. In India, this idea is deeply ingrained in the promise of free and compulsory education enshrined in the Constitution, enshrined by the five-year plans and major policy initiatives such as the Right to Education Act (2009). Yet, an expanding body of empirical research, complemented by ethnographic explorations and institutional inspections, suggests a paradox at the centre of Indian academia: the institutions of education that have the potential to emancipate citizens from poverty are themselves suffering from - and in certain arrangements, generating - poverty and structural deprivation.

The term "poverty in academic institutions" refers to a set of phenomena. First, it encompasses the material poverty of economically disadvantaged students, such as the lack of a decent meal, textbooks, computer devices, and poor-quality housing in the vicinity of school and college campuses. Second, it pertains to the poverty of resources of these institutions themselves: under-resourced schools and colleges with inadequate infrastructure, teacher vacancies and the lack of laboratories and libraries. Third, it refers to epistemic poverty of curricula that do not address, reflect or prepare students from poor communities to participate in a hierarchical social world. Fourth, and most importantly, it denotes the institutionalisation of poverty through a credentialism, examination and cultural practices that disadvantage students from the Scheduled

Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, religious minorities, and rural areas.

This paper offers a comprehensive, theoretical, and policy-relevant analysis of these multiple dimensions of academic poverty in India. Section 2 outlines the theoretical analyses. Section 3 provides an empirical overview from key sources. Section 4 delves into the problem of deficits. Section 5 delves into sociological perspectives. Section 6 examines current policy. Section 7 sets out an agenda for reform. Section 8 concludes.

### Theoretical Framework

A robust understanding of poverty in university settings demands a theoretical framework that can theorise the inter-relationship of material, symbolic, agency and institutional. This paper employs three theoretical perspectives.

#### 2.1 Bourdieu's Concept of Cultural Capital and Reproduction

Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual framework, most specifically the concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and field is an invaluable set of concepts for analysing the reproduction of social inequalities in educational settings. Bourdieu suggested that the educational system appears to be meritocratic, but favours those whose habitus (system of durable dispositions) coincides with the cultural requirements of the dominant classes. Students from lower-class families often lack the cultural capital that translates into academic success in the form of the embodied knowledge of academic language, the institutionalised world of the university

and the rituals of examination. This lack of fit results in not only individual failure but institutionalisation of class difference (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

In India, this model is confounded and compounded by caste. The habitus of economically advantaged upper-caste students is legitimated in elite institutions while the knowledges, languages and other cultural forms of Dalit, Adivasi and lower-caste students are either obscured or relegated to a secondary status. Academic poverty, in this sense, is economic as well as epistemic - a double dispossession theorised by Bourdieu's understanding, extended by postcolonial analysis.

#### 2.2 Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed

The analysis of the "banking model" of education, in which students are seen as "containers" filled with knowledge by an "all-knowing" teacher, offered by Paulo Freire resonates with many Indian public schools. Freire suggested education should be a dialogue between teacher and student, grounded in student's experiences, and leading to conscientisation (Freire, 1970). Curricula that do not draw on the social experiences of marginalised students, then, serve the purposes of domestication rather than liberation. The impoverishment of pedagogy and curriculum in many government schools, and rural colleges in India, exemplifies this Freirean insight.

#### 2.3 Sen's Capability Approach

Amartya Sen's capability approach provides a normative framework for assessing

educational poverty not just in terms of income. On Sen's view, poverty is a deprivation of capabilities - the actual freedoms and opportunity to function in a manner a person wishes to have (Sen, 1999). Thus, educational poverty is not just the lack of education but the lack of the nutritional, psychological, social, and material conditions necessary for learning and personal development. Martha Nussbaum's development of this approach into a list of human capabilities adds to the evaluative power of this approach for determining what Indian education institutions are failing to deliver to their disadvantaged students (Nussbaum, 2011).

These three frameworks triangulate the analytical problem by explaining how institutions reproduce inequity (Bourdieu), diagnosing complicity with oppression in education (Freire) and offering the normative measure for institutional performance (Sen).

### Empirical Overview: Academic Poverty in India

India's empirical landscape of academic poverty reflects deep regional and identity-based divides, and an overall shortfall in government investment in education. This section presents the evidence from key data sources.

#### 3.1 Enrolment and Drop-Out

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India is 28.4% as per the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22, compared to the target of 50% by 2035 as mentioned in the National

Education Policy 2020. But this overall statistic hides deep divides. Scheduled Tribes' GER is at 19.7% while that of the general category is at 29.5%. The GER for females in rural areas is significantly lower, especially in Bihar, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. The secondary school drop-out rate, as per Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2022-23, remains high at about 14.9% with economic factors being a major contributor (National Family Health Survey [NFHS-5] qualitative modules).

Table 1: Social Category-wise Gross Enrolment Ratio (Higher Education, 2021-22)

Category	GER (Overall)	GER (Female)	GER (Rural)
General	29.5%	28.9%	22.1%
OBC	27.1%	26.8%	20.3%
SC	23.4%	22.7%	17.5%
ST	19.7%	18.9%	15.2%
National Average	28.4%	28.5%	20.0%

Sources: AISHE 2021-22, Ministry of Education, Government of India

Chart 1



#### 3.2 State Expenditure on Education

Over the last ten years, public expenditure on education in India (as a percentage of GDP) has been around 2.9-3.1%, significantly lagging the recommended 6% by

every Education Commission since Kothari (1964-66), and reiterated by NEP 2020. By comparison, the OECD average is 5.0% of GDP. Within this limited pie, there are disparities: elementary education gets the bulk of the pie via the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, and higher education and vocational education are short-changed. The average expenditure on government higher education per student is around INR 22,000 per year, compared to INR 2.5-5 lakh in central universities and IITs, leading to a binary system, where educational quality is a function of family income.

### 3.3 Infrastructure Deficits

UDISE+ 2022-23 data show that 11.7% of government schools do not have toilets, 18% lack electricity, and 42% lack a library room. At the higher education level, the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) accreditation data shows that less than 30% of the 43,000 colleges in India have been accredited by the NAAC, with many unaccredited colleges found in economically poor districts of the states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. The vacancy rate for teachers in government schools is 18.5% at the national level and more than 35% in aspirational districts.

### Anatomy of Deficits in Indian Academia

The deficits that make up the structure of academic poverty in India are fiscal, human capital, infrastructural and epistemic. These deficits are not randomly scattered but rather they are spatially, caste, class and gender-mapped.

### 4.1 Fiscal Deficit, Malallocation of Resources

The biggest structural deficit is financial. As mandated by the Constitution and by policy, the Indian state has persistently underfunded public education. The adoption of the goods-and-services tax regime, while improving the taxation system, results in vertical fiscal imbalances that disadvantage poor states in their ability to develop their education systems. The states with the highest rates of educational poverty (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh) are also those with the lowest fiscal capacities, creating a misalignment between need and capacity.

Further, within education budgets, there is misallocation of resources. Recurrent expenditures often squeeze capital and teachers' expenditures. Scholarship schemes, ostensibly to alleviate student economic vulnerability, are plagued with payment delays, bureaucratic conditions, and low quantum. The Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA, 2023) survey revealed that more than 38% of Post-Matric Scholarship beneficiaries in Scheduled Caste category faced delays in payments of six months, resulting in abandoning studies or taking loans.

### 4.2 Human Capital Deficits: The Teacher Crisis

India's teacher crisis is one of the most significant educational deficits. Large teacher vacancies, lack of pre-service and in-service training, contractual status with poor remuneration and the rise of para-teachers have resulted in a teaching population that is

ill-prepared to teach economically disadvantaged students. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2023, almost 44% of the students in Grade 8 cannot read a text at the Grade 2 level - not only a testimony to the readiness of the students but of the teaching environment in which they have been placed.

In higher education, the rise of ad-hoc and contractual faculty in government colleges has resulted in a segmented labour market in higher education. Regular faculty members are guaranteed employment, pensions and fair remuneration, while the contractual faculty, who make up more than 50% of college teaching staff in many states (reported by the University Grants Commission (UGC) reports) are paid INR 15,000-25,000 monthly with no benefits. This institutional poverty of the teaching staff affects the quality of teaching, mentoring and research.

#### 4.3 Digital and Infrastructural Poverty

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the infrastructural and digital inequality that is one of the most pressing forms of academic poverty in India today. The transition to online education resulted in an estimated 400 million students - according to a UNICEF-UNESCO report (2020) - being excluded from the learning process due to the unavailability of devices, internet connectivity and electricity. While the pandemic emergency has passed, the factors that allowed this exclusion have not. The National Optical Fibre Network (BharatNet) project, despite its scale, has been plagued by delays in implementation and last-

mile connectivity is not guaranteed in tribal and hilly areas.

Lack of infrastructure compounds lack of digital infrastructure. Without electricity, even digital devices donated to schools are useless. In colleges without libraries, even free digital libraries are unavailable. The poverty of infrastructure is therefore not just additive but multiplicative for education poverty.

#### 4.4 Curriculum and Language: Epistemic Structural Deficits

A structurally unanalysed aspect of academic poverty is epistemic: the marginalisation of knowledges, languages, and epistemologies in formal curricula. The use of English as the medium of instruction in higher education by elite institutions is a mechanism of closure. Those whose primary language of instruction has been a regional language face a linguistic "drop-off" point at entry into higher education, which is also a caste and class sorting point. The cultural capital in the form of linguistic competencies required by elite institutions is not equally distributed in the population along economic and caste boundaries, reproducing Bourdieusian cultural capital hierarchies.

In addition, syllabi at all levels are largely oblivious to the geographies, histories and practices of marginalised communities. Students' knowledge traditions, the thinking of Adivasi leaders and Dalit intellectuals and reformers, and non-Western epistemologies are rarely taught in the curriculum, making these students epistemically invisible in the education system.

## Sociological Implications of Academic Poverty

### 5.1 Reproduction of Caste-Based Stratification

Perhaps the most serious sociological consequence of academic poverty in India is the reproduction of the caste system through education. Although post-independence constitutional provisions and affirmative action measures have been put in place to address this, the top echelons of the Indian education system (Indian Institutes of Technology or IITs, Indian Institutes of Management or IIMs, central universities, medical colleges) continue to be dominated by upper-caste students from urban, middle-class, and wealthy backgrounds. In a recent study, Thorat and Newman (2010) showed that after accounting for educational qualifications, Dalit graduates experienced substantial discrimination in labour markets, implying that caste is an independent predictor of socioeconomic outcomes, independent of education.

At the institutional level, caste is more insidious: in the patterns of social interaction on campus, in the informal mentoring that occurs between upper-caste students, in the lack of senior-level representation among Dalit and Adivasi faculty and staff, in institutional responses to caste-based discrimination. The deaths of Rohith Vemula (University of Hyderabad, 2016) and Payal Tadvi (TN Topiwala National Medical College, Mumbai, 2019) are the extreme examples of institutional violence against students from the Dalit community that have not been redressed.

### 5.2 Gender in Academic Poverty

Economic inequality, caste and gender interact to disadvantage girls and women in the Indian education system. Despite considerable achievements in closing gender gaps in primary education in India, secondary and higher education still demonstrate substantial gender differences in rural and economically disadvantaged groups. Poverty often leads to girls' earlier withdrawal from school than boys, with domestic labour and mobility and safety concerns in addition to the direct cost of education cited as reasons for ceasing education.

At the institutional level, poor women face further challenges: poor sanitation, lack of safe hostel arrangements, sexual harassment in a context of low institutional accountability and a curriculum that is not only blinded to feminist thinking and women's historical contributions, but actively excludes it. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) at higher education level is positive across the board (GPI of 1.01 for the country, AISHE 2021-22), but this masks significant intra-state and intra-caste differences (statistically, due to relatively high representation of women in less competitive fields and in institutions).

### 5.3 Spatial Disparities: Rural-Urban Educational Divide and Geographic Marginalisation

India's educational geography is highly skewed. Cities, especially metropolitan ones, are home to the majority of high-quality educational institutions, while rural and tribal areas are marked by institutional deficit, teacher shortages and lack of higher education

opportunities. This spatial clustering of opportunity compels aspirational rural students to migrate to the cities where they encounter new social environments, poor quality housing and isolation. The economic costs of migration (accommodation, travel and living expenses) often dwarf the cost of education and effectively exclude students from rural poor families from accessing higher education.

The notion of educational deserts, geographic areas with high density of educationally disadvantaged populations and low density of education institutions, applies to many parts of India. Aspirational districts, as identified by NITI Aayog on the basis of development indicators, are often found in educational deserts, creating areas of multiple deprivation.

#### 5.4 Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects

There are under-recognised psychosocial aspects of academic poverty. Economically disadvantaged students in elite and even moderately elite higher education institutions are often highly stressed as a result of financial insecurity, impostor syndrome, cultural mismatch and stigma. Lacking institutional mechanisms for counselling - estimated at one counsellor per 40,000 students in public higher education in India - these mental health challenges go unaddressed. Studies by Mishra and Gupta (2021) of the IIT campuses show high levels of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts among first-generation college students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds,

indicating the psychological toll of institutionalised privilege.

#### Assessment of Current Policy Responses

There has not been a lack of policy initiatives on the part of India to address academic poverty. It has implemented a variety of schemes, programs, and laws, with mixed results.

##### 6.1 Scholarships and Fellowships

The Government of India has a range of scholarship schemes for economically and socially deprived students: the Post-Matric Scholarship for SC/ST/OBC students, the National Means-cum-Merit Scholarship Scheme (NMMSS), the Prime Minister's Research Fellowship (PMRF) for PhD candidates and state-level scholarships. But these schemes are plagued by four main problems: first, quantum inadequacy - scholarships, often unchanged for decades, are insufficient to offset rising cost of living; second, implementation efficiency - administrative delays, problems with Aadhaar linking and opening bank accounts hinder timely payments; third, coverage - income and other eligibility criteria shut out a large part of the "near poor"; fourth, institutional apathy - institutions fail to actively support the scholarships' application process, especially among first-generation students unfamiliar with bureaucratic processes.

##### 6.2 Reservations: Policy and Practice

India's largest affirmative action program is the constitutional reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other

Backward Classes in schools, colleges, and universities. But reservation policies have been contested, inconsistent and often subverted. Hundreds of thousands of backlog vacancies for faculty positions in Indian universities and colleges - seats set aside for reserved category teachers that go unfilled - remain. The Supreme Court's shifting interpretations of the "creamy layer," the debate around reservations in private unaided educational institutions and the bureaucratic intricacies of roster systems all limit the impact of reservation policy. Further, while reservation policies address the question of access to institutions, they don't address institutional conditions that disadvantage students.

### 6.3 National Education Policy 2020

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) is the most ambitious reform policy in Indian education since the Kothari Commission Report. NEP 2020 sets laudable objectives: 6% of GDP to be spent on education, GER of 50% in higher education by 2035, multidisciplinary pedagogic institutions, credit-based flexible curricula, mother-tongue-based early education, and equity interventions. But critics have pointed to some problems in NEP 2020's design: the reliance on private institutions to increase access is a risk of commercialisation; the language policy, though progressive on paper, may disadvantage students in multilingual settings; and the time-frames and resource allocations are poorly articulated. NEP 2020's aspirational goals and the reality of cash-strapped government institutions are worlds apart.

### REFORM AGENDA: MULTI-PRONGED

To tackle academic poverty in India, a multi-faceted reform agenda is needed: structural, institutional, pedagogic, and cultural. The following are recommended at various levels.

#### 7.1 Fiscal Reforms: towards Fair Financing

The most important reform imperative is fiscal. India needs to ramp up towards the 6% of GDP public expenditure on education target, with constitutional time-frames and checks and balances. In this larger pie, a needs-based formula should be adopted more favourably towards educationally deprived states, aspirational districts, and institutions with large proportions of economically disadvantaged students. Institutional participatory budgeting, with the involvement of students, faculty, and community representatives in resource allocation, can enhance the efficiency and equity of resource allocation.

Scholarship schemes need to be overhauled: the amount needs to be indexed to living cost inflation; disbursement mechanisms need to be streamlined and digitalised, with real-time monitoring; the coverage needs to be expanded to include the near-poor; and the institutional responsibility for facilitating scholarships needs to be formalised. Education savings accounts for the children of below-poverty-line families, as implemented in Chile and South Korea, could be a useful supplement for long-term investments in education.

### **7.2 Human Capital: Teacher Professionalisation and Security**

The teacher crisis needs to be addressed on a systemic level. Contractual and para-teacherships should be made permanent with tenure-track positions, with commensurate salaries, professional development benefits and working conditions. Curricula for teacher training and development need to be revamped to include skills for diverse classrooms, differentiated learning, and meeting the psychosocial needs of marginalised children. The creation of university and national centres for Dalit studies, tribal studies and gender studies will provide spaces for alternative pedagogies to be developed and disseminated.

### **7.3 Infrastructure and Digital Democratisation**

Digital infrastructure should be considered a public good and a right to education in the 21st century. BharatNet should be fast-tracked and the last-mile roll-out is to be audited by independent agencies. All government schools and colleges must have a minimum digital infrastructure package: 24-hour electricity, broadband internet, one device per five students and a digital literacy coordinator. Open Educational Resources (OER) in all scheduled languages of the country need to be created with central government funding and made available free of cost, to reduce the burden on students from poor families of expensive private textbooks and tuitions.

### **7.4 Curriculum Reform: For Inclusion and Dialogical Pedagogy**

Following Freire's dialogical pedagogy, curriculum reform needs to shift from the transmission to the participatory approach, which is based on student experiences and social contexts. This means the strategic inclusion of Dalit, Adivasi, feminist, subaltern, and other perspectives at all levels of the curriculum - not as "add-ons" to "diversity" but as foundational epistemic perspectives. The medium of mother-tongue instruction should be continued (with qualified support) up to secondary school, with systematic English education rather than English as the medium. Examinations need to be reformed to minimise the dominance of high-stakes testing, which tends to discriminate against students whose learning opportunities are limited by poverty.

### **7.5 Institutional Accountability and Anti-Discrimination**

Equality must be institutionalised through an accountability system that is based on equity indicators. NAAC accreditation should include equity measures such as the representation of SC/ST/OBC students and teachers, the presence of mechanisms for redress of anti-discrimination grievances, the provision of mental health services and scholarships and their disbursement rates. A National Educational Equity Commission, independent of the government and answerable to Parliament, should be established to receive and investigate complaints of caste, gender, and economic discrimination in academic institutions, and

recommend sanctions and steps to redress discrimination.

### 7.6 Social Capital Building

Following Sen's approach of capabilities, reform should go beyond institutional provision to build the social and community infrastructure for educational participation. Learning support centres in educationally backward areas, run in partnership with local self-governments and civil society organisations, can offer additional support, study spaces and mentoring for first generation learners. Institutions can enable the formation of alumni groups from marginalised groups to provide role models and mentors to redress the societal capital deficiency of economically disadvantaged students. Civil society organisations at the education-poverty interface must be explicitly part of district and state level educational planning and monitoring mechanisms.

### Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that academic poverty in India is not a marginal or incidental issue, but a structural problem that is symptomatic of a system that reflects and reproduces the socioeconomic inequalities of Indian society. Using the conceptual paradigms of Bourdieu's cultural capital, Freire's pedagogy of liberation, and Sen's capability approach, we have analysed how academic poverty - characterised by fiscal underfunding, human capital deficits, infrastructural poverty, and epistemic exclusion - produces an educational system that, while nominally committed to equity,

continues to marginalise students from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, rural areas and economically marginalised classes.

The sociological consequences are far-reaching and multifarious: academic poverty entrenches caste differentiation, entrenches gender inequality, contributes to rural-urban disparities, and has severe psychosocial consequences for the most marginal students. Current policy initiatives, such as scholarships, reservations, NEP 2020, while important, do not go far enough. These point to the need for a more transformative reform strategy.

The reform pathways outlined in this paper - equitable funding, teacher professionalisation, digital democratisation, inclusive curriculum reform, institutional accountability, and community engagement strategies - are a multi-layered set of responses that tackle the problem of academic poverty at the root. It's not enough to tweak policy but to redefine the very purpose of education: from a reproduction of existing inequalities to the expansion of human capabilities for all citizens, regardless of their economic, caste, gender, or geographical location.

India's higher education system can never unleash its transformative promise until millions of its brightest students are provided with the material, cultural and institutional resources for learning. Learning for the poor is not just educationally but also politically necessary for the realisation of the constitutional promise of social, economic, and political justice in India.

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