

India's Higher Education in Transition: Expanding Access, Enhancing Quality, and Advancing Toward Global Competitiveness

Dr. Gyanesh Kumar¹, Dr. Gyan Singh²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Anjaneya University, Raipur (C.G)

²Assistant. Professor, Department of Economics, Maa Gangadai Govt. College Bastar District- Bastar (C.G)

Abstract—India's higher education system is the third largest in the world in terms of student enrollment and has witnessed remarkable expansion in recent years. According to the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22, India now has over 1,168 universities and more than 45,000 colleges, with total student enrollment reaching 4.33 crore. Despite this rapid institutional growth, the sector faces persistent structural, financial, and quality-related challenges. This study analyzes the current status and key issues of higher education in India using AISHE data and insights from the National Education Policy 2020.

The analysis highlights significant improvements in access to higher education, particularly reflected in the rise of the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) from 25.6% in 2019–20 to 29.5% in 2022–23. Increased participation of women and marginalized social groups such as SC, ST, and OBC communities indicates progress toward greater inclusiveness. However, the findings reveal several ongoing challenges, including faculty shortages, financial constraints in public universities, disparities in infrastructure, and a persistent gap between theoretical curricula and industry requirements. The growing dominance of private institutions and the increasing reliance on coaching culture also raise concerns regarding educational quality and equity.

The study emphasizes the need for systemic reforms focusing on faculty development, digital infrastructure, curriculum modernization, and value-based education. Strengthening institutional governance and ensuring equitable access to quality education will be crucial for achieving the GER target of 50% by 2035 envisioned under the National Education Policy 2020. The paper concludes that while India has achieved substantial quantitative expansion in higher education, sustained efforts are required to enhance quality, inclusiveness, and global competitiveness in order to transform the country into a leading knowledge economy.

Index Terms—Higher Education, AISHE 2021-22, GER, Faculty Shortage, Quality Assurance, NEP 2020.

I. INTRODUCTION

India's higher education system is the world's third-largest by enrollment. According to the latest AISHE 2021-22 report, the landscape has expanded to 1,168 Universities and 45,473 Colleges. Total student enrollment has reached 4.33 crore, a 26.5% increase since 2014-15.

Despite this expansion, the sector faces a paradox: while India is a global provider of skilled labor, internal challenges persist. Only 7% of Indian students reach graduation, and international rating agencies rarely place Indian institutions in the global top tiers. The involvement of the private sector—now promoting over 60% of institutions—has accelerated growth but often at the cost of standardized quality.

II. DATA-DRIVEN ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES

Overview of Higher Education: Evidence from AISHE

The All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), conducted annually by the Ministry of Education, is the principal source of official data on India's higher education sector. AISHE provides comprehensive information on enrolment, institutions, teachers, Programmes and infrastructure.

2.1 Institutional Growth and Enrolment

Provisional figures reported in the Economic Survey 2025–26, based on AISHE data, indicate steady growth in the sector.

Table 1: Growth of Higher Education in India

Indicator	2019–20	2021–22	2022–23*
Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)	52,000	58,600	60,380
Student Enrolment (crore)	3.85	4.33	4.46

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER %)	25.6	28.4	29.5

Note: 2022–23 figures are provisional. The data show a clear upward trend in enrolment and access; however, the pace of improvement remains modest relative to policy ambitions.

Trend in Higher Education Enrolment in India

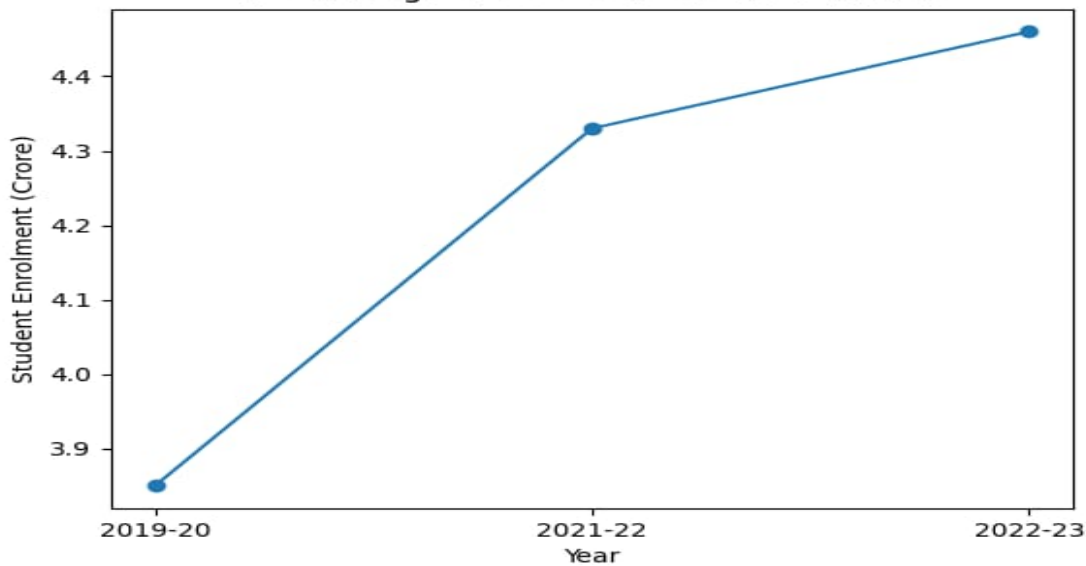


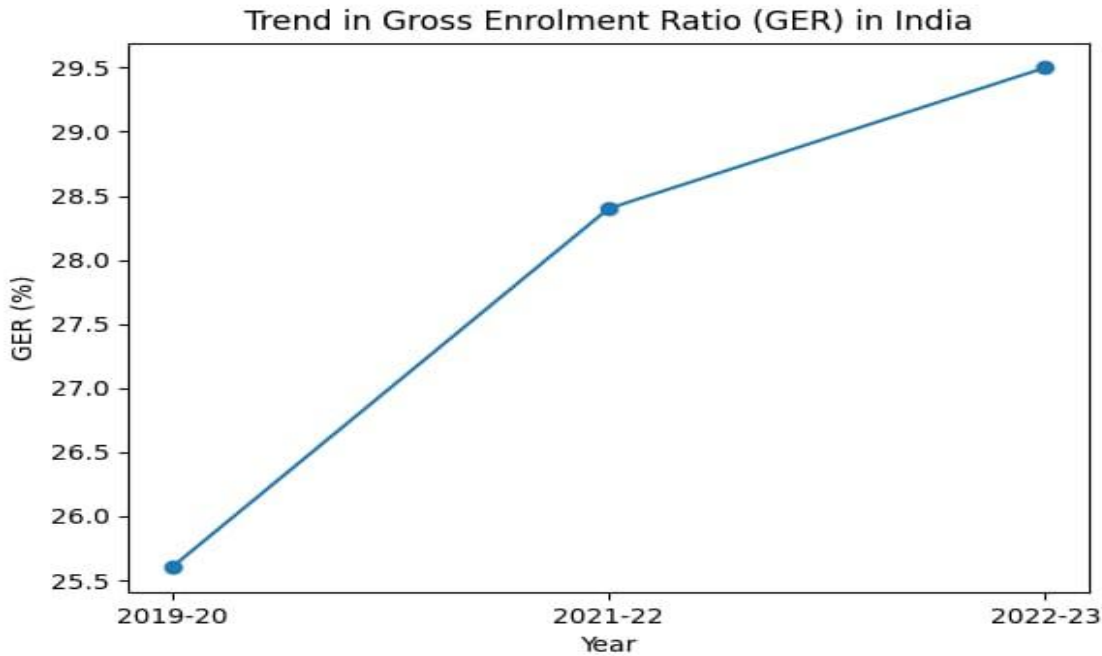
Figure 1. Trend in Student Enrolment in Higher Education

2.2 Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)

The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) measures participation in higher education among the 18–23 age group. The chart shows a steady increase in GER in India during the observed period. In 2019–20, the GER stood at 25.6%, indicating that roughly one-fourth of the eligible age group was enrolled in higher education. By 2021–22, the GER rose significantly to 28.4%, reflecting expanded access to higher education institutions, improved enrolment policies, and the influence of reforms such as the National Education Policy 2020. The upward trend continued in 2022–23, with GER further increasing to 29.5%, demonstrating gradual progress toward India’s national target of achieving 50% GER by 2035.

Although GER has improved steadily over the past decade, it still remains below the global average for upper-middle-income countries. This consistent growth indicates improvements in institutional capacity, increased participation of women and marginalized groups, and the expansion of universities and colleges across the country. However, achieving the ambitious target set under NEP 2020 will require accelerated expansion of higher education institutions along with significant improvements in quality, accessibility, and inclusiveness. The chart illustrates a steady increase in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India during the observed period.

Figure 2. Trend in Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)



Figures 1: are based on AISHE provisional data and the Economic Survey 2025–26.)

2.3 The Faculty Crisis and Teaching Quality

The "faculty famine" remains the most significant barrier to quality.

- Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR): The current PTR stands at 24:1 in regular mode.
- Demographics: There are 15.98 lakh teachers currently, with a persistent gender gap (77 female teachers per 100 male teachers).

Many colleges recruit young graduates without pedagogical experience, leading to a decline in instructional standards. Furthermore, teaching in a multilingual context remains a challenge, often leaving students ill-equipped for the globalized job market.

2.4 Financial Instability and Under-Investment

Financial instability remains a significant concern in India's higher education system, largely due to uneven resource allocation and limited public funding. Although government institutions constitute a relatively smaller proportion of total Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), they cater to a disproportionately large share of student enrollment,

thereby placing considerable pressure on available financial resources.

Many public institutions are facing growing financial deficits as operational costs continue to rise without a corresponding increase in funding support. Delays and inconsistencies in grant disbursement further disrupt academic planning, administrative functioning, and long-term development initiatives.

In addition, inadequate funding has adversely affected infrastructure development and maintenance. Institutions often struggle to upgrade laboratories, classrooms, digital facilities, and research infrastructure, which directly impacts the quality of teaching and learning. These constraints also limit the capacity for innovation, research output, and global competitiveness.

However, the government has undertaken several positive initiatives to address these challenges. The Pradhan Mantri Uchchar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA) aims to strengthen state higher education systems through strategic funding, quality improvement, and institutional reforms. The Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) facilitates infrastructure financing for educational institutions, while the National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes increased public investment, institutional

autonomy, and innovation. Additionally, initiatives promoting digital learning and research development are contributing to strengthening the higher education ecosystem and moving toward a more sustainable and quality-oriented framework.

2.5 Socio-Economic and Gender Barriers

The Gender Parity Index (GPI) has reached 1.01, showing remarkable progress in female enrollment. However, female dropout rates remain high at the postgraduate level due to conservative cultural attitudes.

Table 2: Enrollment Growth by Social Category (2014-2022)

Social Category	% of Total Enrollment (2021-22)	Growth since 2014-15
OBC	37.8%	45%
SC	15.3%	44%
ST	6.3%	65.2%
Muslim Minority	5.2%	21.8%

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22, Ministry of Education, Government of India (2024).

III. STRUCTURAL AND CURRICULAR DEFECTS

- **Theory vs. Practice:** Enrollment is highest in Arts (34.2%), yet these courses often remain narrow and theoretical, failing to meet industry needs.
- **Governance and Institutional Autonomy:** Governance in higher education institutions is often affected by administrative and external influences, which can limit institutional autonomy and delay academic decision-making. Strengthening transparent governance mechanisms and ensuring autonomy are essential for maintaining academic integrity, innovation, and efficient institutional functioning.
- **The Coaching Culture:** A societal shift toward competitive exam coaching has created a "shadow education" system, widening the class divide and devaluing university-led learning.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

- **Digital Integration:** Investment in high-speed ICT infrastructure is essential to bridge the knowledge gap between rural and urban sectors.
- **Pedagogical Shift:** Testing mechanisms must move away from rote memorization toward Project-Based Learning (PBL) and creativity.
- **Faculty Development:** Teachers must be empowered as entrepreneurs of knowledge through continuous training and global digital exposure.
- **Character Education:** To prevent professional corruption, ethics and value-based education must be woven into the core curriculum.

V. CONCLUSION

The path toward reclaiming India's status as a "Vishwa Guru" requires harmonizing massive growth with uncompromising quality. The AISHE 2021-22 data indicates that while the "quantity" of education has increased, the "quality" remains a work in progress. By leveraging the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and addressing the financial paucity in public institutions, India can transform its demographic dividend into a global knowledge powerhouse. The current resource crisis is not an endpoint but an opportunity to build a more resilient, inclusive, and world-class academic ecosystem.

REFERENCES

- [1] Appu, S. (2017, January 28). Present education system in India. Group Discussion Ideas. <http://www.groupdiscussionideas.in/present-education-system-in-india/>. British Council. (2014). Understanding India: The future of higher education and opportunities for international cooperation. British Council.
- [2] Classbase. (2016). Education system in India. <http://www.classbase.com/countries/India/Education-System>.
- [3] Department of Higher Education. (2024). All India survey on higher education (AISHE) 2021–2022. Ministry of Education, Government of India.

- [4] Joshi, K. (2017). How India's education system is breaking the country. DailyO. <http://www.dailyo.in/voices/school-education-englishgovernment school/story/1/16610.html>.
- [5] Kremer, M., Chaudhury, N., Rogers, F. H., Muralidharan, K., & Hammer, J. (2004). Teacher absence in India: A snapshot. Journal of the European Economic Association. <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/macarthur/inequality/papers/KremerTeacherAbsenceinIndia.pdf>.
- [6] Masani, Z. (2008, February 27). India still Asia's reluctant tiger. BBC Radio 4.
- [7] Masani, Z. (2008). India still faces huge regional and social disparities in education. BBC News.
- [8] Ministry of Education. (2020). National education policy 2020. Government of India.
- [9] Mishra, S. (2006). UGC and higher education system in India. Book Enclave.
- [10] Shaguri, O. B. (2013). Higher education in India: A critical review. Research Journal of Educational Sciences, 1(4), 15–19.
- [11] Shaguri, O. R. (2013). Higher education in India: Access, equity, and quality. EAN World Congress Scholar, Global Access to Postsecondary Education.
- [12] Sharma, S. (n.d.). UGC and higher education system in India.
- [13] University News. (2005, December 26–2006, January 1). University News.
- [14] University News. (2011, August 11). University News, 49(31).
- [15] University News. (2011, August 29–September 4). University News, 49(35).