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THE UNNOTICED CHALLENGES SURROUNDING HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

NEYMAT CHADHA

ISSUE BRIEF

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ABSTRACT

According to the World Bank, India has the third-largest higher education system in the world followed by the United States of America and China. However, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India is merely 26.3%. In this context, this issue brief brings to fore the unnoticed challenges surrounding higher education in public universities in India, rooted in the slow and gradual demise of public funding for research and innovation, steered by a substantial cut in allocation for grants and scholarships. It further highlights the critical importance of the State in addressing these challenges and further ensuring a paradigm shift in higher education in public universities.

INTRODUCTION- INDIA AND HIGHER EDUCATION AT A GLANCE

For nations worldwide, higher education¹ is instrumental in the development of human capital as well as in facilitating informed decision-making processes and fostering public debate and dialogue (Rajapakse 2016). Accessibility and affordability to higher education and research and innovation are instrumental in laying the foundation of a knowledge-based economy. It is an effective tool for redistribution of economic, political and social opportunities for the disadvantaged, marginalised and excluded groups, by providing means to ensure horizontal and vertical mobility².

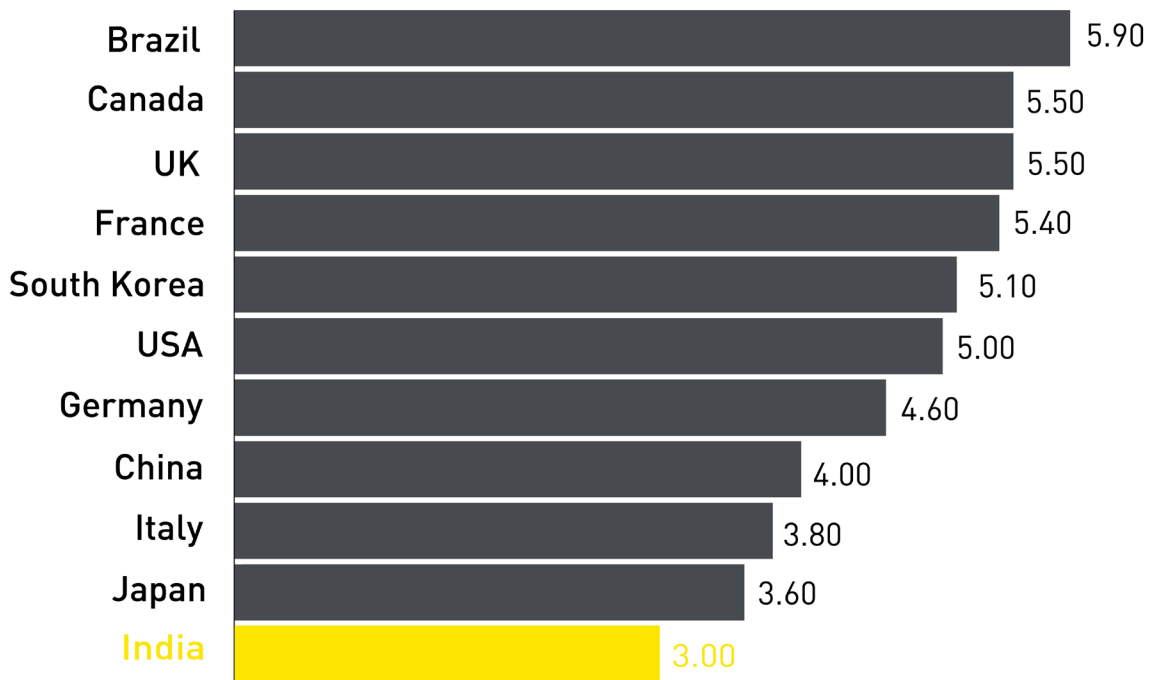
According to the World Bank, India has the third-largest higher education system in the world followed by the United States of America and China. However, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India is 26.3%. Out of the total number of students enrolled in higher education programmes, about 79.8% of students are enrolled in undergraduate level programmes, in contrast to less than 0.53% students enrolled in Doctoral/PhD programmes (AISHE 2019). There has further been a 10% decline in the total enrolment rate for undergraduate courses, from 89% in 2005 to 79.4% in 2012 (Varghese 2015).

From a global perspective, India spends only a 3.8% share of its total GDP on education. In 2000, India spent 0.77% of its total GDP on higher education, which fell to 0.63% in 2015. On the other hand, China's expenditure on higher education has increased from 0.89% in 2000 to 2.11% in 2016 (Raman 2019). More specifically, currently, India's investment in the field of research and development stands at 0.68% of the total GDP as compared to 2.8%, 2.1% and 4.2% in USA, China and South Korea respectively (Venkatasubramanian 2019).

¹ Higher education refers to post-secondary tertiary education provided by a college or a university.

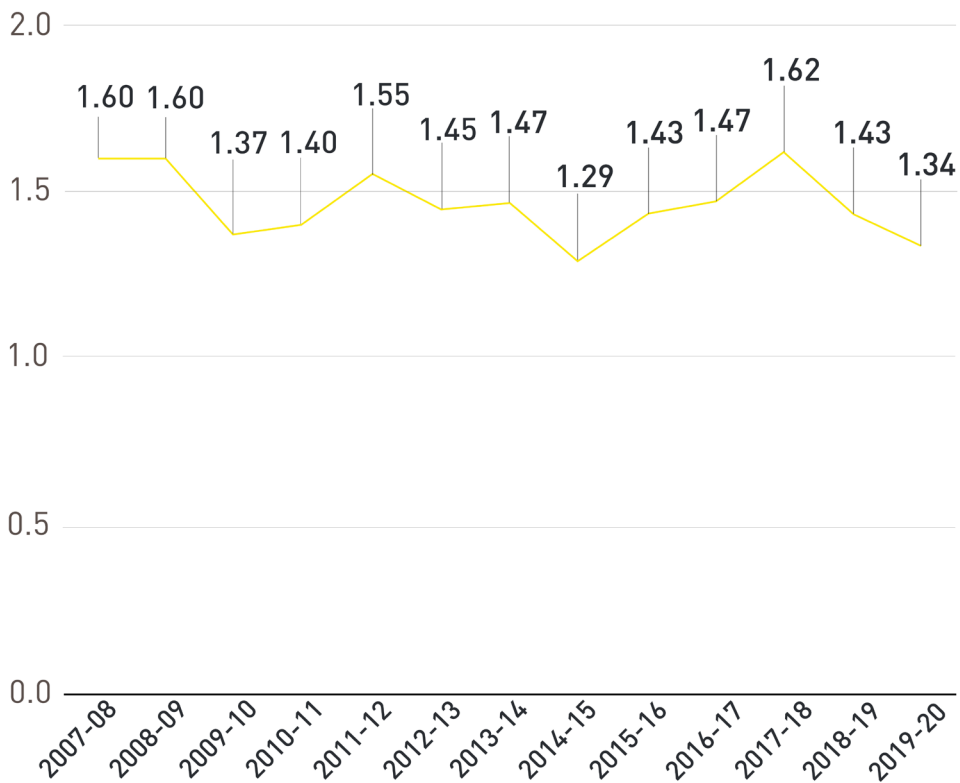
² Horizontal and vertical mobility are two classificatory categories to understand social mobility. Horizontal mobility refers to the movement of an individual from one position to another, within the same social status, without any change in his/her position in the wider social hierarchy. On the other hand, vertical mobility is defined as the movement from one social status to another, where a change in status leads to an overall change in the social positioning of an individual within the social hierarchy.

FIGURE 1: GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE ON EDUCATION
(PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL GDP)



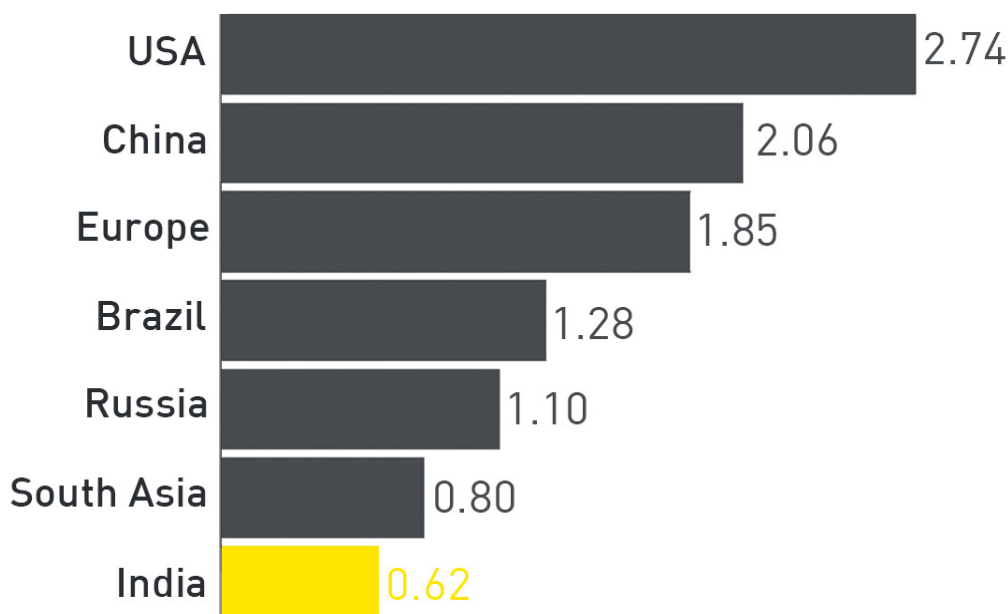
SOURCE: WORLD BANK

FIGURE 2: BUDGETARY ALLOCATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION
(PERCENTAGE SHARE OF THE TOTAL BUDGET)



SOURCE: UNION BUDGET

FIGURE 3: EXPENDITURE ON RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
(PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL GDP)



SOURCE: UNESCO

According to the All India Survey for Higher Education, 2018-19, there are 993 universities in India (49 central universities, 367 state universities, 123 deemed universities and 282 private universities) as opposed to 642 universities in 2011-12 (AISHE 2019). The staggering increase in the total number of universities is fueled by the emergence of 199 private universities, out of a total of 351 new universities since 2012, with little to no reliable information about the quality of higher education imparted in these institutes (Yadav 2019). In India, massification of higher education is imbued in a private market-driven process as opposed to a state and public-sector led initiative.

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN DIFFERENT HIGHER EDUCATIONAL DEGREES

Undergraduate Degree (UG)	79.6%
Post-Graduate Degree (PG)	10.81%
Research (M.Phil and PhD)	0.53%
Diploma/Certificate Course	8.26%
Integrated Degree	0.64%

SOURCE: ANNUAL REPORT UGC 2018-2019

The state of higher education in India seems to be dismal, gripped by grave institutional and structural deficiencies in the higher education system. An unnoticed crisis thus stems from a range of issues, rooted in the slow and gradual demise of state funding in public universities and is steered by a substantial cut in the allocation of grants and scholarships to students and early-stage scholars in public universities.

CHALLENGES PLAGUING INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

- THE UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION, NATIONAL ELIGIBILITY TEST AND JUNIOR RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP: THE CRIPPLING CHALLENGE OF INADEQUATE GRANTS**

The University Grants Commission (UGC) is the statutory body responsible for coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of higher education by providing recognition to universities as well as dissemination of funds and grants to universities and colleges. Intending to offer opportunities to undertake advanced studies and research, UGC provides the Junior Research Fellowship (JRF)³ to students qualifying the National Eligibility Test (NET) to pursue an M.Phil and PhD in 94 subjects in any Central University in India.

As per UGC regulations, in the absence of a PhD degree, qualifying the NET examination is a mandatory eligibility criteria for being appointed as an Assistant Professor in any university in India. However, of the total number of students appearing for NET for various subjects, merely 6% are considered to be qualified, contingent on the availability of funds as well as vacancies. From the qualified 6%, a merit list is created, enlisting a selected number of students who are further considered eligible to avail JRF. However, the rest of the students pursuing MPhil and PhD, irrespective of qualifying NET, are eligible to avail only the Non-NET fellowship with a nominal amount of INR 5000 and INR 8000 for M.Phil and PhD respectively (University Grants Commission n.d.).

TABLE 2: MONTHLY GRANTS FOR STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR JRF

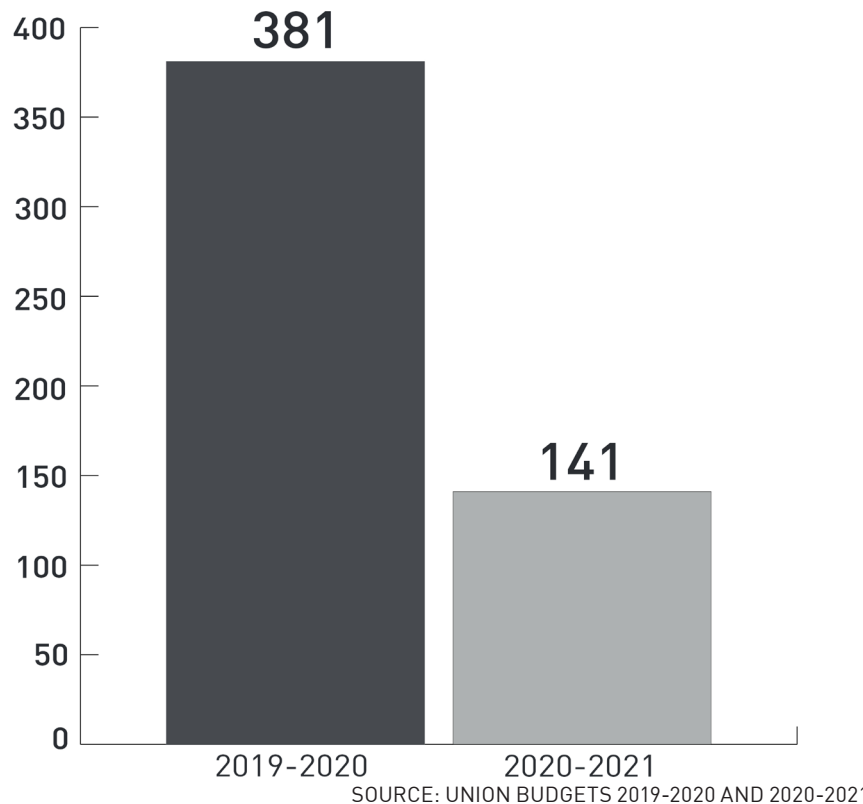
NET-JRF	INR 31,000
NET-SRF	INR 35,000
Non-NET Fellowship- MPhil	INR 5,000
Non-NET Fellowship- PhD	INR 8,000

- BUDGETARY ALLOCATION FOR SCHOLARSHIPS: A DISMAL PICTURE**

Over the years, despite education being a part of the Concurrent List, higher education has often been neglected by the state. This becomes evident through the Union Budget 2020-21, which raises questions about the deteriorating budgetary allocation for research and innovation. The Union Budget 2020-21 witnessed a 60% cut in the total budgetary allocation for financial aid and scholarship for students in colleges and central universities from INR 381 Cr in 2019-20 to INR 141 Cr in 2020-21 (Ministry of Finance 2019; 2020).

³ Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) is the financial assistance provided by the UGC to students pursuing MPhil and PhD for an initial tenure of two years, after which the work of the fellow is evaluated. If found satisfactory, the tenure of the fellowship is further extended for a period of three years under the Senior Research Fellowship (SRF) Scheme (University Grants Commission n.d.).

FIGURE 4: BUDGETARY ALLOCATION FOR STUDENT FINANCIAL
FOR STUDENT FINANCIAL AID
(SCHOLARSHIP FOR COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS) (IN CRORES)



The grants for scholarship for students belonging to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes have been cut down from INR 39 Cr to INR 15 Cr and INR 19 Cr to INR 8 Cr respectively. This poses severe challenges to Non-NET research scholars, especially from economically weaker sections, who in light of the lack of hostels in public universities struggle to sustain themselves through their academic training (Ibid.).

- **INSTITUTIONAL FEE AND HIGHER EDUCATION: DISPROPORTIONATE FEE HIKE AS OPPOSED TO INCREASE IN FELLOWSHIPS**

The continuous undermining of higher educational institutes becomes evident through the imposition of sudden fee hikes in universities such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), National Law University, among many others. Despite the widespread student protests against the proposed fee-hike in JNU, there has been a two-fold hike in the institutional fee for the academic year 2020-21. There has also been an almost 10 times increase in the one-time medical fee of INR 9 to INR 1000. There has been over a 60% fee hike in semester fee for MPhil and PhD programs (INR 295 in 2019-20; INR 780 in 2020-21) as well as undergraduate and postgraduate programs (INR 283 in 2019-20; INR 786 in 2020-21) (Das 2020). Even in research institutes such as Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), the fee has been increased from INR 4,840 per semester in 2014 to INR 18,200 in 2019, a 276% increase as opposed to only a 24% increase in fellowships over the years (Mudur 2019).

The systematic transformation of education into a commodity, accessible to a select demographic with financial capital, poses serious challenges towards achieving equity and inclusivity in the field of higher education.

- **THE NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION: THE QUESTION OF AUTONOMY**

In June 2019, the central government proposed to set up the National Research Foundation (NRF) to strengthen the research ecosystem in the country, i.e. “to fund, mentor, incentivise and build capacity” for quality research. NRF is one of the significant recommendations stated in the draft New Education Policy 2019. The body will consist of four major divisions- Sciences, Technology, Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities. NEP further suggests that once established, NRF will assimilate the research grants from various ministries into a single organisational body (Sharma 2019).

However, according to some critics, NRF also opens up paths for increased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in higher education. This raises concerns about the trickling down of expenditure by the central government, a step towards increasing privatisation of research and innovation. Further, NEP recommends that NRF will consist of a central authority, Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog (RSA) chaired by the Prime Minister to oversee all education (Siddharthan 2019). It further stated that the apex body would also be responsible for monitoring and encouraging research along with issues of ‘national interest’, a category which has been left reasonably ambiguous in the draft NEP. This poses serious concerns about the bane of an increased role of the state in deciding and determining the fields and area of research for scholars, embedded in a political motive, hence hampering the academic interests of scholars as well as the autonomous functioning of education institutes.

- **INCREASING EDUCATED UNEMPLOYMENT: A DEEPENING EMPLOYMENT CRISIS**

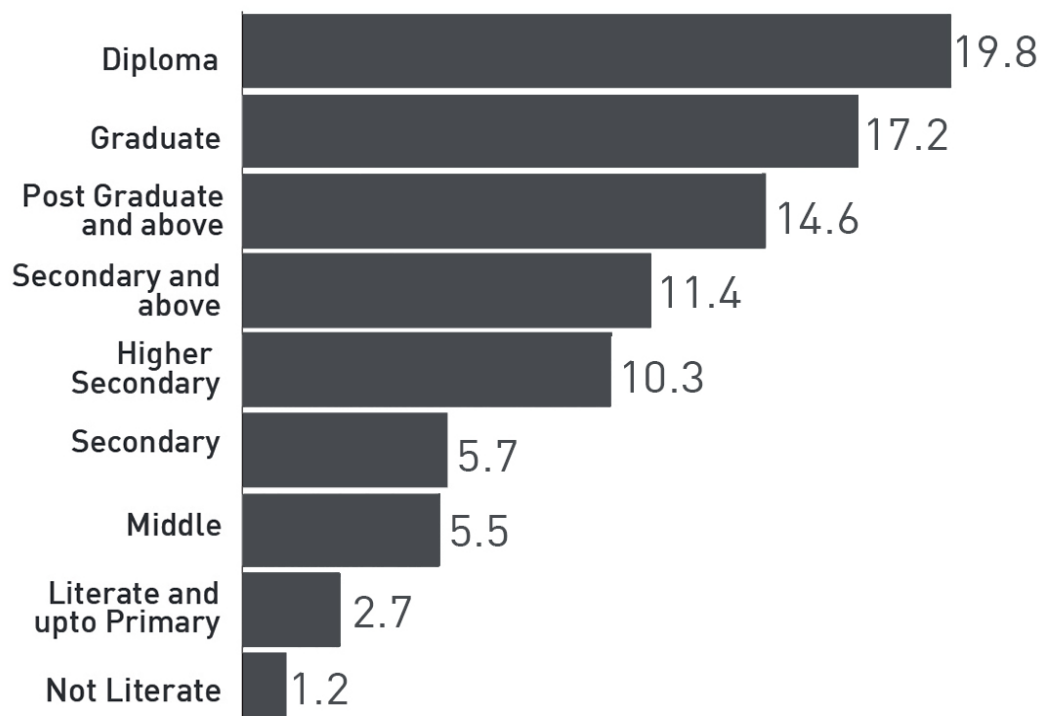
According to the CMIE Report, the unemployment level in India has increased with a rise in education level, creating a large pool of educated unemployed individuals. During September-December 2019, the unemployment rate among graduates reached 13.2% (Vyas 2020).

Additionally, with the mushrooming of more and more private colleges and universities in India, there is a lack of a standardised regulatory mechanism to gauge the quality of education being imparted in these institutes, deterring the required skill-development and training for a more lucrative job market. It is also important to point out that in an employment market driven by the motive of profit, with science and technology gaining paramount significance as primary parameters of measuring development, social sciences seem to be getting lost in “competitive flurry, abilities crucial to the health of any democracy internally, and to the creation of a decent world culture” (Nussbaum 2016: 7).

India, with the fifth largest GDP in the world, produces less than 2 lakh students who are pursuing an M.Phil or a PhD (Yadav 2019). There is still a lack of absorption of research scholars in both academia as well as in public educational institutions as Associate and Assistant Professors, followed by a refusal to provide permanent faculty positions to Ad-Hoc professors despite only 60% of the total sanctioned vacancies being filled (Reddy and Vaidyanathan 2019). At present, there are 18,243 sanctioned teaching posts and 34,298 sanctioned non-teaching posts in Central Universities across India, out of which 6688

teaching posts and 12,323 non-teaching posts are vacant⁴. Thousands of professors are hired in public universities all over India as 'Ad-Hocs', where their employment is contingent on the renewal of their contracts every four months, transforming academia into a highly unstable and precarious space (Ashley 2019).

FIGURE 5: UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (IN PERCENTAGE)
(ACCORDING TO USUAL STATUS FOR PERSONS OF AGE 15 YEARS AND ABOVE OF
DIFFERENT GENERAL EDUCATION LEVEL)



SOURCE: ANNUAL REPORT PLFS 2017-2018

⁴ This information is from a Lok Sabha question, answered by Minister of Human Resource Development, Shri Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank'.

| CONCLUSION

Noble Laureate Amartya Sen attributed the dismal state of Indian higher education system not merely to negligence by 'thoughtless actors' but also to grave failures in formulating a public policy which incorporates the economic and social forces operating within the country and the response of policymakers in addressing these issues (Sen 1970). The gradual dismantling and defunding of public higher educational institutes poses grave concerns surrounding the higher education landscape in India. The mushrooming of private universities, with a dearth in scholarship and grants is a step towards transforming higher education into a privilege, marred by class homogeneity and non-inclusivity.

In times of rampant educated unemployment, there is a need to increase state funding in the form of scholarships and grants, at least for students, to avail accessible and high quality education before they step into the precarious job market. Furthermore, instead of establishing new organisations to monitor higher education and research and innovation, there is a need to repair and strengthen the already existing commissions and systems, plagued by budget and funds cuts, irregular dispensation of stipends and fellowships, undermining research in the social sciences, and a lack of regulation of quality of teaching in public institutes. To expand India's knowledge economy, it is thus imperative to strengthen its research base. There is a need to restructure and rebuild autonomous and inclusive public institutes for higher education in India, independent of political intervention in the field of research and innovation.

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