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HINDU (P-13), 01 JANUARY 2026

Past, present, future: the dangerous path of distorted history

Romila Thapar always relied on rigorous analysis and credible sources to write about the past and explain its ties with the present; in her new book, she has a conversation with Namit Arora on why history is misunderstood and the perils of learning about the past from WhatsApp forwards

Ziya Us Salam

Many years ago, when we first dipped into Romila Thapar's defining work, *A History of India*, the lasting impression was that here was a historian who presented facts cogently, persuasively, and by the end of a chapter managed to convince you to read more on the subject.

Not much has changed in the intervening years, and her collections, *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History*, *The Future in the Past: Essays and Reflections*, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of History*, provide an understanding on how the present draws on the past, "not necessarily always to better understand the past but to use the past to legitimise the present."

Her latest tome, *Speaking of History: Conversations about the Past and the Present*, co-authored with Namit Arora, dissects contemporary trends and expresses the concerns of a discerning Indian.

Anguished at the way things have shaped up in Indian society and polity over the last few years, she opens up to Arora, stating, "It used to be claimed that Indian culture was different from other world cultures because the people of India were concerned with values such as non-violence and tolerance, and the ethics of a situation. It was almost automatic to invoke the words of Gautam Buddha and Ashok Maurya in this context. Yet today, few associate these values with India... If you have a society in which ethical values are no longer even discussed, let alone practised, then you're in for a society that... will be ruled by mobs and demagogues."

WhatsApp history

Unlike most of us who fail to put a finger to the root cause of the problem, Thapar feels the growth of the so-called WhatsApp brand of history does a lot of damage to the social fabric of the nation. "There are at least two features specific to our society that are responsible for the rise of 'WhatsApp history'. The first is our abysmally poor standard of education. Even our so-called educated middle classes lack a basic understanding of any social science discipline... Textbooks are mauled and courses are chopped up into unconnected, indigestible bits... The second reason is that in our times, politics is impinging far more on our lives than ever before. Hindutva has a theory about the past that draws from texts on mythology, on the colonial view of Indian history and a believed fantasy history....Those who question it are dubbed Marxists."

Colonial duplicity

The rise of the WhatsApp history factory, in turn, can be traced to the British days of easy, if inaccurate and lazy, division of Indian history into Hindu Ancient India and Muslim Medieval India. This falsification emanated from another myth, that Indians did not have written history!

In her latest book, where conversation flows nice and easy and myths are busted regularly, Thapar writes, "In the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century, colonial power assumed that Indians had no written history and that they would have to create it." So this creation came out in the form of a history divided into periods of two religious communities, which James Mill referred to as Hindu and Muslim.

"He attributed to these highly diverse socio-religious communities a perpetual, permanent hostility towards each other, which is his own invention. The communities as nations are his invention, as is the hostility," feels Thapar. This division of history into two religious watertight departments has, in many ways, led to our times when a large section of society consumes 'WhatsApp history', and peddles it as fact.

At the preliminary stage, it presents all Muslim rulers as invaders and blood thirsty tyrants. Then come the attempts to appropriate all Aryans as the original inhabitants of India. Writes Thapar, "Most scholars today agree that the speakers of Indo-Aryan originated outside the boundaries of British India, arriving from Central Asia... Indo-Aryan used in north-western India was a cognate of Iranian-Aryan used in north-eastern Iran. It was a close relationship... If the Vedic Indo-Aryans were performing the Soma ritual, the Iranian-Aryans were performing what they called the Homa ritual, the 's' sound being replaced by the 'h' sound from one language to the other. Hence, the river Sindhu (Indus) in the Indo-Aryan becomes Hindu/Hind(h)u in the Iranian-Aryan, and the Iranians refer to the people who live beyond the Sindhu as Hindus, which is a geographic and not a religious descriptor." Of course, the term 'Hindu' to describe people with a particular religious belief came into use later.

Sindhu or *Hindu*, patriarchy was strong in the Indo-Aryan culture. As the veteran historian points out in the book, "Dharmashastras permitted upper caste women hardly any freedom, as they were to be controlled by their father, husband and son, in the three phases of their life as daughter, wife and widowed mother."

The exceptions

Inevitably, there were exceptions. Like Prabhavati Gupta, who ruled as the Queen Regent in the fifth century after her husband died, and her son was yet to come of age. Much like Rani Laxmibai, many a century later. Then there were women Bhakti saints like Andal in South India, Lal Ded in Kashmir and Mirabai in Rajasthan. But they were isolated instances with little ripple effect. Even the latter marriages between the Mughals and Rajputs were largely political alliances where women were treated as mere property.

In reality, ours has been a male-dominated history. Add to that the present communal toxicity. And it becomes a recipe for disaster. Thapar provides a note of comfort, "If there is one thing I have learnt in my long life, it is that nothing... will last forever. There are periods when things work well and others when they don't. One has to accept the constant change."

MILLENNIUM POST (P-15), 01 JANUARY 2026

Admissions 2026: DON'T CHOOSE A DEGREE, CHOOSE A FUTURE

DR SANKU BOSE

As 2026 unfolds, higher education finds itself at a quiet but unmistakable turning point. For generations, we told students that a good degree would open doors. That promise is no longer reliable. What now determines employability is not what a student knows on graduation day, but how fluently they can keep learning, adapting, and applying that knowledge over their professional lives. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has repeatedly pointed out that job roles are changing faster than educational cycles, with nearly a quarter of today's roles expected to transform by the end of this decade. This explains why many high-performing graduates still struggle in their first jobs: they were prepared for exams, not for evolution.

In my view, graduates need to work towards building a set of five "power skills" to ensure they are employable after four years—and remain relevant for their entire careers. They are: i) AI and data fluency; ii) cybersecurity awareness; iii) portfolio of real work exposure; iv) industry alignment and v) analytical thinking, creativity and curiosity based in ethical judgement.

One of the most visible changes inside classrooms is the way artificial intelligence is reshaping every discipline. AI is becoming a basic academic language. Degrees that will age well are combining artificial intelligence and machine learning with applied data analytics, decision intelligence for business, and even prompt engineering, AI workflow automation, and agent-based systems. Universities that treat AI literacy the way they once treated computer labs risk graduating students who feel outdated on arrival.

Running parallel to this is the growing importance of cybersecurity, a domain that is still underestimated outside technical circles. As organisations increasingly adopt AI across operations, finance, healthcare, and governance, cyber risk becomes everyone's problem. Graduates entering management, compliance, auditing, or policy roles are now expected to understand digital forensics, cloud security, governance frameworks, and privacy engineering. The skill gap here is rarely about hacking expertise and more about judgement—understanding threat models, responding to incidents, and designing systems that respect privacy by default.

We also need a rethink on how degrees themselves are structured. The four-year programme still matters, but it needs to be increasingly modular, designed to deliver employable value at every stage rather than only at the end. Universities are moving toward stackable pathways where students earn recognised credentials year by year, embed industry certifications into transcripts, and accumulate credit-bearing internships and live projects. Employers are no longer impressed by course completion alone; they want to see proof—portfolios, project outcomes, and demonstrated competence.

The climate transition and sustainability is also reshaping employability in ways that are often overlooked. Careers in renewable energy, smart grids, climate risk, ESG analytics, sustainable finance and circular economy models are becoming relevant far beyond their original audiences. Even graduates in traditional roles are increasingly assessed on their ability to understand carbon accounting, lifecycle analysis, and sustainability reporting. Climate literacy is fast becoming a baseline expectation rather than a specialisation.

India's renewed emphasis on building and manufacturing provides further options to explore. As the country invests in semiconductors, electronics, robotics, automation, and industrial systems, demand is rising for professionals who can design, test, and scale. Programmes in VLSI and semiconductor engineering, embedded systems, industrial AI, computer vision, quality engineering, and reliability systems emphasise labs, simulation, and product thinking over rote theory. Employability here comes from hands-on competence and a mindset geared toward real-world constraints.

Yet for all the attention on technology and industry alignment, the most enduring differentiators remain human. Analytical thinking, creativity, resilience, curiosity, ethical judgement, and leadership consistently rank among the most valuable capabilities. Universities that take this seriously are rethinking pedagogy itself—introducing credit-bearing communication and professional writing, debate and case-based learning, leadership labs, peer-assessed team projects, and reflective practices that build ethical reasoning. These are not "soft" additions; they are what make technical skills usable.

FOR STUDENTS ENTERING COLLEGE IN 2026 AND HOPING TO BE EMPLOYABLE BY 2030, THE CHOICES MADE AT ADMISSION WILL MATTER MORE THAN EVER

For students entering college in 2026 and hoping to be employable by 2030, the choices made at admission will matter more than ever. Programmes must be evaluated not only by reputation, but by how deeply they integrate AI and data skills into the core curriculum, whether they expose students to cybersecurity and sustainability thinking, and how seriously they embed internships, live projects, and industry certifications. Students who graduate with a visible portfolio of real work—projects, case studies, research, or startup experience—will stand apart. Waiting until the final year to "prepare for jobs" is foolhardy; employability now has to be built carefully and deliberately, year by year.

The promise universities must make to students and parents in 2026 is therefore very different from the one made a generation ago. It is not merely about placements or rankings, but about building a dependable system of career and life readiness. Graduates who leave with AI and data fluency, cyber awareness, a visible portfolio of real work, strong industry alignment, and deeply rooted power skills are not just employable after four years—they remain relevant for their entire career. In a world that refuses to slow down, education must stop preparing students for a single job and start preparing them for continuous reinvention.

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5 EDUCATION TRENDS TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN 2026

From AI literacy to micro-credentials, education is entering a new phase. 2026 will prioritise skills, flexibility and employability

ANINDITA ACHARYA

Happy New Year

As India steps into 2026, the education sector is all set to undergo a monumental change. Policy push, rapid technological adoption and industry pressure are reshaping the education ecosystem. Artificial intelligence (AI) is moving from the margins to the mainstream. Degrees are giving way to skills, portfolios and stackable credentials as employability becomes the central metric of quality. Global collaborations and the entry of foreign universities are opening up international pathways within India. Millennium Post lists top five education trends that will matter the most in 2026.

MAINSTREAMING OF AI LITERACY

One of the most significant trends in 2026 will be the mainstreaming of AI literacy across disciplines. AI will no longer remain confined to engineering or computer science programmes. "Rather, the ability to use simple AI fluency, such as knowledge of how the algorithms work, how data is understood and how AI can be used responsibly will be a basic skill across fields of business, healthcare, education, design, and logistics," said Dr Ashwini Kumar Sharma, Pro- Vice Chancellor, Medhavi Skills University. According to Prof Braj Bhushan, Deputy Director, IIT Kanpur, the rise of AI driven personalization will reshape the education system in 2026. For Shantanu Rooj, Founder and CEO, TeamLease Edtech, education in 2026 will become AI-native, not just AI-enabled. "Institutions will move beyond using AI as a tool on the side and start embedding it into curriculum design, assessment, student support and personalised learning pathways," he said.

FROM DEGREE-FIRST TO CAPABILITY-FIRST PATHWAYS

In 2026, education will see a sharper shift from degree-first to capability-first pathways, believes Rooj. According to him, employers are already signalling that they care more about demonstrable skills, projects and portfolios than just course transcripts. "Apprenticeships, work-integrated degrees and industry-co-created programmes will gain more ground as credible routes into high-growth roles," he said.

> EDUCATION AND RESEARCH WILL INCREASINGLY FOCUS ON TRANSLATIONAL OUTCOMES, CONVERTING ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE INTO REAL-WORLD PRODUCTS, SYSTEMS, AND SOLUTIONS. SYSTEM-LEVEL THINKING AND PRODUCT-ORIENTED EDUCATION WILL BECOME CENTRAL TO CURRICULA

Dr Sharma also is of the opinion that 2026 will normalise skills-based and modular learning pathways. "Degrees will not disappear as much and will also be more frequently divided into stackable units anchored by micro credentials and short-term certifications," he said. Dr Girish Jain, Professor of Finance and Chairperson- Admissions at BIMTECH, Greater Noida highlights that education will undergo a deeper structural shift rather than a cosmetic one in 2026. "Driven by NEP 2020, universities will move from the traditional degrees, to flexible curricula, and multidisciplinary learning components tailored to individual and industry needs," he said.

Other Big Changes Coming to Education in 2026

- Entrepreneurship, innovation, and patent-driven research will continue to accelerate
- Relationship between industry and academia will change towards shared ownership instead of occasional involvement
- Growth of dual and multiple degree programmes
- Equity and employability will move to the centre of education strategy
- Employability will become the core metric of quality
- Rise of smart classrooms and blended learning ecosystems
- Continued growth of micro credentials

RISE IN INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIONS

Prof V Kamakoti, Director IIT Madras, believes in 2026, there will be a significant rise in international collaborations. "As regulatory frameworks evolve, we will see deeper partnerships between Indian institutions and global universities, fostering joint research, faculty exchange, and collaborative academic programmes," he said. Prof Mahadeo Jaiswal, Director, IIM Sambalpur, believes universities are forming stronger ties with leading institutions worldwide, offering joint programmes, research collaborations, and dual degrees. "These partnerships provide students with cross-cultural learning, exposure to international standards, and access to cutting-edge knowledge," he said.

ENTRY OF FOREIGN UNIVERSITIES INTO INDIA WILL BEGIN

Prof Kamakoti is also of the opinion that entry of foreign universities into India will begin to take shape in 2026. "With enabling policies now in place, global institutions are expected to establish a presence in the country, enriching the academic landscape and offering students greater choice without needing to go abroad," he said.

DIGITAL BADGES AND COMPETENCY-BASED RECOGNITION

Digital badges are becoming an increasingly popular way to showcase skills and learning achievements. They give students and professionals the chance to demonstrate practical competencies beyond traditional degrees, highlights Prof Jaiswal. "Earned through courses, workshops, or conferences, these badges can be shared on platforms like LinkedIn, helping learners gain recognition and visibility across the globe," he said.

PIONEER (P-10), 01 JANUARY 2026

A Contrarian Investor

Kaun banega crorepati, CA or MBA?

Is the balance sheet more crucial than strategy and vision?

KM Birla's admission on *'Kaun Banega Crorepati,'* which is anchored by iconic celebrity, Amitabh Bachchan, stirred appreciation across the globe. The Birla scion, who manages the Aditya Birla Group, revealed how his father and grandfather insisted that he had to become a chartered accountant (CA) to join the family business. This was when KM wanted to pursue MBA. He did both, first CA, and then MBA. Although this anecdote was interpreted as family's values related to education, the real implication lies between the lines. The incident shows how the Indian business families, especially the Marwaris, give precedent to a mastery in numbers, figures, and financials, rather than strategy, management, and tactics.

Generally, a CA-oriented approach means that the balance sheet, topline, and bottom line are given credence. The MBA-based one focuses more on future vision, mission, and techniques to grow the company. In the first, profits, cash flows, and costs are crucial. In the second, global best practices, expansion, diversification, and integration are critical. The former looks at the present, the latter at the future. Although KM has grown his empire several times since his father's demise, and he is the only Birla faction, whose business chart is on the ascendant, other business families have vanished, especially since the economic reforms in the 1990s. One of the reasons is this dichotomy, narrow focus, or the inability to change.

One of the most-common tenets of family business is the three-generation rule. The first generation works hard to build a business. The second maintains it, or even grows it. The third squanders the wealth, and destroys or dilutes the empire. In some, this three-step play happens within two generations. In others, it may take a few generations. However, KM has achieved the opposite. In the fourth-generation avatar, if one takes the legendary GD Birla as the real patriarch, KM has grown the group to dizzying heights, and the empire has achieved the status of an Indian MNC, with footprint across the globe. The second distinction between family businesses, and professionally-owned ones is the former's focus on 4Cs, continuity, community, connections, and command.

If one examines the nuances of the 4Cs, loyalty and trust is imperative. This is what broke down in the case of Tata Group, when the directors of Tata Trusts, which own two-thirds of Tata Sons, the holding company, distrusted each other, and showed it publicly. Although the events are well-known, what was buried under the debris thrown by the two tussling factions against each other was the boardroom blunder. In October 2024, after Ratan Tata's demise, the Tata Trusts took the decision to give lifetime directorships. During the battle between Noel Tata's faction (Noel is Ratan's successor), and the one led by Mehli Mistry (who was finally ousted), the trusts forgot about an important change in the laws.

In late 2025, Maharashtra's laws for trusts were changed, and perpetual directorships were allowed only for a quarter of the directors. This implied one lifetime directorship for every four directors. So, when one of the Tata Trusts appointed a second director for perpetual tenure, it was illegal since it had only seven directors, and Noel Tata already had this distinction. Realising the blunder, the trust immediately changed the tenure to three years. But the law gave another trust the leverage to reject the perpetual claim of Mehli Mistry, and throw him out. Some experts point to the coincidence of the timing of the law, which came smack in the middle of the boardroom tussle within the Tata Group.

According to a Supreme Court lawyer, who was quoted in a media article, "This (Maharashtra Ordinance) impedes Tata Trusts' recent resolutions aiming for all trustees to have lifetime tenures, forcing a fundamental reexamination of board compositions, and tenure policy in compliance with the new law. The Government likely intended to curtail concentrated governance, promote periodic renewal, and preempt internal disputes over succession and control in high-profile public trusts." Hence, in the future, this may derail Noel Tata's vision to appoint himself, his children, and loyalists as permanent trustees, and continue to exercise control over Tata Sons, and Tata Group forever. Thus, the law, which allowed Noel to possibly exclude Mehli, will probably curtail his ambitions, and succession planning.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

Laws generally have unintended consequences. Another episode which reflects this paradox relates to the so-called gig workers. The Government announced four new labour codes, and one of them gave social security, safety, and enhanced status to the gig workers, which includes the delivery boys who work for Swiggy, Zomato, Blinkit, and other platforms and apps. Yet, the workforce was unimpressed, and went on strike on December 25, and December 31. It demanded official intervention to secure their incomes, and safety. The 10-minute or 30-minute delivery deadlines, which promoted consumers to do online and app-based shopping, hampers the delivery persons. Their safety is compromised as they rush to be on time. Their incomes are jeopardised as the blame for the delays falls on them even if someone else is responsible for the mess.

As the world becomes faster, and speed becomes the yardstick for efficiency and productivity, rather than quality and safety, new challenges crop up. This is evident in other areas such as real-time supplies of inputs, and finished products. Any delays due to extreme factors like pandemic, or short-term ones like transport issues create bottlenecks that disrupt production and, hence, efficiency, and productivity. Tight logistics is great to save costs. But even a minor crisis costs the company much more as it loses reputation, and credibility, apart from revenues and profits. This was evident when the China-linked supply chains were decimated during the pandemic for several months, and created chaos throughout the world.

Firms, including MNCs opted for China+1 strategy so that there was always a second supplier to make up for the possible disruptions. This creates another challenge. Should the second supplier be as large as the main one? If yes, the buyer had to set up two parallel factories, only one of which would be the main supplier. If not, then there was no point in the second supplier, who could never make up for the loss of supplies from the main one. In addition, there was the cost factor, i.e., investing in two plants, and buying from one at a time. This was a crucial decision for the firms in the US and Europe, where the costs of setting up alternative factories is massive.

New sports order

Bindra panel report offers a chance to clean up

THE Abhinav Bindra-led task force's recommendations for a comprehensive reset of the Indian sports setup now face the ultimate test —what happens next? The Union Sports Minister's assurance that the report would be fully implemented sounds promising, but putting in place an entirely new system of sports governance is a mammoth and complicated task. Set up by the sports ministry, the panel has pointed out systemic deficits. Olympic champion Bindra's preface sets the tone for a transformative blueprint. The report, he says, is both diagnostic and prescriptive, identifying the structural, functional and systemic gaps that currently constrain sports administration. As India nurtures the dream of hosting the Olympics, a broad framework has been provided to address the prerequisite of setting the house in order.

The report points to the lack of a professional cadre of sports administrators, and outdated training opportunities for them. Most athletes are ill-equipped to transition into administrative roles. It has called for the setting up of an autonomous statutory body to train a specialised cadre. IAS and state cadre officers, it says, must be trained in structured sports governance modules given their central role in implementation. Considering the bureaucratic hold in the well-entrenched lobbies running sports federations, the proposal to institutionalise their role and make them accountable offers a fresh perspective. It's worth serious consideration.

The report is candid about what ails the backbone of Indian sports: the Sports Authority of India, National Sports Federations and state departments. Systemic and capacity challenges have been highlighted. The onus is now on the Centre. Having stakeholders on board, laying out more precise reorganisation strategies, and a phased implementation of the recommendations appear to be the pragmatic way forward. A much-required cleanup is hopefully on the cards, though to what extent is an open-ended question.

DECCAN HERALD (P-8), 02 JANUARY 2026

A PROMISE UNDELIVERED

Workers without work: Why skills matter more than ever

Gaps in skill development and a slow shift to productive jobs place India's demographic advantage under strain

CHITRA SARUPARIA

India stands at a decisive moment in its economic journey. With one of the largest working-age populations in the world, the country is often described as enjoying a demographic dividend. Demographics alone do not create prosperity. Jobs do, and skills ultimately determine outcomes. A recent report, *India's Employment Prospects: Pathways to Jobs*, by the National Council of Applied Economic Research, highlights that India's labour-market challenge lies not in a shortage of people, but in the slow movement of workers from low-productivity activities into skilled, higher-value employment.

Over the past decade, pressure on India's labour market has steadily intensified. Between 2017 and 2024, close to 90 million people were added to the working-age population, while employment increased by only about 60 million. This gap of roughly five million jobs each year highlights a growing imbalance between labour supply and demand. Labour force participation remains around half of the working-age population, with women participating at significantly lower rates. These numbers point to a structural weakness in India's growth story, where output expansion has not translated into enough productive employment.

What makes the situation more concerning is the nature of jobs being created. A substantial share of recent employment growth has come from self-employment, particularly in agriculture and informal non-farm activities. For many workers, self-employment reflects economic compulsion rather than entrepreneurial choice. These activities are typically characterised by low capital intensity, limited technology adoption, and weak productivity. They provide subsistence but offer limited scope for income growth or skill accumulation. As a result, the transition from low-skilled to skilled employment has remained slow, constraining both wages and productivity.

This structural pattern has serious implications for India's economic future. Productivity growth is the foundation of sustained expansion, rising incomes, and global competitiveness. High-value sectors such as advanced manufacturing, logistics, healthcare, renewable energy, and modern services depend on workers with technical competence, adaptability, and problem-solving ability. When employment remains concentrated in low-skilled activities, productivity growth weakens, and firms struggle to move up the value chain. India's ambition to sustain high growth and generate quality employment cannot be realised without a decisive improvement in workforce skills.

A central constraint lies in the persistent mismatch between education, skills, and labour market demand. Only a small proportion of the workforce has received formal vocational training, and where training exists, quality and relevance vary widely. Curricula often lag industry requirements, employer engagement in training remains limited, and certification does not consistently signal job readiness. This disconnect creates a paradox: firms report shortages of skilled workers while many educated young people struggle to secure suitable employment.

Digital capability has emerged as another defining fault line. Enterprises that adopt digital tools tend to scale faster, access broader markets, and employ more workers. At the same time, digital literacy remains uneven, particularly among workers in rural and semi-urban areas. Without focused digital skilling efforts, technological change risks reinforcing existing inequalities in employment outcomes rather than broadening opportunity.

Micro, small, and medium enterprises sit at the heart of India's employment challenge. MSMEs account for a substantial share of jobs and serve as the primary entry point for new labour market participants. However, most microenterprises remain confined to subsistence operations, employing only the owner. Constraints such as limited access to formal credit, low technology adoption, and regulatory complexity discourage expansion and hiring. Evidence from policy assessments shows that even modest improvements in access to finance or digital tools significantly increase the likelihood that these enterprises will hire additional workers. Strengthening MSMEs is, therefore, essential not only for job creation but also for improving job quality.

This is where closer collaboration between skill institutions and enterprises becomes critical. Large firms may invest in internal training systems, but MSMEs depend on external ecosystems. Apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and industry-linked curricula can bridge the gap between education and employment. Training models that combine classroom instruction with workplace exposure deliver better employment outcomes than standalone approaches.

Bridging the gap

What is required now is a shift from fragmented interventions to a coherent workforce strategy. Skill development must be anchored in labour-market demand rather than in training targets. Stronger employer participation in curriculum design, assessment, and certification can ensure that skills acquired translate into employability. At the same time, smoother pathways between academic and vocational education are essential to reduce stigma and increase participation in skills-based learning.

Universal access to basic digital skills, combined with targeted training in technology-enabled and platform-based work, can expand employment opportunities across sectors. For women and rural youth, digital access can lower entry barriers by enabling flexible and location-independent work.

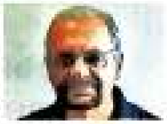
Equally critical is enabling MSMEs to absorb skilled labour. Employment growth at scale will remain constrained unless these firms are supported to move beyond subsistence operations. Easier access to formal credit, simplified compliance requirements, and incentives linked to hiring and skill upgrading can encourage small enterprises to expand their workforces. When combined with apprenticeships and on-the-job training, such measures can strengthen the link between skills, productivity, and wages.

Finally, workforce policy must balance national coherence with flexibility. Labour markets vary widely across India, and skill strategies must align with local economic structures while maintaining national standards for quality and certification. Coordination between states, industry bodies, and training institutions is essential to ensure that skill investments translate into real employment outcomes.

India's demographic window that promises growth and opportunity will narrow over time, and delays carry real economic and social costs. Population advantage alone does not guarantee prosperity. Skills are the bridge between aspiration and opportunity. Building that bridge deliberately and at scale will determine whether India converts its demographic promise into durable economic strength.

(The writer is Director, Centre of Economics, Law and Public Policy, at National Law University, Jodhpur)

Mandating student presence, erasing learning



Shelley Walia

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The Delhi High Court's affirmation that law students may sit for examinations without satisfying rigid attendance thresholds has provoked predictable anxiety among administrators still tethered to an older, bureaucratised conception of education. But the ruling, far from eroding academic seriousness, restores a truth that Indian universities have resisted for decades, a truth that learning cannot be secured through surveillance. Compulsory attendance belongs to a paternalistic era that believed that students must be prodded into intellectual life rather than invited into it. A university worthy of its name should cultivate curiosity, not compliance.

The obsession with a student's presence

I say this not only as a critic of the managerial culture that has consumed our campuses, but as someone who has spent more than 40 years in the classroom. In all those years, I rarely took attendance and almost never prevented a student from taking an examination. I believed, and still believe, that coercion produces neither seriousness nor scholarship. If students do not wish to attend a class, the proper response is not punishment but introspection. A teacher must ask the harder question: what did I fail to offer that could have made this hour indispensable to them? Attendance is not a measure of learning; at best it is a measure of obedience.

The obsession with physical presence, understandably, flourishes where the classroom has been reduced to the perfunctory transfer of "yellowing" notes, the rote delivery of prefabricated knowledge that students could obtain faster and more efficiently through digital means. The ruling disrupts this apathy. It forces institutions of law to confront a truth long evaded, that a classroom that enforces attendance is already pedagogically bankrupt. This ruling of the High Court, I hope, will go a long way in changing the attendance norms across the country in all universities of higher learning.

Paulo Freire saw this with a clarity that remains electrifying. For him, education was never the mechanical depositing of information but a dialogic encounter, an awakening of consciousness through questioning, debate, and the shared labour of inquiry. In his Pedagogy of the Oppressed, a seminal classic, students are not passive vessels receiving knowledge but beings who "name the world" and interpret through thought, and critical imagination.

For instance, my strongest classrooms have always been those born not of obligation but of desire. I remember speaking with Sir Isaiah Berlin, the renowned historian of ideas, over lunch in Oxford many years ago, and he confessed, with characteristic generosity, how rigorously he prepared his notes, outlines, marginalia, a meticulously constructed road map of ideas, jokes, narrative turns, and emotional crescendos. His lectures captivated not by accident but because they were acts of craftsmanship. Students came not out of duty but anticipation.

Indian universities must confront a truth that they evade — a classroom where attendance is enforced is pedagogically bankrupt

I carried that ethic into my own teaching. I never entered a lecture room unprepared, often working late into the night before class. And like Sir Berlin, I believed that the teacher's labour should disappear into the pleasure of learning, an effort made invisible but unmistakable in its effect. I was not alone in thinking this way. Terry Eagleton's lectures overflowed not because he demanded attendance but because his ideas were intensely incendiary. Germaine Greer filled halls because she brought intellectual rebellion to the podium. The Cambridge historian, Professor Sir Christopher Bayly, spoke history as if it were happening in the present tense. Frank Kermode, the influential literary critic, lectured after dinner with a glass of wine in hand, and this atmosphere of informal brilliance made literature feel even more urgent. None of them needed the threat of consequences to fill a classroom. They made absence unthinkable. This is what the Indian university has forgotten.

Classroom experiences

My strongest classrooms have always been those born not of obligation but of desire. I recall an afternoon when I took my students to a ridge overlooking the valley to read Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." I wanted them to encounter the poem not as a museum piece but as a living meditation on memory and perception. The students dispersed under the pines and wild grass where, suddenly, Wordsworth's idea of nature as "nurse", "guide" and "guardian of my heart" felt neither archaic nor maudlin but provocatively contemporary. I asked a single question: What does it mean for nature to educate us? What followed was not conventional interpretation but a collective reflection on how landscape shapes consciousness. The poem seemed to open of its own accord, demanding a point of view, rather than receiving it.

A similar transformation occurred when we carried Thoreau's Walden to the edge of a wooded trail. The students sat on stones and fallen branches, thumbing through a text, interpreting individually and not merely toeing the line. Thoreau's claim that most lives are lived in "quiet desperation" kindled an unexpected debate about our own system, its addiction to metrics, its reduction of intellectual life to attendance charts, its inability to recognise solitude, reflection, or slowness as virtues. Reading outdoors, my classroom dissolved, and what emerged instead was inquiry in its most rudimentary form.

The ruling, perhaps inadvertently, moves us closer to this ideal. In an era where digital resources, Artificial Intelligence tools, and open-access archives place vast knowledge at students' fingertips, the insistence on physical presence feels not only antiquated but also pedagogically unimaginative. The finest universities, Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, MIT and others, do not treat attendance as the measure of commitment. They assume maturity, always trusting a student's intellectual autonomy. Their confidence lies in the quality of their teaching, not in the surveillance of their students.

The sorry state of the Indian university

In this context, the Indian university has been reduced to a mere shell of its former self, suffocated by bureaucratic rigidity and administrative overreach. The Centre's increasing control has transformed campuses into intellectual vassals, where curricula are scrutinised, dissent is silenced, and administrative positions are filled by those who prioritise loyalty over scholarly merit. Within this stifling paradigm, mandatory attendance policies serve as a tool of pedagogical pacification, undermining student autonomy and intellectual curiosity.

A university that prioritises attendance over engagement ultimately betrays its fundamental purpose to nurture critical thinkers who can challenge and transform society. This is why the attendance debate is not administrative but philosophical, asking whether we trust students as thinking beings, or whether we regard them as wards of the institution. Coercion, indeed, is always the refuge of a pedagogy that has lost confidence.

The High Court ruling opens up a transformative possibility for rethinking the very fabric of teaching across higher education. By removing the coercive element of compulsory attendance, educators will be compelled to innovate and reimagine their pedagogical approaches. An empty classroom can be a catalyst for introspection, prompting teachers to craft learning spaces that are intellectually compelling and inherently engaging. Peer dynamics also undergo a paradigmatic shift, where the shame lies not in absence but in being disconnected from a class that has garnered admiration and enthusiasm from other students. This reorients the incentive structure, shifting the locus of motivation from external compulsion to intrinsic curiosity.

Learning, in this context, is reconceptualised as a dynamic and evolving process, marked by its restless and vital nature. It thrives on contradiction, dialogue, imagination and risk-taking. The true university is built on this refusal of stasis, its purpose not to disseminate information but to facilitate discovery. The future of education hinges on recognising and embracing this fundamental distinction.

The ruling therefore, serves as a testament to the inherent tension between freedom and coercion in the pursuit of knowledge. By decoupling attendance from examination eligibility, the Court has highlighted the futility of attempting to legislate intellectual engagement. True learning cannot be mandated. It can only be cultivated through the creation of spaces that foster intellectual curiosity and freedom. The university's future depends on its ability to navigate this fundamental distinction.

VBSA Bill 2025: Transformational Reforms for Excellence in Higher Education

PROFESSOR RAJNISH JAIN

As Bharat prepares to emerge as Viksit Bharat by 2047, higher education must be a major force in preparing the youth of Bharat to be the torch bearers of this developmental journey. Our country has one of the largest education systems in the world. The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA)Bill is a transformational reform to address many of the present challenges faced in educational ecosystem. It provides a pathway for excellence in higher education to re-establish India as the Global Knowledge Superpower (Vishwa Guru). It contains much-needed regulatory architecture for operationalizing the reforms proposed in National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020).

On July 29, 2020, the launch of National Education Policy (NEP 2020)proposed a complete revamp of the entire Indian educational ecosystem to provide futuristic, flexible, holistic, multidisciplinary and quality higher education to all and prepare value-strong youth to stand on their own feet and contribute to national development. VBSA 2025 will create required enabling systems for smooth implementation of NEP 2020 and act as the catalyst in this transformative journey.

India has produced many elite institutions, and their alumni are well-recognised in the country's top organisations as well as the global community. However, we also have a long tail of institutions facing several challenges impacting lakhs of students. VBSA 2025 brings this to practice by tackling present barriers related to over-regulation and multiple regulators, complex accreditation schemes, high variability in academic standards, low Graduate Enrolment Ratio (GER), poor institutional planning and governance, lack of public disclosure, and limited punitive measures for non-compliance, among others.

Presently, the bodies such as the UGC, AICTE and NCTE fulfil multiple roles without requisite firewalls between their regulatory, accreditation and standard-setting functions. Establishment of VBSA is a historical decision in redefining education landscape in Bharat to provide a much-awaited unified regulatory architecture. It was mandated in the NEP 2020 to establish an overarching umbrella body with independent bodies for regulation, accredisation and academic standard-setting.

HIGHLIGHTS OF VBSA BILL 2025

- **Effective Implementation of NEP 2020**for realizing its vision and goals by addressing challenges in present educational systems and processes.
- **Multiple regulators to Unified Regulator** – removing overlapping and complexities for HEIs with 'light but tight' regulation.
- **Greater participation of State representatives and Eminent academicians** for fair representation in the Commission and Councils.
- **Autonomy with Accountability** through facilitative mechanism and public disclosure.
- **Academic Quality** through setting up of standards and support academic frameworks.
- **Institutional planning and good governance for accreditation and ranking.**
- **Internationalisation of higher education** – creating global footprints.

The VBSA, with its three verticals — Viksit Bharat Shiksha Viniyaman Parishad (VBSVP) — Regulatory Council,Viksit Bharat Shiksha Gunvatta Parishad (VBSGP)—Accreditation Council, and Viksit Bharat Shiksha Manak Parishad (VBSMP) — Standards Council, provides a governance structure to implement this.

The structure of the VBSA and its verticals is as follows:

"VBSA, as the overarching body will provide overall strategic directions and roadmap for reforms in teaching, learning, research, governance, internationalization etc. It will also advise and coordinate with different councils, central government, state government and other bodies for effective implementation of NEP 2020. At one end it will facilitate autonomy with accountability, on the other it would monitor and regulate the adherence to defined standards for quality education. "VBSVP, the Regulatory Council, will set the institutional standards, frame regulations, provide handholding, and ensure compliances by the HEIs with complete transparency through public disclosures. It will provide a technology enabled single window for higher, technical and teacher education and remove the duplication or overlapping of processes in dealing with multiple regulators.

"VBSGP, the Accreditation Council, will act as meta-accrediting body, coordinating and facilitating accreditation of the HEIs. It will try to ensure adherence to benchmarks/standards related to quality academic frameworks, outcomes, resources, governance, infrastructure, facilities and amenities etc. for ensuring quality higher education. "VBSMP, the Standards Council, will primarily be responsible for coordination and determination of academic benchmarks for excellence in teaching, learning, research and innovation. It will guide the HEIs in developing quality academic frameworks, outcome-based curriculum, innovative pedagogies, assessment methods, integration of Bhartiya Knowledge Systems and other related aspects.

Establishment of VBSA will be a defining moment in higher education for ushering a new era of excellence in academics, governance, regulation and nation building. It is expected to bring much awaited benefits to all the stakeholders — mainly students, teachers, and higher educational institutions - by realising the goals of NEP 2020. Institutions will no longer face challenges in dealing with multiple regulators and complex processes. The VBSA will emerge as an integrated, stable, and tech-enabled regulatory system with desired levels of effectiveness, efficiency and transparency to evolve our nation as a global knowledge leader — Vibrant, Atmanirbhar and Viksit Bharat.

Former Secretary, University Grants Commission, New Delhi.

DECCAN HERALD (P-6), 05 JANUARY 2026

Don't ruin futures of kids, teachers

For more than a decade, Karnataka has made the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) a mandatory gateway to government school jobs, holding out the promise of quality teaching and merit-based recruitment. Today, that promise rings hollow. Nearly 4.5 lakh candidates have cleared the test since 2014–15, yet only 28,277 teachers have been recruited. Thousands of qualified candidates now find themselves stranded, staring at the prospect of becoming age-barred. The irony is striking: the Department of School Education and Literacy has the highest number of vacancies in the state government, at 79,694 posts. A responsible government would treat this as an emergency, given the direct impact on classrooms and learning outcomes. Instead, recruitment has been paralysed.

The government's primary defence is the unresolved issue of internal reservation within the Scheduled Castes. Since October 2024, recruitment was effectively frozen while the state awaited the recommendations of the Justice H N Nagamohan Das Commission; it later attempted to implement a sub-classification formula. Legal challenges followed swiftly. Interim orders of the High Court, and broader Constitutional questions about breaching the 50% reservation cap laid down in the Indra Sawhney judgment, have resulted in a prolonged stalemate. While the Karnataka Scheduled Castes (Sub-classification) Bill, 2025, has been passed, appointments remain on hold pending the court's final verdict. This legal and policy tangle may explain the delay, but it does not justify the human cost. For lakhs of eligible candidates, this prolonged uncertainty has meant crushed hopes and wasted years. They appeared for the TET, assuming timely recruitment would follow. Instead, the test has become, as many ruefully put it, a burden rather than a bridge to employment. If the government cannot recruit, it should at least suspend the test until these issues are resolved.

> **School appointments are on hold because of an administrative stalemate**

Compounding the problem is the state's decision to plug the gap by hiring over 50,000 guest or temporary teachers. Experience from other departments shows that temporary appointees eventually demand regularisation, leading to an entirely new problem for the government to resolve. More importantly, frequent teacher turnover undermines continuity and adversely affects learning outcomes in government schools that cater to the most vulnerable children. A pragmatic approach would be to set aside the internal reservation issue for the School Education and Literacy Department for the present and proceed with recruitment under the earlier policy. Internal reservations can be implemented prospectively to fill vacancies arising in future. To hold an entire generation of qualified teachers and students hostage to an unresolved legal battle is neither just nor sensible. When such paralysis afflicts the education system, it amounts to a theft from the future.

DECCAN HERALD (P-7), 05 JANUARY 2026

Tech giants racing to embed AI in schools around the globe

More governments are rolling out chatbots in schools. Some experts warn the tools could erode teaching and learning

NATASHA SINGER

THE NEW YORK TIMES

In early November, Microsoft said it would supply artificial intelligence tools and training to more than 200,000 students and educators in the United Arab Emirates.

Days later, a financial services company in Kazakhstan announced an agreement with OpenAI to provide ChatGPT Edu, a service for schools and universities, for 165,000 educators in Kazakhstan.

Last month, xAI, Elon Musk's AI company, announced an even bigger project with El Salvador: developing an AI tutoring system, using the company's Grok chatbot, for more than one million students in thousands of schools there.

Fuelled partly by American tech companies, governments around the globe are racing to deploy generative AI systems and training in schools and universities.

Some US tech leaders say AI chatbots — which can generate humanlike emails, create class quizzes, analyse data and produce computer code — can be a boon for learning. The tools, they argue, can save teachers time, customise student learning and help prepare young people for an "AI-driven" economy.

But the rapid spread of the new AI products could also pose risks to young people's development and well-being, some children's and health groups warn.

A recent study from Microsoft and Carnegie Mellon University found that popular AI chatbots may diminish critical thinking. AI bots can produce authoritative-sounding errors and misinformation, and some teachers are grappling with widespread AI-assisted student cheating.

Silicon Valley for years has pushed tech tools like laptops and learning apps into classrooms, with promises of improving education access and revolutionising learning.

Still, a global effort to expand school computer access — a programme known as "One Laptop per Child" — did not improve students' cognitive skills or academic outcomes, according to studies by professors and economists of hundreds of schools in Peru. Now, as some tech boosters make similar education access and fairness arguments for AI, children's agencies like UNICEF are urging caution and calling for more guidance for schools.

"With One Laptop per Child, the fallouts included wasted expenditure and poor learning outcomes," Steven Vosloo, a digital policy specialist at UNICEF, wrote in a recent post. "Unguided use of AI systems may actively de-skill students and teachers."

Education systems across the globe are increasingly working with tech companies on AI tools and training programs.

In the United States, where states and school districts typically decide what to teach, some prominent school systems recently introduced popular chatbots for teaching and learning. In Florida alone, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the nation's third-largest school system, rolled out Google's Gemini chatbot for more than 100,000 high school students. And Broward County Public Schools, the nation's sixth-biggest school district, introduced Microsoft's Copilot chatbot for thousands of teachers and staff members.

Outside the United States, Microsoft in June announced a partnership with the Ministry of Education in Thailand to provide free online AI skills lessons for hundreds of thousands of students. Several months later, Microsoft said it would also provide AI training for 150,000 teachers in Thailand. OpenAI has pledged to make ChatGPT available to teachers in government schools across India.

The Baltic nation of Estonia is trying a different approach, with a broad new national AI education initiative called "AI Leap."

The programme was prompted partly by a recent poll showing that more than 90% of the nation's high-schoolers were already using popular chatbots like ChatGPT for schoolwork, leading to worries that some students were beginning to delegate school assignments to AI.

Estonia then pressed US tech giants to adapt their AI to local educational needs and priorities. Researchers at the University of Tartu worked with OpenAI to modify the company's Estonian-language service for schools so it would respond to students' queries with questions rather than produce direct answers.

Introduced this school year, the "AI Leap" programme aims to teach educators and students about the uses, limits, biases and risks of AI tools. In its pilot phase, teachers in Estonia received training on OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Gemini chatbots.

"It's critical AI literacy," said Ivo Visak, the chief executive of the AI Leap Foundation, an Estonian nonprofit that is helping to manage the national education programme. "It's having a very clear understanding that these tools can be useful — but at the same time these tools can do a lot of harm."

Estonia also recently held a national training day for students in some high schools. Some of those students are now using the bots for tasks like generating questions to help them prepare for school tests, Visak said.

"If these companies would put their effort not only in pushing AI products, but also doing the products together with the educational systems of the world, then some of these products could be really useful," Visak added.

This school year, Iceland started its own national AI pilot in schools. Now several hundred teachers across the country are experimenting with Google's Gemini chatbot or Anthropic's Claude for tasks like lesson planning, as they aim to find helpful uses and to pinpoint drawbacks.

Researchers at the University of Iceland will then study how educators used the chatbots.

Students won't use the chatbots for now, partly out of concern that relying on classroom bots could diminish important elements of teaching and learning.

"If you are using less of your brain power or critical thinking — or whatever makes us more human — is is definitely not what we want," said Thordis Sigurdardottir, the director of Iceland's Directorate of Education and School Services.

Tinna Arnardottir and Frida Gylfadottir, two teachers participating in the pilot at a high school outside Reykjavik, say the AI tools have helped them create engaging lessons more quickly.

Arnardottir, a business and entrepreneurship teacher, recently used Claude to make a career exploration game to help her students figure out whether they were more suited to jobs in sales, marketing or management. Gylfadottir, who teaches English, said she had uploaded some vocabulary lists and then used the chatbot to help create exercises for her students.

"I have fill-in-the-blank word games, matching word games and speed challenge games," Gylfadottir said. "So before they take the exam, I feel like they are better prepared."

Gylfadottir added that she was concerned about chatbots producing misinformation, so she vetted the AI-created games and lessons for accuracy before asking her students to try them. Gylfadottir and Arnardottir said they also worried that some students might already be growing dependent on — or overly trusting of — AI tools outside school.

That has made the Icelandic teachers all the more determined, they said, to help students learn to critically assess and use chatbots.

"They are trusting AI blindly," Arnardottir said. "They are maybe losing motivation to do the hard work of learning, but we have to teach them how to learn with AI."

Teachers currently have few rigorous studies to guide generative AI use in schools. Researchers are just beginning to follow the long-term effects of AI chatbots on teenagers and schoolchildren.

"Lots of institutions are trying AI," said Drew Bent, the education lead at Anthropic. "We're at a point now where we need to make sure that these things are backed by outcomes and figure out what's working and what's not working."

The New York Times

SW| 5|7

A smooth transition

As many students prepare to enter the workforce in 2026, here are some tips to close the readiness gap

Ponmythili Muralidharan

In a few months, thousands of final-year students across India will step out of their campuses and into the workplace. Some may already have their placement offers, and many more will receive theirs soon; a moment filled with relief, pride, and the feeling that life is finally moving forward.

Ari and Sri felt the same. After months of interviews, preparation and uncertainty, their offers arrived like a long-awaited victory. But what they did in the days between receiving the offer and joining the organisation shaped everything that followed.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Different ways

Ari moved into the familiar post-offer comfort zone that many students slip into. The interviews were over, the goal had been achieved and the pressure had eased. Ari enjoyed the praise and believed that learning would begin after joining. For many students, the offer letter feels like a finish line.

Sri also celebrated, but in a different way. To him, the offer letter felt like a doorway, not the destination. He spent time reading up on the organisation, understanding its products and services, refreshing important concepts, and completing a short online course related to the role. He reached out politely to a future colleague. Only a few students do this but, when they do, the transition becomes smoother and the first week feels far less overwhelming.

Across organisations, seniors often wonder how new entrants will adapt. This does not come from judgment. It is a mix of curiosity and concern because the workplace they entered years ago looked very different from the one that youngsters today will enter. In my leadership sessions, I hear something consistent from senior managers. They admire Gen Z's intelligence, courage and speed. What they worry about is not whether they can do the job. They wonder whether they will settle in well, learn steadily, and show consistency.

Satya Nadella captures the essence of this when he talks about the value of being a learner. His reminder that the learn-it-all will always outperform the know-it-all is especially relevant to those preparing for their first job. Indra Nooyi often says that the first step to improving an organisation is improving ourselves.

Consistent behaviours

Organisations do not expect mastery on the first day. They look for sincerity, humility, and a willingness to understand how things work. For young professionals, that improvement can begin before Day One. Research from McKinsey in 2023 also shows that even a little preparation before joining helps new employees learn faster, adapt better, and experience less stress in their initial weeks.

Students today constantly hear about productivity hacks, communication styles, and success habits. But early success comes from certain consistent behaviours: listening fully, respecting time, asking thoughtful questions, preparing before meetings, and completing small tasks with care. These habits quietly build trust and create a strong foundation for growth.

Those who begin like Sri often say that they settled in faster, understood the team sooner, felt more confident in meetings, and handled the early days with less stress. Those who begin like Ari are not wrong. They just take a little longer to find their rhythm. The difference is not about talent or capability. It is about the small choices made in the quiet days before joining.

Beginning like Sri does not require intense study. It requires small, meaningful steps. Reading about the organisation, refreshing one important skill, learning the basics of a new tool, completing a short certification, and setting a simple routine can make a young professional feel grounded and ready.

As you prepare to enter your first job, it helps to remember that the offer letter is not the end of the journey. It is the beginning. The days before joining are a chance to build clarity, understand the workplace and prepare your mind to grow. You do not need to prove anything on your first day. Begin quietly and steadily. Let your early actions show that you value the opportunity, you are ready to learn, and you are prepared to begin well. The future that unfolds will be shaped by how you choose to step into it.

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PIONEER (P-8), 06 JANUARY 2026

Teachers: The unsung sculptors shaping our society

SAKSHI SETHI

2ND OPINION
THE PIONEER

As the New Year tiptoes in with its ritualistic optimism, glittering resolutions and recycled affirmations about growth and transformation, it is an opportune moment to acknowledge a profession that has been transforming society long before hashtags made it fashionable. Teachers are, after all, the sculptors of society — though not the romanticised kind chiselling masterpieces in sunlit studios. Their workshop is a crowded classroom, their tools are patience and persistence, and their raw material is a volatile mix of curiosity, confusion, defiance, brilliance and inherited prejudice. They are expected to mould the future while standing knee-deep in systemic contradictions, armed with idealism but short on institutional backing.

It is universally agreed, at least in theory, that teachers shape the destiny of nations. This belief is proclaimed in speeches, policy documents and ceremonial celebrations. Yet, once the applause fades, the same society turns conveniently forgetful. Teachers are instructed to inspire innovation but discouraged from questioning outdated curricula. They are urged to cultivate critical thinking but warned against unsettling established narratives. They are told to personalise learning while being handed overcrowded classrooms and rigid timelines. Apparently, sculpting excellence is easy - as long as it fits neatly into predefined moulds.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

Modern teachers are also expected to be marvels of multitasking efficiency. They must alternate between educator, counsellor, administrator, technologist, motivator, evaluator and, occasionally, crisis manager. They are expected to nurture emotional intelligence while navigating their own burnout in silence. When a child falters, teaching methods are interrogated. When a child excels, credit is distributed among parenting styles, private tutoring and inspirational influencers. Teachers, it seems, are valued as background characters in success stories and foreground suspects in narratives of failure.

Accountability flows generously in one direction. Teachers are observed, assessed, retrained and audited with admirable regularity. Meanwhile, systemic inefficiencies enjoy immunity from scrutiny. Policies are drafted far from classrooms; reforms are announced without groundwork, and implementation gaps are treated as minor inconveniences. Teachers are expected to adapt overnight, smiling through workshops steeped in jargon and detached optimism. If the sculpture cracks, the sculptor is blamed - never the flawed marble or unstable pedestal.

Yet teachers persist with a stubborn commitment. They arrive each day carrying not just lesson plans, but hope. They notice the silent child shrinking into invisibility, the restless mind seeking purpose, the confident voice masking insecurity. They teach beyond academic content; they model resilience and quietly challenge inherited biases. In an age obsessed with instant gratification, teachers practise the radical act of patience.

As society enters another year of promises, it is time to reassess how we treat those entrusted with our collective future. Respect cannot remain performative and expectations cannot remain unrealistic. Teachers do not seek sainthood or sympathy; they seek trust, autonomy and systems that enable meaningful education. Ultimately, the quality of a society can often be traced back to its classrooms. When classrooms thrive, communities flourish, and nations inherit a deeper, lasting resilience for generations ahead.

The writer is an educator and a counsellor

TELEGRAPH (P-10), 06 JANUARY 2026

2025 was the year the classroom opened up to the world

Tangible hope

SOMAK RAYCHAUDHURY

This is a truly fascinating time to be an educator, particularly in India.

During the past year, in India, the first batch of universities that adopted the new, four-year undergraduate programme under the National Education Policy 2020 scheme (I belong to one such university) welcomed its first-ever fourth year. India continued a string of rapid strides in technological development in the international arena. And worldwide, large language model-driven AI tools challenged every aspect of education as we know it, with widespread disruption in Indian institutions at all levels.

Unusually for Indian university education, this final year has the option of an original research thesis. This has been a practice that has been followed at a handful of elite institutions such as IITs and IISERs for a while now, but now, for the first time, all universities in the country adopting the NEP are asked to implement this option.

The most immediate shift of 2025 was the beginning of the dust settling on the wide range of issues that fall under the umbrella of 'Artificial Intelligence'. For two years, academia oscillated between impetuously banning Generative AI and blindly embracing it. This year, we drifted to the middle path, that of the inevitable integration. The conversation moved from the doom and gloom of 'Will AI replace us?' to accepting the exploration of 'How is AI useful for us?'

For the academic cohort of 2025, the change has been nothing short of revolutionary. We have watched undergraduates routinely use personalised AI tutors to bridge gaps in their foundational knowledge that might previously have caused them to drop out of STEM courses. We have seen them generate routine code to create visualisation and graphics, or summarise vast bibliographies, that would otherwise take far too long to be useful in semester assignments. Slowly but inexorably, AI has shown the capacity for pushing students up the cognitive ladder. In the coming years, they will no longer be graded on the capacity for retrieving information, but on curation, critique, debate and interpretation.

For teachers, the initial apprehension has broken conventional shackles, leaning towards pragmatism. They are discovering that the administrative burden that plagues academia, namely the unrelenting grading of standard assessments, scheduling, the rote paperwork, compilation of course materials — all of these can be offloaded to intelligent systems. In the past year, one has realised that this freed-up faculty time can be used for the one thing AI cannot simulate — personal mentorship. The lecture hall can now permanently become a 'flipped classroom'. Students can consume the content (often AI-assisted) before class, and the classroom can become a theatre of discussion, debate, ethical reasoning, and collaborative problem-solving. We can now teach students to drive these powerful engines, not merely be the passengers.

At the same time, in keeping with the changes ushered in by the NEP 2020, Indian higher education is poised for perhaps the most significant structural reform in decades. The move to replace the University Grants Commission, All India Council for Technical Education and the National Council for Teacher Education under a single regulatory body, the Higher Education Commission of India, which is now dealt with under the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill 2025.

This is much more than an administrative shuffle — the Bill takes education funding away from the control of the regulator and proposes a commission with a radically different structure. For too long, Indian education was bisected into 'technical' and 'general' streams, a binary that made little sense in a world where a biologist needs coding skills and an engineer needs ethics. The unified regulator promises to dissolve these artificial boundaries. By streamlining the approval processes and focusing on light regulation, one anticipates a significant reduction in the compliance burden that often stifles innovation.

For a university administrator, the prospect could be liberating. It implies a shift from inspection-based governance to disclosure-based governance. In 2026, this should translate into faster curriculum updates, easier collaboration between IITs and liberal arts universities, and a more fluid movement of credits. One hopes that the Academic Bank of Credits will truly come into its own under this unified umbrella, allowing students to weave together degrees that are as unique as their own aspirations.

As for students, before they enter universities, there are many key changes that are emerging. For example, the Central Board of Secondary Education has decided to hold two rounds of the Class X exams — this will start in 2026. Several state boards have already implemented a similar scheme, notably West Bengal in its higher secondary curriculum. This may radically change the way university admissions are carried out in the future and the kind of subjects the students take up after school.

2025 was also the year the world came to India, and India went to the world with renewed confidence. The regulations allowing top-tier foreign universities to set up campuses on Indian soil are beginning to bear fruit, laying the seeds for an ecosystem of competition and collaboration. This is also about the internationalisation of Indian pedagogy as university curricula look far and wide to make their courses compatible with those elsewhere in the world.

At Ashoka, and across the peer group of forward-looking institutions, we are seeing a surge in the notion of internationalisation at home. A student in Sonipat can now work in real time on a climate change project with a peer in Melbourne and another in Singapore. Furthermore, we are increasingly becoming a destination for the Global South. Students from Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East are looking to India for high-quality, affordable education that is culturally intelligible to them. 2026 will likely see this trend accelerate, turning our campuses into true melting pots of global culture, vital for developing the global citizenship envisaged by the NEP.

Perhaps the most intangible yet profound shift in 2025 came not from the classroom but from the stars as the first Indian, modern-day astronaut visited the International Space Station *via* Axiom-4. When Shubhanshu Shukla docked with the ISS, it did something to the psychology of the Indian student. For decades, cutting-edge research was something that happened elsewhere. Today, our students see Indian scientists and pilots at the frontier of human exploration. This has a cascading effect on higher education. We are seeing a marked increase in interest in pure sciences, astrophysics, and aerospace engineering, not just as career paths but as vocations of national pride.

This achievement has validated the 'research mindset' we have been trying to cultivate. It proves to a 19-year-old in a chemistry lab that his/her work is part of a larger, successful, scientific ecosystem. It bridges the gap between the abstract theory of the textbook and the visceral reality of technological prowess. As we move into 2026, universities must capitalise on this enthusiasm by fostering more 'mission-mode' research, linking student projects to national goals in space, defence, and sustainability.

As we look to the future, the contours of 2026 are clear. It will be a year of consolidation. The regulatory frameworks are falling into place; the technology is maturing; the global connections are active. We must ensure that the benefits of this high-tech, flexible, and globalised education system are based on the principles of equity, are not restricted to islands of excellence but permeate the vast enclave of colleges and universities across the nation.

Education is, ultimately, an act of hope. It is a belief that the future can be better than the past. At the start of 2026, buoyed by the integration of AI, the promise of better opportunities and more efficient governance of higher education, and the inspiration of our astronauts, that hope feels more tangible than ever. We are building a system where an Indian student can study the classics, code an algorithm, and dream of Mars, all within the same semester. That is a future worth working for.

Somak Raychaudhury is Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Physics, Ashoka University, Sonipat, Haryana. All opinions are personal

उच्च शिक्षा की समस्याओं का समाधान

केवल डिग्री हासिल कर लेने को शिक्षा नहीं कह सकते। शिक्षा वह शक्ति है, जो जीवन को दिशा देती है। सफल शिक्षा एक व्यक्ति के सोचने का तरीका बदल सकती है, उसे जीवन उद्देश्य दे सकती है और अपने भीतर छिपी संभावनाएं पहचानने का अवसर दे सकती है। खासतौर पर उच्च शिक्षा वह पड़ाव है, जहां युवा अपनी रुचियों और क्षमताओं को पहचानते हैं और भविष्य की राह खोजने की शुरुआत करते हैं। जहां एक तरफ स्कूली शिक्षा हमें हमारे आसपास की दुनिया का ज्ञान देती है, वहीं उच्च शिक्षा छात्रों को अपने विकल्प जानने की आजादी देती है। उच्च शिक्षा समय है अलग-अलग विषयों और क्षेत्रों को समझने और यह तय करने का कि उन्हें जीवन में क्या करना है। यह प्रक्रिया सरल नहीं, जटिल होती है। एक छात्र के आजादी से अपनी राह चुन सकने के पीछे एक मजबूत संस्थान, संसाधन और निरंतर प्रयास की आवश्यकता होती है।

भारत जैसे विशाल और विविध देश में संस्थान निर्माण एक बहुत बड़ी चुनौती है। आज देश की लगभग 65 प्रतिशत आबादी की उम्र 35 वर्ष से कम है। हर साल लाखों छात्र स्कूलों से निकलकर उच्च शिक्षा की ओर रुख करते हैं, लेकिन संस्थानों में इतनी सीटें ही नहीं कि सबको दाखिला मिल सके। नतीजतन प्रतिस्पर्धा और तेज होती जा रही है और परीक्षाएं और ज्यादा मानकीकृत हो रही हैं। इस सबके साथ-साथ व्यवस्था अक्सर प्रशासनिक सुविधा की सहूलियत देखती है। इस गहन माहौल में हर छात्र की अलग पहचान और क्षमता पर ध्यान दे पाना असंभव हो जाता है। आज भारत में लगभग 70,018 उच्च शिक्षा संस्थान हैं। भले ही यह उत्साहजनक लगे, लेकिन देश की जरूरतों के मुकाबले अभी भी पर्याप्त नहीं। युवावर्ग अब भी बड़ी संख्या में गुणवत्तापूर्ण उच्च शिक्षा खोज रहा है। आपूर्ति की कमी का असर छात्र के इस निर्णय पर पड़ता है कि वह कहां पढ़े। सख्त आव्रजन नीतियों के बाद भी भारतीय छात्र बड़ी संख्या में विदेश पढ़ने जा रहे हैं। कनाडा, अमेरिका और ब्रिटेन उनके प्रमुख गंतव्य हैं। हालांकि अब फ्रांस, आयरलैंड और इटली भी तेजी से छात्रों में लोकप्रिय हो रहे हैं। जनवरी 2025 तक के आंकड़ों के अनुसार 12 लाख से अधिक भारतीय छात्र विदेश में पढ़ रहे थे। इस आंकड़े से घरेलू स्तर पर आवश्यकता और सीमित विकल्प साफ उजागर होते हैं। इन चुनौतियों के बीच से ही बड़े अवसर भी उत्पन्न होते हैं।

प्रमथ राज सिन्हा

> **नए पाठ्यक्रम, बेहतर तकनीक और उद्योग से पढ़ाई को जोड़कर भारतीय संस्थान खुद को मजबूत बना सकते हैं**

समय की आवश्यकता के अनुरूप बने शिक्षा ● फाइल

तेजी से बदलती दुनिया में पहला अवसर नवाचार में निहित है। भारत में हमें अधिक बहुविषयक कार्यक्रमों की आवश्यकता है। हमें ऐसे कार्यक्रमों के बारे में सोचना होगा, जो तकनीक, पर्यावरण, सूचना और रचनात्मक क्षेत्रों से जुड़े हों। मैनेजमेंट, कानून और मेडिकल जैसे पारंपरिक कोर्स को भी नए ढंग से देखना होगा। नए पाठ्यक्रम, बेहतर तकनीक और उद्योग से पढ़ाई को जोड़ कर भारतीय संस्थान खुद को वैश्विक स्तर पर मजबूत बना सकते हैं। दूसरा बड़ा अवसर है, डिजिटल शिक्षा। हाइब्रिड माडल प्रभावी हो सकते हैं, जिन्हें आनलाइन और आफलाइन पढ़ाई को मिलाकर बनाया गया हो। अगर सही ढंग से लागू किए जाएं तो ये बड़े पैमाने पर लाभकारी शिक्षा का साधन बन सकते हैं। भारत जैसे विशाल और विविध देश में, जहां छात्र दूरदराज के इलाकों में रहते हैं, डिजिटल शिक्षा एक असरदार समाधान प्रस्तुत करती है। अपने सशक्त डिजिटल ढांचे की सहायता से भारत विश्व के लिए एक उदाहरण स्थापित कर सकता है, और उसे ऐसा करना भी चाहिए। नीतिगत स्तर पर आज सकारात्मक बदलाव दिख रहे हैं। तीन दशक बाद राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति ने शिक्षा व्यवस्था में बड़े सुधारों का बीड़ा उठाया है। बहुविषयक पढ़ाई, विषयों में लचीलापन और संस्थानों की स्वायत्तता जैसे विचारों पर अब जोर दिया जा रहा है। दुनिया भर के शिक्षा क्षेत्र के पूर्व अनुभव बताते हैं कि जब-जब सरकारें शोध, नवाचार और तकनीक को शिक्षा का केंद्र बनाती हैं, तब-तब शिक्षा की गुणवत्ता में सुधार होता है। तीसरा अहम पहलू है, प्रतिभा निर्माण। उच्च शिक्षा संस्थान का उद्देश्य केवल रुखा ज्ञान देना नहीं, बल्कि छात्रों के सोच के दायरे को विस्तार देना, कौशल को बढ़ाना और छात्रों को पेशेवर समझ देना भी है। सार्थक शिक्षा देश को ऐसा मानव संसाधन देती है, जो न सिर्फ घरेलू जरूरतों को पूरा करने क्षमता रखता है, बल्कि वैश्विक स्तर पर भी आत्मविश्वास के साथ अपना योगदान दे सकता है।

अगर हम पीछे मुड़ कर देखेंगे तो पाएंगे कि उच्च शिक्षा की परंपरा हमारी सबसे बड़ी ताकत रही है। अपने-अपने समय में तक्षशिला, नालंदा और विक्रमशिला जैसे प्राचीन शिक्षा केंद्र विश्व भर से विद्वानों को आकर्षित करते रहे। इन सभी ने जिज्ञासा एवं शोध को शिक्षा का मूल सिद्धांत बनाया। आज भले ही समय और परिस्थितियां बदल गई हों, लेकिन हमारा लक्ष्य और भी स्पष्ट है। अगर हमें 2035 तक सकल नामांकन का अनुपात 50 प्रतिशत तक पहुंचाना है, उच्च शिक्षा के क्षेत्र में अंतरराष्ट्रीय सहयोग बढ़ाना है और केवल डिग्री पर केंद्रित न रह कर सीखने की सामर्थ्य को प्रोत्साहित करना है तो संस्थान निर्माण को राष्ट्रीय प्राथमिकता बनाना होगा। हमारे आज के प्रयास से भारत के शिक्षा संस्थान न केवल युवा पीढ़ी की महत्वाकांक्षाओं को सही दिशा दे सकेंगे, बल्कि यही युवा आगे चलकर विकसित भारत 2047 की नींव भी मजबूत करेंगे।

(लेखक अशोका युनिवर्सिटी के चेयरपर्सन, बोर्ड आफ ट्रस्टी हैं)

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DECCAN HERALD (P-7), 06 JANUARY 2026

Can merging government schools reverse dwindling enrolment?

KATHYAYINI CHAMARAJ

Despite opposition, the Karnataka government has issued orders to start 700 government schools across the State as 'KPS Magnet Schools' by upgrading selected government schools and merging schools located within a 5-6-kilometre radius into them. The stated aim is to address the problem of small schools with dwindling enrolment and to provide well-equipped schools offering education from the primary level up to PUC in a single location. Activists, however, fear that this will lead to the closure of 7,000 government schools and, in the long run, to the closure of 37,000 schools, as indicated in the government notification.

While few would dispute the need for better-equipped schools, there is strong opposition from the public and educationists to the proposed mergers. The government has promised to provide transportation, but parents remain unconvinced, as several villages lack proper roads. They fear that children will be forced to walk long distances, with girls being particularly affected.

The government's solution of merging schools appears to address the symptoms rather than the root causes of the problem. If parents are increasingly choosing to send their children to private schools, the government must introspect on the reasons behind this shift. One of the reasons given is that parents are choosing English-medium education. But is that the only reason?

Since 2018, nearly 3,000 government schools have been closed, while about 3,500 private schools have been granted permission in recent years. As one activist points out, where once 500 students attended the lone government-run village school, today only 37 remain, as eight private schools have come up in the same village. How did so many private schools mushroom? According to experts, the reason is that political leaders, who run private schools, are ruling the roost in the government.

Compounding this is the problem of vacancies of regular government teachers, which is 79,000, with just 51,000 guest teachers filling the gap. This is despite the ruling party's manifesto before the 2023 elections promising to fill all government vacancies within the first year.

As many as 20% of schools function with a single teacher, and 21.2% of children are enrolled in such schools. Often, one teacher is required to handle more than 30 children across Classes 1 to 8, inevitably leading to poor learning outcomes. This is in clear violation of the Right to Education Act, which mandates at least two teachers for a lower primary school with enrolment of up to 60 students.

The poor infrastructure of schools is the next impediment. Only 22% of schools in Karnataka are fulfilling the 13 facilities required under the RTE Act. The department's website says that 2,038 schools have no boys' toilet, 701 lack a girls' toilet, 16,810 lack playgrounds, and 4,756 lack compound walls. Is it any wonder if parents are turning away from such schools?

In the long-pending suo motu PIL (WP 23708/2013) in the High Court of Karnataka, the government has been asked to provide the budgets and timeframes required to fulfil all RTE norms in all schools. In its response, the government has stated, "Proposals are made every year based on the available funds allocated. Hence, the total requirement of infrastructure is not considered during the budget proposals, and "if sufficient funds are allocated, the entire infrastructure ... can be fulfilled by the next 5 to 10 years." This, when all RTE norms were supposed to be fulfilled by 2015, and it is now 10 years after that deadline.

This is the result because the state's budget for education has been consistently less than the national average around 11.5% this year when the national average is 15%. This, from a well-developed state with the highest per capita income in the country.

While the State Education Policy is dormant, a report submitted in 2017 on how to rejuvenate government schools, placed in the Assembly by the CM with the promise to implement it, has been forgotten.

At a recent discussion organised by the All India School Education Committee (AISEC), protesters against the merging of schools said that their village school is a cultural icon of the village, and all villagers participate in its cultural activities, which builds solidarity among them. A distinguished thinker said, "Had I not got free education in a government school, I would have ended up just grazing cows or sheep in the village." The feeling was that those who study only in English lose their cultural roots, while education in the local language in a local school enhances their rootedness in local culture and promotes critical thinking on societal issues. That the government school is a vehicle for building an inclusive society and needs to be preserved was the dominant opinion.

The indifference towards education as a government duty by those in power is the cause of the government school system losing its importance and credibility, was the overarching feeling. Allowing full-scale privatisation of a public good such as the right to education cannot be the hallmark of a welfare state. So, should the government be focusing on removing the current deficiencies in the government school system before deciding that merging the schools is the only answer?

(The writer is the Executive Trustee of CIVIC Bangalore)

India's academic openness under strain

T.T. Sreekumar

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The recent denial of entry to noted Hindi scholar Francesca Orsini from the U.K., despite holding a valid visa, has brought to light the need for a more balanced and thoughtful approach to understanding and assessing the role of critical academic engagement, and to recognising the broader value of scholarly exchange both within and beyond India.

It seems that a rather difficult situation is emerging for international scholars who have critically engaged with Indian society, politics, or history. Entering on a tourist visa and participating in academic events can expose them to procedural complications related to visa regulations, while applying for an academic visa may itself become challenging in light of their critical scholarly work.

The long-term consequence of this paradox is clear: independent and critical voices from abroad will gradually be silenced, rendered rare, and eventually made invisible in India's academic landscape. This situation raises a fundamental question about the spirit of inclusiveness in Indian academia. Universities and research institutions have historically thrived on exchange, critique, and intellectual diversity. The presence of global scholars – sometimes sharply critical, sometimes sympathetic – has enriched debates, introduced new frameworks, and helped Indian academics situate their work in global conversations.

Sign of vitality

In a democracy, criticism is not a threat; it is a sign of vitality. From anthropologists studying caste to historians revisiting colonial legacies and economists questioning policy orthodoxy, these critical engagements in Indian academia have helped refine national self-understanding. India's reputation as a vibrant democracy has never been undermined by such scholarship. On the contrary, it has been strengthened by the openness with which these voices were received and debated. It is important to recall that no government in India has ever fallen because of academic criticism. Universities and research programmes across the country have long demonstrated maturity in accommodating a spectrum of ideas, including those critical of state policies. Research funding agencies such as the UGC, ICSSR, ICHR, and DST have historically supported projects examining sensitive social and political questions without censorship or hostility.

> India, which has always projected itself as a civilisation rooted in dialogue, *samvad*, must not turn its back on this tradition

Intellectual loss

The danger today is not only administrative. When international scholars with a critical perspective grow hesitant to apply for visas, when Indian researchers hesitate to engage with interrogative frameworks, and when conferences avoid certain topics to ensure permissions, academic life itself becomes impoverished. The loss is not merely institutional but intellectual and moral. Nations that have prized only conformity have rarely advanced in the long run, either in knowledge or in innovation. India, which has always projected itself as a civilisation rooted in dialogue, *samvad*, must not turn its back on this tradition.

Furthermore, academic collaboration today operates in a deeply interconnected global environment. Research in areas such as digital culture, climate change, migration, artificial intelligence, and postcolonial theory cannot be meaningfully pursued in isolation. When certain scholars are denied access, entire research networks fragment. Students lose opportunities to interact with international peers; projects lose comparative depth; and the overall quality of scholarship declines. The effect is cumulative, slow but lasting. Inclusiveness in academia, hence, is not simply a matter of hospitality but of democratic responsibility.

Shape global view

The work of sociologists, historians, and anthropologists, both Indian and foreign, has shaped global understanding of caste, gender, religion, and modernity. These studies have sometimes been uncomfortable for those in power but have helped India appear as an intellectually vibrant society fearless of bureaucratic scrutiny. This pluralism is a hallmark of democracy, and it has always coexisted with patriotic commitment.

If it begins to appear that India is using visa restrictions as a means of selective control over academic engagement, the message sent to the world will be unfortunate: that India no longer welcomes the exchange of ideas unless they conform to official narratives. Over time, the space for independent thought would shrink, and universities would risk becoming echo chambers. What India needs instead is a renewed commitment to academic openness, a framework that differentiates between political subversion and intellectual dissent, that trusts scholars to engage in debate without ulterior motives, and that recognises the long-term benefits of a plural academic environment.

It is not that there are no initiatives to promote international academic collaboration; the Global Initiative of Academic Networks (GIAN) is a notable example of such efforts. However, for initiatives like GIAN to be truly meaningful, they must also create space for critical scholars to engage freely and thoughtfully with Indian academia, enriching dialogue through diverse and independent perspectives.

An inclusive and confident academic culture is the best reflection of a mature democracy, one that listens, argues, and learns.

HINDU (P-10), 07 JANUARY 2026

Rethinking India's skilling outcomes

What prevents skilling from becoming a first-choice pathway for youth? Why has formal vocational training reached only a small share of the workforce? What limits industry participation in public skilling programmes? Why do Sector Skill Councils lack credibility with employers?

EXPLAINER

Pravesh Dudani

The story so far:

Over the last decade, India has built one of the largest skilling ecosystems in the world. Between 2015 and 2025, India's flagship skilling programme, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, has trained and certified around 1.40 crore candidates. Yet skilling has not become a first-choice pathway for most young Indians. Employability outcomes remain uneven, and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data show that wage gains from vocational training are modest and inconsistent, particularly in informal employment, where most workers are absorbed, offering limited recognition for certified skills and little visible improvement in quality of life.

Why does skilling still fail to inspire aspiration?

India's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) stands at 28%, but the National Education Policy 2020 aims to raise it to 50% by 2035. This cannot be done just by expanding traditional education; it must be integrated into higher education pathways in a way that makes it easier for people to learn new skills.

Despite years of investment, only about 4.1% of India's workforce has received formal vocational training, barely improving from about 2% a decade ago (PLFS; World Bank). In contrast, across OECD countries, about 44% of upper-secondary learners are enrolled in vocational programmes, rising to around 70% in countries such as Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, the Netherlands, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia.

The India Skills Report 2025 shows that post-degree skilling by graduates is not a mainstream or high-participation behaviour in India. If skilling is to scale meaningfully, it must travel through and alongside formal education.

GETTY IMAGES

How can industry contribute meaningfully?

Industry is the single largest beneficiary of effective skilling and trained manpower. According to various industry reports, high attrition, long onboarding cycles, and productivity losses impose real costs, with attrition rates of 30-40% common across retail, logistics, hospitality, and manufacturing alone.

Yet, there is still not much participation from the industry. Most employers do not use public skilling certifications as hiring benchmarks; instead, they use internal training, referrals, or private platforms (NITI Aayog; World Bank). The National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) has increased participation, but its effects are still unequal, particularly among bigger companies.

Industry is neither incentivised nor obligated to meaningfully contribute to relevant curriculum development, certification standards, or assessment rigour at scale. As long as skilling remains something industry consumes rather than co-designs, it will lag labour-market reality.

Why do Sector Skill Councils fail?

The most serious structural failure in India's skilling ecosystem lies with the Sector Skill Councils (SSCs).

SSCs were created with a clear mandate: to act as industry-facing institutions that define standards, ensure relevance, and anchor employability. In effect, they were meant to own the skilling value chain – from identifying industry demand to certifying job readiness. That mandate has not been fulfilled.

Today, responsibility is fragmented: training is delivered by one entity, assessment by another, certification by SSCs, and placement by someone else – if at all. Unlike higher education or technical institutions such as polytechnic diploma colleges, where reputational risk enforces accountability, the skilling system diffuses responsibility without consequence.

This fragmentation has eroded trust. Employer surveys frequently indicate that SSC credentials have limited signalling value compared to degrees or prior work experience. Standards exist, but employers do not reliably hire against them. Industry-led certification models illustrate what is missing. Certifications from AWS, Google Cloud, or Microsoft work because the certifier's credibility is at stake. Assessments are fair and graded, not binary, and employers know what a certified candidate can do.

SSCs were meant to play this role at a national scale. Instead, they have largely limited themselves to standards creation, without owning outcomes. Until SSCs are held accountable for employability, certification will remain symbolic rather than economic.

The ongoing overhaul of standard-setting bodies must confront this directly.

How can skilling drive sustained economic growth?

India's skilling challenge is a failure of accountability, not of intent or government funding.

Expanding NAPS and deepening industry integration can become one of the fastest levers to improve job readiness at scale by pushing skilling into the workplace. Initiatives like PM-SETU, the central scheme for modernisation of ITIs, point towards stronger execution models where industry ownership and accountability are built into programme design.

When skills are embedded in degrees, when industry is treated as a co-owner, and when SSCs are made answerable for placement outcomes, skilling move from fragmented welfare intervention to a pillar of national economic empowerment.

That shift is not just about jobs. It is about the dignity of labour, productivity, and India's ability to convert its demographic strength into sustained national growth.

Pravesh Dudani is the Founder & Chancellor of Medhavi Skills University and an Advisor to NSDC

THE GIST

▼

Despite PMKVY training around 1.40 crore candidates, employability outcomes remain uneven, wage gains are modest and inconsistent, and informal employment offers limited recognition for certified skills and little visible improvement in quality of life.

▼

Limited industry participation, uneven NAPS outcomes, and the structural failure of Sector Skill Councils — fragmented responsibility, weak signalling value of certifications, and lack of accountability for employability — have reduced skilling to a fragmented welfare intervention rather than a driver of sustained economic growth.

REFORM LENS

Building Standards With Freedom

The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill marks a major higher-education reform, replacing fragmented regulation with autonomy, accountability, linguistic inclusion and globally credible accreditation

MANISH R JOSHI

THE WRITER IS THE SECRETARY, UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

India's latest higher-education reform, the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, is best understood not as an administrative reshuffle but as a philosophical recalibration of how a modern state relates to knowledge. For decades, India has governed its universities through a patchwork of regulators, approvals, and inspections that prioritised procedural compliance over intellectual consequences. The Bill marks a clear departure from that inheritance, replacing regulatory excess with functional clarity and outcome-based accountability.

At its heart lies a simple proposition: autonomy and accountability are not adversaries but complements. By separating regulation, accreditation, and academic standard-setting into distinct institutional functions, the Bill dismantles the structural confusion that previously forced universities to answer multiple masters for the same academic act. The result is not centralisation, as critics allege, but coherence—an essential prerequisite for any system that seeks both scale and credibility.

What distinguishes this reform from earlier attempts is its explicit rejection of permission-centric governance. Instead of micromanaging inputs, the framework insists on transparent disclosure, nationally synchronised minimum standards, and credible consequences for persistent failure. This shift reflects a mature regulatory philosophy: quality emerges not from constant surveillance, but from clear expectations and a serious enforcement approach.

VIKSIT BHARAT
SHIKSHA ADHIKSHAN
BILL, 2025

The Bill separates control from standards, authority from enforcement, and ideology from institutional autonomy

Importantly, the Bill's conception of academic standards is neither uniformitarian nor culturally evasive. By allowing institutions the freedom to exceed benchmarks while maintaining a common national floor, it accommodates diversity without diluting comparability. This space is particularly significant in a country where knowledge traditions have historically been multilingual and multi-epistemic. Indian Knowledge Systems—spanning philosophy, mathematics, medicine, linguistics, and the arts—have long evolved through diverse intellectual lineages rather than a single canonical mode. A standards-based, non-prescriptive framework is precisely what allows such traditions to engage contemporary disciplines on equal scholarly terms, rather than being marginalised by rigid curricular templates.

The same logic applies to language. A higher-education system that aspires to mass excellence cannot remain linguistically exclusionary. While the Bill does not legislate pedagogy, its emphasis on institutional autonomy, outcome transparency, and curricular flexibility creates enabling conditions for teaching, learning, and scholarship in Indian languages—without compromising academic rigour or international comparability. In global terms, this is not parochialism; it is cognitive inclusion. Advanced societies increasingly recognise that intellectual depth and linguistic plurality are mutually reinforcing.

Accreditation, too, is reconceived as an ecosystem rather than a bureaucratic bottleneck. By supervising multiple quality-assurance pathways instead of monopolising them, the framework aligns India with international best practices where accreditation functions as a trust infrastructure, not a gatekeeping ritual. This is essential if Indian institutions are to be read credibly by global partners, ranking agencies, and research collaborators.

The Bill's enforcement architecture deserves equal attention. Regulation without consequence invites indifference; consequence without due process invites fear. The proposed framework avoids both. It embeds proportionality, procedural fairness, and escalation, signalling that chronic non-compliance is a failure of governance rather than a paperwork lapse. In doing so, it restores moral seriousness to the idea of regulation itself.

Concerns regarding governmental policy direction should be viewed through the lens of constitutional realism rather than ideological suspicion. Higher education is intrinsically linked to national priorities, including equity, scientific capacity, cultural continuity, and global engagement. A complete firewall between policy and regulation would be neither feasible nor desirable. The Bill's challenge—and its promise—lies in ensuring that policy guidance remains strategic rather than intrusive, enabling rather than prescriptive.

Ultimately, the significance of the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill lies in its quiet confidence. It assumes that Indian universities need not be governed through distrust, redundancy, or excessive proceduralism. Instead, it places faith in standards, transparency, and institutional responsibility. In an era where knowledge power defines national capability, this is a timely assertion: that a developed India must also be an epistemically self-assured one—open to the world, anchored in its intellectual traditions, and governed by frameworks worthy of both.

Views expressed are personal

> The Bill marks a clear departure from that inheritance, replacing regulatory excess with functional clarity and outcome-based accountability

पृष्ठ-7

MILLENNIUM POST (P-9), 07 JANUARY 2026

TS Eliot, Indian thought, and the philosophical horizons of the NEP 2020

GARIMA GUPTA | **DUSHYANT KUMAR RAI**

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 may well be described as a decisive moment in India's intellectual and cultural life. It is not merely an administrative blueprint for educational reform; it is a manifesto for the civilisational renewal of India. At a time when the world is grappling with the marvels and perils of artificial intelligence, the uncertainties of climate change, and the erosion of human values, education can no longer be confined to the acquisition of technical skills. It becomes, rather, a question of the soul and of consciousness: what kind of human being do we wish our young to become?

In this context, the writings of TS Eliot acquire renewed relevance, for Eliot not only diagnosed the fragmented consciousness of modern civilisation but also sought its remedy in the philosophical depths of Indian thought. It also exemplifies how the NEP is not parochial, but rather an inclusive mindset that promotes Indic knowledge beyond spatio-temporal boundaries.

Eliot's intellectual journey stretched from the mechanical modernity of the West to the spiritual landscapes of India. He matured his childhood interest as he studied Sanskrit and Pali at Harvard, immersing himself in the Vedanta, the Yoga Sutras of Patañjali, and the Buddhist canon. His engagement with these texts, unlike that of his contemporaries, was not an exercise in antiquarian curiosity or Orientalist fascination; he drew upon them as instruments to interpret and heal the ruptures of Western civilisation through holistic knowledge. The NEP, in its own way, seeks to address contemporary crises with a holistic vision wherein yoga, Ayurveda, the classical arts, and philosophy engage in dialogue with modern science and technology. The policy reminds us that the aim of education is not efficiency alone but self-realisation. Just as Eliot transformed his poetry and criticism through the assimilation of Indian philosophy, the NEP envisions the revitalisation of India's knowledge traditions as a medium of dialogue with the challenges of the future.

Eliot's 1922 masterpiece The Waste Land embodied a universal code for restoring balance to human life. Its climactic invocation — "Datta (Charity), Dayadhvam (Compassion), Damyata (Self-restraint)" — is not a decorative citation but a shloka from the Brhadaranyaka Upani?ad, offered as an ethical prescription for a Europe scarred by the First World War. Here, Indian philosophy is not merely supplemental to Western modernity; it emerges as its guide. The urgency of this message grows sharper today. Artificial intelligence is reshaping work, thought, and communication at a staggering pace, pressing education towards narrowly technical training. Yet the real question remains: do we wish to cultivate "mechanical experts" capable of innovation but devoid of compassion and wisdom? Or do we aspire to form citizens who, while mastering technology, remain grounded in human dignity, ecological balance, and cultural dialogue? The NEP's answer is unambiguous: knowledge is meaningful only when bound to ethics, and education is complete only when it fashions individuals who are at once local and global. The climate crisis makes this imperative all the more pressing.

The NEP not only emphasises scientific research but also regards environmental consciousness, sustainability, and responsibility as integral to education. This echoes Eliot's Four Quartets, where the balance between nature and eternity discloses itself as a condition of human meaning. Just as Eliot wrote that "the significance of human life lies not only in the present moment, but in the capacity to go beyond it," so too education derives its meaning not from immediate utility but from the preservation of the future and the renewal of eternal values.

Eliot had warned that the true crisis of modernity was not material but spiritual. Machines and economies cannot provide direction to life. This truth is now revealed in the crises of climate and inequality. The NEP, therefore, insists that value education, the arts, yoga, and philosophy form essential components of learning. This is not merely an Indian prescription; it is a message from the Global South to the world: that development is not mere production and consumption, but balance and restraint.

In adopting Indian thought, Eliot did not abandon his Western heritage; he deepened it. He demonstrated that civilisations endure through dialogue. In his poetry, the Upani?ads converse with Dante and the Gospels. Similarly, the NEP envisions Sanskrit texts conversing with artificial intelligence and environmental science. Such dialogue is neither narrowness nor imitation; it is creative redefinition.

The central insight of this dialogue is clear: knowledge severed from moral and cultural foundations becomes sterile, but nourished by the wisdom of tradition, it becomes a power of renewal. Eliot transformed modern poetry through Indian philosophy; the NEP seeks to transform the future of Indian education through the same. At a time when the world does not seek fragmented specialists but integrated human beings, the shared message of Eliot and the NEP acquires new urgency. This has been successfully demonstrated by the "Design Your Degree" programme of the University of Jammu, which has envisioned education beyond the confining walls of separate disciplines. It also exemplifies the practicality of the implementation of the NEP: that, if adopted in its true essence, it can create responsible citizens who are not only a future-ready workforce but also understand the responsibility of belonging to a region and to the nation. Such learner-centric courses, like DYD of Jammu University, with revolutionary pedagogy that fosters the humility of knowing rather than the pride of knowledge, play out the true spirit of the NEP.

Eliot once wrote that "the little wisdom we may acquire is the wisdom of humility." In embracing Indian thought, he lived this humility. His works — The Waste Land, Four Quartets, The Elder Statesman — testify that the final fulfilment of life lies in the confluence of love, compassion, and eternal consciousness. This is the path NEP-2020 seeks to make the foundation of Indian education. Thus Eliot and the NEP remind us alike that civilisations endure not by wealth or power alone but by their capacity for wisdom, compassion, and restraint. These are the very values that resound from the Upanisads to the present journey of Indian education — reminding us that the path to the future lies at the confluence of past wisdom and present responsibility.

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STATESMAN (P-11), 07 JANUARY 2026

Bottlenecks in Indian intellectual property:

A comprehensive analysis and roadmap for reform

SHUBHRO CHAKRABARTY

India's intellectual property rights framework is going through a major transition phase, which is influenced not only by the country's past but also by factors such as technology, worldwide trade, and local innovation ecosystems. Over the past 20 years, India has taken significant steps towards establishing a well-organised, structured IP framework. Nevertheless, even after the reforms, digitisation, and policy changes, the functioning of the system is still obstructed by structural bottlenecks. In reality. These problems are common to patents, trademarks, and copyrights. However, it is the patent system that is most severely and extensively limited. The consequences are research into productivity, startup competitiveness, foreign investment, and the overall innovation culture of the country. To grasp these problems, one must look to the inventors, researchers, examiners, legal practitioners, and other stakeholders who are the direct participants of the Indian IPR ecosystem on a daily basis. The long time-span for the examination of patent applications is one of the most frequently recurring issues. Though legal frameworks set out timelines, the actual time from filing to publication and request for examination, issuance of a first examination report, and final disposal can be several years. India does have a route for expedited examination, but it is only available to a limited number of categories, i.e., female applicants, recognized startups, MSMEs, applicants choosing India as the International Searching Authority under PCT, and a few government-supported entities. Besides, for those who can qualify for fast track processing, the additional fees charged create economic obstacles, especially for independent inventors and small research entities. Thus, in the case of normal applications, the waiting period can be so long that it is enough to lose the commercial value of the invention by the time the patent is granted. Such delays hinder the intent of protection in rapidly evolving areas like electronics, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, and digital technologies, as the technology lifecycle may end even before the patent is granted.

The situation at the Indian Patent Office is made worse by the fact that they have had a continuous shortage of manpower for a long period. The number of trained and specialised examiners is still very low, even though recruitment drives have been held from time to time. The burden of each examiner is considerably greater than that of their counterparts in established jurisdictions such as the USPTO or the EPO, necessitating the management of a far higher volume of applications. Newly hired examiners also need to go through a certain level of training to understand complex technical areas. There is a limited budget that restricts both the number of people that can be hired and the amount of training they can be given, and the government pay offered does not match the market salaries for people with similar technical and legal expertise. Therefore, some of the staff members quit their jobs, and those who remain often deal with heavy workloads, which in turn affects both turnaround time and the quality of the examination. Besides the problem of manpower, the technological infrastructure for patent processing is not at par with worldwide standards. The online systems for file wrappers, legal event updates, and document access are frequently plagued with irregularities. Applicants regularly come across situations where examination reports are missing from correspondence, documents are unlinked, or file histories are outdated. Despite a series of efforts by the Indian Patent Office to digitise archives, the system is still suffering from irregular updates.

While the Indian Patent Office struggles with irregular updates, global patent offices maintain robust, fully indexed, searchable, and transparent prosecution histories that support applicants, litigators, investors, and researchers. Incomplete file wrappers in India make it difficult to interpret claims, decrease the level of legal certainty, obstruct due diligence, and increase the risk of litigation. The problem of tracking and visibility of legal events in patent prosecution is closely related to that. Assignments, amendments, oppositions, and hearings are not always reflected in real-time. This results in a lack of understanding of the current legal status of a patent or application, thereby making it harder for companies to conduct freedom-to-operate analyses or evaluate investment risks. India has a high volume of pre-grant and post-grant opposition cases. Therefore, clear and timely updates are very important. However, they are often lacking. The shortcomings also extend to the interactions between inventors and examiners. In many advanced jurisdictions, examiner-applicant interviews are a powerful tool to clarify issues, resolve misunderstandings, and expedite prosecution. In India, however, such interviews are not consistently conducted and are still dependent on the willingness, availability, or interpretation of the rules of the examiner.

These conversations, if handled appropriately, could be the reason for a drastic reduction in the number of objections that are repeated in examination reports, and also for the reduction of the unnecessary formalities that delay the grant. When there are no such structured interactions, misunderstandings continue, and applicants have to respond in writing repeatedly. Thus, both the cost and the delay are increased. Besides, the problem of identifying prior art in India has a different aspect. The technological landscape of India is rapidly evolving; however, there is no comprehensive domestic database that would aggregate non-patent literature, MSME innovations, academic research, traditional knowledge, defense publications, and conference proceedings. As a result, examiners heavily depend on foreign search reports and international prior art databases, which might not reflect the indigenous innovation. The matter gets even worse in the fields of software and digital technology. India does not allow software per se to be patented, but permits patents for software combined with hardware or showing a technical effect. Since the limits of this provision are still conceptually unclear, examination practices vary to a great extent.

The absence of a robust non-patent literature database and the insufficiency of tools for tracking software innovation led to the inconsistency of decisions and the loss of trust by technology companies and investors who work in this crucial sector of the industry. Besides, India has a problem with 'forged' or low-quality patents as well. A significant number of applicants submit a patent application only with the intention of quickly meeting a deadline before the publication, or to use the application as a priority for something that is not an actual invention. These applications might be abandoned later, but not before they take up the time of the examiner, and thus, the backlog increases. This phenomenon has been partly attributed to the lack of awareness and partly to the fact that patent filing is sometimes misused for academic promotions, performance metrics, or business optics. At the same time, some applicants use loopholes to create 'submarine' patent cases by trying to delay publication or hide claims until a tactical moment. Though Indian law stipulates that publication shall be made after 18 months, there are still some practical delays and procedural exploits that take place, thus hurting transparency and creating risks for companies that operate in the affected industries. Moreover, patent applications coming to India via the PCT route are also facing delays. India is a member of the Patent Cooperation Treaty. However, the national phase entry and the following examination are frequently slow due to backlog and a lack of sufficient automation. Worldwide applicants are looking forward to getting a quick response, especially when they are dealing with emerging markets. When the Indian part of a trial is slower than the other jurisdictions, it influences the decisions of investments and makes the strategies of global prosecutions more complicated.

Double patenting is yet another issue where the Indian examination has been inconsistent. Although the rejection itself is legally correct since one cannot have two patents for the same invention, the lack of clear rules like terminal disclaimers in the USPTO creates uncertainty. Sometimes, applicants file divisional applications in order to escape double patenting issues, but these also take a lot of time and resources, and thus they increase the procedural burden and contribute further to the backlog. The trademark system, besides patents, is becoming congested as well. India is getting a huge number of trademark filings every year, ranking among the top most in the world, but the capacity of examiners and hearing officers has not increased accordingly.

India is witnessing a large backlog of opposition cases that have been piling up for years, and procedural delays have become the norm. The search system that is available to the public is working, but it does not have advanced features such as AI-based phonetic search, image recognition for logos, or automated similarity analysis. Consequently, small businesses may unknowingly file marks that are similar to the existing ones, thus putting themselves at legal risk. Moreover, trademark squatting, where such people intentionally register marks that are identical or similar to widely known brands, is still a problem that businesses face, both local and foreign ones, in the domestic and international markets. Meanwhile, copyright management is going through the same kind of inefficiencies. Copyright is granted automatically, but registration gives enforcement a legal backing. However, the registration itself is often slow; sometimes it takes months or even years because it is done manually and there is a limited number of staff. In particular, the mechanisms for the enforcement of copyright are very limited. The unauthorised use of films, music, software, books, and OTT content is very large, and the punishments are still not enough to discourage the offenders. Collective Management Organisations, which should take care of licensing and royalty distribution, are often not very transparent, technologically advanced, and do not have reliable audit mechanisms. A lot of creators, especially small artists, photographers, and independent filmmakers, are not aware of their rights, which leads to loss of income becoming easy targets for exploitation. The lack of coordination between academia, industry, and intellectual property offices, which is present everywhere else, is the main reason for the reduced effectiveness of the system that exists for intellectual property of all categories.

Academic researchers quite often come up with ideas that have no connection with industrial potential or patent landscapes that already exist. Without integrated platforms for patent landscaping, white-space identification, competitive intelligence, and trend analysis, researchers are in the dark about what has already been done and where the opportunities are. Such a comprehensive national dashboard could provide real-time analytics on patents, copyrights, and trademarks across all technology domains and thus solve the problem. However, there is no such system in India yet. Judicial delays worsen the issue. Even if a patent or trademark is granted, its enforcement is often followed by a court case. Despite improvements in recent years and the setting up of commercial courts, Indian courts are overwhelmed with a heavy workload and lack technical expertise. The duration of cases may be several years. Thus, the value of enforcement as a deterrent is considerably diminished, and the offenders can continue their activities with minimal consequences.

India needs to have a wide range of reforms in place due to the coexistence of challenges at different levels. It is first necessary to address the issue of shortages in manpower. The government must engage a significantly larger number of examiners and legal officers in all divisions of IP. Remuneration should be attractive enough to recruit and keep people with substantial technical and legal knowledge. Besides, there should be continuous education programs to keep the staff informed about the latest developments in AI, robotics, biotechnology, semiconductors, and advanced computing. Equally important is the investment of money and administration in the digital infrastructure. An advanced intellectual property framework cannot exist without a reliable database system, AI-driven agents to assist in the examination, and automated workflows. Transparency would be achieved by the interaction of stakeholders with real, timely updates of file wrappers, legal events, and prosecution histories. The integration of Indian research publications, defense R&D, MSME innovations, and startup disclosures into a single prior art database would be a significant step toward self-reliance in India to cut down the extensive reliance on foreign sources. This would also enhance the quality of examinations. India needs to develop detailed and uniform rules to clarify what should be regarded as a technical effect for software-related inventions to be patentable. At the same time, the protection of software as copyright work should be reinforced. Also, there should be an increase in the availability of non-patent literature search tools for the software industry. The implementation of advanced search algorithms, more stringent scrutiny to avert bad faith filings, and more hearing officers to meet the opposition backlog are some of the ways in which trademark administration should move forward. Copyright enforcement also requires the use of technology in this instance, for example, blockchain-based registration and tracking, automated content monitoring, stronger cyber enforcement, and transparent digital royalty management. Educating creators, startups, researchers, and small businesses about their rights and obligations would go a long way in lowering the inadvertent infringements and economically empowering these people. The last but not the least of the reforms should be in the judiciary, which should guarantee speedy and efficient IP litigation. Enforcement outcomes would improve significantly if specialised IP benches with technical members were established, e-litigation were encouraged, and strict procedural timelines were enforced.

The use of mediation and arbitration in IP disputes may also lessen the load that the courts have and provide the parties with quick resolutions. India has the potential to be a global leader in innovation. It has many scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, and creative artists who, in fact, are constantly pushing the limits in different sectors. Nevertheless, these innovations find it hard to become economic gains without a responsive, efficient, and well-resourced intellectual property system. Hence, it is not only a legal or administrative necessity to strengthen the IPR system but a strategic imperative for national development. With continuous policy commitment, the investment in human capital, the modern digital tools, and institutional reform, India will be able to transform her intellectual property environment into one that promotes innovation, invites investment, and supports the creators and entrepreneurs in any field. The way forward is not easy and needs foresight, but the benefits in terms of technological leadership, economic growth, and cultural vitality are worth the effort.

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ECONOMICS TIMES (P-6), 08 JANUARY 2026

Prep for AI, It's a Tool, Not Cheat Sheet

AI has entered the portals of educational institutions — schools, colleges, universities — at a speed that makes the entry of computers a generation ago seem glacial. Hrrmphs regarding the danger it poses as a detour for critical thinking in young minds is less Luddite than those who believed computers would signal the end of civilisation as we knew it. So, without sounding alarmist, guidance and policy must keep pace with rapid proliferation of generative AI in education. The urgency is driven by the fact that tech companies are turning to schools and universities across the world as potential consumers and clients — apart from the free options already available. In this case, 'caveat emptor' goes beyond the usual warning.

The aggressive marketing draws on the old playbook of computers to improve computer literacy. Again, Fomo is driving schools to sign up. For the education system at large, there is no need to shun this technology. On the contrary, familiarity is necessary to ensure that a new generation learns new ways of using it. Which is why it's more than helpful to draw on learnings from the old computer access programmes to develop necessary guidance for teachers, education administrators, curriculum developers and parents. Training on how to use AI in classrooms and beyond, as well as a tool to enhance teaching and the learning experience without undermining efforts to enhance critical thinking, cognitive skills and learning outcomes is essential.

AI's rapid deployment presents a challenge to accurately determine actual learning outcomes and learning loss. Efforts must be made to disincentivise AI as the option for students to 'outsource' their learning and learning outcomes. Make it an integral tool, not cheat sheet. ET|6

Youth leadership is key to Viksit Bharat

Mansukh Mandaviya

is the Union Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports, and Labour and Employment, Government of India

India's growth story will be written by those who are shaping its ideas today. Across the country, young Indians are thinking deeply about how India can grow faster, govern better and become developed by 2047. Their ideas are emerging from campuses and communities, start-ups and sports fields, classrooms and village meetings. The real question is no longer whether the youth have something to contribute, but whether their ideas are given a credible platform to influence the nation's direction. The Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue (VBYLD) is designed to provide that very platform.

India is home to the largest youth population in the world. It is therefore but natural that the direction of the nation's future will be shaped not merely by policies or institutions, but by the imagination, conviction and courage of its young citizens. This vast reservoir of *yuva shakti* is far more than a demographic advantage; it is India's greatest national asset, capable of driving innovation, strengthening democracy and propelling the country towards inclusive and sustainable development.

Lead the change

During my time as Youth Affairs and Sports Minister, I have had the opportunity to engage with young Indians in varied settings, on university campuses, in rural districts, at sports arenas and during youth-led community initiatives. What consistently stands out is the seriousness with which young people think about the nation's future. I recall meeting a group of rural youth volunteers who had organised informal learning centres in their villages. With limited resources but strong conviction, they were addressing gaps in education and skill development through locally designed solutions. Experiences like these reaffirm a simple truth: when young people are trusted and given space, they do not merely participate, they lead.

> The vast reservoir of *yuva shakti* in the country is far more than a demographic advantage; it is India's greatest national asset

Inspired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call from the Red Fort to bring one lakh youth without political backgrounds into public life, the Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue was launched in January 2025 reimagining the National Youth Festival in an entirely new format. Over 30 lakh young people engaged through the Viksit Bharat Challenge, more than two lakh essays were submitted, and thousands of youth presented their ideas at the State level. The journey culminated at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi, where 3,000 youth leaders interacted in a free-flowing dialogue with the Prime Minister, who spent hours listening to their ideas and inspiring them to lead.

Shaping the India of 2047

Beyond the numbers, it was the nature of engagement that made the Dialogue truly historic. It recognised, both in letter and spirit, that the voices of India's youth matter in shaping the India of 2047. Young participants were encouraged to think critically about national challenges, propose solutions and align personal ambition with collective purpose.

The strength of the youth leadership platform lies not only in its scale, but in its design. Diversity of thought, language, culture and lived experience is embedded into the very structure of the initiative. Youth from urban and rural India, students and professionals, innovators and grassroots leaders come together on a common platform. Multiple stages of engagement ensure that ideas are refined through dialogue and exchange, not filtered out by geography, language or background. In doing so, the Dialogue ensures that every young person who participates has both a voice and a platform to amplify it.

India's youth have always been at the heart of the nation's defining moments, from the freedom struggle to the building of the institutions of an independent India. Today, the nation once again looks to its youth not just for participation, but for leadership and dynamism in co-creating India's growth story.

Building on the success of the first edition, VBYLD 2026, scheduled to be held from January 9-12, 2026, signals a decisive leap from a national youth convening to a platform with global resonance. With new initiatives such as Design for Bharat and Tech for Viksit Bharat, and the inclusion of the international Indian youth diaspora, the dialogue expands beyond borders.

More than 50 lakh young people participated in the Viksit Bharat Quiz, the first stage of selection for VBYLD 2026, making it one of the largest youth engagement exercises of its kind. Over four intensive days, participants from every corner of the country will engage with leading national and global voices, drawing upon practical insights, ideas, and visions that transcend disciplines and geographies.

Dialogue to Direction

What truly sets VBYLD 2026 apart, however, is that it gives our *yuva shakti* an opportunity not only to speak, but to be heard. On 12 January, observed nationwide as National Youth Day in commemoration of Swami Vivekananda, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will personally interact with the youth at Bharat Mandapam, listening to how they imagine, and intend to shape the future of Bharat.

More than a platform for dialogue, the Viksit Bharat Young Leaders Dialogue is a movement that calls upon young Indians to lead from the front, confront national challenges, and channel their ambitions towards building a Viksit Bharat.

A Viksit Bharat will be built by those who have the confidence to lead and the commitment to serve. India's youth are ready. The nation must be ready to walk with them.

MILLENNIUM POST (P-15), 08 JANUARY 2026

IF I WERE A STUDENT AGAIN IN 2026!

DR SANKU BOSE

If I were a student again in 2026, the first thing I would do is make peace with an uncomfortable truth: a degree, by itself, no longer guarantees a career today. It may still open doors, but it does not keep them open long enough! The world of work is changing faster than ever before, driven by technology, demographic shifts and a global labour market that is more fluid than ever before. Careers are becoming longer, less predictable, and far more demanding, not just in skill, but in judgement.

As a student today, I would, therefore, stop preparing for a specific "job" and start preparing for change itself. Previous generations could afford to train for a single role and refine it over decades. And they were appreciated for doing that! In 2026, that mindset is risky. Job titles are evolving rapidly, and many roles that sound stable today will most certainly either disappear or be fundamentally redefined within a decade. What endures is not a designation, but the ability to adapt, to learn quickly, to unlearn without ego, and to apply knowledge across contexts. The most valuable skill is no longer mastery of a narrow domain, but intellectual agility.

I would also treat technology not merely as a subject but as a language to be spoken fluently. Artificial intelligence (AI) and data systems now shape decisions across fields, from healthcare and law to design, media, education, and public policy. One does not need to become a programmer to remain relevant, but one does need to understand how technology influences outcomes, where its blind spots lie, and how its misuse can cause harm. As a student, I would focus on applied fluency: knowing how to work with intelligent tools, how to question their outputs, and how to bring human judgement where algorithms fall short.

Equally important, I would stop "polishing" my resume and start building a visible body of work. In a world flooded with degrees and certificates, proof matters more than promise. Employers and collaborators increasingly ask not just what you studied, but what you have actually built, solved, written, researched, or contributed to. If I were a student again, every academic year would leave behind tangible evidence: projects, internships, fieldwork, social initiatives, research papers, digital portfolios, or entrepreneurial experiments. Waiting until the final year to "prepare for placements" would be a missed opportunity. Employability now is not an event any longer, it is a habit built steadily over time!

I would also think globally, even if I planned to work locally. The globalisation of work is no longer only about migration. Remote teams, cross-border projects, and international collaborations mean that global competence is essential even in domestic roles. Communication skills, cultural sensitivity, professional writing, and the ability to work with diverse perspectives would be non-negotiable. Awareness of global trends, whether in sustainability, geopolitics, or technology would no longer be "extra knowledge," but part of professional survival.

Another area I would take far more seriously than students traditionally do is cybersecurity and ethics. As systems become more automated and data-driven with progressive AI integration, trust becomes a critical. Every profession now carries digital risk, whether through data privacy, intellectual property or algorithmic bias. I would not aim to become a cybersecurity expert, unless that was my calling, but I would ensure I understand digital responsibility, governance frameworks, and ethical decision-making.

When it comes to passion, I would be more honest with myself than romantic. "Follow your passion" is well-meaning advice, but dangerously incomplete. Passion without capability or market relevance often leads to frustration. If I were a student in 2026, I would continuously ask myself three questions: What genuinely interests me? What skills can I realistically develop to a high level? And where does this intersect with real-world demand? Sustainable careers emerge where curiosity, competence, and opportunity overlap, not where one's passion is pursued in isolation.

IF I WERE A STUDENT IN 2026, I WOULD ASK MYSELF THREE QUESTIONS: WHAT GENUINELY INTERESTS ME? WHAT SKILLS CAN I REALISTICALLY DEVELOP TO A HIGH LEVEL? WHERE DOES THIS INTERSECT WITH REAL-WORLD DEMAND?

Above all, I would embrace lifelong learning in its truest form. With working lives likely to span four or five decades, multiple reinventions are inevitable. Short courses, certifications, interdisciplinary learning, and periodic re-skilling will become routine. I would stop seeing education as a phase that ends with graduation and start seeing it as a permanent companion! Re-entering the classroom, physical or digital, should not feel like failure, but foresight.

The promise education must make to students in 2026 is therefore very different from the one made a generation ago. It is about building the capacity to remain relevant, resilient, and fulfilled across an entire lifetime of change. The future will belong to those who can keep reinventing themselves without losing direction.

The author is the Vice-Chancellor of Sister Nivedita University and Group CEO, Techno India Group. A visionary leader, he is shaping future-ready institutions and inspiring students to lead with purpose

MILLENNIUM POST (P-15), 08 JANUARY 2026

SKILLS-FIRST IS NEW NORMAL FOR JOBS IN 2026

Companies are shifting from degree-centric hiring to competency-based models

ANINDITA ACHARYA

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Are you the kind who tops every exam, mugs up theories in minutes, and walks away with medals and trophies but barely works on practical skills? That might make you a university star, but it won't guarantee you a long queue of job offers. By 2025, Artificial Intelligence (AI) stopped being just a buzzword and became part of everyday conversations. AI literacy is no longer a "good-to-have"; it's a basic life skill, especially in education and employment. Recruiters now put AI skill sets right at the top of their priority list, and AI fluency has become the bare minimum for new hires. "Companies have moved or are moving away from degree-centric hiring to competency-based models. Graduates must demonstrate applied skills, adaptability, and agility. India will remain a strong growth hub, especially in technology, green energy, and advanced manufacturing, but hiring will be selective," said Vishal Khurma, CEO, Woxsen University, Hyderabad.

Forbes also mentioned in their report that AI and skills-first hiring will be one of the biggest workplace trends in 2026. According to Shantanu Rooj, Founder and CEO, TeamLease Edtech, the 2026 job market will be defined by selective growth rather than broad-based hiring, with employers prioritising productivity, capability and outcomes over headcount expansion. He also reminded all that overall hiring sentiment in India will remain positive, but job creation will be uneven, strong in skill-intensive roles and muted in repetitive, entry-level work that can be automated. In fact, Monster's 2026 WorkWatch Report, based on a national survey of 1,504 US workers, echoes the same mood. Employees are stepping into 2026 having largely accepted uncertainty as the new normal. Instead of rushing into bold career moves, many are choosing stability and income security, quietly adjusting through side hustles, upskilling, and a more cautious, selective approach to job hunting.

Of course, AI fluency will be the baseline skill in 2026, not just for technologists but across functions, but equally important will be human capabilities like critical thinking, creativity and decision-making. Sachin Alug, CEO, NLB Services, highlighted that information technology and digital services will lead hiring, driven by continued demand for AI, data, cybersecurity, and technology literacy in 2026. "Employment growth will be strongest in sectors where skill requirements are accelerating. Financial services and insurance will see steady job creation as analytics and risk-focused roles gain priority. Healthcare, manufacturing, automotive, and aerospace will also expand, supported by digital systems and advanced production needs. In parallel, energy, utilities, and sustainability-linked sectors will add roles as environmental and compliance-driven skills gain relevance," added Alug.

Khurma placed his bet on graduates in 2026, who have experienced exchange programmes, interdisciplinary learning modules, and cross-cultural projects will stand out in a market that values diversity and global mindset. He also highlighted that technology and AI will see steady growth because businesses everywhere are adopting digital tools and automation. Also, Global Capability Centers (GCCs) in India are expanding, creating jobs in software development, data analytics, cybersecurity, and AI applications. "Electric vehicles and electronics need strong supply chains, so jobs will grow in robotics, quality control, and logistics technology. With ageing populations and tech-enabled healthcare, demand for doctors, nurses, and health tech specialists are always on the surge. Telemedicine and AI-driven diagnostics will also create new roles in digital health," said Khurma.

Rooj mentioned that technology-enabled sectors including digital services, AI-led platforms, manufacturing linked to automation, healthcare, and green energy, are expected to drive employment growth in 2026. "Hiring will concentrate on roles that require specialised skills rather than volume-driven labour," he said.

> PLACEMENTS TODAY DEMAND A SHIFT FROM **'PLACEMENT-READY'** TO 'FUTURE-READY' TALENT. EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS MUST MIRROR THIS BY OFFERING INDUSTRY-ALIGNED PROGRAMS & EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

India's employability crisis: Industry-integrated learning

ASHISH MUNJAL

India is on the cusp of a demographic change, fuelled by a burgeoning youthful population ready for the workforce. However, employability remains one of its oldest challenges. Only half of new graduates are classified as employable each year. This statistic does not arise from a lack of capacity, but relevance. The kind of academic rigour created in classrooms often falls short of the aptitude required for a professional environment.

Understanding the Disconnect

Rote learning and theoretical mastery are still the primary resources of the conventional education model. Many colleges and universities — and even certifications — prioritise theoretical mastery over practical learning experience. For many institutions, exposure to industry is limited to a short internship or a couple of guest presentations. Students are often left with only a fraction of the engagement they need in order to succeed in a practice that now demands flexibility, digital fluency, and soft skills such as communication, collaboration, and adaptability. Meanwhile, companies continue to spend heavily on retraining recruits, delaying productivity and disillusioning fresh graduates.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

What is often overlooked is that education, when disconnected from experiential learning, becomes obsolete faster than curriculum revisions can keep up. The modern workplace does not reward memorisation; it values problem-solving, creative thinking, and the ability to translate knowledge into action.

Integrating Industry and Education: A Working Model

Some institutions are stepping up to tackle this crisis by teaming up with industry experts to co-design curricula, effectively linking academia with the realities of the workplace and fostering a more practical approach. This strategy does more than just boost employability; it transforms the very essence of learning. When professionals join forces with faculty to create course modules, theory becomes tangible through real-world case studies, hands-on workshops, and engaging simulations. Courses that promote ongoing assessment through live projects and internships empower students to learn by doing, rather than just passively listening.

Equally vital is the inclusion of structured mentorship. With the help of experienced professionals who break down the ins and outs of industry culture and the evolving expectations for skills, students gain a real understanding of how fast-paced the industry can be. Institutions that create this scaffolding often view placement as a by-product of a thoughtful learning experience, not merely a destination - one that begins career readiness from day one.

Building Career Confidence, Not Just Competence

A common observation of graduates from such industry-immersion programmes is their clarity of career direction. They approach professional arenas with conviction born of experience - the type gained from addressing live problems, not abstract scenarios. Their capacity to connect skills to business results distinguishes them during interviews and on the job. Recruiters, whose pressures towards efficiency are growing, find in such students an effortless fit - individuals who not only settle in fast but contribute valuable input from the start.

Soft-skills development, once relegated to finishing schools, has rightly become an educational core. Classroom discussions today focus on integrating communication strategies, negotiation skills, and problem-solving frameworks. It is clear that being employable is about far more than simply having technical know-how. Exposure to industry tools and workplace technology continues to close the gap between what students learn in the classroom and what is expected of them in the workplace.

Toward a Career-Centric Education Paradigm

The transition from degree-focused to career-focused learning is a necessary adjustment in India's philosophy of education. The aim should never be to produce job seekers, but job contributors — graduates with a command of both work theory and the realities of the workplace. That will happen only when there is academic flexibility and greater collaboration, where industry is an engaged partner, not a mere passive beneficiary. When schooling begins with accountability, guaranteeing measurable career outcomes, it surpasses its classical mandate. True transformation takes place when learning spaces are crafted to reflect the fluidity of business, creating graduates who do not merely qualify to work, but qualify industries to evolve.

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HINDUSTAN TIMES (P-14), 09 JANUARY 2026

[VITAL SIGNS]

Ramanan Laxminarayanan

Learning from Singapore to realise Viksit Bharat

To many Indians, Singapore represents the ideal of what successful development looks like. At the time of Singapore's independence in 1965, its per capita GDP was roughly four times that of India. Today, that ratio is more than 30 to one. Differences of scale matter, but scale alone cannot explain the extent of divergence. Singapore's experience offers lessons that run deeper than size or circumstance — lessons that are especially relevant as India articulates its ambition of becoming Viksit Bharat by 2047.

The most common explanation for Singapore's success focuses on what is visible: Vibrant capitalism, gleaming skyscrapers, and world-class infrastructure. In many ways, India's recent development push — particularly its emphasis on roads, ports, and physical capital, and tax-free enclaves like GIFT city in Gujarat — has sought to emulate this model. But Singaporeans themselves are quick to point out that these were not uniquely their inventions. They were ideas borrowed from elsewhere but executed with consistency. The truly distinctive innovation lay beneath the concrete and glass in the deliberate construction and relentless focus on social cohesion.

At the time of independence, Singapore was a deeply fragile multi-ethnic society. In the last colonial census before self-government, ethnic Chinese made up roughly three-quarters of the population, while Malays accounted for about 14% and Indians for under 10%. This imbalance mattered not only politically, but also economically. Colonial labour and education patterns had already produced significant differences in income and opportunity, with the Chinese community, on average, better represented in commerce, skilled work, and capital ownership. That imbalance could easily have turned into a permanent advantage. A majoritarian State, pursuing development through demographic arithmetic alone, would not have been unusual in the post-colonial world. Instead, Singapore's first President, Lee Kuan Yew, treated ethnic inequality as an existential threat. Social cohesion was not framed as a moral aspiration but as a condition for survival.

The core principles were clear: Prevent ethnic segregation, anchor social mobility, and ensure that every community had a visible stake in the success of the State.

Housing became one of the most powerful tools for this project. Strict rules enforced ethnic heterogeneity within neighbourhoods, deliberately limiting the formation of enclaves of any single ethnicity. Public housing was designed not merely to shelter citizens, but to bring them, both physically and psychologically, into a shared civic space. Over time, this reduced the likelihood that economic success or failure would align too neatly with race or ethnicity.

Over the subsequent decades, Singapore invested heavily in policies to prevent early disparities from becoming destiny. Universal education widened access to skilled employment; sustained investments in public health improved baseline outcomes; social policies focused on levelling the starting line rather than guaranteeing equal outcomes. These interventions did not erase income differences overnight, nor were they expected to. But they fundamentally altered trajectories.

The results are visible today. Absolute incomes have risen sharply across all three major ethnic groups, and Singapore no longer resembles the stratified society it inherited in 1965. Income differences have not vanished entirely — recent census data show that median household income from work remains lower on average for Malay households than for Chinese and Indian households, even as all groups have benefited from sustained growth. Notably, Indian households today often perform on par with, or above, the Chinese average on some income measures, reflecting substantial upward mobility since independence.

This mixed outcome is instructive. Singapore did not attempt to eliminate inequality by decree, nor did it assume markets alone would resolve inherited disadvantages. It also deliberately kept the government small relative to the economy and reserved spending on health and education to remove inequity, rather than trying to remove inequality through cash transfers and subsidies.

Instead, it focused relentlessly on preventing inequality from aligning permanently with identity, while ensuring that economic mobility remained visible and credible across communities. That credibility mattered. When people could plausibly believe that effort and education offered a path forward, trust in institutions deepened and incentives for rent-seeking diminished. This likely explains low corruption in Singapore in contrast to the rest of Asia more than any other single reason.

If Singapore offers lessons for other countries pursuing long-term development, they lie less in copying specific policies than in setting the right priorities. Four stand out. First, treating social cohesion as economic infrastructure — not as sentiment, but as something to be deliberately designed and protected. Second, using housing as a tool of integration, not merely shelter: Mixed neighbourhoods, proximity to jobs, schools, and transport, and a visible stake for all groups in shared urban spaces. Third, building a credible escalator of mobility through education and skills, so that effort and talent are seen to translate into opportunity. And fourth, sustained investment in public health, ensuring that basic health outcomes do not track identity or income too closely. Together, these are not symbolic gestures but structural commitments. They create the trust that allows markets to function, institutions to endure, and growth to compound over decades.

Singapore's experience is not a template to be copied wholesale, particularly in a country as large and diverse as India. Its circumstances were particular, its methods sometimes severe, and its scale unique. But it does offer a reminder that development is not built on infrastructure and growth alone. If Viksit Bharat is to be more than a slogan, economic ambition must be matched by social architecture.

As Lee Kuan Yew once said, "We were determined to build a nation where no one would feel that he had to look after only his own group." That focus, more than any single economic policy, shaped the Singapore that we admire and envy today.

Ramanan Laxminarayan is president, One Health Trust. The views expressed are personal

HINDUSTAN TIMES (P-14), 09 JANUARY 2026

Nature's spokesperson, a scientist of the people

Ashish Kothari

Madhav Gadgil called his memoirs *A Walk Up the Hill*. It aptly summed up his life — bold, unconventional, swimming against the tide. In my three-plus decades of knowing and working with him, I found in him the rare ability to bridge several gaps, between various academic fields, and between academics and activism.

His achievements in the ecological sciences, as founder of the Centre for Ecological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, were remarkable. He was among the first ecologists in modern times to question the authenticity of the forest department's "scientific forestry", showing its ecological unsustainability. He provided a rigorous base of research for many people's movements challenging destructive "development" projects, among them the iconic struggle against the Silent Valley Hydel project in the 1970s-80s. His books on India's ecological history, co-authored with Ramachandra Guha, have been essential readings for generations of students. His contribution to the drafting of India's Biological Diversity Act (we were both members of the drafting committee) was crucial.

Madhav combined rigour in his research with a deep sensitivity to issues of people's concerns and livelihoods, bridging what is often a huge chasm between advocates for the protection of nature and those of human rights. If this meant getting out of the lab and classroom, where he already excelled, into the messy arenas of what nature and people can teach us outdoors, he never hesitated. If it meant working in multiple languages and cultural idioms and communicating his findings and thoughts to the general public with minimum academic jargon, he revelled in it. If all this entailed challenging authority, he was not shy of it. He opposed policies and projects that he felt were ecologically or socially problematic. He was supportive of our attempt to create a participatory, holistic vision cutting across ecological-political-economic-social divides, in the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) process, of which he was on the national advisory body. His seminal report as head of Western Ghats Expert Ecology Panel set up by the ministry of environment, forests and climate change, was historic in its attempt to balance environment, development, livelihoods and rights. It was also inspirational that he stuck to his stand when the same governments that commissioned it rejected the findings and recommendations.

Madhav was one of the few scientists to support the struggles of Adivasis and other forest-dwelling communities to reclaim their rights to govern and use forests. He spent considerable time helping villagers in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, to prepare detailed plans for conservation and sustainable use of forests. His very recent statement that the forest department should be dissolved and the Wild Life (Protection) Act repealed, generated huge controversy, and would appear to be "extreme", especially in a situation where these can sometimes be a bulwark against the devastation caused by mining, dams and the like. But there was also a basis for it in that these have caused irreparable damage to the relationship between local communities and nature, disabled long-standing local institutions and knowledge systems that have sustained forests for long, and displaced or dispossessed a large number of forest-dwellers.

In this and other issues, Madhav's stands were at times at odds with others in civil society. At times, his view of traditional community practices and knowledge could be criticised as weak on caste and religious inequities. His championing of People's Biodiversity Registers as a means of documenting the ecological knowledge of communities challenged the notion that only so-called "expert" institutions were the repository of such knowledge. But some of us found this still relied too much on the role of the outside ecological expert, who could inadvertently become dominating, especially as part of homogeneous government programmes, whereas the community biodiversity register approach by Dalit women of the Deccan Development Society was more grounded. He was, however, always willing to enter into dialogue on such differences and focus on essential commonalities. The need to challenge India's development trajectory and the centralisation of decision-making power in the State were aspects that made him a significant ally for ecological and social justice movements. In this, he mentored generations of young people into breaking through the shackles of academia.

In mid-2025, Madhav lost his life partner, Sulochana, herself an accomplished meteorologist. As so often happens in the case of such inspirational and long-duration unions, one partner follows shortly after the other in search of other domains. I have no doubt they are forging new pathways with the same combination of intellectual rigour and human empathy they showed in their earthly journeys. Meanwhile, the rest of us will continue learning and being inspired by what they have left behind.

Ashish Kothari is an environmentalist based in Pune. The views expressed are personal

HT/14

Madhav Gadgil, the people's ecologist

IN HIS memoir, *A Walk Up The Hill*, Madhav Gadgil recounts a conversation with his father, the economist D R Gadgil, who had just returned from a deliberation on the Koyna Hydroelectric Project. "Baba was normally a cheerful person. But when we had dinner together after the meeting on Koyna, he was distraught. He said, I do believe that we need electricity to drive industrial progress, but surely, we should not be paying environmental and social costs." This was 1956. To the planners of a young nation, the often-contradictory pulls of ecology and economic development were not always apparent. His father's remarks left a deep impression on 14-year-old Madhav. Gadgil, who died on Thursday, built a career that stands as a testament to his commitment to balancing economic well-being with the protection of forests, wildlife, and aquifers. He was a rare scholar whose work is seen as synonymous with the discipline.

Born in 1942 into a family steeped in public service, he was deeply influenced by the reformist traditions of Maharashtra. His parents counted B R Ambedkar and Irawati Karve as their friends and they inspired young Madhav to be argumentative. A stint as a research scholar in the US led to lively conversations with the greats of biological sciences, such as E O Wilson. Gadgil, however, gave up on an academic career in the US to join the Indian Institute of Science, then headed by one of the country's finest institution-builders, Satish Dhawan. The Centre for Ecological Sciences, which he founded at the IISc, continues to set benchmarks in environmental studies.

Gadgil was a public intellectual in the most expansive sense of the term. One of his most influential contributions was the idea that the country's forests are not "pristine wildernesses" but cultural landscapes, shaped over millennia by human management. He argued that ecological degradation disproportionately harms the poor. The report of an environment ministry committee he headed on the Western Ghats made a powerful case for demarcating parts of the ecologically fragile area that needed to be protected against unregulated mining and tourism. He advocated greater participation of local bodies in the management of these areas. The report was vehemently opposed and remains mostly on paper, even after calamities have underscored its prescience. At a time when ecological challenges are raising questions about India's developmental trajectory, Gadgil's scholarship is a reminder that inconvenient voices need to be heard and heeded.

INDIAN EXPRESS (P-10), 09 JANUARY 2026

His environmentalism put community at the centre

HARINI NAGENDRA

Gadgil launched new work on issues as varied as sacred groves in Maharashtra and Karnataka, the dry deciduous forests in Karnataka and Kerala, and the sustainable harvest of bamboo by basket weavers

MADHAV GADGIL, India's foremost ecologist, passed away on January 7. He left behind a legacy of work that ranged from rigorous scientific research to engagement with conservation policy. He worked with grassroots movements across diverse ecological systems in India — from mining-affected communities to displaced grazers, and from forest protection communities to coastal fishermen's collectives.

To the Indian public at large, Gadgil is perhaps best known for chairing the highly discussed Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, colloquially known as the Gadgil commission, whose 2011 report delineated large sections of the Western Ghats as an ecologically sensitive zone. The report, which attracted equal volumes of praise and controversy, was never implemented, but much of what Gadgil warned of has come to pass — the unchecked economic exploitation of hillsides, forests, wetlands and rivers has had devastating impacts on the ecology and communities that live in these beautiful mountains. Well before this, he was that unusual scientist who sought to use his research to bring about real-life change.

Gadgil was born in Pune in 1942 to the economist Dhananjaya Gadgil and spent much of his childhood amidst nature, whether on his grandfather's farm in Nagpur or climbing the hills of Sinhagad. At an early age, he was deeply inspired by the anthropologist Irawati Karve and the ornithologist Salim Ali, by whom he was informally mentored.

He was a keen sportsman and naturalist who had, as he often liked to declare, a "lifelong love affair" with the Western Ghats. But he was equally at home in all parts of the country. In 1971, after completing his PhD with E O Wilson at Harvard (one of the greatest naturalists of all time), Gadgil — with his wife, the leading climate scientist Sulochana Gadgil — returned to India, joining the Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru in 1973. There, they embarked on an illustrious career in science, raising their children Siddhartha and Gauri in the Institute's green-wooded campus. In 1983, Gadgil founded the Centre for Ecological Sciences, one of India's leading centres for ecology.

At the Institute, Gadgil launched new work on issues as varied as sacred groves in Maharashtra and Karnataka, the dry deciduous forests in Karnataka and Kerala, and the sustainable harvest of bamboo by basket weavers. This work was fundamental in the creation of the Nilgiri Biosphere in 1986 and in launching India's first wild elephant census. With the renowned anthropologist K C Malhotra, he began a long collaboration that examined the historical shifts in resource use of the pastoral communities of the Western Ghats; and with the well-known historian and writer Ramachandra Guha, he wrote two now-classic books on India's ecological history that have been used in hundreds of classrooms across the world —*This Fissured Land*, and *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India*. Gadgil developed guidelines for People's Biodiversity Registers and created the Western Ghats Biodiversity Network (at which point I joined him for my PhD), bringing together college teachers to document the rich biodiversity of the Western Ghats.

He was a keen mentor of 10 PhD students, and inspired scores of young ecologists and naturalists across the country. His work was recognised by numerous Indian and international awards, including the Padma Shri, the Padma Bhushan, the Volvo Environment Prize, the Tyler Prize for Environmental Achievement, and, very recently, the UN Champions of the Earth award in 2024. Gadgil's life and experiences, his contribution to scientific research, policy and practice are far too rich and varied to list in one short summary. Perhaps the best way to understand his life and work is to read his autobiography, *A Walk up the Hill: Living with People and Nature*.

In an especially evocative passage, Gadgil wrote, "the purpose of scholarship is not merely to understand, but to deploy that understanding towards action". His message imbues us with hope in these difficult times.

The writer is director, School of Climate Change and Sustainability, Azim Premji University

PIONEER (P-9), 09 JANUARY 2026

Empowering the Northeast

ARVIND KUMAR

Software Technology Parks of India (STPI) has been at the forefront of driving India's digital transformation and entrepreneurial growth. In line with this vision, STPI's OctaNE (Open Connectivity through Technology and Networking of Entrepreneurs) initiative is creating a powerful innovation network across the Northeast, one of the country's most promising regions.

Designed as a cluster of eight Centres of Entrepreneurship (CoEs), OctaNE is catalysing deep-tech innovation, fostering start-ups, and building a self-sustaining digital ecosystem that empowers local talent to contribute to India's growing innovation economy. It seeks to bridge the gap between India's established start-up hubs and the Northeast's emerging potential. The eight interlinked CoEs focus on technology domains aligned with local strengths and global opportunities - IoT in Agriculture (Guwahati), Animation (Shillong), AR/VR (Imphal), Gaming and Entertainment (Aizawl), Data Analytics and AI (Agartala), Healthcare and Agritech (Gangtok), Drone and GIS (Itanagar), and Graphic Design (Kohima). Each CoE functions as a specialised hub while collaborating across domains to foster joint innovation. Collectively, they are projected to create jobs within CoE facilities as well as additional opportunities in start-up-led ventures in the future, reinforcing the Government's vision of digital inclusion and resilient economic growth.

OctaNE's incubation infrastructure offers start-ups end-to-end support, including cutting-edge labs, co-working spaces, technical mentorship, market access, and investor linkages. This integrated ecosystem enables entrepreneurs to reduce capital risk while accelerating innovation and go-to-market readiness. Through this network, start-ups gain access not only to infrastructure but also to a robust community of industry experts, investors, and academic partners.

Till now, STPI OctaNE CoEs in the Northeast have incubated 257 start-ups. These start-ups have collectively developed 51 working prototypes and reported 217 innovative products. The ventures nurtured by OctaNE CoEs have collectively raised external funding of more than ₹7.26 crore. In addition, 89 Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) have been filed, underlining a culture of research-driven innovation. Start-ups nurtured under OctaNE showcase the Northeast's rise as a technology-driven growth hub, blending innovation with regional strengths. Each Centre of Entrepreneurship (CoE) across the seven states drives transformation through IT, agritech, creative tech, and emerging technologies — creating impact, livelihoods, and new opportunities.

In Gangtok, Respirit Healthcare Pvt. Ltd. and Swadha Agri are applying technology in healthcare and agriculture. Respirit offers an integrated respiratory health ecosystem, while Swadha Agri's multilingual digital platform streamlines farm-to-fork operations with transparency and traceability. Deployed in Jharkhand and now being customised for Sikkim IFFCO Organics, Swadha has empowered thousands of farmers and customers.

At Aizawl, gaming start-ups like Looney Dog Productions Pvt. Ltd. and GauravGo Technologies Pvt. Ltd. are redefining entertainment. Looney Dog has developed games such as Echoes of the Past and Dark Archer, while GauravGo's SENA Mayaverse lets users play and earn, supported by in-game brand promotions. In Itanagar, Scraptechies Solutions Pvt. Ltd. builds affordable surveillance and drone technology, while Srajan Data Analytics Pvt. Ltd. develops AI tools to monitor farms and optimise yields.

At the Imphal CoE, Double Uppercut Games and Inkrid Studios Pvt. Ltd. develop immersive AR/VR games rooted in storytelling and culture. The Shillong Animation CoE supports Diffusion G Production Pvt. Ltd. in advanced CGI and Baby Jingles Pvt. Ltd. in creating engaging children's content. In Guwahati, Sarus Agro Pvt. Ltd. and Poohar Essence Pvt. Ltd. are transforming agriculture through IoT-enabled sensors and AI-based advisories.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

The Agartala CoE drives innovation through Dreambot Pvt. Ltd.'s robotic cooking platform and Auradristhti Technologies Pvt. Ltd.'s AI-powered virtual fashion-shoot solution. In Kohima, Lumapix Creative Studios LLP and Creatvise are building a vibrant design ecosystem with VFX, animation, and simplified digital workflows — positioning the Northeast as a growing force in India's digital and creative economy.

Beyond incubation, OctaNE has become a launchpad for first-generation entrepreneurs, providing world-class facilities and mentorship once limited to metropolitan centres. It encourages students, researchers, and professionals to explore emerging technologies, prototype ideas, and solve region-specific challenges, helping retain talent and drive sustainable regional growth.

OctaNE's Investor Connect initiative links start-ups with venture capitalists, angel investors, and corporate leaders, offering visibility, partnerships, and capital to scale beyond regional markets. Today, OctaNE is more than an incubation network — it is helping transform the Northeast into India's next tech frontier, spreading digital opportunity through collaboration, innovation, and inclusion.

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TRIBUNE, (P-7), 09 JANUARY 2026

Fair use or free ride? AI copyright dilemma

DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

TOWARDS the end of 2025, the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade published a working paper on Generative AI and copyright. It is the report of an expert committee to examine the vexed question of copyright protection in the era of artificial intelligence, and its findings will most likely form the basis of India's policy on the subject in the near future.

Generative AI products like ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, etc, are large language models (LLMs) that generate content based on prompts given by users. For instance, one can provide a brief storyline and ask ChatGPT to write a short story in the style of RK Narayan or Premchand, and it would generate it. Similarly, Dall-E, Midjourney (and other similar text-to-image and text-to-video generation models) can make a painting on a given subject based on prompts to generate it in the style of, say, Jamini Roy or MF Husain or a short movie clip in Satyajit Ray's style. Such outputs from generative AI models are based on their training that uses data from a variety of types of sources (like novels of Narayan or paintings of Husain and others).

The data used for training AI models may fall in different categories — copyrighted, copyright-expired works and data in the public domain available for 'fair use'. Ever since technology firms launched commercial versions of generative AI products, the question of their use of copyrighted material, such as books, research papers, photographs, films and other forms of creative expression has become central to the AI debate. It has posed complex legal, ethical and moral questions. Another unresolved issue is the copyrightability and authorship of AI-generated outputs.

UNFAIR: The govt's proposal and industry's demands leave creators at the receiving end. SANDEEP JOSHI

Governments and courts in many countries have been struggling to deal with this new phenomenon — data training of AI models. Technology companies worldwide, including in India, have argued that AI models do not violate copyright laws as they are not copying or plagiarising copyrighted books, photographs, etc, but using them only as aggregated datasets to train algorithms using patterns, styles, structures in terms of statistical relationships to enable them to generate new content. This, they claim, amounts to the well-accepted dictum of 'fair use' of creative works.

To argue that AI models are not 'copying' original works but only 'learning' from them does not hold water. This is because the process of training an AI system involves multiple steps, including copying and storage of data (original works), which, in effect, constitutes infringement. This, the AI industry says, can at most be considered a 'technical infringement', not a legal one.

Rejecting the notion that no copyright licensing is required, and after studying various models being discussed or implemented elsewhere in the world, the expert committee has recommended a hybrid framework for India. It has suggested a blanket licence to AI developers for the use of lawfully accessed copyright-protected works for training AI systems, provided the copyright holders are paid a royalty. But rightsholders will not have the option to withhold their works for use in the training of AI systems.

A centralised non-profit entity consisting of rightsholder organisations and designated by the government would be responsible for collecting the payments from AI developers. This entity would have copyright societies and industry organisations as its members, and these member-organisations would be responsible for passing on the royalties to individual creators. A certain percentage of the revenue generated from AI systems trained on copyrighted content would be payable as royalties, and the rates would be fixed by a government committee.

Technology companies argue that regulating the use of creative works and enforcing new copyright laws to make licensing compulsory would hinder technological innovation. They demand complete exemption of text and data mining (TDM) from copyright laws to enable the training of AI models. The representative of the industry body, Nasscom, in the expert committee disagreed with its recommendations and gave a dissent note. Instead of a copyright system based on the revenue of AI models, it wants a layered system of using copyrighted materials.

Nasscom has suggested that it was the responsibility of rightsholders to prevent the use of their publicly available work for TDM, and for this, they should be given an 'opt out' option at the point of availability of their work. For content which is not publicly accessible, rightsholders should be able to protect their rights through contract or licence terms. All this puts the onus on rightsholders to protect their work, which, under the present circumstances, is very difficult because copyright is being violated openly and protected material is available online illegally. Technology companies have already mined data from millions of books thus available online. The 'opt out' option also seems impractical in this scenario.

In both cases, people who create new works (rightsholders) are going to be at the receiving end. The expert panel wants automatic availability of copyright-protected works for training of AI systems and will make it a legal certainty to help the AI industry, while denying copyright holders the right to opt out of the TDM system. On the other hand, the industry is not ready to accept the royalty-based system proposed by the government, but wants to make copyright holders responsible for protecting their works through means like an 'opt out' or individual contracts. Both types of regimes are unfair to the creators of original content. In any case, the creators will have to depend on policies and whims of the platforms (and other mediators) where their content is displayed.

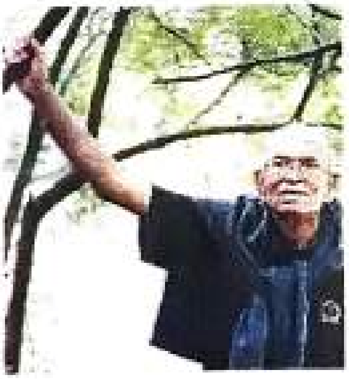
The AI companies have begun generating billions of dollars of business, and the volume is projected to grow. Yes, LLMs and other models are a result of technological innovation, but one that critically hinges on the digital theft of the work produced by millions of creative people around the globe over the decades. The copyright framework India is proposing must place the interests of creators ahead of those of the industry.

> India's copyright framework must place the interests of creators ahead of an industry built on their work.

ECONOMICS TIMES (P-4), 10 JANUARY 2026

Gadgil's Communities Are Natural Allies

For a Harvard-trained scientist working at a top-tier institution like IISc, it would have been easy for Madhav Gadgil to remain confined to labs, conferences and government panels. But Gadgil, one of the world's most influential ecologists who passed away earlier this week, thought differently. He moved effortlessly among these spaces and farmers, forest residents and young students, patiently revealing the deep, often fragile, connections between people and nature. Resisting labels such as 'pro-conservation' or 'anti-development', Gadgil placed people at the centre of ecological thinking. He argued that local communities were not obstacles to conservation but its most vital stewards.



He was also an institution builder and mentor. Gadgil established Centre for Ecological Sciences at IISc, and like a banyan tree, he offered shade, stability and a meeting ground for generations of ecologists. He chaired Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, which called for treating the range as a single ecological entity and regulating environmentally destructive activities. The report triggered a political storm. But subsequent floods and landslides in the region have only underscored the prescience of its warnings.

Among Gadgil's most enduring contributions was his work on People's Biodiversity Registers. Long before 'citizen science' became a buzzword, he envisioned communities documenting their ecological knowledge. These registers sought to rebuild fading connections between people and their landscapes, nurturing pride in local natural heritage. In a world increasingly shaped by climate change, Gadgil's vision of environmentalism — participatory, humane, and grounded equally in science and justice — remains profoundly relevant.

Is H-1B still a skills bridge, or a gatekeeping tool shaped by politics, price and perception?

Shooting Itself in the Foot

Lubna Kably

Every spring, thousands of skilled professionals across the world refresh their inboxes with quiet hope. For many Indian engineers, data scientists, doctors and architects, the H-1B visa has never been just a work permit. It has been a bridge — to opportunity, global exposure, and often to a life planned across continents.

As we head into 2026, that bridge is being redesigned. Not dismantled perhaps — but narrowed, fortified and priced differently. The question is no longer whether the H-1B programme will change, but what it is changing into.

According to a USCIS report, of the total H-1B applications (including extensions) approved in FY2024, 71%, or about 2.8 lakh, were for Indian beneficiaries. Chinese nationals, next in line, accounted for roughly 47,000 approvals, or 12% of the total.

At the same time, National Foundation for American Policy has pointed out that demand for the H-1B visa from Indian-headquartered companies is declining. In FY2025, the top 7 India-based companies had only 4,573 H-1B applications approved for initial employment — a 70% drop from fiscal 2015 and 37% fewer than in fiscal 2024. Recent comments by Indian corporate leaders suggest this trend will continue. Yet, the programme remains critically important for Indians aspiring to work in the US — and even more so for those already there.

Textbook self-harm

Perhaps the most unsettling aspect of H-1B's future is not any single rule, but how policies are now made. Most changes come through executive action rather than legislation, creating uncertainty that reverberates across borders.

Recall Trump's proclamation issued on September 19, imposing a proposed $1 lakh entry fee for H-1B workers. There was a scramble, especially among newly approved visa holders, to reach the US within 2 days to beat the deadline. Flights were hastily booked — logistics were stretched to the limit. American employers called upon H-1B hires not to travel overseas. The threat of immediate legal challenge led to a dilution, with USCIS clarifying that the fee would apply only to new applications submitted after September 21. But the episode left a mark: policy shocks can now arrive overnight.

Currently, thousands of Indians find themselves stranded in India due to another policy shift. Many had travelled for short family visits or personal emergencies. Those requiring visa stamping discovered that consular appointments had been pushed back by months.

The reason: mandatory social-media vetting for all H-1B workers and their dependents, introduced from December 15, 2025, in the name of protecting 'national interest' and 'national security'. Consulates appear unable to cope with the workload. Whether this reflects poor planning or deliberate friction is open to interpretation.

The consequences are real. Families remain separated. Rent and utility bills on locked US apartments continue to pile up. Jobs are at risk, as is children's schooling (including that of US-citizen children).

Some employers have attempted damage control. Amazon, which had the highest number of H-1B approvals in 2025 — 14,532 for continued employment and about 4,600 for new roles — has reportedly allowed certain stranded employees to work remotely from India until early March. Even then, compliance constraints limited what work could be performed. Few employers can replicate this model. The result is not only job loss but reduced productivity, harming American companies and, ultimately, the US economy.

The most unsettling aspect of H-1B's future is not any single rule, but how most policies are now made – through executive action rather than legislation

For businesses planning hiring cycles and professionals planning lives, this instability is corrosive. Immigration systems work best when they are predictable, transparent and slow to change. The H-1B has become anything but....

A structural shift is also underway. For decades, the H-1B operated through a random lottery, perhaps imperfect, but relatively neutral and unlinked to wages. From 2026, that randomness gives way to a wage-weighted selection system. Higher salaries mean better odds; lower-paid roles, regardless of skill intensity, fall behind.

On paper, the logic appears sound: higher wages signal higher skills. In reality, the human story is more complex. By tying selection probability to pay, the H-1B risks becoming a visa not for the 'most skilled' but for the most expensive jobs. The programme subtly shifts from bridging labour gaps to engineering a particular labour market outcome.

Large corporations will adapt. Startups, universities, hospitals, research labs and the like may not. Add to this department of labour's proposal to raise H-1B wage floors across levels, rising compliance costs, proposed entry fees and heightened scrutiny by USCIS and Department of Homeland Security, and the message becomes clear: financial, legal and emotional costs are rising — for American employers and H-1B workers alike.

The system still invites talent, but on terms that increasingly test endurance. There is a palpable fear that initial visa tenures could again be shortened, as they were during Trump's earlier presidency, and that requests for evidence will spike. Hanging over all of this is the uncertainty surrounding the extended two year Optional Practical Training (OPT) available to international STEM graduates.

None of this suggests reform was unnecessary. Abuse needs checking. Wage undercutting deserved correction. But taken together, these policy changes prompt a fundamental question: is H-1B still a skills bridge, or has it become a gatekeeping device shaped by politics, price and perception?

In trying to protect domestic workers, the US risks shrinking the talent pool that has powered its innovation economy. In trying to engineer outcomes, it may be discouraging precisely the flexibility and diversity that global skills migration thrives on.

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AI enters the classroom, redefining learning and leadership

RADHIKA SRIVASTAVA

2ND OPINION
THE PIONEER

Imagine a classroom where the first draft of an idea is shaped not by a student's pen, but by an algorithm; where insights emerge from a dialogue between human intuition and machine-generated possibility. This is no longer speculative fiction. It is the new academic reality. Artificial intelligence has already entered the lecture hall, the studio, and the seminar room. For the first time, students walk into class with an intellectual companion that never tires, never forgets, and never stops producing answers. It sits beside every learner, accelerating thought, amplifying curiosity, and quietly challenging the very purpose of teaching itself.

Yet, in a world where machines can generate information endlessly, they still cannot assign meaning, discern ethics, or understand intention. Here lies the paradox: the smarter the machine becomes, the deeper and more urgent the responsibility placed on human judgement.

The real question confronting business schools is not whether AI should be used, but how its presence should reshape the very architecture of learning. It is tempting for institutions to respond by adding more coding, analytics, or AI tools into the curriculum. But treating AI merely as a technical skill risks missing its deeper pedagogical impact. This is not a challenge to be policed; it is a signal. When routine tasks are increasingly automated, the value of education shifts from production to interpretation, from generating answers to questioning them. The urgency is unmistakable. As industries deploy AI to accelerate innovation, improve decision-making, and reconfigure entire value chains, business graduates must do more than operate these systems. AI brings not only opportunity but also serious concerns around ethics, accountability, privacy, and bias. If tomorrow's leaders are expected to confront these challenges responsibly, their education must reflect the complexity of the world they will inherit.

Leading institutions are already experimenting with models where AI is not taught in isolation but embedded across disciplines, from marketing and finance to public policy and social impact. This multidisciplinary approach helps students see AI not simply as a tool, but as a lens through which modern organisational dilemmas can be examined. The most powerful learning emerges when AI meets reality. Case studies involving targeted welfare systems or predictive policing expose students to difficult trade-offs between efficiency and fairness, accuracy and privacy, innovation and regulation. Through role-plays, data audits, and structured debates, students witness how even well-designed systems carry social consequences. They grapple with questions of consent, surveillance, equity, and transparency, learning early that responsible leadership demands both technical fluency and moral clarity. In an AI-led world, critical thinking is no longer an academic exercise; it is a professional necessity. Faculty must recalibrate their roles. Teaching increasingly means guiding students through the final steps AI cannot take: inferring meaning, interrogating assumptions, evaluating evidence, and exercising judgement.

Ultimately, AI's arrival compels business schools to revisit the purpose of management education itself. AI may be the new teaching assistant, but the true transformation lies in how it pushes institutions to reimagine what it means to learn, lead, and create impact in an increasingly algorithmic world.

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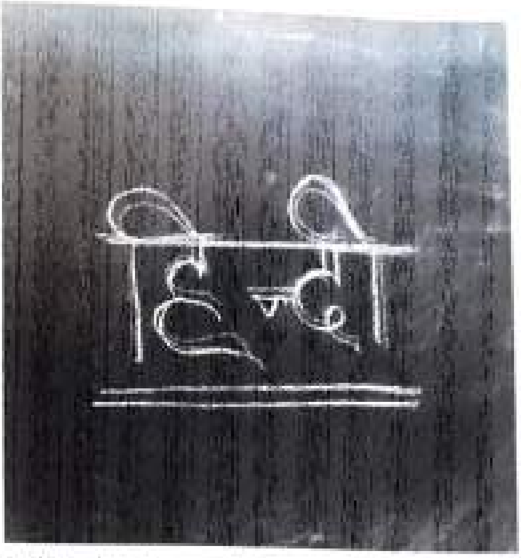
PIONEER (P-9), 10 JANUARY 2026

Hindi: From civilisational root to global connector language



AK SHARMA

Languages do not merely enable communication; they carry the memory, struggles, and aspirations of a civilisation. Hindi, one of the world's most widely spoken languages today, is not a product of a single era but the result of a long historical evolution shaped by cultural exchange, resistance, creativity, and adaptation. World Hindi Day, observed annually on January 10, marks this extraordinary journey and commemorates the First World Hindi Conference held in Nagpur in 1975, which formally positioned Hindi on the global linguistic map.

The evolution of Hindi can be traced back to Sanskrit, the classical language of ancient India. Over centuries, Sanskrit interacted with Prakrit and Apabhramsha, gradually giving rise to regional dialects that would later consolidate into modern Hindi. Medieval Bhakti poets such as Kabir, Tulsidas, and Surdas used early forms of Hindi to reach the common people, breaking linguistic elitism and transforming language into a democratic force. Hindi, therefore, evolved not as a courtly imposition but as a people's language-organic, inclusive, and adaptive.

During India's freedom struggle, Hindi assumed an even more decisive role. In a colonised nation divided by geography, caste, and language, Hindi emerged as a medium of mass mobilisation. Mahatma Gandhi believed that political freedom was incomplete without linguistic self-respect and consistently advocated the use of Indian languages, especially Hindi, in public life. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Ram Manohar Lohia used Hindi to articulate nationalist ideas, ensuring that the freedom movement was not restricted to English-speaking elites but resonated across villages and towns.

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Parallelly, Hindi literature became a mirror to India's social conscience. Writers such as Munshi Premchand exposed social inequality and rural distress; Mahadevi Verma and Jaishankar Prasad enriched Hindi with philosophical depth and lyrical elegance; Harivansh Rai Bachchan brought emotional universality to modern Hindi poetry. Through literature, Hindi matured into a language capable of expressing protest, romance, spirituality, and modernity.

Importantly, Hindi's growth has never been confined to India alone. Foreign scholars and writers have played a crucial role in shaping its global identity. Max Müller, the German Indologist, stressed the civilisational value of Indian languages in understanding world history. Russian scholars translated Premchand and other Hindi writers during the 20th century, while universities in Japan, China, South Korea, Europe, and the United States actively teach Hindi today. This global academic engagement underscores that Hindi is not merely a regional language but a language of international cultural relevance.

The importance of World Hindi Day lies in recognising this global journey while reaffirming Hindi's role at home. In a country as linguistically diverse as India, Hindi functions as a link language, facilitating communication without erasing regional identities. The experiences of countries like China and South Korea offer a valuable parallel-despite long periods of Western influence, their native languages remain central to governance, education, and cultural expression. India's linguistic plurality similarly proves that promoting Hindi need not come at the cost of other languages; coexistence, not competition, is the true strength of a multilingual nation.

As India emerges as a global economic and cultural force, Hindi stands at a critical juncture. Its future lies not in symbolic celebration alone, but in meaningful integration-across technology, education, diplomacy, cinema, and digital platforms. World Hindi Day is therefore not just a tribute to the past, but a call to action: to ensure that Hindi continues to evolve as a language of ideas, inclusion, and global dialogue-rooted in India's civilisation, yet confidently conversing with the world.

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India's real AI challenge is not technology, but skills recognition

India is witnessing an unprecedented surge in self-driven, online, and modular learning. Enrolments in AI, data science, cybersecurity, and cloud computing have grown sharply across platforms such as Coursera, SWAYAM, and private skilling providers

FIRST Column

DINESH SOOD

The year 2025 has quietly confirmed a hard truth for India: the race for global competitiveness will not be won by artificial intelligence alone, but by how fast Indian workers can adapt to it. While debates often fixate on AI replacing jobs, the deeper disruption lies elsewhere: jobs are mutating faster than our systems of education, certification, and hiring can keep up.

Globally, skills required for AI-exposed roles are changing 66 per cent faster than those in less-exposed jobs, according to PwC. India, with its massive and youthful workforce, is particularly exposed to this churn. Degrees, once a near-permanent passport to employment, are losing their signalling power in a labour market where relevance now has a shelf life of just two to three years.

India produces over 1.5 million engineering graduates annually, yet industry surveys consistently show that fewer than half are immediately employable in emerging digital roles. This is not a failure of intelligence or effort. It is a failure of alignment between what people learn, what employers need, and how skills are formally recognised. Encouragingly, Indian workers have already sensed this shift.

India's Silent Learning Boom

India is witnessing an unprecedented surge in self-driven, online, and modular learning. Enrolments in AI, data science, cybersecurity, and cloud computing have grown sharply across platforms such as Coursera, SWAYAM, and private skilling providers. According to industry estimates, India is now among the top three global markets for online professional learning, with millions of learners upgrading skills alongside full-time jobs.

This signals a major behavioural shift: learning is no longer remedial—undertaken after job loss—but anticipatory, driven by the fear of obsolescence and the promise of mobility. The government's Skill India Mission, PMKVY, and the National Education Policy 2020 have laid the groundwork by legitimising lifelong learning and vocational mobility.

AI-EXPOSED ROLES ARE CHANGING 66 PER CENT FASTER THAN THOSE IN LESS-EXPOSED JOBS

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Yet a paradox persists. While Indians are acquiring skills faster than ever, employers still rely on outdated markers—degrees, college brands, and years of experience—to judge capability. The result is widespread skill underutilisation, talent mismatch, and slower productivity growth.

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs 2025 report projects that nearly 44-46 per cent of core job skills in India will change by 2030. Traditional credentials were never designed for such velocity. As a result, workers often possess current, job-ready skills that remain invisible to recruiters and institutions.

The Cost of Not Recognising Skills

India's labour market inefficiencies are not just individual problems; they are macroeconomic constraints. Despite being a global IT powerhouse, India faces persistent shortages in AI engineers, cybersecurity analysts, semiconductor technicians, and green-energy specialists. At the same time, millions of trained youth remain underemployed or stuck in low-productivity roles. This mismatch costs India growth, innovation, and global competitiveness.

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LinkedIn's Economic Graph insights suggest that better skills recognition alone could expand the effective AI talent pool multiple times over by unlocking latent capabilities already present in the workforce. For a country aspiring to be a $5 trillion economy, this is low-hanging fruit.

India has invested heavily in digital public infrastructure-Aadhaar, DigiLocker, UPI, and the Digital Public Stack. Yet skills remain analogue-fragmented across certificates, private platforms, training centres, and informal experience, with no unified, verifiable record.

This gap becomes critical as India positions itself in high-growth sectors: AI, semiconductor manufacturing, renewable energy, defence production, health tech, and digital public services. Without portable and trusted skills recognition, labour mobility across sectors and states will remain constrained.

Towards an Indian Skills Passport

The solution lies not in replacing degrees, but in complementing them with a national digital skills passport—a verified, continuously updated record of an individual's capabilities.

Such a system would document skills acquired through universities, online platforms, apprenticeships, industry training, and on-the-job experience. Linked to DigiLocker and Aadhaar (with privacy safeguards), it could allow employers to verify competencies in real time, rather than infer them indirectly.

India already has partial building blocks. The National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF), sector skill councils, and digital credential initiatives exist—but they operate in silos. What is missing is integration and employer adoption.

A skills passport would enable faster hiring, smoother career transitions, and greater confidence among workers to move into emerging fields like AI, climate technologies, and advanced manufacturing. It would also encourage companies to hire based on demonstrated ability rather than pedigree—an essential shift in a country as diverse as India.

The Way Forward: Degrees to Demonstrated Ability

India's next productivity leap will not come from importing technology, but from unlocking the full value of its human capital. First, India must integrate learning platforms, skilling programmes, and industry certifications into a national digital skills registry, aligned with labour-market demand and updated annually.

Second, public and private employers should be nudged through policy and procurement norms to adopt skills-first hiring, reducing over-reliance on degrees.

Third, skilling incentives must shift from enrolment numbers to employment outcomes, ensuring relevance and accountability.

Finally, continuous learning should be financially supported through tax incentives, credit-linked skilling, and employer co-investment.

If the 2010s were India's decade of digital infrastructure and the 2020s its phase of AI adoption, the 2030s will be defined by how quickly Indians can learn, unlearn, and be recognised for what they know. The real question is no longer whether India has talent. It does. The question is whether India can build *a system that sees, signals, and mobilises that talent at speed.*

अनंत संभावनाओं को समेटे है हिंदी

दस जनवरी का दिन 'विश्व हिंदी दिवस' के रूप में हिंदी प्रेमियों को उत्साह से भर देता है। यह दिन हमें हिंदी भाषा के ऐतिहासिक परिप्रेक्ष्य, उसकी वर्तमान स्थिति और भविष्य की संभावनाओं पर विचार-मंथन का अवसर भी प्रदान करता है। इस वर्ष 'विश्व हिंदी दिवस' हमारे लिए ऐतिहासिक है, क्योंकि नागपुर में आयोजित प्रथम विश्व हिंदी सम्मेलन को पचास वर्ष पूर्ण हो रहे हैं। 1975 में नागपुर में 10 जनवरी को आयोजित प्रथम विश्व हिंदी सम्मेलन वैश्विक स्तर पर हिंदी के प्रचार-प्रसार का महत्वपूर्ण प्रयास था, जिसका उद्घोष था-'वसुधैव कुटुंबकम्'। 30 देशों के 122 प्रतिनिधियों ने उसमें सहभागिता की थी। उस सम्मेलन ने भारत और भारत के बाहर बसे भारतीयों में अपनी भाषाई और सांस्कृतिक पहचान को वैश्विक मंच पर स्थापित करने की उत्कंठा जगा दी। उनमें केवल राष्ट्रीय स्तर पर ही नहीं, बल्कि विश्व स्तर पर भी हिंदी के प्रचार-प्रसार से जुड़ने का संकल्प जागृत हुआ। राष्ट्रीय और सांस्कृतिक दृष्टि से ही नहीं, बल्कि वैश्विक आवश्यकता की दृष्टि से भी हिंदी का महत्व रहा है। अनेक विदेशी विद्वानों ने भी हिंदी की सेवा की है। इस दृष्टि से बेल्जियम के फादर कामिल बुल्के, मारीशस के अभिमन्यु अनंत, जापान के प्रो. क्यूया दोई, जर्मनी के लोथार लुत्से, मास्को के येवगेनी पेत्रोविच चेलिशेव, श्रीलंका की इंद्रा दसनायक, न्यूजीलैंड के रोनाल्ड स्टुअर्ट मैकग्रेगर तथा हंगरी के इमरै बंधा आदि के नाम गिनाए जा सकते हैं।

भाषा किसी भी देश की संस्कृति की मूल्यवान उपलब्धि होती है। वह हमारे भावबोध और आत्मबोध का ऐसा हिस्सा होती है, जिसे यदि हमसे काटकर अलग कर दिया जाए तो हमारा अस्तित्व खतरे में पड़ जाता है। हर भाषा उसे बोलने वालों के इर्द-गिर्द एक जादुई घेरा खींच देती है। यह जादुई घेरा वस्तुतः भाषा की परिधि ही है, जिसके भीतर हमारी पहचान सुरक्षित रहती है, क्योंकि भाषा किसी समूह के सांस्कृतिक प्रतीक-रूपों में जीवित रहती है। आज हिंदी की वैश्विक उपस्थिति ने सिद्ध कर दिया है कि शब्द-सृष्टि का व्यापार अनंत संभावनाओं से परिपूर्ण है। विश्व स्तर पर हिंदी की मांग के नए व्यावसायिक तथा सामाजिक-सांस्कृतिक संदर्भ उभर रहे हैं। विश्वभर में बसे भारतीय हिंदी के स्वाभिमान को बनाए रखने के लिए निरंतर प्रयासरत हैं। वे यह भली-भांति जानते हैं कि हर भाषा की संरचना के सामाजिक-सांस्कृतिक स्रोत होते हैं। इसीलिए भाषा हमें अपने इतिहास, मिथक और परंपरा से जोड़ती है। यह जुड़ाव ही सामूहिक अस्मिता बनकर अत्यंत मूल्यवान हो जाता है। इस प्रकार हिंदी का विश्वबोध निर्मित हो रहा है। भारत की तेज आर्थिक प्रगति को देखकर भाषाशास्त्रियों का अनुमान है कि आने वाले समय में अंतरराष्ट्रीय स्तर पर संपर्क की जो दस भाषाएं होंगी, उनमें हिंदी भी शामिल रहेगी। वह ज्ञान-विज्ञान, उच्च प्रौद्योगिकी तथा नवाचार के वैश्विक परिदृश्य में अपने सामर्थ्य को सिद्ध करेगी। भूमंडलीकरण से जन्मी परिस्थितियों ने भी विश्व भाषा के रूप में हिंदी की स्थिति को सुदृढ किया है।

कुमुद शर्मा

राजभाषा, संपर्क भाषा और जनभाषा के सोपानों को पार कर हिंदी अब विश्वभाषा बनने की ओर अवसर है

विश्व स्तर पर हिंदी की बढ़ती मांग • प्रतीकात्मक

उपभोक्तावादी संस्कृति में भाषा की शक्ति और सामर्थ्य का मानक बाजार बन गया है। आज भाषा समृद्धि के मानदंडों से नियंत्रण और निर्धारण के खेल को स्वीकार या अस्वीकार करती है। भारत के बदलते सांस्कृतिक और आर्थिक माहौल ने बहुराष्ट्रीय कंपनियों में भारतीयता को अपनी मार्केटिंग का प्रभावी हथियार बनाकर अपने उत्पादों के प्रचार-प्रसार की प्रवृत्ति को बढ़ावा दिया है। उन्होंने भारतीय आस्थाओं, परंपराओं और छवियों को विज्ञापनों में जागृत करना शुरू कर दिया है। इन दिनों विज्ञापनों में भारतीय सांस्कृतिक प्रतीकों का व्यापक उपयोग हो रहा है। विज्ञापन निर्माता हिंदी तथा भारतीय भाषाओं का प्रयोग कर भारत के राष्ट्रीय स्वाभिमान को जागृत कर रहे हैं। मनोरंजन उद्योग ने भी हिंदी के वैश्विक क्षितिज को अभूतपूर्व विस्तार दिया है। हिंदी फिल्मों के माध्यम से हिंदी दुनिया भर के देशों में फैल रही है।

हर भाषा अपने युग की परिस्थितियों और प्रेरणाओं के अनुसार बदलती है। आज 'तकनीकी वर्चस्व' के युग में तकनीक हिंदी को नयापन दे रही है। क्षेत्रीय भाषाओं के शब्दों और बोलचाल के शब्दों से हिंदी का नया स्वरूप भी सामने आ रहा है। ऐसे ही विकास के कई मोड़ों से गुजरकर हिंदी अपनी अंतरराष्ट्रीय क्षमता की पहचान बना रही है। हिंदी की अंतरराष्ट्रीय क्षमता का विकास बाजार की जरूरतों से बने विश्वग्राम और विश्व-मानव की मांग भी है। राजभाषा, संपर्क भाषा और जनभाषा के सोपानों को पार कर हिंदी विश्वभाषा बनने की ओर अग्रसर है। उच्च प्रौद्योगिकी के युग में संचार क्रांति के रथ पर आरूढ़ होकर मीडिया के माध्यम से वह अपनी शक्ति से विश्व को परिचित करा रही है। आज आवश्यकता इसकी है कि हम उसकी ठोस सामाजिक और सांस्कृतिक मनोभूमि, उसकी उदारता तथा उसके संरचनात्मक वैशिष्ट्य की अर्थवत्ता को समझें और उसके विस्तार की अनंत संभावनाओं की तलाश करें। यह विश्वास लेकर हिंदी के विकास से जुड़ें कि हिंदी अपनी ऊर्जा से डिजिटल क्रांति के साथ सामंजस्य बिठाते हुए विश्व मंच पर देश का गौरव बढ़ा सकती है।

(लेखिका महात्मा गांधी अंतरराष्ट्रीय हिंदी विश्वविद्यालय, वर्धा की कुलपति हैं)

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India's medical education at a crossroads

BOOK REVIEW

MANISH ANAND

A powerful new book drawing on regulatory experience, court records and on-ground data has brought attention to the future of medical education in India, while examining the effectiveness of reforms. Authored with insider clarity, the book — *Under the Scalpel: Reviving India's Medical Education* by P Sesh Kumar-examines the journey from the scandal-ridden Medical Council of India (MCI) to the National Medical Commission (NMC), and questions whether India's race to expand medical seats is sacrificing quality, equity and human wellbeing.

At the heart of the book lies a searing critique of NEET, India's single high-stakes entrance examination. While acknowledging that NEET reduced corruption and introduced a national benchmark, the author argues that its over-reliance has turned medical admissions into a "gladiatorial contest". Students begin preparing as early as 13, often enduring 14-hour coaching days, crippling anxiety and emotional isolation. Kota, India's coaching capital, emerges as a tragic symbol-where at least 26 student suicides were reported in 2023 alone, writes Kumar. The book warns that this is not an anomaly but "the tip of a mental health iceberg" that policymakers continue to ignore. The crisis deepens after MBBS, he grimly notes in the book, adding: "Each year, over one lakh graduates compete for barely 74,000 postgraduate seats, half of which are in private colleges charging up to ₹1 crore for popular specialities." For middle- and lower-income students, the book notes, this turns aspiration into a ransom demand. A single error in NEET-PG, Kumar argues, can derail years of effort, forcing many into forced breaks, foreign migration or career abandonment.

While the government highlights seat expansion as a success-MBBS seats rising from 83,000 to over 1.18 lakh, and PG seats from 42,000 to 74,000 — the book asks a sobering question: are we mass-producing degrees or competent doctors? He further states that "inspections of newer colleges reveal low patient loads, skeletal faculty and inadequate laboratories". "Super-speciality seats remain abysmally low, with fewer than 2,500 DM/MCh seats nationwide, leaving nearly 80 per cent of specialist posts in district hospitals vacant," he adds in the book.

Faculty shortages form another fault line, the book reveals. Becoming a professor requires nearly a decade of post-MD experience, yet colleges have multiplied rapidly. To address this, the NMC liberalised faculty and infrastructure norms-allowing visiting faculty, reducing bed requirements and easing laboratory standards. While this helped expansion in resource-poor districts, the book warns it has also opened the door to corner-cutting and "desk-based inspections", raising fears of diluted clinical training.

The book also examines the NEXT (National Exit Test)-envisioned as a single exam for MBBS exit, licensure and PG admission. Despite being legislated in 2019, NEXT has been repeatedly deferred, leaving students trapped in regulatory limbo. Attempts to impose it retrospectively were challenged in court, further eroding trust.

A major section of the book is devoted to regulatory failure and corruption. Despite biometric attendance, CCTV mandates and digital audits, ghost faculty and fake patient data persist. "Between 2021 and 2023, over 40 medical colleges faced derecognition, with many cases reaching the Supreme Court. Alarmingly, recent CBI raids — not NMC inspections-exposed inspection scams across multiple states, raising uncomfortable questions about internal vigilance," Kumar reveals in the book.

The book also highlights inequity in geography and access. Nearly half of India's medical colleges are concentrated in just five states, while populous and high-burden regions like Bihar and Odisha lag far behind. Meanwhile, high fees and opaque counselling leave thousands of seats vacant each year — available on paper, unaffordable in practice. This is a telling revelation by Kumar on the nagging challenges faced by India's medical education system.

Perhaps most poignantly, the book documents the desperation driving Indian students abroad. Hundreds were expelled mid-course from foreign universities in 2025, with no refund, no transfer and no protection-turning medical dreams into financial ruin. Kumar cites examples from Russian medical colleges where a nexus of agents and administrators makes students take admissions in excess of capacity, only for them to be expelled after two years on flimsy grounds. From Kenya to the Philippines, from Russia to China, and from Bangladesh to Iran, over a lakh medical aspirants leave India to fulfil their dreams. Sadly, only 30 per cent of them pass examinations in India to obtain a licence to practise.

This should be a wake-up call for administrators and India's medical education czars that reforms are still half-baked and objectives far from achieved. In its concluding chapters, the book calls for sanity alongside scale: unified national counselling, a US-style residency match, integrated health-education governance, mental health support for aspirants, curriculum harmonisation across boards, and relentless regulatory oversight. The message is stark: meritocracy and transparency must be non-negotiable, or India risks repeating the very failures that led to the MCI's collapse.

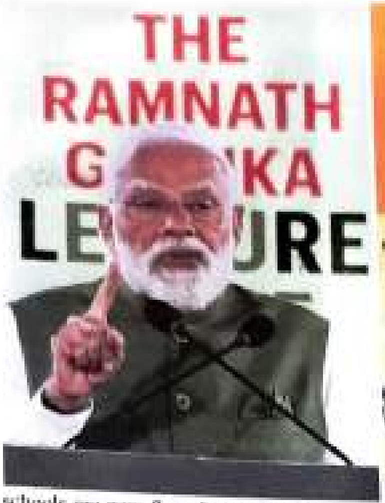
As India seeks to become a global healthcare powerhouse, the book serves as both a warning and a roadmap-reminding policymakers that in medical education, the true cost of failure is ultimately paid in human lives.

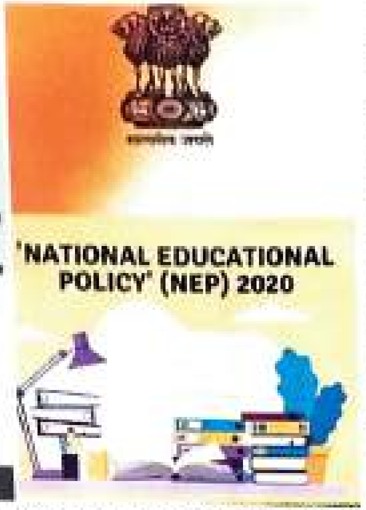
(The writer is a senior Delhi-based journalist)

STATESMAN (P-6), 11 JANUARY 2026

Sorry state of education

The National Education Policy 2020 rightly aims to introduce vocational education at all levels, by integrating vocational education into mainstream education. However, implementation of NEP 2020 seems to be running far behind schedule: NEP had envisaged that by 2025, at least half of the students would have vocational exposure, through school and higher education. The problem in implementation of NEP appears to be of finance and resolve; the NEP document requires that 6 per cent of GDP be spent on education, while we are spending less than half that





Addressing the Sixth Ramnath Goenka Lecture on 17 November 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi slammed Macaulay's 1835 education policy for instilling a 'slavery mentality' in India. The PM set a ten-year deadline to exorcize Macaulay's ghost - in the 200th year of publication Macaulay's Minute on Education. The PM's speech triggered a debate on Macaulay and his education policy, which was enthusiastically joined by politicians of all hues.

Sadly, few of the debaters, if any, chose to discuss, even in passing, the current state of education in India - which would have been much more relevant - because much is wrong with our present education system. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024, a survey of 6.5 lakh children revealed that 76 per cent of Class 3 students, 55.2 per cent of Class 5 students, 32.5 per cent of Class 8 students still cannot read Class 2 level texts, and over 66 per cent of Class 3 and Class 5 students, struggle with simple maths.

Also none of our 1,338 universities figured in the top 100 of the QS World University Rankings, 2025. Aiming at a Gross Enrolment Ratio of 100 per cent by 2030, and a current 88.4 per cent pass rate in twelfth board examinations, with 1.1 lakh students scoring above 90 per cent in CBSE alone, secondary education appears to be doing better. This façade is ripped away at engineering and medical examinations; the qualifying score was 20.56 per cent at the JEE Advanced Examination, and 18.75 per cent, in NEET. Probably, it would be unfair to blame Macaulay for this sad state of affairs, 166 years after his death, or the British, seventy-eight years after their exit from India.

The neglect of education by successive Governments can be gauged from the fact that till today, Government schools established by the British, more than a century ago, are the backbone of our education system. Due to neglect over the years, most Government schools are now floundering, with falling buildings, and a huge shortage of teachers, affecting education of the majority of students in the country. A viral video from Bihar showed five primary Government schools operating from a single room, with five teachers writing on a single blackboard, to a roomful of bemused children. Obviously, education imparted in such schools would be of an abysmal standard, yet, despite pontifications at the highest levels, no efforts are visible for the improvement of Government schools.

The much-reviled British-era education system was successful in promoting upward mobility on a truly large scale. Many icons of modern India like President Abdul Kalam came from disadvantaged backgrounds, had their education in Government schools, and went on to excel in their chosen fields. The system ran smoothly; in small cities, all children right from the Collector's son to his peon's son, went to the same Government school, where practically no fees were charged. The same was true of universities, medical colleges and engineering colleges; once you got admission, the least of your worries was paying for your education.

Slowly, the system disintegrated. The first casualty was primary education. Almost unanimously in the 1960s, all State Governments decided that English should no longer be taught in primary schools. English, however, continued as the language of high society, business and finance, as also of prestigious examinations like IAS and NDA. Quite naturally, educated parents pulled their children out of Government schools.

Secondary education was the next victim. Initially, each State had a Secondary Education Board with healthy competition between various State Boards. Slowly, however, vested interests ensured that the education mafia displaced genuine educationists at crucial levels; examination malpractices became rampant; Bihar Board achieved widespread notoriety when photographs were published of parents scaling walls to "help" their wards. This notoriety was reinforced when videos emerged of Bihar toppers fumbling to answer basic questions. The once respected UP Board did not lag behind; one-sixth of examinees dropped out, when the Government got tough with the copying mafias. Moreover, most State Boards are prone to change their syllabus and teaching policies with a change in Government.

DEVENDRA SAXENA

The writer is a retired Principal Chief Commissioner of Income-Tax

The problems facing Government schools are aggravated by the tyranny of local administrations, which commandeers Government school teachers, whenever the Government needs extra manpower. Government school teachers are called for census operations, elections of all kinds, spreading awareness about Government schemes etc. Government school buildings are regularly requisitioned for police deployment, elections and other contingencies. Students are called in to swell crowds at all manner of Government programmes. Ours is a leading economy of the world; surely, we can hire ad-hoc volunteers to carry forward Government schemes, and leave teachers to teach. The Government could also ensure that Government schools are not used for non-educational purposes. To stem the rot in Government schools, the Government may appoint able and motivated persons, with sufficient financial and administrative powers, as heads of Government schools.

Even in the times of AI, the right kind of university education is necessary for top jobs, because it develops essential skills like analytical thinking, active learning, and complex problem solving. Despite PM Modi declaring that "hard work is more powerful than Harvard," college graduates with the right skillset are paid more, and employed at the highest levels. This would explain why eight lakh students appear for the 16,000 IIT seats, and admissions to some Delhi colleges require 100 per cent marks in the Twelfth Board.

Mutatis mutandis, the IIT story is replicated in NEET. Private universities, which charge a bomb for their courses, are burgeoning, because students graduating from these institutions can easily land a good job. The icing on the cake is that an alumnus of IIT/IIM can, one day, become the CEO of some top US corporate.

On the other hand, most universities, including run of the mill engineering colleges teaching outdated syllabi, struggle to fill their classrooms. The obvious solution of updating syllabi that will make their educational courses relevant for contemporary needs - and prevent wastage of educational resources - somehow appears to have eluded our planners. In this scenario, a student of ordinary means faces a cruel dilemma. After completing his school education, he has little capital, skill or experience to strike out on his own. Not having the talent, or resources, for admission to a top notch college after wasting several years of his life, and his parent's money, he would get some low paying job after graduation, perpetuating inequality.

Ideally, education should be linked to jobs, which would entail popularizing vocational courses, and establishing a sufficient number of colleges offering vocational education. This is not an untried idea: one-half to nearly two-thirds of students pursue vocational education in countries like Germany and Switzerland.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 rightly aims to introduce vocational education at all levels, by integrating vocational education into mainstream education. However, implementation of NEP 2020, seems to be running far behind schedule; NEP had envisaged that by 2025, at least half of the students would have vocational exposure, through school and higher education. The problem in implementation of NEP appears to be of finance and resolve; the NEP document requires that 6 per cent of GDP be spent on education, while we are spending less than half that. Further, changeover to NEP would require teacher re-education, new infrastructure and a complete overhaul of the education system - which is easier said than achieved.

Industry and businesses are offering high-paying jobs for specialists in every field, who may not be college graduates e.g. horticulturists, nannies, vaccine specialists, customer marketing managers etc. An easily verifiable manifestation of this trend is the remuneration of drivers in Government and PSUs, who often earn more than fresh graduates. Probably, a small beginning can be made by colleges to offer courses that develop specialization in emerging fields.

The Government can also rethink its Institutes of Excellence (IoE) initiative, which has hit a roadblock, with only 12 institutes (out of 20) being granted the IoE tag, and funding of Rs.3,200 crore, out of Rs.10,000 crore, being utilised. Currently, the Empowered Expert Committee for IoE is lying defunct for more than two years, making any action on IoE unlikely. Probably, the unutilized funds of Rs.6,800 crore of IoE can be used to establish good vocational colleges in all districts, and thereby kickstart vocational education.

Finally, to learn, we must understand the importance of education. As Mahatma Gandhi had said: "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever."

Whose English is it?

An interview with ELT expert Alan Maley on native-speakerism in English

Albert P'Rayan

"Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) preferred". "Must be a native English speaker with an American or British accent". "Anglo-Indian teachers can apply." Such statements are commonly found in advertisements for English teaching positions.

Native-speakerism in English is an ideology that privileges British or American English and assumes that native speakers are inherently more qualified to teach English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). This perpetuates discriminatory practices in English language teaching (ELT), where highly proficient and professionally trained non-native teachers are often marginalised, their competence questioned, and their expertise undervalued.

In recent decades, ELT professionals advocating inclusivity and equity have increasingly challenged this ideology. Grounded in the concept of World Englishes – the diverse and dynamic varieties of English used worldwide – they argue that these should be acknowledged, respected, and valued rather than hierarchically ranked.

In this interview, Alan Maley, a renowned ELT expert and advocate of Global English, discusses the origins of native-speakerism, the reasons for its persistence, its continuing impact on the profession worldwide, and the need to dismantle it.

BEAUTIFULL
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How do you conceptualise native-speakerism within the context of English language teaching?

The dominance of languages is closely linked to economic, military, cultural, and political power. English has achieved unprecedented global reach. As a result, English language teaching has become a highly profitable international industry. Since the 1960s, demand for English has grown exponentially, with the U.K. and the U.S. dominating teacher education, research, publishing, and testing. Institutions offering tests and qualifications such as TOEFL, IELTS, CELTA, and DELTA are largely based in these countries. This concentration of authority reinforces the belief that native speakers are inherently better teachers.

To what extent do Western-centric models of ELT continue to sustain native-speakerism?

The professionalisation of ELT has largely been driven by English-speaking countries. Dictionaries, grammars, qualifications, and assessments have standardised English and concentrated control over the language in metropolitan centres. Standardisation enables reification – turning language into an object – which then allows commodification. Western models of "standard" English therefore underpin the continuing assumption of native-speaker superiority.

How does native-speakerism affect the quality, diversity, and inclusivity of ELT worldwide?

Clearly, native-speakerism has the effect of undervaluing non-native speaker teachers, which impacts their self-esteem and potentially reduces their motivation for professional development. In this respect, it can diminish the quality of the teaching on offer.

But we also need to remember that, statistically, native-speaker teachers of English will always be in a minority. As the level of expertise grows in countries around the world, so the value of non-native speaker teachers is enhanced. We can observe this in the invaluable work of language teacher associations in many countries worldwide. So, I think the credibility of the native-speaker hegemony is on the wane, though it has by no means disappeared.

What steps can institutions take to ensure more equitable recruitment practices?

This is close to my heart. In 1998, I was invited to set up an M.A. programme at a prestigious private university in Thailand. I accepted on the condition that I would have a free hand in appointing faculty. As our students were from across Asia, I appointed lecturers of diverse nationalities: Indian, Singaporean, Italian, Burmese, Dutch and Thai. I was the only native speaker. This caused consternation in the upper echelons of the university, and also among our first batches of students, who asked, "Where are the native speakers?" However, the quality of the course soon established our reputation, showing that a more inclusive policy can work.

How do deeply held beliefs about "standard" or "correct" English continue to reinforce native-speakerism, even when inclusive practices are demonstrably effective?

Language use is inherently variable and constantly changing, yet humans attempt to codify and standardise it. Standardisation serves practical purposes, but it is also linked to power, control, and nation-building. So-called "standard English" is, therefore, a convenient fiction. While one or two standard varieties may be useful for international communication, learners should be prepared to encounter multiple Englishes.

What concrete measures can counter native-speakerist assumptions?

Teacher educators play a key role in raising awareness, and publishers and institutions such as the British Council are increasingly open to questioning long-held beliefs about native-speaker superiority.

How do you envision the future of ELT beyond native-speakerism?

We must rethink how English is taught and reassess its role as a global language. This reorientation allows us to imagine a more inclusive ELT profession – one that values competence over origin, embraces linguistic diversity, and recognises English as a shared global resource rather than the property of a privileged few.

**The term World Englishes was introduced by linguist Braj Kachru at the 1984 TESOL Conference held in Houston, Texas, the U.S.*

The writer is an ELT resource person and education columnist. Email: [illegible]

4/5

Active educational loan accounts in T.N. decline drastically

The number reduced from over 9 lakh in FY16 to about 3 lakh in FY25

DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Although students from Tamil Nadu remain the leading recipients of educational loans across India, there has been a significant decline in the number of active loans they hold. Given that this student group has been the most active borrower in the country in the last decade, this sharp downward trend warrants a closer analysis.

Chart 1A shows the number of active educational loan accounts in lakh across India between FY16 and FY25. The number decreased from 27.4 lakh accounts to about 20.1 lakh in the period. The fall can be mostly attributed to the fall in Tamil Nadu's numbers.

Chart 1B shows the number of active educational loan accounts in lakh in Tamil Nadu between FY16 and FY25. The number drastically reduced from 9.1 lakh accounts to 3.1 lakh in the period. It is important to note that these are active loan accounts and so they do not include those which were completely repaid or written off.

The decline shown in Chart 1A is primarily driven by the sharp contraction shown in Chart 2B. This is due to the fact that students from Tamil Nadu initially accounted for a disproportionately large share of education loans nationwide; consequently, even after a significant reduction, their borrowing volume remains high enough to dictate the overall trend.

Chart 1D shows Tamil Nadu's share in active educational loans over the years. Between FY16 and FY20, about 30-35% of India's educational loans were garnered by students in Tamil Nadu. Notably, in this period, only Kerala came close with students in the State forming about 12% of the outstanding educational loans in the period, followed by Maharashtra and Karnataka, each at about 8%. Even after the decline, Tamil Nadu's students formed 15% of India's outstanding education loans in FY25, the highest share for any State.

Notably, when borrowing by Tamil Nadu students is excluded from the national total, the number of active loan accounts in India remains remarkably stable. **Chart 1C** illustrates this trend between FY16 and FY25. It shows that, barring a temporary dip during the pandemic years, loan volumes across the rest of the country have held steady rather than declined.

Notably, the decline in active loan accounts in Tamil Nadu is not only because of the pandemic, with numbers trending downward consistently since FY16. This raises a critical question: is this sustained decline a result of sharply reduced accessibility within the State, or is it a market correction – a return to the 'expected volume' after an era of arguably inflated figures driven by overly liberal lending policies?

While the number of active loan accounts may have decreased, the amount of outstanding loans has increased. This essentially means that while the number of loan takers reduced, the loan taken per borrower has increased.

Chart 2A shows the amount of outstanding educational loans in crore between FY16 and FY25. The amount increased from around ₹55,000 crore to over ₹1,15,500 crore. Consequently, the loan disbursed per account increased from about ₹3 lakh to ₹6 lakh in the period as shown in 2B. Data for Charts 2A and 2B do not include Tamil Nadu's figure, given the rapid decline in loan takers.

A report published in December last year by a parliamentary standing committee argued that these figures collectively suggested a decline in accessibility of educational loans over time despite rising educational costs. It also recommended efforts to ensure access to educational loans to the maximum number of students in the country, and to accord priority to families Below Poverty Line.

Less accounts, more amounts

The data for the charts were sourced from a Right to Information reply filed by The Hindu with the Reserve Bank of India

Chart 1a: Number of active educational loan accounts across **India** between FY16 and FY25

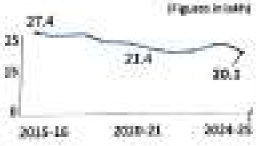


Chart 1b: Number of active educational loan accounts in **Tamil Nadu** between FY16 and FY25

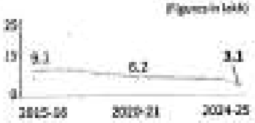
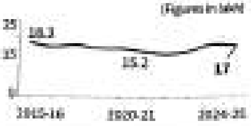
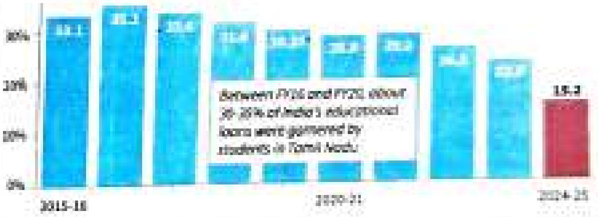


Chart 1c: Active educational loan accounts across India **excluding Tamil Nadu** between FY16 and FY25



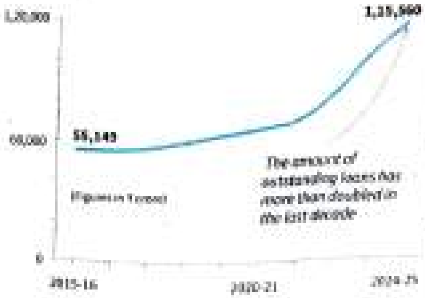
Student Loan Application

Chart 1d: Tamil Nadu's share in India's active educational loan accounts over the years



Between FY16 and FY20, about 30-35% of India's educational loans were garnered by students in Tamil Nadu

Chart 2a: Amount of outstanding educational loans between FY16 and FY25. The chart does not include Tamil Nadu's figure, given the rapid decline in loan takers

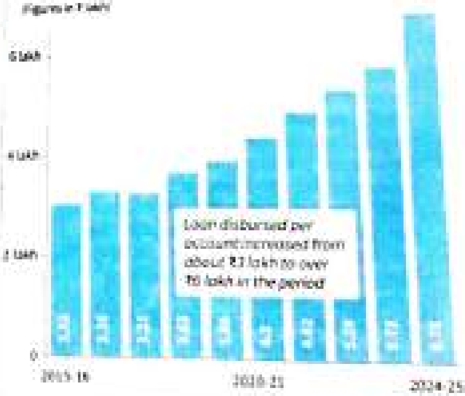


The amount of outstanding loans has more than doubled in the last decade

- The data for the charts are only based on the Priority sector return submitted by Scheduled Commercial Banks.

This does not include figures from regional rural banks

Chart 2b: Amount of outstanding educational loan per active loan account between FY16 and FY25. Data for the chart do not include Tamil Nadu's figure



Loan disbursed per account increased from about ₹3 lakh to over ₹6 lakh in the period

AI Readiness: Preparing and aspiring youth for vibrant Viksit Bharat

T. SENTHIL SIVA SUBRAMANIAN

AI: Industry ready India — a case study

AI readiness is the mantra for youth in the present digital decade. AI has redefined every walk of day-to-day life.

AI has been integrated into everyday activities — Health fit through smart wearables, Healthcare through AI based drug discovery, Horticulture through precession intelligent farming, home and office automation, home care for elderly citizens, Health monitoring of vehicles through predictive analytics.

AI is simply a black box which could be decoded for decision making process through data analytics. The launch of BharatGen AI and Bhashini has filled the gap of multilingual barrier and enhanced the rich cultural heritage across Indian humanity.

India has transformed conventional manufacturing plants into smart e-factories like bajaj silent factory in Pune, Havel's Llyod factory in Rajasthan, Colgate Palmolive in Gujarat which adapted the best practices of Human-Machine interactions like collaborative robots (COBOTS), Automated Guided Vehicles (AGVs), Telepresence robots thereby enabling not only real time monitoring of process flow and quality control but also enhancing workers safety as well.

AI has revolutionised the livelihoods of artisans and crafts especially the AI based Indian carpet design has added values to rural economy and enhanced the supply chain of rural products in various e-commerce platforms. India achieved the second largest contributor to GitHub AI projects with 19.9 per cent worldwide (Source: GitHub, 2024 | Chart: 2025 AI Index report). AI has redefined the employment matrices across the globe leading to revolutionizing the various job roles which could be a machine learning engineer, robotic engineer, data analyst, and AI engineer.

SOAR — AI readiness initiative: youth centric

SOAR — Skilling for AI Readiness is a nation building mission transforming India's educational landscape through reskilling and upskilling the youth to meet the skilling objectives, research, and market challenges.

SOAR - A skill India mission initiated through Skill India Digital Hub is a youth centric AI literacy program empowering youth towards AI skill competency and thereby build social inclusion as well. SOAR enables youth, especially the students from schools and undergraduates in higher educational institutions and Universities, employees from professional organisation, entrepreneurs, innovators to readily access AI learning tools and techniques through virtual modes.

SOAR is flexible and more objective aimed at and aligned with National Educational Policy 2020 to develop a comprehensive approach through firsthand learning and practices. SOAR forms the building block for Aatma Nirbhar Bharat and paves the way for AI awareness, lifelong learning and makes the youth to prepare against the rapid changes and challenges in the job market.

AI digital public infrastructure for Viksit Bharat

India is smartly investing on building Digital Public Infrastructures such as the Data Centres and Centre of Excellence in Artificial Intelligence thereby driving our nation towards Amrit Kaal.

AI is slowly, steadily, and seamlessly integrated into classroom teaching by Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) through adapting best practices of a strong learning framework such as experiential learning and project-based learning.

AI Skill Mission

AI is being integrated into skill India initiatives such as Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana 4.0, National Apprenticeship Embedded Degree program, Craftsman Training through Industrial Training Institute (ITIs) and National Training Institutes.

SOAR forms the cornerstone for different stakeholders, especially the student innovators to transform from their classroom to laboratory to chiplets through focused problem solving, critical thinking and curiosity-based learning.

The pioneering initiatives such as India AI Thinkpreneurs, Smart India Hackathon, World Skill competition, Inspire Manak, Idex Defence innovation challenge has developed smart thing among youth thereby develop customized solutions. AI is no longer an Algorithm in computer. It's transforming variety of problem statement in India into idea to prototype to product leading to increase the value of Lab to Market.

AI Way forward 2026

India is making a big and bold moves in 2026 through the launch of AI Impact Summit which onboard students, educators, innovators, industry practitioners, and entrepreneurs across the globe.

Writer is a head institute industry interface program Hindustan College of Science and Technology, Mathura

DAINIK JAGRAN (P-6), 12 JANUARY 2026

बौद्धिक अवसाद से मुक्त हो जेएनयू

रामानंद शर्मा

> जेएनयू जैसे संस्थानों के भीतर किसी की आलोचना तो वैध है, पर राष्ट्र की वैधता को अपमानित करना स्वीकार्य नहीं है

विश्वविद्यालय
University

दुराग्रह में न बदलें वैचारिक आग्रह • फाइल

हाल में जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय (जेएनयू) में जो कुछ हुआ, वह केवल छात्र राजनीति की हलचल नहीं है। यह भारतीय गणराज्य के यथार्थ और परिसर की पुरानी जकड़न के बीच एक बड़ा विचलन है। साबरमती छात्रावास के पास हुई सभा जिस तरह हिंसक नारेबाजी में बदली, वह चौंकाती नहीं है। यह उस रुग्ण मानसिकता का प्रकटीकरण है, जो संवैधानिक संस्थाओं के निर्णयों को स्वीकार करने के बजाय सड़क पर चुनौती देने की आदी हो चुकी है। विश्वविद्यालय प्रशासन ने इसे 'नफरत की प्रयोगशाला' कहा है। दरअसल यह उस अकादमिक वामपंथ की विफलता है, जो आज भी समय की आहट नहीं सुन पा रहा। प्रखर चुनावी जनादेश के इस दौर में अब 'दिखावे का विद्रोह' अपनी प्रासंगिकता खो चुका है। विश्वविद्यालय किसी विचारधारा की छावनी नहीं, बल्कि संविधान के अधीन चलने वाली सार्वजनिक संस्थाएं हैं। उनका दायित्व केवल प्रश्न उठाना नहीं, बल्कि संवैधानिक मर्यादाओं के भीतर रहकर विवेक विकसित करना भी है। जब कोई परिसर स्वयं को वैचारिक युद्धभूमि में बदल लेता है, तब वह अपनी संवैधानिक पहचान खो देता है। लोकतंत्र में प्रतिरोध का स्थान है, पर वह संस्थागत संतुलन के भीतर होना चाहिए, उसके विरुद्ध नहीं। यहां नीतिगत विरोध नहीं हो रहा, बल्कि सीधे सर्वोच्च न्यायालय के निर्णय को ललकारा जा रहा है। जब छात्र राजनीति न्यायालय को भी सत्ता का औजार बताने लगती है, तब गणराज्य की अंतिम तटस्थ भूमि भी असुरक्षित हो जाती है। यह असहमति नहीं, बल्कि संवैधानिक विश्वास का क्षरण है। ऐसी स्थिति में लोकतंत्र केवल टकराव का अखाड़ा बनकर रह जाता है।

उमर खालिद और शरजील इमाम की जमानत याचिका पर न्यायिक फैसला साक्ष्यों पर आधारित था, किंतु जेएनयू के एक वर्ग ने इसे 'अन्याय' बता दिया। उन्होंने संस्थान को अदालत के सामने खड़ा कर दिया है। जब छात्र संगठन देश के शीर्ष नेतृत्व के विरुद्ध अमर्यादित नारे लगाते हैं, तो वह वैचारिक मतभेद नहीं रहता। वह संविधान की मूल भावना का अनादर है। किसी व्यक्ति के प्रति सहानुभूति अलग बात है, पर न्यायिक प्रक्रिया को शत्रु मान लेना न्यायपालिका की अखंडता पर प्रहार है। लोकतंत्र में असहमति का स्थान न्यायालय में होता है, सड़कों पर उकसावे में नहीं। यदि छात्र राजनीति खुद को न्यायपालिका से ऊपर मान ले, तो यह गणराज्य के लिए बड़ी चिंता है।

जेएनयू जैसे संस्थान आम नागरिकों की गाढ़ी कमाई से चलते हैं। यह समाज के साथ एक नैतिक अनुबंध है। इस अनुबंध के भीतर आलोचना वैध है, पर राष्ट्र की वैधता को अपमानित करना स्वीकार्य नहीं है। करदाताओं से यह आशा करना कि वे अपनी ही बर्बादी के नारों के लिए धन दें, किसी भी समाज में संभव नहीं है। यह जवाबदेही की मांग दमन नहीं, बल्कि एक लोकतांत्रिक आवश्यकता है। शैक्षणिक स्वतंत्रता का सबसे बड़ा शत्रु प्रशासनिक नियंत्रण नहीं, बल्कि वैचारिक एकाधिकार है। जब किसी एक दृष्टिकोण को नैतिक ऊंचाई और अन्य को संदेह की दृष्टि से देखा जाए, तब परिसर स्वतः असहिष्णु हो जाता है। संस्थानों का क्षरण दमन से नहीं, विचारों की एकरूपता से होता है। विविधता पाठ्यक्रम में ही नहीं, विमर्श में भी होनी चाहिए।

कोई भी परिपक्व लोकतंत्र अपने संस्थानों को राष्ट्र के विरुद्ध भावनात्मक उभार का मंच नहीं बनने देता। परिसर की उग्र राजनीति का सबसे अनदेखा प्रभाव उन छात्रों पर पड़ता है, जो पढ़ने आए हैं, नारे लगाने नहीं। पहली पीढ़ी के विद्यार्थी, ग्रामीण पृष्ठभूमि के युवा और सीमित संसाधनों वाले छात्र सबसे अधिक प्रभावित होते हैं। उनकी चुप्पी सहमति नहीं, विवशता है। विश्वविद्यालय यदि उनकी आकांक्षाओं की रक्षा नहीं करता, तो वह अपने सामाजिक दायित्व से चूक जाता है। परिसर में 'स्थायी आंदोलन' की प्रवृत्ति शैक्षणिक क्षरण पैदा कर रही है। जब पहचान पढ़ाई के बजाय प्रदर्शनों से होने लगे, तो छात्रों का भविष्य दांव पर लग जाता है। दीर्घकाल में यह संस्थान को भीतर से खोखला कर देता है। वैश्विक परिदृश्य को देखिए। विकसित लोकतंत्रों ने भी अभिव्यक्ति की सीमाएं तय की हैं। फ्रांस में आतंकी समूहों के समर्थन पर गिरफ्तारियां होती हैं। अमेरिका में हिंसा भड़काने वाले भाषणों को संरक्षण नहीं मिलता। फिर भारत से ही यह अपेक्षा क्यों कि वह अपने अस्तित्व पर प्रहार करने वाली भाषा के प्रति मौन रहे? दुनिया का कोई भी उदार समाज राष्ट्र की अखंडता को खंडित करने वाले आह्वान सहन नहीं करता। भारत इस वैश्विक व्यवस्था का अपवाद नहीं हो सकता। 'आपातकाल' और 'फासीवाद' जैसे शब्दों का प्रयोग अब समाज में एक नैतिक थकान पैदा कर रहा है।

जेएनयू का मौजूदा संकट एक गहरे बौद्धिक अवसाद का लक्षण है। आंदोलनकारियों को समझना होगा कि विरोध का अधिकार देश की जनता के सामूहिक विवेक से ऊपर नहीं है। आपातकाल का कल्पित भय उन लोगों का आवरण है, जो लोकतांत्रिक संवाद का साहस खो चुके हैं। यदि जेएनयू को अपनी प्रतिष्ठा बचानी है, तो उसे कर्मकांडीय राजनीति छोड़नी होगी। उसे नफरत की प्रयोगशाला के बजाय नवाचार का केंद्र बनना होगा। अब समय आ गया है कि परिसर की राजनीति गणतांत्रिक जिम्मेदारियों को स्वीकार करे।

(लेखक दिल्ली विश्वविद्यालय के आर्यभट्ट कालेज में असिस्टेंट प्रोफेसर हैं।

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DECCAN HERALD (P-8), 13 JANUARY 2026

FIRST LINE OF DEFENCE

India must raise climate custodians in its schools

Climate resilience cannot be built by policy alone. It should be introduced as a part of foundational learning

SHUKLA BOSE

India is living through a moment of extraordinary ecological fragility. Every summer is hotter than the last, every monsoon more unpredictable, and every news cycle carries a story of vanishing wetlands, dying lakes, or forests cleared for development. Just the other day, one read the heartbreaking news of a herd of elephants being mowed down by the Rajdhani train. One can ask questions about who was intruding on whose territory.

Climate change has become the silent backdrop of our daily lives. Yet our educational approach still treats environmental learning as a peripheral topic – a chapter in a textbook, a unit to be memorised, or a one-day "environment awareness" programme. What we urgently need, instead, is a profound shift in mindset: climate education must begin at the age of five. Waiting until adolescence or adulthood to introduce ecological thinking is not just ineffective; it is irresponsible.

Much of the world is now trying to retrofit climate education into its school systems. Europe, often seen as environmentally conscious, integrated climate literacy into early childhood education only after decades of ecological degradation. Finland's celebrated National Core Curriculum, which embeds ecological thinking from pre-primary years, and Norway's tradition of *friluftsliv* – outdoor life as a pedagogical approach – are the results of learning born from loss. The UK's recent Nature Park initiative, launched to bring biodiversity mapping and climate literacy into schools, came after dramatic declines in species and forest cover. In these nations, nature education is a corrective, a way to repair damage that has already taken place.

India still has something precious left – its forests, coastal ecosystems, wetlands, and astonishing biodiversity. But these are slipping away faster than most people realise. UNESCO has recorded that nearly one-third of India's natural wetlands have disappeared. The IPBES Global Assessment notes steep declines in species and habitats across the subcontinent. In the Western Ghats, habitat loss in several districts is shockingly high, between 70% and 80%. If we do not cultivate in our children a sense of belonging to the natural world, no policy, mission, or strategy will be enough.

The most compelling reason to begin climate education early comes from developmental psychology and neuroscience. Research by scholars such as Louise Chawla shows that early experiences with nature strongly influence pro-environmental attitudes in adulthood. Children who develop emotional affinity with the natural world are far more likely to grow into adults who conserve, protect, and advocate. Neuroscience also reinforces that empathy – for humans, animals, and ecosystems – has a developmental window in early childhood. If that window is missed, behavioural change becomes more difficult later. In other words, the foundations of environmental responsibility must be laid before the age of seven.

Studies in *Nature Climate Change* show that even primary-school children can comprehend the basic patterns of climate change when taught through observation and storytelling. More importantly, they internalise these lessons emotionally. They connect their own daily experiences – heat, rain, polluted lakes, disappearing birds – to broader environmental shifts. To them, climate change is not an abstraction, but something they witness.

However, urban childhood today is lived among cement, screens, and traffic. Many children have never walked barefoot on grass, watched a butterfly emerge, or seen a clear night sky. Their idea of a river is a polluted canal; their understanding of a lake is a fenced, algae-covered reservoir. When nature becomes a distant concept rather than a lived reality, the instinct to protect it weakens. This is a generational problem.

It was in response to these realities that we created Parikrma Oxygen, a nature school for underserved children. Many of our children live in dense slum communities with no access to green spaces. Their sense of ecology is shaped by scarcity: of clean water, clean air, or open land. For them, nature education must be experiential and immersive. The learning happens outdoors. Children observe plants, insects, birds, and soil; they track changes in rainfall; they learn how lakes breathe and how waste travels; they grow and care for native species; they watch compost become soil. Slowly, they begin to notice patterns. They begin to ask questions. They begin to care. These transformations come not from lectures, but from daily contact and emotional connection.

The window is closing

The idea is to create a generation of climate custodians; children who do not see nature as separate from themselves but as part of their identity. We cannot build a resilient future if conservation remains the domain of scientists and policymakers alone. India needs a citizenry that intuitively understands why trees matter, why water bodies need protection, and why biodiversity is not decorative but essential. This shift requires mass environmental literacy, not specialised expertise. And mass literacy can only be built in schools.

The National Education Policy 2020 already emphasises experiential learning, curiosity, and foundational skills. Climate education should sit at the centre of this vision. Imagine a future in which every school – urban or rural – has a small biodiversity garden, a weather observation log, a composting corner, or a student-run nature journal. If India integrates climate learning into the curriculum from pre-primary years, it can produce a generation more equipped to face and solve the environmental challenges ahead than today's adults ever were.

The window for action is small. If we wait until deforestation accelerates further or until climate shocks deepen, we will be left teaching children about ecosystems that no longer exist. We can raise a generation that grows up seeing the environment not as an academic topic but as a living, breathing part of their daily lives. We can raise citizens who will fight for rivers, trees, forests, and species because they grew up loving them. The question is not whether we can afford to bring climate education into early childhood. The question is whether we can afford not to.

(The writer is the founder and CEO of the Parikrma Humanity Foundation, which runs Parikrma Oxygen, a nature school for underserved children)

DECCAN HERALD (P-8), 13 JANUARY 2026

Course suspension undermines equality

The National Medical Commission (NMC)'s decision to withdraw its permission for the 2025-26 MBBS batch in the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Institute of Medical Excellence in Jammu and Kashmir is wrong and clearly driven by non-academic considerations. It is to be noted that the course received the NMC nod just four months ago, after the infrastructure and amenities in the college were found to have met the stipulated standards. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had, in 2016, inaugurated the state-of-the-art super speciality hospital attached to the college. The commission, after a hurried visit to the college this month, cited inadequacy in "faculty strength, clinical material, and infrastructure" to withdraw the approval. This followed a protest by Hindutva groups against the preponderance of Muslim students in the first batch – 42 in a class of 50.

These students secured admission in the college after appearing for the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET). They earned their seats on merit in a national-level examination. But the admission of a higher number of Muslim students led to protests from Hindutva outfits, who formed a resistance group on the matter. The protesting students were backed by the BJP, and the matter was taken to Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha. One argument put forward by the Hindutva groups is that educational institutions established by the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board are funded through offerings made to Mata Vaishno Devi. But the admissions were done based on established rules and procedures, and the college is not defined by law as a minority institution.

> **The withdrawal of permission to the J&K medical college is discriminatory and furthers political interests**

The NMC succumbed to political pressure arising from communal considerations to withdraw the recognition it had granted to the college. It violated the best regulatory norms and practices in a decision that goes against academic autonomy. It is an act of discrimination based on religion and a violation of the Constitutional guarantee of equality. The NMC did not issue a show-cause notice to the college before the withdrawal of permission, and there is no provision for appeal. The decision against a college set up to promote medical education and healthcare in Kashmir counters promises made to the people of the Union Territory, following the abrogation of Article 370, that their interests would be protected and promoted. It undermines the credibility of the NMC as a regulatory body. While there is a move to accommodate the students in other colleges, it will not right the wrong that has been committed. It would only underline the unjustness of the commission's decision.

HINDU (P-6), 13 JANUARY 2026

A Bill that reimagines higher education regulation

V. Kamakoti

is Director, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras

Poet Tiruvalluvar in his 140th *Thirukkural* says: "Education imparted is useless, unless one learns how to live with the society."

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 intends to provide that holistic education that teaches one to be socially relevant.

To ensure that the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 is achieved, India needs citizens who can lead from here. The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, 2025, which was introduced in the Lok Sabha on December 15, 2025, aims to make this a reality and help reimagine India's higher education institutions.

Need for change

Why is there a need for this? India's higher education system has expanded rapidly, spanning over a 1,000 universities, tens of thousands of institutions, and crores of learners. But, regulation has not evolved at the same pace. Multiple statutory bodies with overlapping mandates have created a maze of approvals, inspections and compliance that often pulls institutions away from teaching, research and innovation. This has turned well-meaning oversight into over-regulation, forcing institutions to prioritise paperwork over outcomes and making it harder to collaborate, innovate or update curricula quickly. Institutions find themselves spending a disproportionate effort on "process" rather than "purpose".

NEP 2020 recognised this and called for a "light but tight" framework – strong on transparency and standards, but minimal on procedural burden, while granting greater autonomy to well-performing institutions. The Bill is a structural step in this direction, aiming to replace fragmented oversight with coordinated standards, streamlined regulation, and credible quality assurance. Anchored in Entry 66 (Union List) of the Seventh Schedule, the Bill creates an apex umbrella body, the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan, with three separate councils for regulation, accreditation and standards. This clear division of roles aims to improve credibility and reduce conflicts of interest. It also proposes repealing three key Acts – the University Grants Commission Act, 1956, the All India Council For Technical Education Act 1987, and the National Council for Teacher Education Act, 1993 – to unify and modernise the regulatory architecture, bringing relevant higher education institutions under a single framework for coordinated standard-setting and oversight.

> The 'light but tight' framework of the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, 2025 will transform higher education and also India

Finally, it envisages a technology-enabled single window system built on public self disclosure, where institutions publish key information on governance, finances, infrastructure, faculty, programmes and outcomes, thus enabling continuous transparency and forming the basis for accreditation and public accountability.

The impact

The Bill could trigger three high-impact outcomes. First, it can enable youth empowerment at scale. A streamlined regulatory landscape can expand access to quality institutions and raise the Gross Enrolment Ratio by reducing bottlenecks that slow down capacity-building and programme expansion.

More importantly, it can shift institutional energy toward what truly matters: teaching that builds reasoning and values; learning that is interdisciplinary and flexible; and opportunities for reskilling and upskilling across a lifetime.

Students will provide feedback on academic quality and the overall learning experience of the higher education institutions. With robust grievance redress, they become active stakeholders and are able to demand quality, reward good governance, and help institutions improve through structured feedback.

Second, it can accelerate the adoption of global best practices while remaining rooted in Indian priorities. International credibility is not achieved by copying foreign models, but by meeting global benchmarks of outcomes, ethics, research culture and student experience. A coherent standards framework can support mobility of learners and faculty, promote collaborative research and help Indian institutions attract international students and faculty while also retaining Indian talent.

Third, it can modernise governance through transparency and minimalistic, responsive regulation. A faceless, technology-enabled single-window system can reduce discretion and delays, encourage integrity, and improve predictability for institutions. Public disclosure, when meaningful and audited, creates a culture where trust is earned, not assumed. Autonomy for well-performing institutions and institutions of eminence can then become a tool for excellence; common standards with differentiated autonomy can allow diversity to thrive without compromising quality. The end goal is smarter regulation: focused on outcomes, learner welfare and national priorities.

In perspective

Atmanirbharta in higher education is achieved when India's institutions can set ambitious goals, innovate responsibly and remain accountable to society. When the Bill succeeds in aligning standards, regulation, and accreditation into a coherent and transparent system, it will help build exactly the kind of citizens that Tiruvalluvar envisioned.

H/E

INDIAN EXPRESS (P-15), 13 JANUARY 2026

In the age of reels, a literary renaissance that connects children to their roots

DESHKAAL

BY YOGENDRA YADAV

A WACKY picture poem on personality development through the fine art of farting. A book with vibrant illustrations about the adventures of a young girl, Maithili, with cute yet conflicted monsters. A wordless story about the Sun, portrayed as a young woman in the Northeast. An engaging introduction to our rivers through myths, stories and drawings. And a stunning art book that introduces children to a modern Indian painter.

You will find all these and hundreds of other innovative books for children of all ages at the ongoing World Book Fair in the national capital. Come to Hall 6, thoughtfully set apart from the rest of the exhibition: Children's books need their own space, just as children do. You will have to wade through a lot of glitter and many gimmicks, dodge decorated pavilions and big publishers. You don't want to be distracted by glossy imported stuff, bog-standard English fiction with blond fairies, the same old Panchatantra books and Amar Chitra Katha that you grew up with, boring activity and drawing books, and lots and lots of "educational material" guaranteed to secure the best rank for your child.

These may not be useless, but you can order them online. You don't go to a book fair for them. You go there to sample new and creative work. You go there in search of books that help develop a taste for reading, writing and learning for children surrounded by videos and reels. You go there to connect your children to their context — the history, myths, stories and real life of this vast subcontinent — where they are growing up. You go there to tickle the curiosity and creativity of a child who is to live with artificial intelligence. In other words, you go there for Indian books, written for Indian children, preferably in one of the Indian languages.

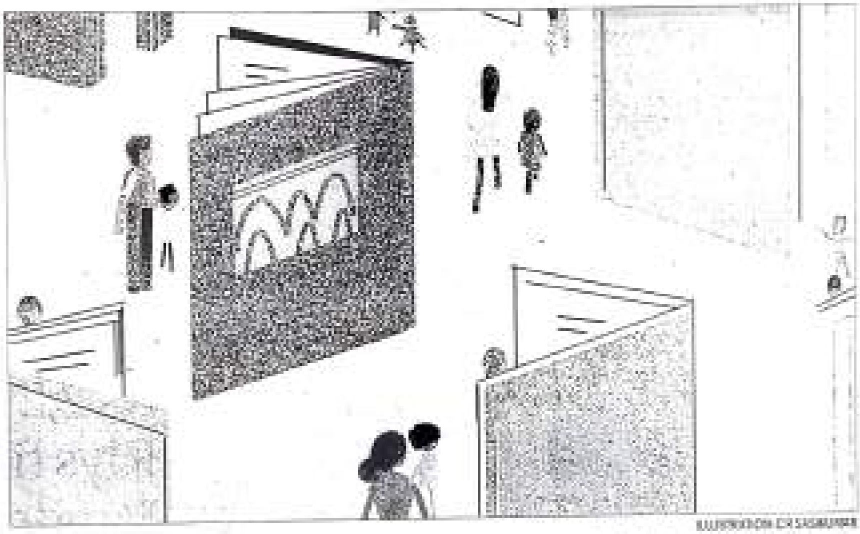


ILLUSTRATION: CR SASIKUMAR

If that's what you are looking for, here's some good news. Indian children's literature is going through a renaissance. It began with Indian books in English. And, going by what I can see in Hindi, it seems to be spreading through Indian languages. It is an exciting time to be an author, an illustrator, a publisher — and a reader — of literature for children and young adults.

You want to start with the modest stall of Parag, a much-needed initiative of the Tata Trust. For the last five years, this trust has announced an annual Parag Honour List: "A curated collection of outstanding books in English and in Hindi for children and young adults". The good thing is that they don't publish on their own and therefore do not compete with other publishers. You have a credible jury doing the initial selection for you. You want to pick up their latest Honour List — for 2025 — and, if possible, the lists for the last five years. You can access it online at www.paragreads.in. So far, this list includes 286 books, categorised by age group and type, featuring 24 publishers. Many of these books are also available in their stall, including some by publishers like Muskaan and Tulika that do not have a stall of their own. Or you can branch off directly to the publishers.

> It is an exciting time to be an author, an illustrator, a publisher — and a reader — of literature for children and young adults

The most exciting stuff is happening in Indian English, as it caters to customers who can pay. We do not have famous author-illustrator duos like Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler of Gruffalo fame, but C G Salamander and Rajiv Eipe are inching in that direction with the story of Asaaam, the music-loving beast. Pratham Books and Tulika Books offer you the best selection for early and very young readers up to age seven, with some good titles from Duckbill and Puffin as well. For 10-plus and teenagers, you can also check out HarperCollins, Speaking Tiger, Tara Books and Kalpavriksh. Unlike most others, Pratham Books also offers translations in multiple Indian languages. Karadi Tales has started a new series, in association with People's Archive of Rural India, of real-life stories from all corners of rural India. Artist has come out with some exquisite books on Indian art, including books on Ganesh Pyne and S H Raza.

But let me take you to two stalls that you might miss. These offer exceptional children's books in Hindi. These are besides the two official outlets, the National Book Trust and the Children's Book Trust, whose older titles continue to be affordable and worth a look. And, of course, Pratham Books, which offers one of the largest selections of Hindi books, especially for early readers.

Welcome to Ektara Trust imprint, Jugnoo which is undoubtedly at the forefront of creativity in children's literature in Hindi. Their list includes a series by Gulzar, books by Vinod Kumar Shukla and recently a novella by Krishna Kumar. Ektara has introduced a whole range of children's books: From pocket books to giant books, from poem cards to artwork folders, from wordless picture books for infants to novels for young adults. Do look for their set of books by Gulzar, evocatively illustrated by Ellen Shaw. Or anything by the astonishing poet and wordsmith Sushil Shukla. I loved the latest picture book, *Gungun Orchestra*. Don't forget to subscribe to their magazines, *Plūto* for early readers, and *Cycle* for young adults.

From Ektara, walk around the corner to the stall of Eklavya, also from Bhopal. This NGO, which builds on the pathbreaking Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme, has expanded much beyond its original brief of science education. You still want to look at their books and toolkits for science, besides books on education that teachers and parents can benefit from. For many years, their imprint Pitara has ventured into poetry, fiction and non-fiction for children across age groups. Varun Grover's *Fitti-ball* is a poignant story of a Ludhiana boy with a Punjabi accent who goes to a Hindi school in Lucknow. You might wish to subscribe to their magazine *Chakmak* for children or *Sandarbh* for educators. Pitara has always stood out for expanding the cultural universe of the child to all corners and communities of India.

You would discover much more than I could, especially if you take children along with you to the exhibition. As they say, children's books are where imagination learns to walk.

The writer is member, Swaraj India, and national convenor, Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan

IE/15

MILLENNIUM POST (P-7), 13 JANUARY 2026

WORK FUTURES

End of Easy Exit?

As global mobility tightens, India's real test is creating an innovation ecosystem where staying, returning and building at home becomes the smartest professional choice

SHISHIR PRIYADARSHI

THE WRITER IS THE PRESIDENT OF CHINTAN RESEARCH FOUNDATION

For two decades, India's most talented engineers, researchers and founders have treated the United States not merely as a destination, but as a default upgrade—better pay, better labs, better odds of success. That bargain is now changing. Washington is steadily raising the financial and procedural cost of mobility through tighter visa rules, higher employer fees, and greater uncertainty around pathways like the H-1B.

This moment should worry India—but it should also concentrate minds. Because the real question is no longer how to help Indians go abroad, but why so many still feel they must.

India needs a two-track strategy. The first is diplomatic and tactical: push back against increasingly restrictive mobility regimes and diversify pathways for short-term assignments, research postings, and project visas. The second—and far more important—is domestic: build such a compelling innovation ecosystem at home that going abroad becomes a choice, not an escape route.

That second task is harder. It requires India to fix career economics, research depth, firm-building friction, urban quality of life and workplace culture in one integrated package. Half-measures will not work.

> Global mobility is shrinking. India's response will decide whether this becomes a moment of loss—or a generational opportunity

What India is doing—and why it still falls short

To its credit, the government has begun investing in frontier technology capacity. AI centres of excellence at IIT Delhi, Ropar and Kanpur, the IndiaAI Mission with its promise of shared compute and foundational models, and national missions in quantum technologies and semiconductors all send the right signal. They tell young researchers and entrepreneurs that the state understands where the future lies.

Yet for most professionals, these initiatives still feel like islands of excellence in an otherwise inhospitable sea. Research labs remain small and siloed. Access to compute, capital and regulatory clarity is uneven. University-industry collaboration is improving but remains constrained by rigid rules and short funding cycles. For many, the daily frictions of working in India—uncertain compliance, slower career progression, cultural hierarchy—continue to outweigh the emotional pull of staying back. That is why talent outflows persist even when patriotism is high.

Competing on career economics, not sentiment

No serious talent strategy can ignore money. If a 28-year-old AI engineer sees a three-to-five-fold lifetime earnings gap between staying in India and moving abroad, national pride will not close it.

The real question is no longer how to help Indians go abroad, but why so many still feel they must

India must become globally competitive in wealth creation, not just in monthly pay. Fixing the taxation of employee stock options—so tax is paid on exit rather than exercise—would immediately improve the risk-reward calculus of joining Indian startups. Simplifying valuation rules and allowing broad-based employee equity, including for remote and gig workers, would help Indian firms compete with Silicon Valley not on cash, but on upside.

In parallel, the government should treat frontier digital roles the way it treats strategic manufacturing: with targeted, outcome-linked incentives. Wage subsidies, payroll tax rebates, or R&D credits tied to hiring in AI, chip design, cybersecurity, and deep SaaS could meaningfully narrow pay gaps. Global capability centres that already operate at the cutting-edge show that when Indian roles move up the value chain, attrition falls—even at higher wages.

Equally important is risk mitigation. Portable social-security benefits that travel with workers across firms and states would reduce the fear of career volatility that pushes many to seek the perceived safety of overseas systems.

Turning universities into engines, not enclaves

India's top institutions still punch below their weight as innovation hubs. Faculty operate under tight administrative control, annual grant uncertainty, and limited freedom to co-create intellectual property with industry.

Select IITs, IIITs and IISc need DARPA-style autonomy: multi-year programme budgets, outcome-based evaluation, and the freedom to share IP revenues with faculty and students. The fact that only three IITs—IIT Delhi, IIT Ropar and IIT Kanpur—currently host national centres of excellence in frontier areas underlines how limited scale remains relative to India's talent base. Allowing institutions to hold equity in campus-incubated startups would help link academic success directly to entrepreneurial outcomes—and justify expanding such centres far more rapidly.

Just as crucial is scale. Industry-embedded research labs—co-located on campuses with shared infrastructure and flexible HR rules—should become the norm, not the exception. A national "Researcher-in-Residence" programme could bring Indian professionals from global tech firms and labs back for six-to-twenty-four-month stints, injecting frontier knowledge without forcing permanent relocation.

Access matters too. IndiaAI compute, quantum testbeds and chip-design tools must be available to startups and SMEs through cloud-like interfaces, not locked into elite silos.

Making India easier to build in

Ask founders why they leave, and salary is rarely the first answer. Facilitative environment and unpredictability are the more common refrains.

India urgently needs a single, digital compliance stack for tech firms—API-first, pre-filled, predictable, and largely decriminalised. Risk-based audits should replace surprise inspections. Capital rules must allow founders to raise and list globally without flipping headquarters to Singapore or Delaware by default.

Cities matter as well. Talent follows liveability. India should explicitly designate five or six "global talent cities" and prioritise housing, transport, safety, and air quality there. Regulatory sandboxes for mobility, payments, health, and logistics—where startups can pilot without whiplash—would anchor innovation locally. Some outward movement is inevitable—and even desirable. The policy goal should be circulation, not retention at any cost.

Time-bound, tax-advantaged return schemes, structured sabbaticals between Indian and global firms, and joint doctoral programmes can convert one-way exits into recurring inflows of skills, capital, and networks. A formal India Digital Talent Network could link diaspora professionals in Big Tech, venture capital and academia to Indian startups and missions as mentors, investors, and collaborators.

This must be paired with smarter migration diplomacy—diversifying beyond a single visa category and ensuring that foreign barriers become a catalyst for domestic reform, not a permanent constraint on Indian ambition.

Looking Ahead

Ultimately, no combination of incentives or policies can compensate for workplace cultures that stifle ambition. Hierarchy, opaque promotion systems, and rigid management practices continue to push talent away—even when salaries are competitive. Retaining India's best minds will require a shift in how work itself is organised and valued.

Indian firms, particularly in technology and research-intensive sectors, must move decisively towards outcome-based evaluation, flexible work arrangements, and transparent career progression. Strong safeguards against harassment and discrimination are not "soft" issues; they are core to global competitiveness. Equally important is recognising technical excellence in its own right—by creating credible career tracks that allow engineers and researchers to rise without being forced into managerial roles.

Public institutions must undergo a similar reset. If India wants world-class technologists to contribute to government, regulation, and public systems, it must offer competitive pay, lateral entry, genuine autonomy, and freedom from suffocating hierarchy. Nations that succeed in the digital age are those that visibly respect and empower their builders.

Global mobility may be tightening, but that is not India's constraint—it is its opportunity. The real test is whether India can open its own ecosystems wide enough to make staying, returning and building here the most compelling choice of all.

Views expressed are personal

PIONEER (P-8), 13 JANUARY 2026

Character building: A national imperative

As India moves steadily toward its aspiration of becoming a developed nation, an uncomfortable truth persists: without integrity, civic responsibility, and strong character at the core of society, material progress alone will remain incomplete.

RAVI CHANDER KOCHHAR

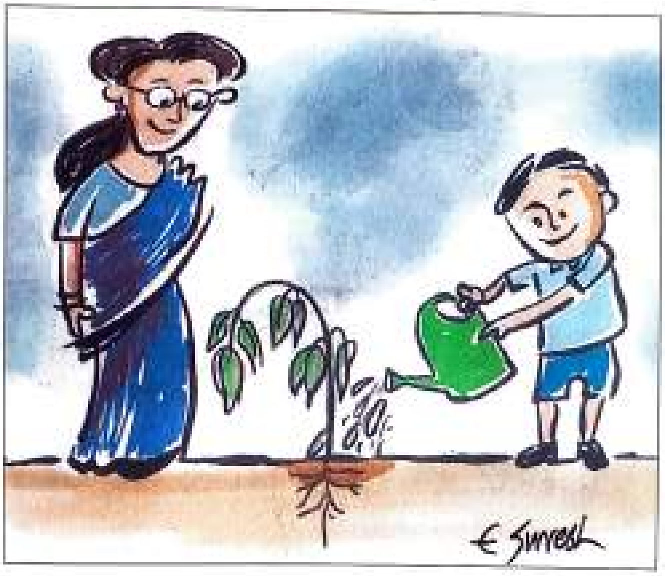
Over the last decade, under the dynamic leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, India has witnessed remarkable progress across multiple dimensions. We have seen significant improvements in infrastructure, defence capabilities, healthcare, the "Make in India" initiative, and many other fields. These efforts have propelled our nation towards the goal of becoming a developed country in the foreseeable future. India's economic growth has been robust, placing us as the fifth-largest economy in the world. With this momentum, it is only a matter of time before India attains the status of a fully developed nation.

However, alongside this impressive progress lies a pressing challenge-one that threatens to undermine the national vision. This challenge is corruption, and it demands urgent attention. Despite rapid modernisation, corruption has permeated deep into the social fabric of our nation. Recent Enforcement Directorate (ED) raids across various sectors have revealed shocking amounts of unaccounted cash, jewellery, and incriminating documents. These findings indicate that earning beyond known means has, unfortunately, become normalised. More alarming is the audacity with which some individuals demand bribes openly-over the table-without fear or hesitation.

This scenario calls for national introspection. At the heart of the problem lies not merely policy or governance, but a more fundamental requirement: character building. For India to truly advance, every citizen must embrace integrity, honesty, and responsibility. Character building is not a short-term project; it is a generational effort. The current generation may take time to understand its importance, but unless this foundational change is initiated now, future progress may be compromised.

This change must be embraced by every segment of society, cutting across economic classes, social groups, and political affiliations. All political parties, irrespective of ideology, must recognise that inculcating strong values and civic sense in citizens is not optional-it is a national imperative. Only when character becomes central to our collective identity can India aspire to be counted among the best nations in the world.

An equally urgent requirement is the development of civic sense, a quality that appears to be diminishing rapidly across both urban and rural landscapes. It is unfortunate to witness widespread disregard for basic public hygiene and civic responsibility. From littering streets to spitting paan indiscriminately, from ignoring traffic rules to erecting illegal billboards, the examples are endless. Municipal workers often neglect their duties, while many citizens fail to respect shared spaces. These behaviours reflect a lack of sensitivity towards others and a casual acceptance of disorder.



COUNTRIES SUCH AS JAPAN AND SINGAPORE OFFER VALUABLE LESSONS IN CIVIC EDUCATION. FROM A YOUNG AGE, CHILDREN ARE TRAINED TO BE RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS. THEY CLEAN THEIR CLASSROOMS, RESPECT PUBLIC SPACES, STAND IN QUEUES, AND SPEAK POLITELY. THESE EARLY LESSONS CREATE ADULTS WHO ARE RESPECTFUL, CONSIDERATE, AND DEEPLY CIVIC-MINDED

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For this reason, the cultivation of civic sense must begin early-in play schools, primary schools, secondary schools, and universities. Civic education should be an integral part of the curriculum, taught consistently at daily, weekly, or monthly intervals. Teachers, too, must be trained and sensitised to this responsibility. Both private and public institutions must incorporate structured programmes that nurture discipline, cleanliness, empathy, and responsibility from a young age.

A child's learning begins at birth. The environment in which a child grows-what they see, hear, experience, and observe-shapes their personality. Children possess immense observational skills and adaptability. If they are nurtured in an environment that emphasises good habits, civic responsibility, and ethical behaviour, these qualities will remain with them for life. The seeds of good character must be sown early; once rooted, they will guide the individual throughout adulthood.

If citizens are well educated in civic values, we would see an immediate transformation. People would refrain from throwing garbage from moving vehicles, stop littering pavements, and avoid spitting paan in public spaces. Such simple changes would create cleaner streets, healthier neighbourhoods, and a more pleasant environment. The physical transformation of our surroundings can trigger a psychological and cultural shift as well.

Consider cities like Mumbai, where despite heavy monsoons, flooding is relatively controlled compared to other major cities such as Delhi. In Delhi, even a single heavy downpour often results in waterlogging, especially in low-lying areas, causing massive traffic jams. These jams frequently escalate into road rage incidents, arguments, and even physical altercations. Much of this chaos stems from poor civic habits-blocked drains due to garbage, reckless driving, and a lack of traffic discipline.

Countries such as Japan and Singapore offer valuable lessons in civic education. From a young age, children are trained to be responsible citizens. They clean their classrooms, respect public spaces, stand in queues, and speak politely. These early lessons create adults who are respectful, considerate, and deeply civic-minded. Their societies function smoothly because people value order, discipline, and the collective good.

If India begins such efforts today, it may take a decade or more to see tangible results. However, when today's newborns grow into teenagers and young adults, they will naturally recognise what is right and wrong. They will make better choices for themselves, their families, and society. This is the only sustainable path towards building a strong, progressive nation.

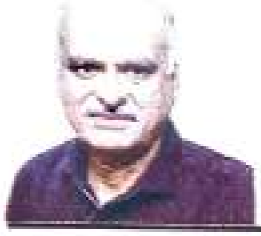
At the administrative level, governments must also take proactive steps. Every state should introduce competitive programmes to encourage clean and well-managed cities. From ministers to municipal workers, accountability must be enforced. All officials should be stakeholders in this transformation, ensuring that cleanliness, discipline, and civic responsibility are upheld at every level.

India's large population is often seen as a challenge, but it can also be our greatest strength. Once we collectively decide to bring about positive change, the impact will be extraordinary. As examples from Singapore and Japan demonstrate, disciplined citizens can completely transform a nation's image and functioning.

The journey towards a more responsible society begins with the first step. If each individual takes responsibility for their surroundings, others will naturally follow. After all, who does not want to live in a clean, bright, and beautiful environment?

Starting today, with commitment and consistency, India can build a future generation grounded in strong character and enriched by civic values-ushering in a more ethical, orderly, and prosperous nation.

Medical college admission controversy fuels fresh polarisation in Jammu and Kashmir



ANIL ANAND

The Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Institute of Medical Excellence (SMVDIME), located in the foothills of the revered shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi at Katra, has been dragged into a controversy that was seemingly avoidable. The barely six-month-old medical college has suddenly been sought to be made an instrument of communal polarisation.

The controversy has erupted at a time when Jammu and Kashmir is struggling on all fronts to come to terms with the fallout of the August 5, 2019 constitutional changes, which by and large have not augured well either for Jammu and Kashmir or for the UT of Ladakh, as reflected in subsequent developments. It is rare that a controversy over the selection of candidates-done in this case by a central agency on an all-India basis-stems from a communal dispute rather than issues of merit or procedure. Out of the 50 candidates selected on the basis of the NEET examination, 42 are Muslims, one is a Sikh, and seven are Hindus. This has become the basis for fringe groups, mostly associated with the RSS-BJP combine, to hit the streets. They questioned how an institute funded by offerings made at the Mata Vaishno Devi shrine could have a majority of Muslim candidates. This is an affront to the country's laid-down systems and norms. There is no denying the fact that the communal divide runs deep in the demography of Jammu and Kashmir and that it is dug up every election season or whenever political leaders feel insecure. The situation has become further entrenched over the last decade, and it would not be wrong to say that the SMVDIME controversy is its latest manifestation, with dangerous consequences. What followed was a quick turn of events-Hindutva-centric outfits staged protests, and an obliging Centre acted "swiftly" by pressing the National Medical Commission (NMC) into service. The NMC, in turn, without wasting any time, withdrew the Letter of Permission (LoP) granted to SMVDIME to run the MBBS course for the 2025-26 session, which had been issued in August-September last year.

Presumably, the LoP must have been granted after finding everything in order. What went wrong within six months? Were flaws, if any, ignored during the earlier inspection, and under whose pressure? Both the Union Health Ministry and the NMC should come clear on the facts in the interest of their own credibility.

The normal practice in such cases is that the erring medical college is given a hearing and time to remove deficiencies before any drastic action is taken. Was SMVDIME given such an opportunity? It appears that it was not. It is another matter that the NMC has protected the interests of the selected candidates by directing the J&K UT government to adjust them in other medical colleges. That itself indicates the uncertain future of the Katra medical college, which, if it remains shut, will amount to a lost opportunity for the Jammu region. Under the existing setup, this question assumes significance because the Narendra Modi dispensation, as seen over the last decade, has been adept at shifting blame to opposition parties, opposition-ruled states, or BJP adversaries for acts of commission and omission, even in areas that fall squarely under its own domain. If the selection process was wrong, as is being alleged by protestors wearing a religious cloak, who is responsible for it? In this context, the overnight action by the NMC is self-explanatory. The chairman of the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board is the Lieutenant Governor, Mr Manoj Sinha, an appointee of the BJP-led NDA government and a former BJP leader. Under his watch, the Board carries out various activities, including setting up a multi-specialty hospital to which the new medical college is attached. He must have played a pivotal role in securing quick clearances from the Union Health Ministry, under which the NMC functions. That, in itself, is appreciable and raises no issue. But did the Board visualise a situation where, in a Muslim-majority UT, such an outcome could arise at any given point? Ostensibly, it did not. Was this an oversight, or was a loophole deliberately left to be stitched up later, depending on political expediency? The NMC could not have moved with such speed without his intervention to bail out the BJP setup in Jammu and Kashmir and protect its overall Hindutva plank. This is especially relevant given that despite sweeping the Hindu-dominated belt of the Jammu region by winning 29 out of 30 seats in last year's Assembly elections, and despite people voting for the BJP repeatedly from Panchayat to Lok Sabha since 2014, the region continues to lie in dire straits.

Did SMVDIME become a convenient tool to divert attention from burning issues and unfulfilled promises by igniting religious sentiments? Frankly, this conundrum is not easy to explain.

The closure of SMVDIME-though BJP circles prefer to call it a mere suspension-has led to two distinct reactions: one between Jammu and Kashmir, owing to politics driven by different demographic realities, and, more importantly, another within Jammu society itself. While the BJP brigade and its supporters were jubilant over the closure of the medical college and the stoppage of Muslim candidates, a substantial section of society has viewed it as a negative move against the interests of the Jammu region. A crucial question is being asked: what has Jammu gained from the closure of the medical college? Another important question is why the Jammu and Kashmir Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Act, 1988, was not suitably amended before proposing a medical college. As experts suggest, amendments were required in sections dealing with governing administration, oversight, and the use of land and institutions developed by the Shrine Board. This would have ensured that the objectives of the shrine fund were clearly defined for such an institute.

Apart from the communal situation that has been created, with counter-reactions from the Kashmir Valley, the more worrying fallout of this episode is that meritocracy itself has come under question. Questioning the merit of students, irrespective of their faith, should disturb all right-thinking people who rise above politics and ignore societal fault lines. If merit is questionable here, then the entire NEET process comes under a cloud. One way out of the crisis, suggested by some experts and right-wing ideologues, is to grant minority institution status to SMVDIME, which would allow seats to be reserved for the Hindu community. If the Centre (read BJP) agrees to this, how will it justify its position on institutions such as Aligarh Muslim University and Delhi's St Stephen's College, which have minority Muslim and Christian character and whose status the ruling dispensation has repeatedly sought to alter? The Jammu and Kashmir Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Act, 1988, requires amendments, particularly in provisions related to administration, oversight, and the use of land and institutions developed by the Shrine Board. What is most intriguing is that the UT administration glossed over the fact that Jammu already has two institutions with minority status.

The Acharya Shri Chander College of Medical Sciences (ASCOMS), run by the Shri Chander Chinar Bada Akhara Udasin Society, enjoys Hindu minority status and reserves 25 per cent of its seats for Hindu students. The Mahant Bachittar Singh College for Engineering and Technology reserves 50 per cent of its seats for Sikh students as a Sikh minority institution. Importantly, both institutions continue to follow standard NEET/BOPEE admission procedures.

In the end, political compulsions appear to have overrun everything else, pushing the UT towards another bout of communal polarisation and accompanying frenzy. Immediate remedial measures are required to prevent the situation from worsening further.

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PIONEER (P-9), 13 JANUARY 2026

How sports and fitness are shaping a youth-driven India

T SENTHIL SIVA SUBRAMANIAN

India, in the present decade, has scripted huge victories in sports, especially women's sports, which have taken Bharat to several heights. The victories across different sporting disciplines have enabled and boosted India's economy and global position as well. Indian states have produced several significantly talented players across different spectrums of sports and fitness. In the 21st century, India is recognised as a nation of excellence in sports and fitness (Yoga) across the globe, in addition to massive growth in innovation and technology. India is the largest member state of the Commonwealth and continues to contribute to sports, and is privileged to host the Commonwealth Games in 2030.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

Stadium to Classrooms

Indian sports have redefined the spectrum of humanity through striking victories, thereby creating immense talent across different segments such as cricket, chess, and many more. Training in sports and fitness is part of the nation-building exercise and holds significant priority for the growth of the country. There is a need of the hour to enhance best practices in sports and fitness, thereby transforming the thinking around skilling in sports and fitness from stadiums, school and college playgrounds to classrooms and conference rooms. The Government of India is planning to utilise the benefits of Digital Public Infrastructure by establishing hubs for different sports and fitness disciplines, thereby enabling India to shine and stand unique across the globe.

Indian Sports: A Youth-Centric model

Khelega India, Khilega India — the torchbearers and core mantra of Hon'ble Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi-aim to make India march towards self-reliance in sports and fitness. This youth-centric mantra builds holistic development and creates an inner spirit of sports and fitness ecosystems and culture in India. The launch of Fit India has promoted healthier lifestyles and has been integrated into daily life among the youth. Excellence in sports and fitness can be achieved by enabling sports and fitness trainers to undergo Training of Trainers (ToT) programmes, which will develop multiple skills and generate additional revenue for the youth as well.

The tangible outcomes of reskilling and upskilling youth in sports and fitness include enhanced self-discipline, self-confidence, empathy, compassion, and most importantly, improved mental and physical well-being, especially among women. The Government of India plans to train youth in yoga and self-defence, aligned with the National Education Policy 2020, the National Skill Qualification Framework, and the National Credit Framework, through Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and National Skill Training Institutes.

Skilling in Sports and Fitness

The Government of India aims to introduce internship programmes in sports that will enable students to learn sports administration, anti-doping testing, and event management. The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, along with the Ministry of Sports, is formulating plans to train ITI students and engage them in skilling in sports, yoga, fitness, and self-defence-marking a first-of-its-kind life-skills and community-based learning initiative. Training in self-defence will develop inner strength, confidence, and effective safety mechanisms for young girls and women.

NSS & NCC: Community-based learning

Indian education systems have adopted effective fitness programmes through the National Cadet Corps (NCC) and the National Service Scheme (NSS), which foster holistic youth development. NCC is offered as an elective or choice-based credit course across universities and higher educational institutions. NSS and NCC form the backbone of community-based learning. These home-grown initiatives build a strong talent pool and facilitate youth empowerment. Together, they strengthen the nation by nurturing youth and creating a trained talent pool that leads to excellence in sports.

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STATESMAN (P-11), 13 JANUARY 2026

Irrelevance of AI-detection plagiarism tools in a world dominated by AI

[illegible]

In a world dominated by Chatbots, every student of the present generation is trained in AI tools, and most have even forgotten how to write in their own words. Even an English literature student finds it difficult to understand grammar without the help of tools like Grammarly or Quillbot. But when it comes to higher education, especially for doctoral students, universities are particularly strict about plagiarism and the use of AI. Many companies are exploring their business in the field, which runs into lakhs annually per purchase. It's like you develop a tool that corrupts the system, then, as a solution, develop another tool to mitigate the impact.

PLAGIARISM

The real question is, do we really need AI-detection plagiarism tools in a world where AI is already a common way to express yourself? These products are increasingly like the old antivirus software from the early 2000s: they are heavily advertised, don't always work as promised, and can't keep up with the systems they claim to protect. Their prolonged existence seems to be less about academic integrity and more about protecting an industry that depends on institutional unease.

AI-detection systems promise to be sure in a field where being sure is impossible. Today, the distance between a bot and a human is so narrow that it's challenging to find the difference. There are instances of journals rejecting genuine research papers for perceived similarity to AI-generated content. A paragraph that was produced after a lot of thought is called '95 per cent AI,' whereas a piece that was made by a machine might be called 'mostly human.' The findings are all over the place — when the exact text is examined across multiple systems, they can range from 0 per cent to 100 per cent AI. When diagnostic discrepancies become the norm, it raises an uncomfortable but essential question about legitimacy.

The transition in how AI detection methods. Statistical signatures, such as patterns, phrase uniformity, predictability indices, and probability distributions, are used by these tools. But people learn quite different ways of writing. The generation that grew up with tools like Grammarly has unknowingly imbibed the writing style these tools promote. Some people write with clear, predictable patterns, while some others write in ways that are hard to predict. As large language models get better, their outputs now seem so much like human writing that it's hard to tell them apart. It's like asking a speed radar to distinguish between two similar cars travelling at the same speed.

Also, the widespread usage of generative AI has transformed what it means to be an author. AI tools are becoming part of our daily

writing habits, whether we're writing an email, organising a report, fixing grammar, or brainstorming ideas. If it's used to use AI, where does 'AI writing' start and human writing' end? Detection tools work on a binary model that is no longer true. They are trying to enforce a boundary that no longer exists.

This is when their business plan becomes clear. AI-detection services, like antivirus firms that sell perpetual fear of invisible threats, make money by making teachers, publishers, and institutions worried about a technological change they don't completely grasp. Many schools and colleges don't want to reconsider how they test students, so they hire detection software to do it for them. The illusion of control is good for business. But it doesn't signify anything.

The unintended results are awful. Students who make their own work are falsely accused. Writers have to change their natural style to sound less like AI, as if creativity has to fit with what algorithms demand. Researchers are afraid to employ fundamental digital tools because they might get in trouble. Detection technologies don't help develop a culture of trust and literacy. Instead, they make people suspicious. They punish real people while not catching those who misuse things.

Instead of spending money on detection systems that don't work, academic and professional ecosystems need to focus on subjective assessment, process-based evaluation, and critical thinking abilities. Tell pupils to turn in drafts, notes, reflections, or spoken explanations. Instead of making an impossible prohibition, push for openness about how AI tools are utilised. Instead of keeping an eye on AI's traces, teach people about AI ethics.

Adding AI to writing is not just a passing trend. It is a change in the way things are done. AI will revolutionise the way we write, think and learn, much like calculators changed how we study maths and search engines changed how we find information. We should adapt to the situation, not police it. AI-detection plagiarism techniques may still be sold as commercial solutions, although they are becoming less and less useful. Their existence is based on an old idea of authorship, and they are not reliable enough to be used as tools for judgment.

In a world dominated by AI, the goal is not to detect it. The goal is to understand it, integrate it, and use it to elevate human learning. The future of academic integrity does not depend on software that scares people, but on innovative teaching, smart policies, and a fresh respect for human creativity that is helped, not threatened, by innovative technology.

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Outsourcing of the university classroom

Why higher education institutions are bringing in edtech firms and coaching academies to teach courses in new tech, finance, and other specialised subjects. And what it means for the idea of a university

Illustration: Uday Deb

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What is a university? It's a place of learning, defined by a curriculum set by the institution, and by pedagogic styles of educators recruited by the institution. Minus these two — in-house syllabus and in-house professors — is a university really a university?

Apparently it is — because across India, higher education institutions are, for certain disciplines, outsourcing curriculum, teaching, training, and even student placement to edtech firms, coaching academies and what are called industry partners.

Exact numbers are hard to pin down. GOI's education ministry or UGC/AICTE or universities themselves don't maintain databases. Universities are also reluctant to share even general information on the issue. The few people in universities who spoke to TOI did so off-record.

But there's no doubt that in many cases, the classroom has been outsourced, the institution has become the interface, and this has happened quietly. University authorities say, off-record, the change is in response to three things: GOI's new education policy (NEP), the rapid rise in the number of universities and colleges, and the speed and scale of tech transformation.

NEP greenlighted courses tailored to new areas of knowledge, with an emphasis on getting graduates job market-ready. What did that mean for universities? They had to — and wanted to, to remain relevant — offer subjects like data science, AI, fintech, blockchain. Plus, as universities and colleges proliferated — in the last 10 years, the number of universities has nearly doubled, from 760 to 1,338 — competition to attract students grew fiercer (see graphic). But universities didn't have the faculty and, even if they did new recruitment, knowledge accretion in these areas happens so fast, there was no guarantee in-house teachers could have kept up.

Outsourcing classrooms was the only option, higher education managers say. Whether this makes universities more responsive or more hollowed out remains an open question. What is not in doubt is that the centre of gravity is shifting — away from the university as a place where knowledge is made and taught, and towards one where it is assembled, branded and certified.

Whatever your take on this is, it's important to remember this is not a story with villains. It's a story of pressure points: for universities, the pressure to scale; for students, the pressure to stay employable; for everyone, the pressure to keep pace with a world that does not pause. Universities are not surrendering their core lightly; they are adapting because they feel they must.

Ex-UGC chairman Jagadesh Kumar is a realist. He says, "students expect universities to offer courses related to cutting-edge disciplines... employers also expect graduates to be work-ready". He recommends "structured partnership with industry". But, he insists, the university "should remain" the "custodian of curriculum, assessment, and academic standards".

SS Mantha, ex-chairman, AICTE, talked of what he sees as a slow unmooring of the university from functions it once held tightly at its core. That's inevitable, he says, even if one admits the pressure.

Innocent Beginnings

Outsourcing the classroom began innocently enough — at the edges. Buses and canteens. Hostels and housekeeping. Hospitality and maintenance. These were practical decisions, framed in terms of efficiency, rationalisation, better focus. Universities would do what only universities do best, and everything else would be managed by someone else.

But the perimeter kept moving inward. The next functions outsourced were marketing, recruitment, admissions counselling, and of late, the financing of tuition that can be paid in EMIs.

Perhaps, universities had grown comfortable with the idea of outsourcing. So, when new courses became the norm, contracting out the core function wasn't as difficult. Universities, as Mantha says, have become credentialing machines, degree-giving institutions. Inevitably, many colleges are increasingly identified and assessed not by who their faculty members are, but by who they are tied up with.

The Outsourcing Model

At the basic level, the business of universities outsourcing teaching to private companies works on revenue sharing. Students are charged different tuition fees for different 'special courses' they opt for. These fees are divided up, usually 50:50, between the outside education provider and the university.

Information about the typical size of a deal is hard to obtain. Universities don't want to provide any detail and edtech and industry partners are wary of sharing business numbers. But people familiar with the process said it's an extremely viable business model and one that's attracting many private companies.

Take Mumbai, for instance. A growing number of colleges in the city have begun outsourcing entire courses to private coaching academies. The shift is particularly visible in commerce and management streams, where institutions are under pressure to offer professional and job-linked qualifications alongside conventional degrees.

"Many of our students do not want to study a plain BCom anymore," said a senior faculty member at one such college, requesting anonymity. "They want to pursue CA or CFA, and at the same time enrol for a BMS from an online private university in Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan."

To meet this demand, the college has entered into a revenue-sharing arrangement with a coaching academy, under which the external partner runs the professional courses, brings in its own faculty and curriculum, and keeps 60% of the revenue, while the college retains 40%.

"Giving students a choice is good... courses like BMS are a stepping stone to an MBA. It's almost like going shopping. Students are picking what they think is new and promising," says Sunil Mantri, ex-principal, NM College. Some colleges, Mantri says, get the teaching done by the edtech partner but the faculty are shown on college rolls. TOI could not independently verify this.

What's clear is that universities and affiliated colleges are feeling the pressure to create a brand. Some of this is reflected in BA, BSc and BCom having been split into endless subtypes, all clamouring for attention with adjectives like 'global', 'smart', or 'innovative'. Every campus is in a race to offer something the next one doesn't, as another professor put it.

The New Teachers

A Andre, CEO of DataTech Labs, which runs around 20 specialised programmes in areas such as data science, fraud analytics, smart manufacturing and diagnostic AI, works with 25 institutions — including in outside India — to deliver these courses. "These skills are now needed across domains," Andre said. "From arts to commerce to science and technology, from law to music — colleges and universities are being asked to offer them because placement heads are looking for these capabilities."

Andre said exposure and demand are jointly driving this shift. "Exposure is the mother of innovation and need is the father of change," he said. "That combination is what is reshaping curricula across streams."

Pune Prep, for instance, which offered campus placement training for over 10 years, started the business of taking over and running degree programmes in 2021. The courses it handles are BCA or BSc in AI, data science and machine learning, BCom in fintech with AI, and BBA in ecommerce with digital marketing.

The CEO of another company, which provides similar services in healthcare courses in Karnataka, said: "These are specifically for programmes that need specialised curriculum, highly trained faculty, and skill labs. He says his company is "a training partner that produces industry-aligned modules and provides placement support and internships. But, he points out, "exams, assessment, and award of degrees are done by the colleges".

Rajesh Kumar, CEO and co-founder of Kalvium, points to universities' old-style faculties. Kalvium runs computer science engineering programmes in 17 universities currently and 13 more are in the pipeline for the next academic year.

Kumar says businesses like his have come up because India's education system undervalues teaching. "Teaching as a profession is not considered prestigious", he says, and "therefore, the quality of teachers has dipped". He says this is particularly true in cases like engineering.

Deepak Powdel, principal of Pune's Brihan Maharashtra College of Commerce (BMCC), said the college has tied up with the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) to offer an online, two-credit course in the Indian knowledge system, titled 'Introduction to the Vedas'.

"BORI is a renowned institute for the study of ancient India. When we have such a wealth of knowledge next door, why go elsewhere?" Powdel says. "They offer online courses on the Vedas. All our other courses are taught by our own faculty."

Sundeep A Meshram, associate dean at the College of Engineering Pune Technological University, said the university has tied up with industry players and specialised institutes to offer students a range of multidisciplinary minor courses beyond its core engineering expertise.

"These are minor courses in other domains," Meshram said. "We have partnered with FinIQ Consulting India for a course in quantitative finance, with Vizuara AI Labs for artificial intelligence, and with Jnana Prabodhini's Institute of Psychology for a minor in psychology. Faculty from the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics also teach a course in economics."

So, What's The Future?

Many educators TOI spoke to for this story are certain that the trend of outsourcing the classroom will continue. Finding quality faculty to teach is tough in traditional subjects, they say, but near-impossible in new areas where the scope of required knowledge expands every year.

But, they also say, universities will still be necessary, not just as the degree giver but also as a gatekeeper when it comes to assessing the quality of teaching offered by outside partners. Also, students still want to go to a university, not to an edtech firm.

Universities will become increasingly flexible in their approach, more responsive to how technology and economic conditions are shaping student choices and needs. But will a more networked university still retain the character rooted in the emphasis it gave to sustained inquiry, thinking through difficult problems, the long relationship between teachers and students?

That question will likely get answered over the next few years.

Additional reporting by Sruthy Susan Ullas in Bengaluru and Ambika Nair in Pune

THE EDUCATION EXPLOSION

One reason unis are outsourcing courses is because there are so many of them, many of them private, and competition is fierce. Here are some numbers

NO. OF UNIS HAS NEARLY DOUBLED

760 in 2014-15

1,338 as of June 2025

NO. OF COLLEGES UP, TOO

38,498 2014-15

52,081 June 2025

Enrolment in higher education increased to 4.3 crore in 2021-22 from 3.4 crore in 2014-15. That's an increase of 91 lakh students, or a 26.5% jump

Female enrolment in higher education increased to 2.1 crore in 2021-22 from 1.6 crore in 2014-15. A jump by 50 lakh students, or 32%

Gross Enrolment Ratio increased to 28.4 in 2021-22 from 23.7 in 2014-15; female GER increased to 28.5 in 2021-22 from 22.9 in 2014-15

Female GER continues to be more than male GER for fifth consecutive year since 2017-18

Per AISHE 2021-22, 79% of college students are in undergrad courses, and 12% in postgrad ones

BCA or BSc in AI, data science and machine learning, BCom in fintech with AI, and BBA in ecommerce with digital marketing — this is a sample of courses for which universities are roping in edtech firms amid a focus on producing graduates who are job market-ready

It's important to remember this is not a story with villains. It's a story of pressure points: for universities, the pressure to scale; for students, the pressure to stay employable; for everyone, the pressure to keep pace with a world that does not pause

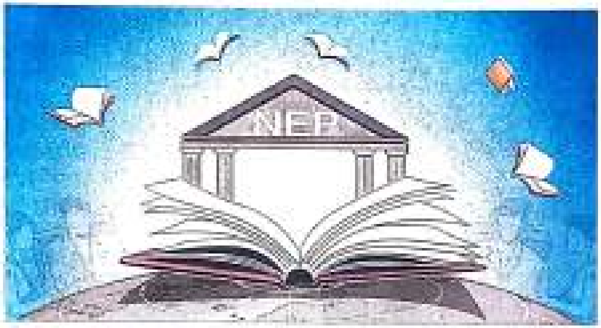
शिक्षा के अंतरराष्ट्रीयकरण की चुनौती

बद्री नारायण

हमारे शिक्षा संस्थानों को विदेशी विश्वविद्यालयों से प्रतिस्पर्धा के लिए तैयार होना होगा। इसके लिए विश्व-स्तरीय शोध और उच्च क्षमता वाले शिक्षक आवश्यक हैं

प्रधानमंत्री नरेन्द्र मोदी के नेतृत्व में राष्ट्रीय जनतांत्रिक गठबंधन (एनडीए) सरकार के बारह वर्ष पूरे होने वाले हैं। इस पूरे कालखंड को अनेक विकासपरक मिशनों के लिए याद किया जाएगा। इसमें अनेक प्रशासनिक सुधारों के कार्य संपन्न किए गए। प्रधानमंत्री मोदी का प्रशासनिक दर्शन, जो अब तक उनके कार्यों से परिलक्षित हुआ है, वस्तुतः व्यवस्था को सरल, सुलभ और प्रभावी बनाने का रहा है। जनता के लिए योजनाएं बनाना, उन्हें लागू करना और उनके सामाजिक-आर्थिक एवं राजनीतिक प्रभावों को समझना तथा उन्हें और अधिक प्रभावी बनाने के लिए समय-समय पर उनमें सुधार कर नया रूप देना प्रधानमंत्री मोदी की प्रशासनिक कार्यशैली का मूल तत्व है। आज इसी सुचिंतित नीति-निर्माण प्रक्रिया के कारण भारत दुनिया की तीसरी सबसे बड़ी अर्थव्यवस्था बनने की दिशा में अग्रसर है। विकसित भारत का मिशन इस लक्ष्य का आधार तत्व है। आजादी के बाद भारत के विकास-इतिहास के इस विशिष्ट कालखंड में देश ने बड़े सपने देखे हैं और उन्हें साकार करने की दिशा में आगे बढ़ रहा है। विकास के इस इतिहास में भारतीय शिक्षा के नवाचारी उन्नयन का भी एक बड़ा योगदान है। इसी कालखंड में राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति-2020 बनी और लागू हुई। अब उसे लागू हुए पांच वर्ष हो चुके हैं।

आजाद भारत में एक नवाचारी, रचनात्मक और गैर-औपनिवेशिक शिक्षा व्यवस्था की शुरुआत भी इसी दौर में हुई। शिक्षा मंत्री धर्मेंद्र प्रधान ने स्कूली शिक्षा से लेकर उच्च शिक्षा तक नई शिक्षा नीति के कार्यान्वयन के क्रम में अनेक नवाचारी कदम उठाए। एक ओर स्कूली शिक्षा के लिए एनसीईआरटी के नए पाठ्यक्रम विकसित किए गए, तो दूसरी ओर केंद्रीय विद्यालयों और नवोदय विद्यालयों जैसे सरकारी स्कूलों के नेटवर्क का विकास, विस्तार और संवर्धन किया गया। इस कालखंड में भारत में स्कूली शिक्षा का क्षैतिज विस्तार संभव हो सका। दूर-दराज के सरकारी विद्यालयों में भी आधारभूत संरचना विकसित की गई। इसके साथ ही शैक्षिक गुणवत्ता बढ़ाने के लिए निगरानी की प्रक्रिया को अधिक प्रभावी बनाया गया है। स्कूलों में बिजली की उपलब्धता, कंप्यूटर एवं डिजिटल संसाधनों का विस्तार, खेल मैदान और पुस्तकालय जैसी सुविधाओं में 2014 के पूर्व की तुलना में लगभग दोगुनी वृद्धि हुई है। प्रति बच्चे शिक्षा पर किए जाने वाले सरकारी खर्च में प्रधानमंत्री मोदी के नेतृत्व वाली एनडीए सरकार ने लगभग 130 प्रतिशत की वृद्धि की है। शिक्षा को वंचित और कमजोर तबकों को सशक्त बनाने के साधन के रूप में विकसित करते हुए इससे जुड़ी नौकरियों और नामांकन में महिलाओं, दिव्यांगों, दलितों और पिछड़े वर्गों की समुचित सहभागिता सुनिश्चित की गई है।



अमेश ठाकुर

स्कूली शिक्षा में भारतीय भाषाओं को शिक्षण-प्रशिक्षण का माध्यम बनाने की प्रक्रिया आगे बढ़ रही है। 23 भाषाओं में कक्षा-एक एवं दो की पाठ्यपुस्तकें उपलब्ध कराई जा चुकी हैं। दीक्षा प्लेटफार्म पर अनेक भारतीय और विदेशी भाषाओं में बहुभाषी सामग्री उपलब्ध है। श्रवण-बाधित छात्रों के लिए आइएसएल चैनल भी शुरू हुआ है। इसके अतिरिक्त मातृभाषा में उच्च शिक्षा और विशेष रूप से मेडिकल एवं इंजीनियरिंग में पढ़ाई के प्रयास किए गए हैं। शिक्षा मंत्री धर्मेंद्र प्रधान के शब्दों में, आज हमारे विद्यालय न केवल ज्ञान, बल्कि कौशल के केंद्र बन चुके हैं। ज्ञान, रचनात्मकता और व्यवहार, तीनों मिलकर स्कूली शिक्षा को नया स्वरूप दे रहे हैं। इस कालखंड में उच्च शिक्षा के क्षेत्र में भी व्यापक विस्तार हुआ है। समाज के दूरस्थ क्षेत्रों और पिछड़ी आबादी को ध्यान में रखकर नए केंद्रीय विश्वविद्यालय, आइआइटी, आइआइएम और राज्य विश्वविद्यालय स्थापित किए गए हैं।

उच्च शिक्षा को सामाजिक न्याय और समावेशन के सशक्त माध्यम के रूप में भी विकसित किया गया है। आंध्र प्रदेश में दो जनजातीय विश्वविद्यालयों की स्थापना और ओडिशा के संबलपुर में आइआइएम का खुलना इसके उदाहरण हैं। 2014 के बाद 11 केंद्रीय विश्वविद्यालय, 14 आइआइएम और सात नए आइआइटी स्थापित किए गए हैं। एक महत्वपूर्ण मिशन-भारतीय शिक्षा का अंतरराष्ट्रीयकरण भी इसी कालखंड में प्रारंभ हुआ है। इसके अंतर्गत भारतीय शिक्षा संस्थान, जैसे आइआइटी, आइआइएम और डीम्ड विश्वविद्यालय विदेश में अपने परिसर खोल रहे हैं। इसी के साथ विश्व के प्रतिष्ठित विश्वविद्यालय भी भारत में अपने परिसर या अंतरराष्ट्रीय कार्यालय स्थापित कर रहे हैं। आने वाले समय में कई विदेशी विश्वविद्यालयों के भारत स्थित परिसरों में पठन-पाठन देखने को मिल सकता है। भारत में भारतीय शिक्षा संस्थानों को विश्व रैंकिंग में उल्लेखनीय स्थान प्राप्त हो रहे हैं। भारतीय शिक्षा के अंतरराष्ट्रीयकरण से शिक्षकों, छात्रों और संस्थानों को अंतरराष्ट्रीय मंच मिलेगा एवं छात्रों को भारत में रहते हुए ही विश्व-स्तरीय शिक्षा पद्धतियों का लाभ प्राप्त होगा। इससे गुणवत्ता-आधारित प्रतिस्पर्धा भी उत्पन्न होगी। भारतीय उच्च शिक्षा संस्थानों को विदेशी विश्वविद्यालयों के समकक्ष गुणवत्ता के स्तर पर प्रतिस्पर्धा के लिए स्वयं को तैयार करना होगा। इसके लिए विश्व-स्तरीय शोध, सशक्त वैचारिक विमर्श और उच्च क्षमता वाले शिक्षकों से परिसरों को सुसज्जित करना आवश्यक है। भारतीय शोध-उपलब्धियों को अंतरराष्ट्रीय संवाद और प्रकाशनों के माध्यम से वैश्विक पहचान दिलानी होगी।

वास्तव में भारतीय शिक्षा का अंतरराष्ट्रीयकरण हम सबके लिए एक महत्वपूर्ण सामूहिक मिशन होना चाहिए। इसके अंतर्गत हमारा लक्ष्य शिक्षा की गुणवत्ता के संवर्धन के साथ-साथ भारतीय विकास का एक वैश्विक वृत्तांत रचना भी होना चाहिए। इससे न केवल विकसित भारत का मिशन सुदृढ़ होगा, बल्कि वैश्विक स्तर पर भारत का प्रभाव भी बढ़ेगा। इस दिशा में भारतीय शिक्षा अधिष्ठान विधेयक-2024 सहायक सिद्ध होगा। इसका उद्देश्य शोध और शिक्षा को भविष्य की चुनौतियों के अनुरूप संगठित कर विश्व-स्तरीय बनाना है। नए वर्ष में भारतीय शिक्षा विकसित भारत के मिशन के लिए मन, मानस और मस्तिष्क को गढ़ सके-यही हमारा लक्ष्य होना चाहिए।

(लेखक टाटा इंस्टीट्यूट आफ सोशल साइंसेज, मुंबई के कुलपति हैं।)

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ECONOMICS TIMES (P-8), 14 JANUARY 2026

Elite Education, Get Industrious

Subhamoy Maitra

IIT Council's decision earlier this month to reform JEE Advanced, MTech and PhD programmes is an acknowledgement that India's elite education model is under pressure to adapt. When institutions as reputation-conscious and tradition-bound as IITs decide to revisit how they select students and train postgraduates, it reflects unease not with intent but with outcomes.

India has long lived with two parallel ideas of education. One is mass-oriented — designed to expand access, improve employability and ensure minimum competence across a vast population. For a country with 1.5 bn people, such 'socialist' ideas can't be ignored. The other is unapologetically elitist. It selects aggressively, excludes without remorse and rewards those who survive prolonged competition. Institutions such as IITs and IIMs belong to this category.

The entrance processes of the latter are among the most competitive in the world, their brand value is global, and their graduates are embedded in capitalist systems of production and management. By philosophy and design, these institutions cannot be separated from markets, hierarchy or competition. Any serious reform must begin by acknowledging this reality rather than softening it with comforting rhetoric.

So, elite engineering education cannot confine itself to abstract discussions on pedagogy or academic ideals. Its graduates do not merely acquire knowledge, they enter systems of power, capital and influence. Nation-building becomes an implicit expectation, even as the definition of 'nation' remains flexible. Many graduates contribute to building other countries' tech and economic capabilities.

This global mobility only heightens institutional responsibility. If elite institutions are producing individuals who will shape industries, technologies and policies across borders, their education must emphasise real-world problem-solving, not just exam excellence.

Get the glove to fit

Which makes the latest emphasis on mandatory internships welcome. Over time, however, many internships, particularly at the PG level, have drifted into academic comfort zones. Students remain within labs or research groups, producing outputs that satisfy evaluation metrics, but often fall short of industrial or societal relevance.

Exposure to industry teaches constraints that classrooms rarely capture: hard deadlines, imperfect information, organisational frictions and that deployable solutions matter more than elegant ones. For institutions that wish to remain relevant in a rapidly changing tech landscape, deeper industry engagement is no longer optional.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the proposed reforms is the implicit recognition that exceptional performance in entrance exams is a poor proxy for long-term success or innovation. Of late, the IIT entrance ecosystem has become heavily pattern- and preparation-driven. Coaching systems have professionalised success in entrance exams to such an extent that many students arrive on campus fatigued.

Curiosity gives way to optimisation. Intellectual risk-taking yields to strategic caution. But these are absent in a considerable proportion of students admitted through the present process dominated by multiple-choice answering frameworks. This is not individual failure, but a predictable outcome of sustained hyper-competition. Burnout at entry point also casts a long shadow. Industry leaders and research supervisors report a similar pattern as well.

Adaptive testing, curriculum restructuring and rethinking PG pathways are attempts to recalibrate incentives. If implemented thoughtfully, they may help restore balance between assessment and imagination.

There is also a broader societal expectation that elite institutions can no longer overlook. It increasingly expects graduates from top institutions to not merely compete for the best jobs, but to create jobs themselves. In an economy aspiring to scale innovation rapidly, employment generation cannot remain incidental.

So, internships can't be confined to corporate absorption alone. They must be equally oriented towards entrepreneurship, exposing students to product development, market validation, regulatory navigation and early-stage failure. An internship that teaches how to build, pivot or responsibly abandon an idea may be as valuable as one that trains students to optimise existing systems.

Elite education will always remain competitive, and rightly so. But competition must remain a means, not the destination. The timing of the decision is appropriate. But its success will depend on whether reforms translate into measurable outcomes, rather than well-meaning frameworks.

The writer is professor, Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), Kolkata

HINDU (P-8), 14 JANUARY 2026

Language of harmony

The rights of linguistic minorities must be protected in every State

The Malayalam Language Bill, 2025, which seeks to promote the language and passed by the Kerala Assembly, is being opposed by leaders in Karnataka. The concern that minority languages in the State, particularly Tamil and Kannada, would be adversely affected is misplaced and arises out of misunderstanding of the provisions. The Bill's objective is to provide for the "adoption of the Malayalam language as the official language of the State of Kerala and for Malayalam to be used for all official purposes, to provide for the use of the Malayalam language in all sectors in Kerala, subject to the provisions of the Constitution of India", and to advance the overall progress and enrichment of the language. The Bill proposes the adoption of Malayalam as the first language for schoolchildren and measures to promote the language in various sectors, from the judiciary to IT. The Bill states that Tamil and Kannada linguistic minorities in notified areas may correspond with the State Secretariat, Heads of Departments, and local State offices in their respective languages, and replies shall be issued in those languages; and that students whose mother tongue is not Malayalam may pursue education in other available languages in State schools, in accordance with the National Education Curriculum. Additionally, students from other States or foreign countries studying in Kerala whose mother tongue is not Malayalam are exempt from writing Malayalam examinations at the classes IX, X, and higher secondary levels.

An earlier version of the Bill, passed in 2015, was languishing for the Centre's clearance for 10 years. After the Centre returned the Bill following a Supreme Court of India decision that Bills cannot be indefinitely delayed, the State passed the current version. The Centre, ostensibly, has a policy of promoting all Indian languages, as do several States. As long as such measures are undertaken alongside those for the protection of the rights of linguistic minorities, no other State or the Centre should have any objection. Most States, including Kerala and Karnataka, have multiple linguistic communities. The linguistic division of States was only an approximation, and language borders have weakened due to migration. Language policies at the national and regional levels must account for these realities rather than pursuing a blind cultural agenda of Hindi or any single language promotion. To be clear, all these languages must have their rightful places in administration and the public sphere. To achieve that objective without allowing hostilities between communities is a challenge of nation-building. Mechanisms such as the Inter-State Council, which has been dormant, must be invested with more authority, and wider, good-faith conversations across linguistic groups promoted.

Kashi-Tamil Sangamam: Tribute to Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat

Narendra Modi

Prime Minister of India

A few days ago, I was in the sacred land of Somnath to be part of the Somnath Swabhiman Parv, marking a thousand years since the first attack on Somnath, which took place in 1026. People from all across India had come to be part of this moment of remembrance, united by a shared reverence for history, culture and the enduring spirit of the people of India. During the programme, I met a few people who had previously come to Somnath during the Saurashtra-Tamil Sangamam and had been to Kashi during the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam. Their words of appreciation for such platforms touched me and so, I thought of sharing a few thoughts on this subject.

During one of the *Mann Ki Baat* programmes, I had said that not learning Tamil is a major regret of my life. Fortunately, over the last few years, our Government has had several opportunities to further popularise Tamil culture across India and to deepen the spirit of 'Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat.' A prime example of such an effort is the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam. In our ethos, Sangam or confluence has a special place. Seen in this light, the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam stands out as a truly distinctive initiative, one that celebrates the living unity of India's many traditions while honouring their unique identities.

And what can be a better place than Kashi to host such a Sangamam. The same Kashi, which has remained a civilisational anchor from time immemorial... where, for thousands of years, people from all over have come in search of knowledge, meaning and Moksha.

Kashi's connection with Tamil people and culture is very deep. It is in Kashi that Baba Vishwanath resides, while Tamil Nadu has Rameswaram. Tenkasi in Tamil Nadu is known as Kashi of the south or Dakshin Kashi. Saint Kumaragurupara Swamigal forged a lasting link between Kashi and Tamil Nadu through his spirituality, scholarship and institution-building. Mahakavi Subramania Bharati, one of Tamil Nadu's greatest sons, found in Kashi a space of intellectual growth and spiritual awakening. It was here that his nationalism deepened, his poetry sharpened and his vision of a free, united India took clearer shape. There are several such instances that highlight this close bond.

The first edition of Kashi-Tamil Sangamam took place in 2022. I recall attending the inauguration programme. Scholars, artisans, students, farmers, writers, professionals and many others from Tamil Nadu travelled to Kashi, Prayagraj and Ayodhya.

Subsequent editions expanded the scale and depth of this effort. The aim was to keep introducing fresh themes, innovative formats and deeper engagement, thus ensuring that the Sangamam continued to evolve while remaining rooted in its core spirit. In the second edition in 2023, technology was used on a larger scale to ensure that language does not become a barrier for people. In the third edition, the focus was on Indian knowledge systems. At the same time, academic discussions, cultural performances, exhibitions and interactions witnessed greater participation. Thousands of people have taken part in these events.

The fourth edition of the Kashi Tamil Sangamam commenced on 2nd December 2025. The theme picked was very interesting — Tamil Karkalam — Learn Tamil. It presented a unique opportunity for people in Kashi and other parts to learn the beautiful Tamil language. Teachers came from Tamil Nadu and the students of Kashi had a very memorable experience.

KASHI'S CONNECTION with Tamil people and culture is very deep. It is in Kashi that Baba Vishwanath resides, while Tamil Nadu has Rameswaram. Tenkasi in Tamil Nadu is known as Kashi of the south or Dakshin Kashi.

There were many other special events this time. Tholkappiyam, the ancient Tamil literary classic, was translated into 4 Indian languages and 6 foreign languages.

A unique event, Sage Agasthya Vehicle Expedition (SAVE), was undertaken from Tenkasi to Kashi. On the way, various initiatives such as eye camps, health awareness camps, digital literacy camps, among other things, were held. The expedition paid homage to King Adi Veera Parakrama Pandiyan, the great Pandya ruler who spread the message of cultural oneness. There were exhibitions at Namo Ghat, academic sessions at Banaras Hindu University, as well as cultural programmes.

One of the things that makes me most happy about the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam is the participation of thousands of youngsters. It illustrates the passion among our Yuva Shakti to deepen their connect with our roots. It is a brilliant platform for them to showcase their talent and creativity during the various cultural programmes.

In addition to the Sangamam, efforts have been made to make the journey to Kashi memorable for the participants. The Indian Railways operated special trains to take people from Tamil Nadu to Uttar Pradesh. In many railway stations, particularly in Tamil Nadu, they were cheered, and the train journey was marked by melodious songs and conversations.

Here, I would also like to appreciate my sisters and brothers of Kashi and Uttar Pradesh for their warmth and hospitality shown to the delegates of the various Kashi-Tamil Sangamams. Several people opened the doors of their homes for the guests from Tamil Nadu. The local administration worked round the clock to ensure the guests had a seamless experience. As the MP from Varanasi, I could not be prouder!

This time, the valedictory function of the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam was held in Rameswaram and it was graced by the Vice President of India, Thiru CP Radhakrishnan Ji, who is himself a proud son of Tamil Nadu. He delivered a very inspiring address, emphasising India's spiritual greatness and how such platforms deepen national integration.

The Kashi Tamil Sangamam has delivered meaningful outcomes like strengthening cultural understanding, fostering academic and people-to-people exchanges and creating lasting bonds between parts of the country that share a civilisational ethos. In the coming times, we want to make this platform even more vibrant. Most importantly, it has furthered the spirit of 'Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat.' This spirit has flourished for centuries through our festivals, literature, music, art, cuisine, architecture, systems of knowledge and more.

This time of the year is very auspicious for people across the length and breadth of India. People are enthusiastically marking various festivals like Sankranti, Uttarayan, Pongal, Magh Bihu, which are, among other things, associated with the Sun, nature and farming. These festivals bring people together and deepen the spirit of harmony in our society. I convey my best wishes for these festivals and hope they continue to inspire us to deepen national unity through our shared heritage and collective participation.

HINDU (P-8), 15 JANUARY 2026

What is the Malayalam Language Bill, 2025?

What does the Bill entail? Has a similar Bill been tabled earlier in the Kerala legislature? Why has the Karnataka government opposed the Bill, describing it as 'unconstitutional'? Does the Bill make Malayalam the mandatory first language across all schools in Kerala?

EXPLAINER

Sarath Babu George
Sharath S. Srivatsa

The story so far:

On October 6, 2025, the Kerala government tabled the Malayalam Language Bill, 2025 in the Kerala Legislative Assembly. Three days later, the Bill was passed following scrutiny by the Subject Committee. The Bill now awaits the assent of the Governor. However, the Karnataka Government has expressed concerns over the provisions of the Bill as it could hurt the Kannada linguistic minority in Kerala.

What does the Bill entail?

The Malayalam Language Bill, 2025 seeks to formally adopt Malayalam as the official language of Kerala, and mandates its use across government, education, judiciary, public communication, commerce, and the digital domain, subject to constitutional provisions. Presently, the State recognises both English and Malayalam as official languages. Malayalam will become the compulsory first language in all government and aided schools in Kerala up to Class 10. Steps will also be adopted to translate all judgments and court proceedings in a phased manner. Besides, all Bills and Ordinances will be introduced in Malayalam.

The draft law also intends to rename the existing Personnel and Administrative Reforms (Official Language) department as the Malayalam Language Development department. The government will also constitute a Malayalam Language Development Directorate under the department. The Information Technology department will be entrusted with developing open source software and accessories for the efficient use of Malayalam language in the field of IT.

What prompted its introduction?

Over a decade ago, the Kerala government had introduced the Malayalam Language (Dissemination and Enrichment) Bill, 2015, which was also intended to adopt Malayalam as the official language and be used for all official purposes. Despite being passed by the Kerala Legislative Assembly, the Bill was referred to the President who withheld assent.

The Bill was reserved for the President's consideration since it contained provisions that contravened the Official Languages Act, 1963. The Central government also raised objections regarding other provisions pertaining to the rights of linguistic minorities; the three language formula in accordance with the national educational curriculum; and provisions in the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. The new Bill has been introduced after removing such defects.

Language dispute: A delegation from the Karnataka Border Area Development Authority delegation meets Kerala Governor Rajendra Arlekar in Kasargod on January 7. THE HINDU

Why has Karnataka opposed the Bill?

The Karnataka government has opposed the Bill, describing it as "unconstitutional" and contrary to the interests of the Kannada-speaking linguistic minority in Kerala, particularly those residing in the border district of Kasaragod. It has raised concerns over the provision that proposes making Malayalam the compulsory first language in all schools across Kerala.

A delegation from the Karnataka Border Area Development Authority submitted a memorandum to Kerala Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar on behalf of the Karnataka government, seeking his intervention to reject the Bill. The petitioners contended that linguistic minority students in Kasaragod and other Kannada-speaking regions of Kerala currently study Kannada as their first language in schools. The government fears that this set-up will be disrupted. The number of Kannada medium schools in Kasargod district has already come down from 197 to 182 in recent years. The Karnataka government has also expressed apprehension that implementing the Bill in Kasaragod could have far-reaching consequences and adversely impact the Kannada language in general.

What has Kerala government said?

Law Minister P. Rajeeve, while tabling the Bill, had emphasised that the Bill seeks to protect the rights of linguistic minorities, including citizens who consider Tamil, Kannada, Tulu and Konkani as their mother tongues. It contains special provisions for linguistic minorities, who will be permitted to use their mother tongues for correspondence with the State government Secretariat, Heads of Department and all local offices of the State government situated in those areas. Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said that the Bill contains a clear and unambiguous non-obstante clause in Clause 7 that provides special provisions to other State linguistic minorities. He has said that Kerala's Language policy is fully aligned with the Official Languages Act, 1963, and Articles 346 and 347 (Articles which lay out details regarding the language to be used for official purposes).

What has been Karnataka's response?

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has said that Karnataka will oppose the Bill by exercising every constitutional right available if the Bill in the current form is not withdrawn. Kannada and Culture Minister Shivaraj Tangadagi has said that the Chief Minister was likely to meet with the President in this matter.

Meanwhile, the Karnataka Border Area Development Authority has said that it wants amendments to the provisions of the current Bill, the nature of which would explicitly exempt Kannada-speaking areas in Kasargod from the ambit of the Bill.

THE GIST

- The Malayalam Language Bill, 2025 seeks to formally adopt Malayalam as the official language of Kerala, and mandates its use across government, education, judiciary, public communication, commerce, and the digital domain, subject to constitutional provisions.
- Law Minister P. Rajeeve, while tabling the Bill, had emphasised that the Bill seeks to protect the rights of linguistic minorities, including citizens who consider Tamil, Kannada, Tulu and Konkani as their mother tongues.
- The Karnataka government has opposed the Bill, describing it as "unconstitutional" and contrary to the interests of the Kannada-speaking linguistic minority in Kerala, particularly those residing in the border district of Kasaragod.

GETTY IMAGES

Who pays starting salaries of over ₹2 crore per year to fresh graduates?

High frequency trading firms are offering fresh graduates starting salaries in the ₹2 crore range, reflecting a growing trend of high-paying job offers in India's premier educational institutions. Such jobs offer exciting career opportunities both in terms of money and job satisfaction

O.R.S. Rao

The story so far:

Optive, a Netherlands-based global trading company, has offered a starting salary of ₹2.5 crore to a B.Tech (Computer Science) student of IIT Hyderabad.

What is behind the rise of the ₹2-crore recruiter club?

Such high starting salaries are not new. Last year, a student at IIT Madras received a record-breaking offer of ₹4.3 crore per year, for the role of a Quantitative Trader in Jane Street, a Wall Street trading firm from the U.S. The competitive landscape of campus placements of over ₹1 crore per year is estimated to have tripled from about 60 offers in 2021 to 180 in 2025. The share of ₹2-crore+ offers, though still small, has been growing steeply. This phenomenon is not a blip any longer.

The large-ticket "Day-1" financial trading recruiters of the current placement season at IIT Bombay are reported to have offered salaries ranging from ₹2.2 crore to ₹3.6 crore per year. It clearly shows that the trend will continue, despite the impact of artificial intelligence (AI).

In the last five years, the "₹2-Crore Club" has grown to be a robust technology-driven financial stock trading ecosystem. It is helmed by Quantitative Trading (QT) firms, who leverage technology for quick trades in a fraction of seconds. High Frequency Traders (HFT) further automate the trades, without any need for human intervention, using the power of efficient algorithms.

Jane Street and Optiver are not alone. Hudson River Trading (HRT) offered over ₹2.2 crore for an Algorithmic Developer post, whereas Da Vinci Derivatives offered salary packages exceeding ₹2 crore for the role of a Quant Researcher. NK Securities followed with around ₹1.65 crore while Rubrik has extended ₹1.49-crore offers. Other firms in this league include Citadel Securities, IMC Trading, Graviton Research, APT Portfolio, Atlas Research, Quadeye, Quantbox, The Trade Desk, and others.

Around 70% of them have been repeat recruiters, who view the IITs as their primary talent pipeline globally. A few years back, the hunting ground for these recruiters was limited to first generation IITs, but recent years have seen entry of second generation IITs like Hyderabad, IIT(BHU) and IIITs like Allahabad and Raipur.

How can they afford to pay such high salaries?

In order to understand why and how these firms pay such high salaries, one must look at their business model, particularly, of how they make money. Most of them are medium-sized proprietary financial trading houses and earn profits by leveraging price arbitrage, buying and selling stocks between two stock exchanges like NASDAQ and New York Stock Exchange, for tiny profits – as low as $0.01 per share. By executing millions of such trades in seconds they make massive profits.

A software developer at an HFT firm, who can reduce even a few microseconds in execution of a program can generate an extra profit of millions of dollars in a month. As the intellectual efforts of the developer are directly and quickly translated into profit, it is not difficult for the firm to share a part of the profit. This is why these firms hire the best of engineers to optimise every line of the program. These firms are lean with low overheads, with only 200-500 employees, which allows them to distribute a significant portion of their trading profit as bonuses to the employees. A significant portion of the "2 crore" packages, going up to 40%, is the performance bonus.

What are the roles offered and skills needed?

A quantitative trader takes trading decisions in a live trading desk, using game theory and probability. A quantitative researcher analyses historical data to find patterns or "signals" that predict future price movements and devise trading strategies using advanced Statistics, Stochastic Calculus, and Machine Learning. A low-latency developer builds the ultra-fast engines that execute the trades, leveraging the mastery of low-latency expertise in areas like memory management and concurrency.

Typically, these firms look for people with a deep knowledge of algorithms, low level systems and mastery in areas like probability, linear algebra, and game theory. While financial literacy is not always mandatory, an understanding of the financial market microstructure and derivatives is an advantage.

Prior work experience is not essential for these roles, as the firms look for youngsters with exceptional quantitative aptitude, deep conceptual understanding of Mathematics, proficiency in programming, and smart problem-solving abilities. Most firms prefer fresh graduates for their innovative and out-of-the-box thinking ability. In terms of behavioural traits, they look for people that can work under pressure, without losing balance of mind.

Generally, the aspirants go through multiple rounds of rigorous interviews, involving "Brainteaser" rounds, probability puzzles and low-latency C++ coding skills. Most Quant and HFT firms prefer the Pre-Placement Offer (PPO) route for recruitment, where students are selected after a rigorous internship of eight weeks.

What are domestic posting salaries?

Total compensation called Cost-To-Company (CTC) often includes base salary, guaranteed/target bonus, relocation/sign-on bonus, and Restricted Stock Units (RSUs) as employee stock options, and profit-sharing bonus. Because most of the roles are based abroad, in locations like Amsterdam, Dublin, Hong Kong, London and New York, the salary packages convert into Indian Rupees of 2 crore or more. Some companies offer domestic postings, with salaries ranging from ₹60 lakh to ₹1.2 crore.

A ₹2 crore international offer (based in Europe) is roughly equal to a ₹60 lakh offer in India in terms of lifestyle and savings, considering the cost of living and taxes. Students need to keep this in mind, while comparing international offers with domestic offers.

Are there career growth avenues?

Such jobs offer exciting career opportunities both in terms of money and job satisfaction, particularly for students that are strong in mathematics and enjoy solving probability brainteasers. However, there will be intense day-to-day job pressure, due to the live trading environment, which does not tolerate even small mistakes. Besides burn-out, career growth may be limited to the financial technology sector.

While the volume of entry-level roles in traditional IT services is shrinking, due to AI-driven automation, the demand for specialised talent is growing. The Quant and High-Frequency Trading sector is just one example of competitive bidding for the natural human intelligence needed to solve problems that AI is yet to master.

O.R.S. Rao is Chancellor of the ICFAI university, Sikkim. Views are personal.

HINDUSTAN TIMES (P-18), 15 JANUARY 2026

Ensuring effective RTE implementation

The Right to Education (RTE) Act provision of private, unaided schools needing to reserve 25% of seats in Class I for students belonging to economically weaker sections (EWS) was borne of the realisation within policy circles of the many deficiencies of public education in India. The EWS quota was expected to harness private education in a manner where the poor benefitted while the schools were reimbursed by the government for costs incurred. In the 16 years since, however, the significantly low intake of EWS students relative to vacancies, despite a large population of eligible children, underscores a failure in the implementation of the provision. It is in this context that the Supreme Court has ordered the framing of binding rules on EWS admissions across states and Union Territories.

But the challenge is also one of battling mindsets. Integration of EWS students has been a pressing issue among schools that have reluctantly implemented the provision. There are several reports of schools discouraging EWS students, through segregated seating in classrooms to separate shifts at inconvenient timings. Several other hurdles are also reported, from disputed documentation to reluctance on the part of schools due to delays in reimbursements from the government. All of this has been exacerbated by learning gaps within nominally integrated classrooms —fostering an "equal-but-separate" atmosphere. Eliminating EWS vacancies will need these issues to be addressed, but it can only play a supplementary role in bridging the accessibility gap. For a truly robust school ecosystem, public schools will need to get better in terms of quality of education and infrastructure — obviating the need for quotas in private schools.

HT/18

MILLENNIUM POST (P-7), 15 JANUARY 2026

NEXUS OF GOOD

Learning Beyond Classrooms

Through patience and pedagogy, Dr Archana Shukla helped students move from observation to action, creating a scalable model of experiential learning rooted in public responsibility

ANIL SWARUP

THE WRITER IS AN AUTHOR AND A FORMER CIVIL SERVANT

A simple classroom question about a missing bird sparked a movement that blended conservation, science education, and community action—offering lessons for beyond textbooks

In 2021, as schools cautiously reopened following the COVID-19 pandemic, many students remained mentally and emotionally disengaged from learning. The traditional education system, already under strain, was ill-equipped to re-engage learners in a meaningful way. Amid this uncertainty, in a government school classroom in Madhya Pradesh, a quiet yet powerful revolution began—not through textbooks or online modules, but with a single question posed during a biology lesson:

"Is there any species around you that needs to be conserved?"

This simple yet profound question sparked curiosity in a group of 11th-grade students. One student recalled how her mother used to feed a small bird called *goriya*, or the house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), which they no longer saw. This nostalgic memory became the seed of a transformative journey—one that would blossom into a state-supported conservation project and a model for Project-Based Learning (PBL) in India.

As a government school science teacher, ornithologist, and State Resource Person for PBL, Dr Archana Shukla had long advocated for inquiry-driven education. She believed that learning should go beyond rote memorisation and foster curiosity, critical thinking, and real-world problem-solving. Instead of assigning a theoretical chapter on conservation, she encouraged her students to investigate the actual causes behind the disappearance of the sparrow. Contrary to the popular belief that mobile tower radiation was responsible for their decline, students discovered through scientific literature and field research that the true culprit was habitat loss—specifically, the disappearance of nesting spaces in modern urban architecture.

What started as a class research assignment quickly evolved into action. In 2022, a new batch of students took up the challenge of designing sparrow houses. They used cardboard, husk, mud, and recycled materials, showcasing their prototypes at a school exhibition. While some boxes were adopted by sparrows, issues such as fungal growth, water damage, and fragility soon emerged. Rather than giving up, the students adapted. They collaborated with the school carpenter to build stronger, eco-friendly houses from discarded wood. This iterative, design-thinking approach taught them the value of resilience and adaptability.

NEXUS OF GOOD
4th ANNUAL AWARDS 2025

Dr Archana Shukla transformed a biology lesson into a living classroom, proving that inquiry-driven teaching can build ecological awareness, civic responsibility and lasting student engagement

Over the next two years, each new batch of students refined the birdhouse designs based on direct observation and experimentation. They addressed challenges such as larger birds, like Brahminy Starlings and Magpie Robins, occupying the houses, resolved overheating by introducing ventilation, and prevented predator attacks by removing perch sticks. They even added drainage holes to reduce fungal buildup caused by unhatched eggs. Through evidence-based design, their birdhouses evolved—providing a hands-on education in environmental science, engineering, and empathy.

Dr Shukla often shared with her students that sparrows have lived alongside humans for nearly 5,000 years, dating back to the dawn of agriculture. Unlike other birds, nesting isn't hardwired into their genes; sparrows rely on human-made structures to breed and survive. As urban architecture now offers few crevices or nooks, sparrows are losing their homes. Their disappearance is more than symbolic; it has ecological consequences. Sparrow chicks require high-protein food, and their parents feed on garden and kitchen pests—primarily larvae and insects. Without sparrows, people turn to harmful pesticides, which can lead to diseases such as cancer and bacterial or viral infections. Thus, conserving sparrows also safeguards human health and urban biodiversity.

By 2024, what began in a single classroom had grown into a full-fledged community movement. Students started installing sparrow houses in housing societies, temples, mosques, and public spaces—especially in the Awadhpuri area of Bhopal. Parents and local residents became actively involved. The project fostered community bonding, environmental education, and civic engagement. Students continued to modify their designs—adding slanted roofs to deter pigeons and adjusting box sizes based on bird behaviour.

To date, over 5,000 sparrow boxes have been installed through this initiative. Even more heartening is that people and institutions across India have begun replicating this work—from urban neighbourhoods in Delhi and Jodhpur to school campuses in Maharashtra and Karnataka. This ripple effect is a testament to the project's relevance and impact.

In collaboration with the Madhya Pradesh Tiger Foundation Society, students installed 200 sparrow boxes free of charge in public areas. After a year of monitoring, over 85 per cent of these boxes were adopted by sparrows, with some being reused multiple times within a single breeding season—clear evidence of the project's ecological success.

However, the most transformative impact was on the students themselves. One student wrote and published a research paper, and the work was also featured in the international wildlife magazine *Whispering Wild*—making their school one of the first government schools in Madhya Pradesh to achieve this. Another student was selected for the prestigious Sakura Science Exchange Program in Japan, citing his involvement in the sparrow project as central to his application. A third student, who later secured All India Rank 47 in the UPSC Civil Services Examination, credited the bird identification and habitat mapping PBL project with building his analytical and research skills.

The project drew attention from educational forums and forest officials alike. Students presented their work to the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF), who appreciated their thorough research and practical innovation. The Madhya Pradesh Tiger Foundation Society awarded the project a grant of ₹1,00,000, recognising it as a model for integrating student learning with conservation impact. The work has since been showcased at the India International Science Festival, state science fairs, and international educator workshops, where I had the privilege of training teachers from ten different countries on how PBL can transform learning outcomes.

This journey has not only been about conserving sparrows, but it has also been about reimagining education itself. Through this project, students developed a range of 21st-century skills:

- **Critical thinking** and scientific literacy through research
- **Design and innovation** through iterative prototyping
- **Leadership and** collaboration through teamwork
- **Communication skills** through public exhibitions and media outreach
- **Civic and environmental responsibility** through hands-on engagement with local biodiversity

What started as a classroom discussion on conservation turned into a scalable, state-supported model of experiential education. Today, sparrow boxes designed by our students are in demand not only in Madhya Pradesh but also in Delhi, Noida, Gurgaon, and Jodhpur. Our students are now regarded as young urban conservationists—mentoring peers, guiding NGOs, and partnering with forest departments.

This story is not just about the house sparrow—it is about the potential of every student in every government school in India. It is a call to reimagine our classrooms as spaces of exploration, empathy, and empowerment. It is proof that when we trust students with real-world problems, they do not just solve them—they transform communities. For her seminal effort, Dr Archana Shukla was honoured with the Nexus of Good Annual Award in 2025.

Views expressed are personal

MILLENNIUM POST (P-15), 15 JANUARY 2026

CEO SPEAKS

FROM SMALL TOWNS TO BIG DREAMS:

WHERE DETERMINATION REPLACES PRIVILEGE

DR SANKU BOSE

I often find myself in rooms where India's future is discussed in confident phrases. Yet, the most enduring lessons I learn about ambition, resilience and purpose do not come from those discussions. They come from classrooms filled with students from tier-2 and tier-3 towns. Perhaps this connection runs deeper because I, too, come from one.

Growing up away from metropolitan centres, opportunity was never abundant. Career pathways were hazy, mentors were few and exposure to the wider world arrived late. Confidence had to be earned slowly. What we did have, however, was an unshakeable respect for education, patience in the face of constraint and a quiet determination to move forward even when the path ahead was uncertain. Years later, as I engage daily with students from small towns across India, I see those same qualities mirrored back at me with striking clarity.

These students teach me that ambition does not require privilege. Many are first-generation learners. Their parents are farmers, shopkeepers, factory workers, drivers, or small traders. There are no professional networks waiting to be tapped, no family playbooks on navigating higher education. Yet, their aspirations are expansive. They want to become engineers, researchers, doctors, entrepreneurs, scientists and teachers. Their ambition is not ornamental. It carries the weight of family sacrifice and collective hope. It is rooted not merely in personal success, but in the desire to lift entire households. That kind of ambition has dignity.

They also teach me that discipline matters more than early confidence. Students from big cities often arrive fluent in self-expression. Many students from smaller towns, especially in the early months, hesitate to communicate in English, struggle with unfamiliar digital tools, or wait longer before raising a hand in class. But what they rarely lack is consistency. They attend lectures without fail, rewrite assignments patiently, absorb feedback without defensiveness, and practise until competence replaces hesitation. Confidence can be taught. Discipline must be lived. And many of these students arrive with it already embedded in their character.

Time and again, they remind me that talent is evenly distributed, even if opportunity is not. Some of the sharpest analytical minds I encounter come from districts that barely appear on innovation maps. Their curiosity is deep, their reasoning rigorous, and their moral compass often steadier than most. What they lack is not intelligence, but exposure to research environments, internships, global conversations, and role models who look like them. When institutions invest in them through mentoring, project-based learning, industry engagement, and patient academic support, the transformation is remarkable. Not dramatic, not noisy, but lasting. It reinforces a simple truth: brilliance is not urban property.

In an age increasingly shaped by entitlement, these students also teach me gratitude. Many approach education not as a transaction, but as a privilege. They thank their teachers, apologise for missing classes, celebrate small milestones and understand instinctively that learning can alter the destiny of generations. This awareness nurtures humility, and humility, in turn, shapes character.

Often, I am reminded of a timeless idea associated with Swami Vivekananda, that one should leave a mark on the world. Not through wealth, titles or status, but through integrity, contribution, courage, and service. Every day, I see students from small towns attempting exactly that. Quietly. Without spectacle. They do not seek shortcuts. They seek chances.

They also clarify what the idea of a developed India must truly mean. National progress cannot be measured only in skyscrapers, startup valuations, or metropolitan indices. It must be reflected in the confidence of small towns, the competence of rural youth, and the quality of opportunity available beyond a handful of highly urbanised clusters. If these students succeed, not merely as employees, but as thinkers, researchers, innovators, and ethical leaders, India succeeds. They are, fundamentally, the backbone of our country!

> **NATIONAL PROGRESS MUST REFLECT IN THE CONFIDENCE OF SMALL TOWNS, THE COMPETENCE OF RURAL YOUTH AND THE QUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AVAILABLE BEYOND A HANDFUL OF HIGHLY URBANISED CLUSTERS**

They do not ask for privilege. They ask for fairness: good teachers, relevant curriculum, digital infrastructure, internships, research exposure, and dignified work. That is not charity. That is nation-building.

History itself offers reassurance. Dr Meghnad Saha, one of India's greatest scientists, emerged from poverty in a small village, walking miles to school and studying under street lamps before reshaping global understanding of the stars. Dr APJ Abdul Kalam rose from a modest childhood in Rameswaram to shape India's scientific destiny and inspire generations as the People's President. These lives are powerful reminders that birthplace does not define destiny. In our classrooms today sit thousands of unfinished stories like his, quiet, determined, waiting for opportunity to meet preparation.

Having lived through the same set of challenges, I recognise their silences, their struggles, and their restrained confidence. And in their journeys, I see the future of India, not loud, not entitled, but steady, ethical, and rising. From everywhere!

The author is the Vice-Chancellor of Sister Nivedita University and Group CEO, Techno India Group. A visionary leader, he is shaping future-ready institutions and inspiring students to lead with purpose

MILLENNIUM POST (P-15), 15 JANUARY 2026

WHY INTERNSHIPS MATTER MORE THAN EVER TODAY

Internships aren't just casual stints, they also act as career launchpads

ANUSHKA GHOSH

Arijita Banerjee, 21, was in the final year of her civil engineering course when she landed an internship with a real estate firm in Kolkata. Her sincerity and work ethic impressed the management and she was asked to get in touch after she graduated. Arijita did just that and the internship turned into her first full-time job. Gone are those days when a degree alone could guarantee a smooth entry into the job market. In today's fast-changing job landscape, students are valued not just by their marks but by the skills they bring to the table. As collaboration between industry and academia grows stronger, competition is getting tougher and relevant internships are becoming increasingly important that help young professionals stay ahead.

Reports suggest that interns are nearly 25% more likely than non-interns to land a full-time job within six months of graduation. In fact, anywhere between 21.5% and 47% of college students now complete at least one internship during their academic journey, thus showing how hands-on experience is no longer an option but mandatory. "I have seen several high academic performers struggle to secure jobs, while candidates with one or two internships were preferred. Even my faculty members emphasise that high CGPAs alone are not sufficient enough as internship provides practical understanding", said Poorna Dhara, BTech Computer Science Student, University of Engineering & Management (UEM).

Internships play a crucial role in providing students with hands-on experience and exposure to real-life work environment. They help the students to develop essential skills such as time management, responsibility, teamwork and communication, which are difficult to acquire through textbooks or classroom learning alone. Internships also enable the students to build professional networks by connecting with mentors and industry professionals. Let's be honest. Recruiters these days prefer candidates who possess prior workplace exposure and relevant practical skills, often giving an edge to those with internship experience. Additionally, internships enhance resumes by demonstrating practical skills and improving student's understanding of the workplace culture, expectations and professional challenges.

Of course, academic performance continues to play an important role particularly for students considering higher studies or a career in academia or in core technical fields like engineering and medical. A strong CGPA reflects subject knowledge, discipline and consistency, which often becomes crucial when the candidates have limited professional experience. In a competitive hiring environment, marks also serve as an initial screening tool for recruiters, helping them shortlist applicants for entry level or specialised job roles. However, while grades may open doors, practical skills increasingly determine how well candidates progress beyond the interview stage.

INTERNSHIP

THE INTERNS SHOULD BE ENGAGED, LEARN TOOLS, **BUILD NETWORK** AND CONNECTIONS THAT CAN LEAD TO FUTURE JOB REFERRALS&AND STAY IN TOUCH WITH THE COMPANY AND MANAGEMENT

Sonika Jain, a BBA student from JD Birla Institute mentioned that internships offer real world exposure and help students navigate job interviews with greater confidence. "When you have real-life workplace experience, it becomes easier for you to answer the questions asked in the job interviews", she said.

Reports suggest that hiring managers prefer to recruit candidates who had an experience through an internship with a company. Now, in several cases, internships are paid and also non-paid. Studies show over 70 percent of employers make full-time job offers to their interns. In fact, a college internship is no longer a bonus but a dire necessity for the resume in the competitive sector. Also, it's important to remember that interns don't treat an internship casually but as their career launchpad. The interns should be curious, engaged, learn tools, build networks and connections that can lead to future job referrals and stay in touch with the company and management and staff post internships.

"The most effective way to bridge the employability gap is through work-integrated, industry-led programmes built around apprenticeships and internships, vocational skilling, and strong industry-academia partnerships. The benefits flow across the ecosystem: employers gain engineers who are job-ready from day one, universities strengthen their placement outcomes and reputation, and students graduate with more than just a degree, they carry skills and experience that make them future-ready," said Dr Lalit Narayan, Dean - Academics & Skill Integration, Medhavi Skills University.

Startups: A boon for bold, jugaad and innovative India's economic growth

T SENTHIL SIVA SUBRAMANIAN

India is a country well known for its excellence in calculated investments, innovation, and infrastructure. It has been a decade since the startup policy was successfully launched on January 16, 2016. Indian startups are slow, smart, and steady growth ventures which have climbed the ladder of stunning and striking success by turning Indian problem statements into scalable and affordable solutions for the common citizen. Indian youth startups have turned unsolvable and unrealistic problems into real-time, realistic, and usable solutions which millions of Indian youths had been dreaming of for several decades. Indian startups have turned action plans into actionable, viable, feasible, and customised solutions. This includes the present era of Industry 4.0 / 5.0 / emerging 6.0 digital transformation technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Robotics, semiconductor chips, quantum technologies, unmanned aerial vehicles, 5G, and the emerging hyperloop of the present decade.

India's National Education Policy 2020 has been developing holistic framework models and a structured approach in the Indian education system through experiential learning, skill development, integration of emerging technologies, soft skills, business model building, and academia-industry collaboration. This, in turn, builds strong and structured startup capabilities among youngsters. Indian universities and higher educational institutions have been offering courses such as idea-to-business models, entrepreneurship, IP management, and how to create smart business plans within course curricula, which paves the way for students to develop startup skills while they are in education. MOOC platforms such as NPTEL and SWAYAM have been revolutionising startup education through digital learning courses on entrepreneurship. Startup India has kick-started free online courses on Artificial Intelligence, financial literacy, digital marketing, and intellectual property, which have facilitated youngsters and startups in building strong foundational startup skills.

Indian Startups: A Jugaad for Building Innovative India

Startup culture has been deeply rooted among young schoolchildren in India through initiatives such as Atal Tinkering Labs, enabling students to work on think-tank problems in school laboratories. The infrastructure created in schools helps students build grassroots innovative models through experiential and project-based learning using 3D printing, the Internet of Things (IoT), unmanned aerial vehicle technologies, and many more. India's youth innovation competitions such as DST INSPIRE MANAK, Smart India Hackathons, MSME hackathons, DRDO's iDEX Innovation Challenge, and the World Skills Competition have helped build scalable models which youngsters have been striving to develop. Additionally, Government of India-supported bootcamps and cohort training programmes have trained youth to follow a structured framework for converting micro ideas into calculated and scalable product models.

Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY), an iconic government initiative to Fund the Unfunded, and organisations such as SIDBI (Small Industries Development Bank of India) have provided confidence and handholding support to young startups and Indian MSMEs. Initiatives such as Swavalambini have empowered female undergraduates to launch ventures, forming the basis of livelihood and self-reliance among them.

India has built extensive Digital Public Infrastructure, including startup incubators, research, and innovation parks across the nation, such as Atal Incubation Centres (AICs), MSME Incubation Centres, STPI (Software Technology Parks of India) incubation centres, BioNest, and several state-run centres to boost startup culture among youth.

India's startup culture is encouraging the power of Nari Shakti, which enabled women students in Kerala to build the nation's first women-engineered satellite launched by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). The Indian youth startup mantra is jugaad innovation. Indian agriculture has been redefined by startups and jugaad innovators such as Niyo FarmTech, which developed frugal technologies like Neo Solar and Bahubali models affordable for marginal farming communities. These innovations help reduce the burden of traditional heavy backpack spraying systems.

Indian startups such as Skyroot Aerospace have created a dream of space innovation in the country, paving the way for advanced aerospace systems and encouraging ventures to enter the private space sector. These achievements highlight not only the power of India's technological infrastructure but also the strength of youth taking calculated risks and making smart investments, thereby building strong foundations for future generations.

Indian Startups: Fiction to Facts

India has achieved landmark success by developing home-grown semiconductor chips such as Vikram 32 and the recently introduced DHRUV64, a 64-bit microprocessor. Quantum startups such as QNu Labs have developed Quantum Random Number Generators, demonstrating the power of the three Ts — Technology, Talent, and Temperament — among Indian youth. These products are listed on the MSMEs GeM portal, adding value to supply-chain commerce and boosting the economy. The dreams of Indian youth are no longer confined to childhood television fiction.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

The IIT Madras-incubated startup TuTr Hyperloop, a student-run venture, has developed India's first indigenous hyperloop technology, marking a historic achievement in transportation technology. NeoMotion, another IIT Madras-incubated startup, has developed innovative and socially inclusive wheelchairs, giving mobility and dignity to persons with physical disabilities.

The DPIIT (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade), under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, has recognised startup Ramuka Global Services Pvt. Ltd, which, in collaboration with CSIR-CRRI, developed ECOFIX, a sustainable solution for pothole repair. Biocon, a women-led innovative and integrated pharmaceutical venture, has been building foundational blocks for pharmaceutical development while promoting young startup innovators through smart investments.

Way Forward for Amrit Kaal and Viksit Bharat

India's vibrant startup culture stands as a defining icon for the nation. Indian startups have been transforming initiatives into impactful results. India's startup ecosystem has given wings to the dreams of youth to fly to greater heights. It has built resilience and confidence among young minds, grooming them to convert dreams into real-world products, thereby adding stepping stones and milestones towards Amrit Kaal and Viksit Bharat @2047.

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PIONEER (P-10), 16 JANUARY 2026

OUR TAKE

A full-time job, and a side hustle

Gen Z does not believe in traditional degrees, and job titles

There was a time not too long ago, when an engineering or medical degree, or a professional course like chartered accountant or MBA was crucial to young people's professional success. Designations were crucial, and people vied to get that respectful title that gave them power above a team, teams, department, or divisions. It was cool to be a vice president or president, a partner or director. Not any longer. Gen Z, according to a recent survey, shuns degrees and job titles. A small, but substantial, minority does not even believe in formal and organised higher education, and more than 90 per cent of the surveyed are uninterested in hierarchical designations.

For the parents, and older generations, such attitudes towards jobs and education are blasphemous. But they have no choice but to accept and acknowledge them. For employers and firms, this implies that they need to change the HR focus on other issues rather than on hiring people with degrees through campus interviews, and relying on increments, bonuses, and promotions to please their employees. For the policy-makers, it is a warning that education does not mean setting up colleges, universities, and institutions that aim to arm youngsters with an engineering or a medical degree. What is needed to think in terms of skills, and not formal education.

Skills, rather than degrees, are more important to Gen Z. Hence, 94 per cent of the respondents in the survey said that they would rather pick up new and relevant skills before and while working, rather than opt for additional degrees. In the past, most professional CVs focused on the number of degrees the individuals had acquired. Most firms, especially the larger ad renowned ones, still rely on hirings based on some minimum professional degrees. The first will change as Gen Z will highlight skill sets in their CVs to woo the employers. Firms too will need to change with the times as relevant skills will become more crucial as tech adoption increases.

A full-time job is important for Gen Z, but so is a side hustle to earn extra incomes. This implies that people from this generation do not wish to be straitjacketed into 9-5 jobs. They prefer flexible hours, possibly work-from-home. But more importantly, as the survey shows, more than 40 per cent are willing to work two jobs, or one-and-a-half jobs as a side hustle. According to a media report, the youngsters wish to "blend income streams instead of chasing one steady career path." Only 16 per cent of the surveyed people wanted a typical traditional, single, and full-time job.

This explains why the acquisition of relevant and new skills is critical for Gen Z. A desire for a full-time job, and side hustle without giving priority to degrees implies that the youngsters pin their hopes on skills, especially in tech-related fields. In any case, tech in the form of Artificial Intelligence (AI) will make its presence felt across sectors, and segments. Thus, issues like job stability, and routine employment are out the window. What enters through the main door is the confidence and swag that they can contribute more to the employers' needs through possession of tech-related skills.

Not surprisingly, most of Gen Z is giving up on formal education. Although the number is still small, it is significant that 11 per cent of the surveyed individuals do not believe in formal higher education. They will rather skip the step, and join the workforce sooner because the "traditional educational path does not feel worth it." Another survey highlights a "disconnect between academic curricula and workplace demands, and 78 per cent of Gen Z respondents agree that "degrees do not equip them with job-ready skills." Such realisations are not new, and even employers in some sectors believe in them.

For example, the IT and software sector has long believed that the Indian techies, especially the younger crop, lack 'soft skills,' though they may be armed with excellent degrees like engineering and MBA. In software, Indians deal with foreign clients, especially in the US and Europe, where communication skills may be more relevant than math or science-related ones. Over the past decades, IT associations and firms focused on improving the soft skills through courses, workshops, and inhouse training. Gen Z seems to have gone beyond this, and believe in acquiring both hard and soft skills.

In the US, a recent poll among Gen Z respondents finds that 60 per cent believe that "they can achieve financial independence without a 9-to-5 job." This may imply two attitudes. On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, the younger generation is willing to work harder, and longer, since it desires a full-time job with a side hustle. On the other, it may imply that Gen Z believes in flexible hours, and feels that because of its tech skills and competence, it can do a specific job faster than the older employees. Hence, they need to work less hours than the others, and do not wish to work for eight hours.

Some of the voices from the Indian survey among Gen Z proves these findings. A 22-year-old woman says, "I do not want a job that consumes my entire life. That is not my idea of success. I want flexibility, creativity, and meaningful work, not just a title that looks good at social gatherings. Another 19-year-old pipes in, "My cousin is doing AI bootcamps, and getting freelance gigs with higher pay than many fresh engineering grads. Why should I spend four years on theory when I can learn and earn simultaneously?" Hence, micro-courses, certifications, and hackathons are more important.

Parents too have only begun to understand the job-related attitudes of their children. Till recently, they were angry and frustrated with this apathy from formal education, and disregard for degrees. Now, some have understood that the job environment has changed, and employers' needs have changed. Yet, many stick to the old beliefs. A professional mother says in the Indian survey, "Engineering was our assurance. I worked overtime, and struggled so my son could study with the best teachers. Now, he talks about freelancing, and digital marketing. It is unstable. I do not understand it."

Several reasons can explain the new attitudes among the younger generation. The youngsters, as well as some firms, value skills, and not degrees, unlike in the past. Indeed, employers and employees seek multiple skill sets to engage with multiple tech tools. Careers are no longer stable because of sudden and regular layoffs. Hence, multiple incomes and gigs, and flexibility is crucial. The flip side is that the youngsters want autonomy with flexibility. No longer do they depend on employers to manage their careers.

Ref 10

'Today, Many Indians Aspire To Be Job Creators'

As Startup India completes 10 years, its success is underlined not just by business growth. It's also delivered a major cultural shift in a country that used to chase select careers, writes the commerce minister

Piyush Goyal

India now has one of the world's largest startup ecosystems. The Startup India initiative has evolved into an inclusive and innovative ecosystem across the country, channelising youthful entrepreneurial energy to create jobs and accelerate economic growth, paving the way for the Viksit Bharat 2047 mission.

This transformation did not happen overnight. Startup India was announced by PM Modi from the ramparts of Red Fort on Independence Day in 2015. It was launched by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) on Jan 16, 2016. Today, startups are energising some of the most critical sectors of the economy.

Innovation & AI | A defining shift over the past decade has been the growing focus on innovation and deep technology. India's rank in the Global Innovation Index has improved from 81 in 2015 to 38 last year, and govt support for deep tech ventures will improve it further. The number of AI startups is rising rapidly, building on the Digital India initiative.

A vision for building a deep-tech nation has led to the establishment of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, and the launch of the India AI Mission and the Research Development and Innovation Scheme. India's startups are also innovating across areas like aeronautics, aerospace and defence, robotics, green technology, Internet of Things and semiconductors.

A sharp rise in intellectual property creation reinforces this trend. Indian startups have filed more than 16,400 new patent applications, reflecting a stronger focus on innovation, long-term value creation, and global competitiveness.

Pan-India growth | From just four states with startup policies in 2016, there are now DPIIT-recognised startups in every state and UT, underscoring the depth of institutional support and grassroots participation. More than 200,000 startups have been recognised so far, representing a decade of sustained, policy-led ecosystem development. In 2025 alone, more than 49,400 startups were recognised, the highest annual growth since Startup India began.

Inclusion has been a cornerstone of this journey. Women-led entrepreneurship has emerged as a major strength, with more than 45% of recognised startups having at least one woman director. About half the startups are based in non-metro cities, highlighting the growing role of Tier II and Tier III cities as engines of innovation and employment.

Local to global | As Indian startups scale, the world is increasingly their marketplace. To support global ambitions, Startup India has built strong international partnerships. Now, 21 international bridges and two strategic alliances facilitate market access, collaboration, and expansion across key economies, including UK, Japan, South Korea, Sweden and Israel. More than 850 startups have already benefitted from these initiatives.

In my recent visits to Sweden, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Israel, startups were an integral part of India's business delegations. These engagements provided a platform to showcase Indian innovation globally, while exposing our entrepreneurs to innovation and business practices in developed economies.

Reforms, market access | Improving the ease of doing business has been central to enabling this growth. Eligible startups can avail of a tax holiday for three consecutive years within their first decade. More than 4,100 startups have already received eligibility certificates. Over 60 regulatory reforms have reduced compliance burdens, facilitated capital raising, and strengthened domestic institutional investment. Abolition of angel tax and opening up of long-term capital pools to Alternate Investment Funds (AIFs) have further strengthened the startup funding ecosystem.

Access to markets has been prioritised. Through the Government e-Marketplace, over 35,700 startups have been onboarded, securing more than 5L orders worth over ₹51,200cr.

These efforts are complemented by strong financial support. Over ₹25,500cr has been invested by AIFs under the Fund of Funds for Startups scheme, benefitting more than 1,300 enterprises. Additionally, collateral-free loans worth over ₹800cr have been guaranteed under the Credit Guarantee Scheme for Startups.

Startup India Seed Fund Scheme with an outlay of ₹945cr provides financial assistance to startups for Proof of Concept, prototype development, product trials, market-entry and commercialisation.

Mindset change | Indian startups heralded a significant cultural change in the country, where children were once encouraged to aim only for jobs in a few sectors such as govt service, engineering or medicine. Today, many young Indians aspire to be job creators, not job seekers, and their families respect and encourage entrepreneurial ambitions.

India's startup journey is ultimately a story of confidence in our young entrepreneurs, in policy-led growth, and in India's capacity to innovate for the world. As we move confidently towards our mission to become a developed country by 2047, startups will remain central to building a prosperous, inclusive, and globally competitive India.

TOI/16

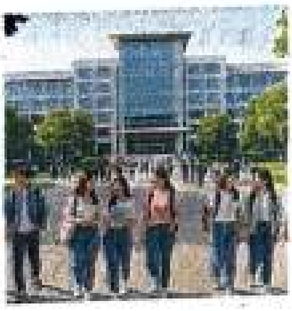
ECONOMICS TIMES (P-4), 17 JANUARY 2026

In Academia, a New Kid on the Block

China's industrial rise boosts its univs, rivals US

Chinese universities are displacing America's top colleges in research output and quality. This has to do with the pace of China's industrialisation, which creates demand for academic research, a role that the US appropriated during its post-WW2 industrial boom. European universities, struggling with post-war reconstruction and brain drain, yielded to academic institutions across the Atlantic. Europe also deindustrialised rapidly, relying on the US military industrial complex. The rise of China as a factory to the world spread deindustrialisation to the US. This had a bearing on academic research on American campuses. US universities are producing more papers, and their quality has not deteriorated. However, rivals in Asia have become much better as they made world-beating products for European and American consumers.

There are some key differences between the US and Chinese models of academic excellence. American universities rely on students and faculty from around the world to fill their classrooms and laboratories. They also have a close financial relationship with industry to direct research into specific areas. China relies on its own talent pool to come up with solutions that its military and industry seek. The relationship among the Chinese state, its defence establishment and its industrial base is more intimate. It allows an easier confluence for targeted research. The US, on its part, is introspecting migration, a pillar for academic excellence.



The bigger worry for the US is the mismatch between its primary and higher education systems. American schools do not produce appropriate input for the country's colleges, where the cost of education beats inflation to retain academic edge. This has behavioural effects on students saddled with debt at the beginning of their careers. A college degree no longer guarantees better or more secure income for Americans. Competition for top research positions is intense among 1st- and 2nd-generation immigrants. All of this was held together by US industrialisation. With a new kid on the block, the glue is becoming weak.

Celebrating science, outside the classroom

Vivek Wadhwa

I spent last weekend in Pune at the India Science Festival and left with real confidence in the country's future. The event brought together students, scientists, teachers, policymakers, and families in a buzzing atmosphere of ideas and discovery. Young people from across the country, including children from the poorest villages, were talking about AI, sensors, and quantum computing, and proudly demonstrating their projects. They spoke openly about failed experiments, what they had learned, and what they would try next. This was learning by doing, not memorising; they were collaborating, tinkering, and thinking like builders.

This is exactly what India needs more of to inspire the next generation. For the first time in history, children in remote villages have access to the same knowledge and technologies as students in the West.

Their schools may lack resources and their teachers may not always show up, but that hasn't stopped them from learning or building. They may be poor, but they are digitally fluent. They use smartphones to watch tutorials, search for answers, join online communities, and increasingly explore with AI. They don't wait to be taught, they teach themselves — and in today's world, that may be the most important skill of all.

Meanwhile, as happens too often in education and policy circles, I found myself in rooms with well-meaning academics from India, the US, and Canada reminiscing about Jawaharlal Nehru and calling for more government control and more government funding. Some even argued that Indian children can't innovate without top-down reform. It was clear they hadn't stepped outside. They were out of touch with the quiet revolution already underway, led not by institutions, but by young people who are learning, building, and solving problems on their own.

This shift is easy to miss if you are looking through outdated foreign lenses. But it is happening all over India, and it is moving faster than most people realise.

That became painfully clear in one of the more heated moments of the weekend, during a closed-door session with a professor from the University of Toronto. He insisted that by every global benchmark, India could not possibly be considered innovative — too few patents, too few academic publications, and too many applications to his university from India (as if the next generation was trying to escape the country).

The subtext — and superiority complex — was unmistakable.

We argued, because what he, and so many others, fail to understand is that these benchmarks were built around Western institutions, publishing systems, and funding models. They measure academic output, not actual learning. They capture invention in formal labs, not grassroots problem solving. They completely miss the raw, distributed innovation I saw at the festival — and the Indian way of *jugaad*.

If the benchmark were digital fluency, India ranks #1 in the world. Nearly everyone has a smartphone; UPI is the default for daily transactions; people troubleshoot on WhatsApp, learn on YouTube, and increasingly ask AI — often in their own languages.

One of my taxi drivers in Delhi casually pulled out ChatGPT, in Hindi, to answer a question I'd asked. That's what innovation looks like in the real world.

India doesn't need to wait for institutions to catch up or take cues from western gatekeepers. The next generation is already innovating — and is not asking for permission. They're learning, building, and solving with what they have, where they are.

The festival reflected the depth and range of India's scientific ecosystem. Children and first-time builders shared space with senior scientists and leaders like Nobel laureate Venki Ramakrishnan, astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla, AI pioneer Ashish Vaswani, astrophysicist Nikku Madhusudhan, and former principal scientific adviser to the government of India, K VijayRaghavan. They weren't behind velvet ropes, they walked the grounds, spoke with students, and answered questions. That proximity matters. For many young attendees, it was the first time they saw science practised by people who looked like them, spoke like them, and took their ideas seriously.

INDIA DOESN'T NEED TO WAIT FOR INSTITUTIONS TO TAKE CUES FROM WESTERN GATEKEEPERS. THE NEXT GENERATION IS ALREADY INNOVATING — AND IS NOT ASKING FOR PERMISSION. IT IS LEARNING, WITH WHAT IT HAS

That openness is central to the festival's DNA. Its founder, Varun Aggarwal, saw the need for a space where science could come alive for everyone, not just researchers or elites. A tech entrepreneur himself, he wanted to bridge the gap between science and society. When he launched the festival in 2020, he called Indian science a sleeping giant and set out to wake it up. That vision has taken hold. The 2024 edition drew more than 36,000 attendees, and it's only growing.

Yes, India has a lot of work to do. Its schools need fixing and it needs to support its innovators. The education system that the British imposed on India still trains for obedience more than creativity. Quality varies wildly and inequality is real. But the most hopeful sign is that learning is no longer waiting for all of that to be solved. It's already happening, driven by curiosity, and enabled by access. The hunger is there, the tools are there, and the spark is already lit.

The India Science Festival is exactly the kind of platform India needs to unleash the potential of its young population and leap into the future. It underscored what is possible when children are trusted to explore, when science is made accessible, and when knowledge is treated not as a privilege, but as a shared resource.

Vivek Wadhwa is CEO, Vionix Biosciences.
The views expressed are personal

Students' well-being

SC spells out institutional responsibility

THE wide-ranging directions issued by the Supreme Court to address the issue of student distress are a much-needed intervention. These follow submission of an interim report by the National Task Force constituted last year to attend to the mental health concerns of students. The apex court has rightly imposed the accountability clause on higher education institutions (HEIs), both public and private. They cannot shirk away from their fundamental duty to ensure safe, equitable, inclusive and conducive spaces of learning, it has said. A terse reminder highlights how the mental well-being of students is as important as ensuring academic excellence. Any incident of suicide or unnatural death of a student will have to be reported, and an annual report submitted to regulatory bodies. The ruling chalks out a broad framework of institutional responsibility. It's a commendable step forward.

The significance of prescribing a new way of functioning cannot be overstated in an ecosystem that prioritises profit over student well-being in case of private institutions, and chooses amnesia for government-run colleges and universities. It's in ordering the filling of key teaching and non-teaching vacancies, including of Vice Chancellors, within four months that the ruling can be truly impactful. The backlog of pending scholarship disbursements, too, has to be cleared within the same period. HEIs have been asked to ensure that positions are filled within a month from the date on which the vacancy arises. Considering the sizeable number of vacancies across the country, how this plays out is unclear, especially when both the Central and state governments have been equally inept.

An overhaul of a flawed system within months is too much to expect. From now on, though, the governments and higher education institutions will find it difficult to seek cover behind lame excuses. Inaction must invite censure.

Our universities are losing their creative vitality

AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

A university, I have always felt, has a higher purpose — something beyond the otherwise talked-about act of equipping the young generation with appropriate academic knowledge and skills needed for joining the specialised workforce. In fact, a good university is one that nurtures the spirit of dialogue, the power of critical enquiry and the elasticity of consciousness that accommodates plurality, diversities and differences.

Moreover, a university ought to be a place where the role of the administration is minimal; its primary function is to protect a dialogic learning milieu inside the campus so that students, researchers and professors can work freely and responsibly, and unfold their hidden potential.

However, it is sad to see the way Indian universities are fast losing this ideal; and, instead, becoming more like conflict-ridden zones filled with fear, mistrust and surveillance. Move around some of our public universities, and you are bound to come across unhappy students, fearful teachers and terribly arrogant administrators continually 'disciplining', punishing and suspending all those who are branded as 'deviants'. In order to understand the gravity of this crisis, let me refer to three recent incidents.

First, imagine the state of a university that does not trust its faculty, and even censors the kind of questions she/he wants the students to reflect on. Jamia Millia Islamia — a leading public university with rich heritage — suspended a professor who, as the paper-setter, included a question on "atrocities against Muslims" in a BA (Hons) semester exam.

Why should a professor be suspended for this? If you truly open your eyes, you can clearly see that there are many incidents of atrocities against minorities. A report by the Association for Protection of Civil Rights and the Quill Foundation documented 947 hate-related incidents between June 2024 and June 2025. And the Muslims, as the report reveals, were the primary targets.

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Special

DRAWBACK: A university without academic freedom fails to promote intellectual rigour. PTI

Who will deny that young students studying a discipline like social work ought to reflect on this violence, or the growing erosion of secular and democratic value? Yes, it is the power of critical pedagogy that enables a teacher/student to raise the kind of questions the status quo loves to hide. In fact, the Jamia incident reveals a dangerous trend: the castigation of critical thinking as an 'anti-national' endeavour. It also conveys a message to the teaching community: "You are under observation. Know your limits."

Second, see the fate of the "Walls of Democracy" that once used to characterise the vibrant culture of political debate, posters and pamphlets at Delhi University. In a way, these walls used to reveal what young students were reflecting on – nationalism, religion, social movements, secularism and justice. But then, it is sad that the university administration has chosen to 'denotify' this democratic space. Recently, some students were not allowed to paste posters opposing the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill. Who would tell the university authorities that thinking/reflexive young minds are the real assets of the country, and whatever prevents them from articulating their world view or voicing their concerns invariably damages the moral and intellectual growth of the nation?

And finally, think of the much-talked-about Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) that seems to be at war with its own students. Recently, the JNU administration filed a complaint with the Delhi Police for lodging an FIR against three students who are associated with the students' union.

> It is sad to see how Indian universities are becoming more like conflict-ridden zones filled with fear, mistrust and surveillance.

According to the administration, these students have violated the university's code of conduct by raising "objectionable and provocative" slogans. Moreover, the students involved in this incident, as the administration has stated, will face disciplinary measures like "immediate suspension, expulsion and permanent debarment from the university".

Well, these students, as reports indicate, were opposing the Supreme Court's recent verdict denying bail to former students Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam. Well, it is quite natural on the part of many — particularly, civil rights activists, legal experts and even politically awakened young students — to feel somewhat disillusioned and sad when even after five years the duo could not get bail.

Possibly, this disillusionment is further intensified because we live in a society in which, as the findings of the Association for Democratic Reforms reveal, 46 per cent of the 543 MPs have criminal cases registered against them. Moreover, 39 per cent of the ministers that are part of the present Union Cabinet have declared criminal cases against them.

Is it, therefore, surprising that some of our leading political figures are not particularly known for the kind of behaviour that promotes the ethos of secularism, religious harmony and cross-cultural dialogue?

I have no hesitation in saying that inflammatory speeches or slogans should always be condemned. However, it is equally important to realise that young/idealist students have always raised anti-establishment slogans all over the world.

Hence, the JNU administration's decision to file an FIR against these students shows the complete breakdown of communication. Possibly, with empathy, art of listening and proper guidance, the university could have handled this situation with grace and maturity.

These three incidents indicate that our universities are fast losing their creative vitality. Hence, we ought to recall the forgotten truth — something we are missing in this neurotically polarised world.

A university without compassion loses its soul. A university without academic/intellectual freedom fails to promote intellectual rigour, meaningful research and critical enquiry. A university that forgets the spirit of dialogue, and relies more and more on punitive measures loses the art of non-violent mode of conflict resolution.

Above all, a university whose administrators behave like autocrats rather than co-travellers walking with students and teachers, and blooming as the seekers of truth, fails to nurture intellectually awakened, socially responsible and democratic citizens.

TRIBUNE, (P-14), 17 JANUARY 2026

How to reduce dependence on coaching centres

Aksheev Thakur

A COMMITTEE formed by the Centre to suggest ways to reduce the dependency on coaching centres has identified the transition from Class 10 to Class 11 as a major stress point for students, while exploring the possibility of introducing competitive tests in Class 11. The committee, headed by Higher Education Secretary Vineet Joshi, met twice in August and November last year. According to officials, the panel is analysing if the difficulty level of competitive exams taken up after Class 12 is in sync with the Class 12 curriculum, which is the basis of these exams.

BOARD EXAM WEIGHTAGE

One of the proposals includes giving more weightage to board examination results in college admissions and exploring the possibility of introducing competitive tests in Class 11.

The nine-member committee — including members from the CBSE, National Testing Agency and professors from IIT-Kanpur, IIT-Madras and NIT-Trichy — has suggested an overhaul of the school curriculum and limiting coaching hours.

The committee is also evaluating the awareness levels among students and parents regarding career options that are not limited to a few top institutions. The deliberations also centred around the availability and effectiveness of career counselling services in schools.

ISTOCK

A Centre-appointed panel has suggested limiting coaching hours, aligning school curriculum with competitive tests and extra weightage to Class 12 board results

Putting a cap on coaching hours, redesigning curricula to mirror post-school competitive entrance examinations and giving greater weightage to board examination results are among the key suggestions of the committee.

DUMMY SCHOOLS

A major concern of the education ministry has been the proliferation of dummy schools, where students take admissions after Class 10 to pursue preparation for engineering and medical entrance exams. These schools are formally affiliated with state boards or CBSE, where students enrol but don't attend classes regularly, instead focusing on coaching for competitive exams like JEE or NEET, using the school only for mandatory attendance for board exams.

The committee discussed that the lack of alignment between the school curricula and competitive exam requirements is leading to a rise in dummy schools. For example, the competitive exams have multiple choice format questions, which is not the case in the school-based curriculum.

SURVEY ON CARDS

The Education Ministry's Department of School Education and Literacy and CBSE might conduct a survey to assess students' level of engagement with coaching classes. It has also been suggested that CBSE could devise a framework for remedial classes within schools to reduce reliance on private coaching.

The NCERT, with the support of CBSE and other boards, could become the nodal agency to ensure that the school curricula and competitive test requirements gel.

GAPS IN SCHOOLING SYSTEM

The Ministry of Education had constituted the committee last year to address growing concerns regarding students' reliance on coaching centres. It is examining the gaps in the schooling system that contribute to the dependence on coaching centres, particularly the limited focus on critical thinking, logical reasoning, analytical skills and innovation, and the prevalence of rote learning practices.

The panel is also reviewing the advertising practices of coaching centres, including the use of misleading claims and promotion of selective success stories.

It will also assess the availability and effectiveness of career counselling services in schools and colleges, and suggest measures for strengthening career guidance frameworks.

Coaching centres came under intense scrutiny after complaints of student suicides rose. In 2024, the Education Ministry came out with guidelines which stated that coaching centres cannot enrol students below 16 years of age, make misleading promises and guarantee rank or good marks.

The guidelines were issued to manage the unregulated private coaching centres charging exorbitant fees from students, and the undue stress on students resulting in suicides and other malpractices.

"No coaching centre shall engage tutors having qualifications less than graduation. Student enrolment should be only after secondary school examination," the guidelines said. The centres cannot hire the services of any tutor or person who has been convicted of any offence, involving moral turpitude, it was mandated.

Coaching centres are also required to take steps for the mental well-being of students.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data shows a concerning rise in student suicides in India, reaching a peak of 13,892 in 2023, an 8.1 per cent share of total suicides, driven by academic pressure, family issues, mental health struggles, and financial stress.

अपने भविष्य को आकार देता भारत

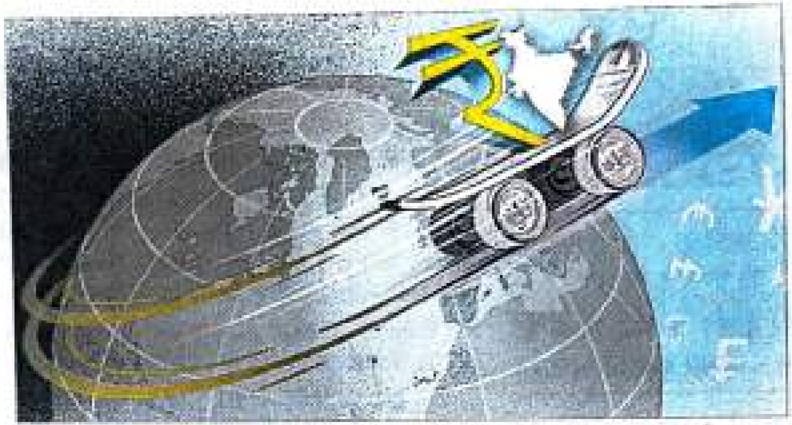
पीयूष गोयल

भारत 2025 में जापान को पीछे छोड़कर दुनिया की चौथी सबसे बड़ी अर्थव्यवस्था बना और अब जर्मनी को पीछे छोड़ने की दिशा में तेजी से बढ़ रहा है

वर्ष 2026 भारत के वाणिज्य और उद्योग परिदृश्य में नया विश्वास और आशावाद लेकर आया है। 2025 में उठाए गए निर्णायक कदम व्यापार और निवेश को तेजी से आगे बढ़ाने, छोटे व्यवसायों और स्टार्टअप्स के लिए वैश्विक बाजार तक पहुंच बढ़ाने, रोजगार सृजन करने और प्रत्येक नागरिक के लिए ईज आफ लिविंग को बढ़ावा देने के प्रधानमंत्री मोदी जी के मिशन को और मजबूत करने वाले रहे। मोदी सरकार की एक प्रमुख पहल स्टार्टअप्स को बढ़ावा देना रही है। आज भारत में दो लाख से अधिक सरकार द्वारा मान्यता प्राप्त स्टार्टअप्स हैं। स्टार्टअप्स को समर्थन देने का उद्देश्य आर्थिक विकास को तेज करना, रोजगार के अवसर पैदा करना और प्रत्येक नागरिक, विशेष रूप से गरीबों के जीवन स्तर में सुधार करना है। आज भारत वैश्विक स्तर पर एक भरोसेमंद और विश्वसनीय व्यापार साझेदार के रूप में पहचाना जा रहा है। वैश्विक अनिश्चितताओं के बावजूद वित्त वर्ष 2024-25 में भारत का कुल निर्यात छह प्रतिशत बढ़कर रिकार्ड 825.25 अरब अमेरिकी डालर तक पहुंच गया। निर्यातकों को और समर्थन देने के लिए सरकार ने 25,060 करोड़ रुपये का निर्यात प्रोत्साहन मिशन घोषित किया है।

रिपीलिंग एंड एमेंडमेंट एक्ट, 2025 के तहत 71 पुराने और अप्रासंगिक कानूनों को समाप्त किया गया है, जिनमें से कुछ वर्ष 1886 के थे। जन विश्वास पहल के अंतर्गत मोदी सरकार ने छोटे उल्लंघनों से जुड़े कई आपराधिक प्रविधानों को हटाया है। ये सुधार शासन को बेहतर बनाते हैं, कारोबार में आसानी बढ़ाते हैं और यह सुनिश्चित करते हैं कि भारत की कानूनी व्यवस्था आधुनिक अर्थव्यवस्था के अनुरूप हो। पिछले वर्ष संसद के मानसून सत्र में शिपिंग और पोर्ट्स से जुड़े पांच ऐतिहासिक विधेयक पारित किए गए। इन कानूनों से दस्तावेजीकरण सरल हुआ है, विवाद निपटान आसान हुआ है और लाजिस्टिक्स लागत में उल्लेखनीय कमी आई है। वाणिज्य के मोर्चे पर विदेश व्यापार महानिदेशालय ने पारदर्शी और सहायक नीतियों के जरिये निर्यातकों का सक्रिय रूप से समर्थन किया है। इन पहलों से व्यापारियों, स्टार्टअप्स और छोटे उद्यमियों की उद्यमशीलता को नई उड़ान मिली है।

भारत की व्यापार और निवेश रणनीति का मूल मंत्र स्थानीय उद्यमियों विशेषकर छोटे व्यवसायों, स्टार्टअप्स, किसानों और कारीगरों को सशक्त बनाकर उन्हें वैश्विक सफलता दिलाना है। इसी के अंतर्गत भारत ने पिछले वर्ष तीन मुक्त व्यापार समझौते (एफटीए) किए, जिनसे भारतीय उत्पादों को यूके, न्यूजीलैंड और ओमान जैसे विकसित बाजारों में ड्यूटी-फ्री पहुंच मिली। ये एफटीए भी सुधार प्रक्रिया का हिस्सा हैं। यूपीए सरकार के विपरीत मोदी सरकार ने विकसित देशों के साथ संतुलित और लाभकारी समझौतों को प्राथमिकता दी है। इन एफटीए से रोजगार सृजन तेज होगा, निवेश बढ़ेगा और छोटे व्यवसायों, छात्रों, महिलाओं, किसानों और युवाओं के लिए परिवर्तनकारी अवसर खुलेंगे। मुक्त व्यापार समझौतों के अतिरिक्त स्विट्जरलैंड, नार्वे, आइसलैंड और लिकटेंस्टीन वाले यूरोपीय मुक्त व्यापार संघ (एफ्टा) के साथ 2024 में किया गया एफटीए भी अब लागू हो चुका है। सभी एफटीए में भारत के कृषि और डेरी क्षेत्रों को सुरक्षित रखा गया है। न्यूजीलैंड और आस्ट्रेलिया जैसे बड़े वैश्विक डेरी निर्यातकों के साथ समझौतों में भी यह शामिल है। इन समझौतों से भारतीय निर्यात को त्वरित या शीघ्र टैरिफ समाप्ति का लाभ मिलता है, जबकि भारत में बाजार खोलना संतुलित और चरणबद्ध रखा गया है। न्यूजीलैंड ने अगले 15 वर्षों में 20 अरब अमेरिकी डालर के प्रत्यक्ष विदेशी निवेश की प्रतिबद्धता जताई है, जो भारत द्वारा एफ्टा देशों के साथ किए गए मुक्त व्यापार समझौते में अपनाए गए नवोन्मेषी निवेश-संबद्ध प्रविधानों को प्रतिबिंबित करता है। यह निवेश कृषि, डेरी, एमएसएमई, शिक्षा, खेल और युवा विकास में सहायक होगा, जिससे समावेशी और व्यापक विकास सुनिश्चित होगा।



अवधेश राजपूत

2024-25 तक के पिछले 11 वित्तीय वर्षों में भारत ने 748 अरब अमेरिकी डालर का प्रत्यक्ष विदेशी निवेश आकर्षित किया, जो उससे पहले के 11 वर्षों में आए 308 अरब अमेरिकी डालर से लगभग ढाई गुना है। यह इसलिए भी महत्वपूर्ण है, क्योंकि मोदी सरकार को एक समय फ्रेजाइल फाइव कही जाने वाली अर्थव्यवस्था विरासत में मिली थी। भ्रष्टाचार-मुक्त शासन, साहसिक सुधारों और वित्तीय अनुशासन के जरिये उन्होंने भारत को व्यापार और निवेश के लिए पसंदीदा गंतव्य बनाया। भारत ने 2025 का समापन एक बड़ी उपलब्धि के साथ किया, जापान को पीछे छोड़ते हुए विश्व की चौथी सबसे बड़ी अर्थव्यवस्था बनना और अब जर्मनी को पीछे छोड़ने की दिशा में तेजी से आगे बढ़ना।

श्रमिकों के लाभ बढ़ाने के लिए मोदी सरकार ने ऐतिहासिक श्रम सुधार किए हैं, जिनके तहत 29 खंडित कानूनों को चार आधुनिक श्रम संहिताओं में समाहित किया गया है। इनका उद्देश्य उचित वेतन, समय पर भुगतान, सामाजिक सुरक्षा और संरक्षण सुनिश्चित करना है, साथ ही महिलाओं की कार्यबल में भागीदारी बढ़ाना है। जीएसटी सुधारों से हर भारतीय नागरिक को लाभ हुआ है, जिससे एक स्वच्छ दो-स्लैब संरचना बनी है। इससे घरों, एमएसएमई, किसानों और श्रम-प्रधान क्षेत्रों पर बोझ कम होगा। 2025 एक सेतु-निर्माण का वर्ष रहा। आगे और भी उत्साहजनक कदम आने वाले हैं। नीति आयोग के सदस्य राजीव गौबा के नेतृत्व में एक पैनल व्यापक सुधारों का अध्ययन कर रहा है, जो प्रधानमंत्री की 'रिफार्म एक्सप्रेस' को और तेज करेगा। भारत का लक्ष्य स्पष्ट है, प्रतिस्पर्धी व्यापार, नवोन्मेषी उद्योग और एक मजबूत, आत्मनिर्भर अर्थव्यवस्था के माध्यम से 'विकसित भारत' का निर्माण। भारत के निर्यातकों, निर्माताओं, किसानों और सेवा प्रदाताओं की सफलता ही राष्ट्र की सफलता है। भारत सिर्फ भविष्य की तैयारी नहीं कर रहा, वह उसे आकार दे रहा है। निर्णायक नेतृत्व, साहसिक सुधारों और स्पष्ट वैश्विक रणनीति के साथ भारत अपनी शर्तों पर एक मजबूत, आत्मनिर्भर और विश्वसनीय राष्ट्र के रूप में दुनिया से जुड़ रहा है।

(लेखक केंद्रीय वाणिज्य और उद्योग मंत्री हैं)

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DAINIK JAGRAN (P-8), 17 JANUARY 2026

सबक सिखाती अमेरिकी शिक्षा व्यवस्था

क्षमा शर्मा

> अमेरिकी समाज और छात्रों की मौजूदा स्थिति से हम भारतीयों की आंखें खुल जानी चाहिए

एक आंकड़े के अनुसार अमेरिका के निजी विश्वविद्यालयों में पढ़ने वाले छात्रों में 61 प्रतिशत से लेकर 83 प्रतिशत तक छात्र कर्ज लेते हैं। जो कालेज निजी और सरकारी मदद, दोनों से चलते हैं, वहां 54 से 61 प्रतिशत और सरकारी संस्थान जिन्हें पब्लिक इंस्टीट्यूशन कहा जाता है, वहां भी 33 से 49 प्रतिशत छात्रों को कर्ज लेना पड़ता है। अमेरिकी शिक्षा विभाग की प्रमुख एजेंसी नेशनल सेंटर फार एजुकेशन स्टैटिस्टिक्स के अनुसार कर्ज की यह राशि हर साल बढ़ती ही जाती है। आज यह राशि अरबों में जा पहुंची है। इस पर लगाने वाले ब्याज की दर भी बहुत ज्यादा होती है।

पिछले साल अमेरिका में हर छात्र के ऊपर 39,375 डालर का कर्ज था। वर्ष 2007 की तुलना में यह तीन गुना अधिक है। आम तौर पर वहां मध्य वर्ग के बच्चे कर्ज के बोझ से दबे रहते हैं। मैरीलैंड, जार्जिया, वर्जीनिया जैसे राज्यों के छात्र ज्यादा कर्ज लेते हैं। नौकरी के बाद वे लंबे समय तक कर्ज चुकाते रहते हैं। अधिकांश छात्र 35 से लेकर 49 साल की उम्र तक कर्ज चुकाते हैं। एक तरह से उम्र का बड़ा हिस्सा कर्ज चुकाने में ही निकल जाता है। इसी संदर्भ में हाल में विचारक एस. गुरुमूर्ति एक इंटरव्यू में बता रहे थे कि अधिकांश अमेरिकी बच्चे कर्ज लेकर पढ़ाई करते हैं। जबकि भारतीय लोग अपने परिवार को प्राथमिकता देते हैं। इसलिए बच्चों की पढ़ाई पर खर्च करते हैं। वास्तव में हर भारतीय माता-पिता चाहता है कि उनका बच्चा खूब पढ़े-लिखे। इसके लिए वे अपने सभी संसाधन दांव पर लगा देते हैं। कई बार तो अपना खेत तक बेच देते हैं। कर्ज भी लेना पड़े तो उसकी जिम्मेदारी खुद ही उठाते हैं। कुछ साल पहले जिनेवा में काम करने वाले एक ऐसे अमेरिकी से मिली थी, जो पचास साल से अधिक था, लेकिन अभी तक शिक्षा के लिए कर्ज को चुका रहा था। उसका कहना था कि वह इतने पैसे नहीं कमाता कि परिवार का बोझ भी उठा सके और शिक्षा के लिए जो कर्ज लिया था, उसकी किस्त भी हर महीने भर सके। अमेरिका में आमतौर पर दस से लेकर तीस वर्ष तक कर्ज की किस्तें भरनी पड़ती हैं। वहां कहा जाता है कि एक बार कर्ज के चक्कर में फंसे तो जीवन भर उसी में फंसे रहते हैं। कर्ज चुकाने में अधिक वर्ष लगने का आशय अधिक ब्याज चुकाना भी है। कल्पना करना कठिन नहीं कि क्यों अमेरिका में बहुत से बच्चे स्कूली शिक्षा के बाद पढ़ाई छोड़ देते हैं, क्योंकि उच्च शिक्षा के संसाधन जुटाना उनके वश का नहीं होता। इसलिए बहुत से युवा किसी न किसी काम में लग जाते हैं। जिस शिक्षा के बारे में कहा जाता है कि वह हर एक के लिए उपलब्ध होनी चाहिए, वास्तव में ऐसा है नहीं।

कर्ज के बोझ तले दबते अमेरिकी छात्र ● प्रतीकात्मक

इन दिनों कृत्रिम मेधा यानी एआइ के आने के डर से अमेरिका में भी रोजगार के मौके लगातार कम हो रहे हैं। वहां बड़ी-बड़ी कंपनियां हजारों की संख्या में लोगों को नौकरी से निकाल रही हैं। इनमें से जो लोग अमेरिकी नागरिक नहीं हैं, वे रोजगार के लिए लगने वाले मेलों में अपना सीवी लेकर जा रहे हैं, तो उनसे पहला सवाल यही पूछा जा रहा है कि वे अमेरिकी नागरिक हैं या नहीं? न कहते ही उनका सीवी बिना देखे लौटा दिया जा रहा है। इनमें से अधिकांश वे लोग हैं, जो अमेरिका में ही पढ़े हैं। इनमें से बहुतों ने पढ़ने के लिए कर्ज भी लिया होगा। जब वहां रोजगार ही नहीं होगा, तो छात्र कर्ज की किस्तें कहां से चुकाएंगे? लगता है वहां जल्दी ही वह समय आएगा, जब बच्चे उच्च शिक्षा इसलिए लेना बंद कर देंगे, क्योंकि नौकरी की कोई गारंटी नहीं होगी। ऐसे में तब उन विश्वविद्यालयों का क्या होगा, जो मशहूर होने के नाम पर इतराते हैं और छात्रों से भारी-भरकम फीस वसूलते हैं। जब वहां छात्र पढ़ने ही नहीं आएंगे, तो वे कर्ज भी नहीं लेंगे। तब जाहिर है कि वे कंपनियां भी खत्म हो जाएंगी, जो कर्ज देती हैं।

अमेरिका के विपरीत भारतीय लोगों में परिवार के प्रति जो आस्था है, वह बेमिसाल है। यहां आज भी बहुत से परिवारों में तीन पीढ़ियां एक साथ रहती मिल जाएंगी। जबकि अमेरिका में यह संभव नहीं है। न केवल अमेरिका, बल्कि अनेक पश्चिमी देशों में यही हाल है। वहां अकेलेपन को एक गुलाबी तस्वीर की तरह प्रस्तुत किया जाता है। वहां बच्चे अकेले रहते हैं। बुढ़ापे में माता-पिता और दादा-दादी भी अकेले ही रहते हैं। पश्चिम में देखभाल को भी पैसे से जोड़कर केयर इकोनमी का नाम दिया गया है, लेकिन अपने यहां परिवार ही है, जो किसी आफत में सबसे पहले दौड़ता है। भारतीय माता-पिता अपनी सुविधा छोड़कर बच्चों के सुख पर ध्यान देते हैं। ऐसा नहीं है कि अमेरिका में परिवार के महत्व को पहचाना नहीं जाता। अमेरिका के पूर्व उपराष्ट्रपति अल गोर की पत्नी तो परिवार की वापसी का नारा 1993 से लगा रही हैं। राष्ट्रपति ट्रंप ने अपने चुनावी अभियान में परिवार के महत्व को बारंबार रेखांकित किया था, लेकिन पश्चिम ने जिस परिवार को अपने हाथों से नष्ट किया है, वह उसकी वापसी का चाहे जितना नारा लगा ले, अब वापस नहीं आने वाला। अमेरिकी समाज और छात्रों की इस स्थिति से हम भारतीय सबक जरूर ले सकते हैं।

(लेखिका साहित्यकार हैं)

response@jagran.com

No unemployment in India!

ACROSS THE AISLE

BY P CHIDAMBARAM

THERE IS a deluge of good news. Retail inflation is at 1.33 per cent. The GDP growth for 2025-26 has been estimated at 7.4 per cent. I think we must add another hurrah: there is *no unemployment* anywhere in India, at least unemployment of the kind we need to worry about.

No takers for jobs!

I have good reasons to state that there are no takers for jobs. Data shows that for hundreds of thousands of vacancies in the government and quasi-government sector, there are *no takers*. Despite good pay (and the 8th Pay Commission will improve it), dearness allowance, annual increments, promotions, job security, medical benefits, HRA, Transport Allowance and other allowances, leave benefits, advances and loans, and Unified Pension Scheme, young men and women are *not* inclined to take the jobs — sanctioned by the government but vacant. What will you conclude from this extraordinary situation other than *there is no unemployment* and no takers for jobs?

Arithmetically, going by the Ministry of Education data on sanctioned and vacant posts in central universities *(see Table 1)*, as of April 1, 2024, 27 per cent of teaching posts and 47 per cent of non-teaching posts were vacant in central universities.

TYPE OF POSTS	SANCTIONED	VACANT/ UNFILLED
Teaching posts	18,940	5,060
Non-teaching posts	35,640	16,719

TABLE 1

As of June 2025, 7,765 teaching posts in KVS and 4,323 teaching posts in NVS were vacant. Nevertheless, we are assured that teaching is well and thriving in India.

Official Data Speaks

There are more examples all over India. In the central armed police forces (CAPF) there are 25,487 posts of constables that are vacant. In Rajasthan, in the post of LDC/Clerk Grade II, there are 10,644 vacancies. In Bihar, there are 12,199 vacancies. In UP, there are 60,244 posts of constables that are vacant. There are 2,255 vacancies for staff nurses in Tamil Nadu. The aspirants are usually from the lower middle class who have just finished higher secondary school or are graduates.

Moving up the education chain, in 21 AIIMS, there are 3,485 persons holding faculty positions and 1,731 positions are vacant. In one district alone — Kendrapara in Odisha — among doctors and paramedics, 1,087 persons were in position while 805 posts were vacant. Bank employment has high value and status. In 12 public sector banks, the position is as follows *(see Table 2)*:

	IN POSITION	VACANT
Officers	4,30,599	17,500
Clerks	2,43,817	12,861
Sub staff	84,092	2,206

TABLE 2

> The theory that unemployment is not a big issue is a myth and hypocritical. While the government is self-congratulatory, we know that joblessness is the darkest stain on the body economic

Do not worry, all is well in internal security, healthcare and banking.

The PM Internship Scheme was launched in October 2024. A report in *The Hindu* dated December 2, 2025, said that, over two rounds, 1,65,000 offers were made by companies and only 20 per cent accepted; and of those who accepted the offers, one-fifth left before completing their internships. So, nearly 1,40,000 offers went a-begging because there were no takers.

Those who believe that unemployment is not a problem in developing India may stop reading at this point.

Those who think that unemployment is a problem may read further.

To be fair, the peculiar situation of vacant posts on the one hand and presumably reluctant job seekers on the other is not attributable to the BJP government alone. It has spanned many governments and many decades. However, two events under the BJP's regime have exacerbated the situation.

Past Haunts Present

First, demonetisation. It was a man-made, self-inflicted grave injury. As I have commented earlier, it was not demonetisation in the strict sense because no currency notes were invalidated or taken out of the system. It was a scheme that offered 'new notes for the old'. The total value of currency-in-circulation (CIC) was restored to the old level, and in fact exceeded it, quickly. On November 4, 2016, the value of CIC was Rs 17.97 lakh crore; at the end of December 2025, it had more than doubled to Rs 39.24 lakh crore. The worst fallout was that demonetisation closed many thousand small and medium businesses and destroyed jobs — which, of course, the government denies to this day. But, according to the All India Vyapar Mandal, there were 6,25,00,00 small businesses in 2016 and nearly 48 per cent of them have closed down in the last decade.

Second, COVID. A survey in 2022 estimated that 14 per cent of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) permanently closed down due to the pandemic. A government report indicated that 75,000 registered MSMEs were shut down between July 2020 and February 2025 (that went beyond the Covid-affected years). UNCTAD estimated as many as 47 per cent of MSMEs in India were permanently or temporarily closed as of February 2022. These numbers cannot be verified but they are in line with common observations. As I wrote in a previous column, the main reason was that government did not fulfill the promises of financial assistance and credit guarantees. Closure of businesses due to demonetisation or Covid meant massive loss of jobs. Were these jobs restored or created again? Government has been silent on this question.

The replacement of MGNREGA by a supply-driven, guarantee-less, funds-constrained scheme will make matters worse for the rural poor who will face unemployment or under-employment (at distress wages). Many rural households, especially women, will face loss of supplemental income.

The theory that unemployment is not a big issue is a myth and hypocritical. While government is self-congratulatory, we know that *joblessness* is the darkest stain on the body economic.

PIONEER (MAGAZINE -4), 18 JANUARY 2026

One of the world's largest centres of brilliance

ANIL BHAT

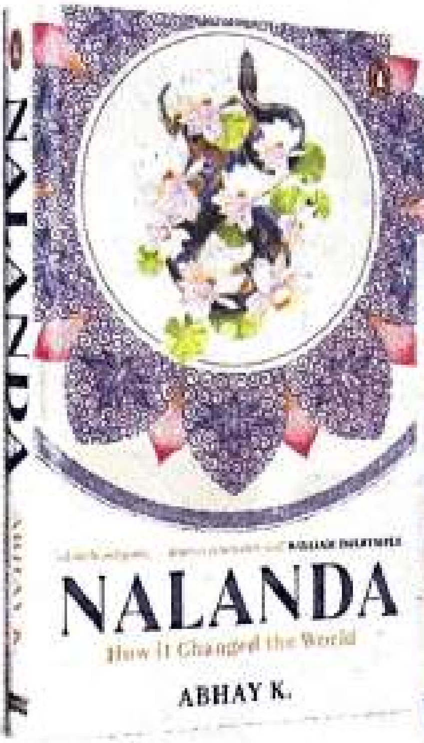
Owing to much suppression and alteration of India's history by the Mughals, the British till 1947, and its Nehruvian hijacking for at least seven decades thereafter, the uniqueness and magnificence of Nalanda never received the recognition it deserved. It was the world's first residential university, a global knowledge hub with immense libraries, attracting scholars from across Asia from the 5th to the 12th centuries CE. After its unfortunate destruction in 1193, the only British contribution was its excavation and some highlighting. As late as 2010, the Congress-led UPA introduced the Nalanda University Act in Parliament, and in 2016 the BJP got it declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site, recognising its global significance. Considering that post-Independence there are not many who wrote about *Nalanda*, this book by Abhay K is most welcome.

Two of the Buddha's most prominent chief disciples, Sariputra, who organised the Buddha's teachings, and Maudgalyayana, a very popular teacher, became instrumental in spreading the Dharma, the Eightfold Path to enlightenment.

Nalanda was the first-ever residential university, spread over a vast, self-contained campus with dormitories housing 10,000 monks and up to 2,000 teachers, classrooms, and a vast nine-storeyed library known as Dharma Gunj (Mountain of Truth), holding millions of manuscripts. This made it a centre for advanced study in various disciplines, apart from Buddhism, including logic, astronomy, medicine, mathematics, philosophy, and grammar.

Nalanda was a prime example of the ancient Indian Guru-Shishya Parampara (teacher-disciple tradition), where students lived closely with teacher-scholars for immersive learning, focusing not just on academics but also on moral and spiritual development. It was a global hub that attracted scholars and students from China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, Java, Sumatra, Greece, and Persia — a gathering that greatly fostered international collaboration.

Some of the many venerated Hindu teachers were Aryabhata, the mathematician and astronomer who wrote Aryabhatiya while at Nalanda, introducing concepts such as zero; Nagarjuna, the philosopher who established Madhyamaka philosophy, meaning the 'Middle Way', a major Mahayana Buddhist school at Nalanda; Dharmakirti and Dignaga, the logicians and Buddhist monks who developed Buddhist logic; Asanga and Vasubandhu, brothers who founded the Yogachara (Mind-Only) school; Shantideva, the author of the Bodhisattvacaryavatara, a guide to the Bodhisattva's way of life; Santaraksita, the head monk of Nalanda Mahavihara who travelled to Tibet to found the Samye Monastery. Tibetan Buddhists credit Nalanda as the source of Tibetan Buddhism; Chandrakirti, revered for his commentaries clarifying Nagarjuna's philosophy; and Atisha, a Bengali scholar critical to the "later dissemination" of Buddhism in Tibet.



BOOK REVIEW

Title: Nalanda: How it changed the world
Author: Abhay K
MRP: ₹699/-
Publisher: Vintage, an imprint of Penguin Random House

Of the many foreign scholars who came to Nalanda, two famous ones were the Chinese pilgrims Xuanzang (Hiuen-Tsang) and Yijing, who documented their extensive studies and teaching experiences at Nalanda, highlighting its international character.

Around 1193 CE, Turkish-Afghan invader Bakhtiyar Khilji (Khalji) caused atrocious destruction at Nalanda University, brutally killing monks and setting aflame its great nine-storeyed library, which, according to historical accounts, burned for an extended period of weeks or even months, destroying millions of manuscripts and marking a catastrophic loss of knowledge.

Post-Independence, there has been a revival of Nalanda in India.

Nav Nalanda Mahavihara was a precursor initiative started in 1951, also near the ruins, focusing on Pali Buddhism and higher learning, predating the international university.

Nalanda Open University was established in 1987 as another step in re-establishing Nalanda's educational prominence.

In 2010, the process of resurrecting Nalanda began in Rajgir, Bihar, as the modern Nalanda University, a 'Net Zero' international research university with a new campus, aiming to revive the ancient centre of learning. While the ancient ruins remain, this new institution carries forward the legacy, attracting scholars and focusing on Asian studies, philosophy, and statecraft. It has been supported by a partnership of 18 participating countries that signed a Memorandum of Understanding for its establishment. These are China, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Portugal, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Various institutions inspired by Nalanda's legacy have been established in foreign countries. The Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies is in Toronto, Canada. The Nalanda Institute is in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The Nalanda Institute for Contemplative Science is in New York, USA, and the International Buddhist College, modelled after Nalanda, is in Hatyai, Thailand.

(The book reviewer is a VSM (Retd), strategic affairs analyst and former spokesperson of the Defence Ministry and the Indian Army)

Ro/mu

TIMES OF INDIA (P-26), 18 JANUARY 2026

Ten years after Rohith Vemula's death, why campus reforms still fall short

BY INVITATION

SUMIT BAUDH

"I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan." Rohith Vemula wrote these words days before his death on Jan 17, 2016. Ten years later, they remain a reminder of what Indian universities failed to recognise: not only a student marked by caste, but a young mind with intellectual aspirations that the system could neither nurture nor protect.

In the decade since Rohith's death, higher education has undergone visible reform. Universities now have anti-discrimination rules, grievance committees, and equity offices, which have been shaped by moral pressure and judicial scrutiny. On paper, the system appears far more responsive than it did in 2016. Yet a harder question remains largely unexamined: have these reforms changed how universities think and teach, or only how they manage complaints?

FOCUS ON PROCEDURE, NOT KNOWLEDGE

Rohith's death is often remembered as a failure of procedure: delayed action, mishandled complaints, and institutional apathy. But at a more fundamental level, it was a failure of knowledge. The university he inhabited could enforce rules and issue notices, yet failed to recognise the intellectual world of learning he wished to enter. This tension continues today. While grievance mechanisms have multiplied, they operate within academic cultures shaped by inherited hierarchies, including what is taught, whose knowledge counts, which histories remain peripheral, and who holds final decision-making authority.

That authority rarely lies with those most affected by exclusion. Curricular decisions are typically insulated within socially homogeneous faculty bodies, where dominant frameworks are reproduced as disciplinary common sense. Resistance to curricular change need not be malicious to be effective; it often appears as inertia, overload, or claims of academic neutrality. Yet the result is the same: existing knowledge remains intact, while transformative demands for curricular and institutional reform are treated as external, optional or someone else's responsibility.

Over the past decade, universities have become far better at demonstrating compliance. In the best-case scenarios, committees are constituted, timelines are prescribed, hearings are scheduled, and reports are written as a matter of formal compliance. This procedural expansion creates the appearance of accountability. Following Rohith Vemula's death, and later the death of Payal Tadvi, UGC regulations and institutional grievance frameworks were sought to be strengthened in the name of prevention and redress. The University Grants Commission notified its revised anti-discrimination regulations on Jan 13. Yet for many complainants, the experience is one of containment rather than remedy. Harm is acknowledged narrowly; responsibility is diffused; outcomes are framed as misunderstandings rather than manifestations of power.

Access to these mechanisms is also uneven. Students and junior faculty often encounter self-doubt, delay, opacity or informal discouragement long before any formal process begins. Even when procedures move forward, time itself becomes an outcome. Semesters pass, courses end, and the original injury is rendered administratively closed rather than substantively addressed.

INTENTION BECOMES A REFUGE

A central reason is that anti-discrimination mechanisms are asked to do work they were never designed to do. They treat discrimination as an interpersonal deviation, apparently something that can be corrected through inquiry and explanation. But much caste-based harm is structural. It lies in what syllabi privilege or omit, which perspectives are treated as essential or optional, and how attempts at curricular reform are facilitated or resisted. When harm arises from these conditions, grievance processes struggle to recognise it because the knowledge system itself is not under scrutiny.

This is also why intention becomes a convenient refuge. Institutions insist there was no intent to discriminate, as if discrimination exists only when openly declared. But caste often operates through routine decisions, inherited curricula, and unexamined norms, forms of bias that do not announce themselves, yet shape outcomes decisively. In such contexts, grievance mechanisms end up managing complainants rather than confronting the conditions that produced the complaint.

BEYOND COMMITTEES

Ten years after Rohith Vemula's death, the challenge before Indian universities is not merely to refine procedure, but to confront what their systems protect and reproduce. Anti-discrimination cannot remain an administrative function detached from teaching, curriculum, and institutional self-understanding. If grievance mechanisms are to matter, they must be accompanied by serious engagement with anti-caste knowledge, curricular accountability, and a willingness to recognise harm even when it is structural rather than personal. Otherwise, reform risks becoming ritual: rules without justice, and process without transformation. ■

Baudh teaches at O P Jindal Global University. Views are personal

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DECCAN HERALD (P-6), 19 JANUARY 2026

IN PERSPECTIVE

AI, copyright and the public domain

Generative AI has challenged norms of copyright law in ways no prior technology ever has

SUNDAR ATHREYA H

The public domain is the backbone of copyright law. The law functions on a delicate balance between the rights of creators, owners and users. It ensures that future creators can rely on previous works, once their protection period has expired, to generate new creations. Though the duration of copyright protection is considered long by many experts (life of the author plus 70 years in the USA, and life of the author plus 60 years in India), it is tailored to balance the market interests of both owners and creators.

Beyond the said period, a work is free for any user to use, adapt or remix as part of their creative work (provided it does not mutilate the previous work in any form or erode the moral rights of the creator). In 2026, the first set of Nancy Drew books and Disney's 1930 animated film Mickey Mouse from The Chain Gang will enter the public domain. These works will then be available for any user to publish or adapt. In India, the works of famed singer G N Balasubramaniam will enter the public domain this year.

Public Domain Day is celebrated across cultures as a way to nurture creativity. The 2026 edition is unlike any other in the past. Over the last year, generative AI has expanded beyond the imagination of both its users and its creators. It has challenged existing norms of copyright law in ways no previous technology ever has. This may diminish the importance of the public domain in the future.

Generative AI, like its human counterpart, learns from existing material to create new works. This is not a problem *per se*, since copyright law was designed to promote learning and creativity after all. In its present form, the law does not distinguish between human learners and generative AI platforms. The only difference is in the massive speed at which AI systems can train and create. At present, these platforms learn from both copyrighted and non-copyrighted material to generate further.

For instance, the previous year saw the famous Ghibli trend surface on the Internet, where social media users posted their own images styled after Studio Ghibli works. It would not have been possible for AI platforms to generate such images unless they had been trained on their works. The resulting creations could potentially challenge the market for the original works on which they were trained. This sparked a copyright controversy, though nothing emerged of it. At present, copyright-respecting countries are responding to such 'AI training' through their respective policies.

In this process, India has signalled a stand that would seemingly balance the interests of generative AI platforms and copyright owners. It aims to allow AI platforms to train on both copyrighted and non-copyrighted works by obtaining a blanket licence from a body that would manage copyrighted material in exchange for a statutorily fixed royalty fee. This complex response is suggested by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade in a recently released white paper.

Somehow, India's response challenges the existing idea of the 'public domain'. This has the scope to alter the future of copyright law. At present, users can adapt or reuse works only after the expiry of copyright; however, the proposed Indian measure would change this. It suggests that generative AI platforms could train on works even before their entry into the public domain. Copyright owners or creators, meanwhile, cannot specifically pinpoint the exact occurrence of infringement within the vast trove of material being used.

The response also signals that generative AI companies/users cannot bypass existing paywalls for AI training. Although this is a step in the right direction, it raises deeper concerns for the public domain. Copyright owners could begin to lock "public accessibility" behind paywalls to safeguard their interests. This would make it difficult for both human users and AI platforms to access works (even when such access is legally permitted), let alone train on them. This scenario is already common in the publishing industry, where research meant to nourish public knowledge is often inaccessible behind paywalls. Now, this could extend beyond the terrain of academia.

Whether the policy promotes the interests of generative AI companies or those of copyright owners, it is the public domain that stands to suffer. While generative AI platforms are logically expected to grow in the future, the public domain and the interests of creators should not be completely abandoned.

(The writer is an assistant professor at KIIT School of Law)

Crisis in education

Higher education institutions need systemic reforms

In an ongoing case relating to student suicides, the Supreme Court of India has issued nine directions to Central and State governments. Recognising the massification of higher education front-ended by privatisation without a commensurate boost in quality, the Court has taken note of student distress covering financial, social, social injustice and academic issues. The Court has invoked Article 142 of the Constitution and seven of the nine directions relate to record-keeping, reporting, and tracking suicides in higher education institutions (HEI) separately. Two directives order the filling of the posts of Registrars and Vice-Chancellors as well as all vacant faculty positions. Evidently, the Court sees these steps as critical to student well-being.

Across India, ground reportage shows that many public HEIs, especially universities, report 50% vacancies. The University of Madras is a case study as it is the premier State-administered HEI in Tamil Nadu – a State which leads the nation in enrolment in higher education and with a stellar record in women's education. With such a storied legacy, the university was known for quality research besides awarding degrees in affiliated colleges through examinations. Teaching became an important component in the late 1970s, but in the last decade, its decline has been pronounced. No new faculty appointments have been made and the teaching strength is half of the sanctioned strength. The university's research component is just about functional. It boasts of centres for advanced studies such as in philosophy, botany and mathematics, but these are a shadow of their original selves. Today, the humanities, science-based and social science research focused on Tamil Nadu, that the government can leverage from its public universities, has been given short shrift. Vice-Chancellor appointments have been stalled by a recalcitrant Governor. The ambiguity thrown in by the Court on the Presidential reference on a Governor's powers may need to be resolved before Vice-Chancellor vacancies can be quickly filled. Filling faculty positions would have to follow UGC process that takes at least six months and a budgetary commitment that may be helped with Union government support. Availability of qualified faculty can be a hurdle. Corruption and political-ideological appointments have affected quality and need to be addressed. Although the four-month schedule prescribed by the Court might seem daunting, the order is a call to action to fulfil the basic requirements of a robust public higher education system before goals such as Viksit Bharat can be seriously aspired for.

EDUCATIONPLUS

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Fashion beyond fabric

Massimo Casagrande, cultural strategist and Director of Education Istituto Marangoni Paris, on what students need to do to prepare for the future of fashion

Archana Subramanian
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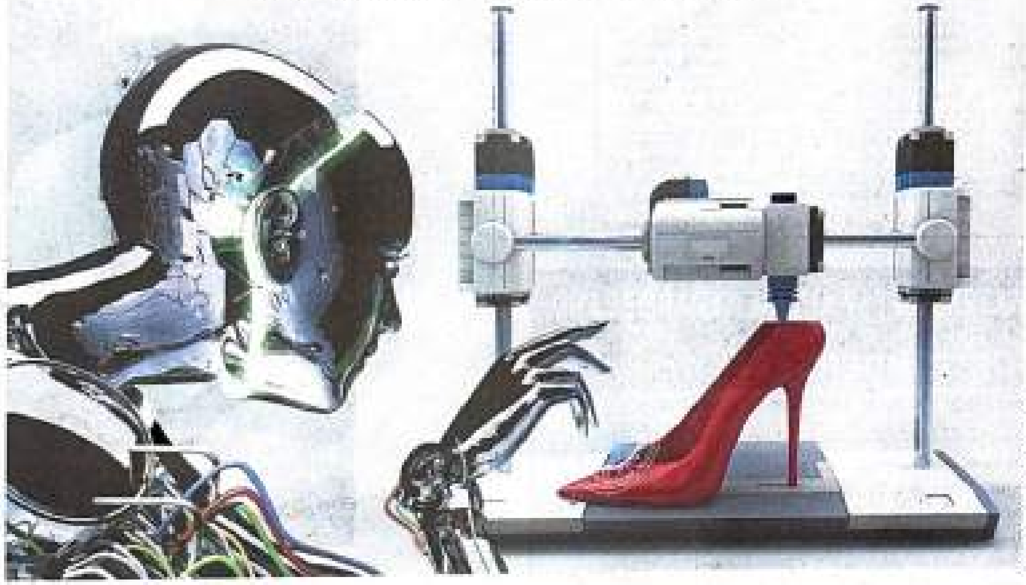
As fashion evolves beyond garments into culture, technology and storytelling, guidance from industry leaders has never been more critical. Massimo Casagrande, fashion educator, creative consultant, and Director of Education at Istituto Marangoni Paris, shares practical insights on building identity, embracing sustainability, and preparing for the future of fashion.


GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

How should young designers balance cultural identity, storytelling, and global market demands when building their brand or portfolio?
Identity should be a source of clarity, not constraint. I always encourage young designers to begin with an honest understanding of where their visual language comes from: their heritage, their rituals, their personal references. But identity becomes powerful only when it is translated into a narrative that a global audience can understand.

The balance comes from intention. Use your culture as an anchor, not a costume. Select elements that carry meaning and articulate why they matter. At the same time, understand the market you want to enter: its needs, rhythms, sensitivities. When designers learn to position their stories within a broader cultural conversation, their work becomes both locally rooted and globally relevant.

What are the skills that today's students must develop to survive and grow in a competitive and rapidly changing fashion industry?
Curiosity and adaptability are essential. The industry changes faster than any curriculum, so students must cultivate the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn. Technical skill is important, but mindset is decisive. Designers today need strategic thinking, the confidence to experiment, and the resilience to navigate uncertainty. They must understand materials, digital tools, cultural research, and communication. But, equally, they need emotional intelligence, the ability to collaborate, interpret feedback, and articulate ideas.

Sustainability is no longer optional. So how can students incorporate responsible design or ethical practices without compromising creativity or commercial appeal?
Responsible design should never be seen as a restriction. When approached thoughtfully, it becomes a source of innovation. I encourage students to begin with questions: What materials am I choosing and why? What value does this garment add to someone's life? How does it honour craft, labour, and longevity? Sustainability isn't only about materials, it's about intention, process, and impact. Students can experiment with modularity, upcycling, digital sampling, and slow design principles without losing aesthetic expression. When responsibility is integrated from the start, creativity expands because it becomes purposeful rather than decorative.

What should design institutes do to prepare students for careers in AI, digital fashion, and cross-disciplinary collaboration?
Digital platforms, AI, and virtual environments will continue to evolve, so the goal is to give students a conceptual framework that allows them to navigate change confidently. We must create environments where designers learn to collaborate with technologists, coders, artisans, writers, and strategists. Fashion now sits at the intersection of culture, technology and communication, so students must become fluent in multiple languages: visual, digital and narrative. The future belongs-to creative thinkers who can move seamlessly between physical and digital worlds without losing authorship.

What are the opportunities for young designers and craftspeople on global platforms?
India has something the global industry desperately needs: depth. There is a richness of craft, material intelligence and cultural memory that cannot be replicated. Young Indian designers who work with craft respectfully – not as embellishment but as a design philosophy – have a remarkable opportunity to shape new luxury narratives.

To stand out, they must combine craft with contemporary design thinking. The world is not looking for nostalgic pastiche; it is looking for innovation grounded in authenticity. When Indian designers articulate the story behind the craft and pair it with modern silhouettes, responsible practices and a clear aesthetic point of view, they become incredibly compelling on the international stage.

What distinguishes successful designers from those who struggle after graduation?
The most successful designers are consistent. They show up with curiosity, discipline and a willingness to evolve. They are open to critique, yet confident in their vision. They understand that creativity is a practice, not a moment of inspiration.

Those who struggle often rely solely on talent. Talent is a starting point, but perseverance and professionalism are what sustain a career. Successful designers know how to build relationships, manage time, communicate ideas and adapt without losing their identity.

Any advice for students in India who wish to pursue fashion education abroad.
Look for a school that expands your perspective, not one that simply confirms it. What truly shapes your career is mentorship, diversity of ideas, and real exposure to industry. Choose a programme that gives you space to experiment, access to new technologies, and a community that challenges you to think critically. Studying abroad should broaden your cultural lens and help you grow as a designer, not just change the address of your classroom.

INDIAN EXPRESS (P-11), 19 JANUARY 2026

Patent rights and public health: What are Bharat's options?

SIDEBAR

BY J SAI DEEPAK

IN MY debut article titled 'Enforcing the Patent Bargain' (IE, January 30, 2023) under this column, I shared my views on striking a balance between enforcement of intellectual property rights (IPRs) and public health obligations in the context of Bharat. The broad undertone of the article was that while Bharat had obligations under TRIPS to enforce IPRs, it equally had the right under TRIPS to protect its national interest in the context of public health, among other things. Simply put, protection of public health concerns through TRIPS-compliant statutory mechanisms to prevent grant or enforcement of "evergreening patents" would not qualify as "protectionism". As a sequitur, I had also taken the position that incentivising unlawful and inequitable conduct of evergreening patentees (especially in the pharmaceutical and agricultural sectors) would come at the expense of statutory rights and legitimate interests of other stakeholders such as the state, society and generic manufacturers. This would lead to sub-optimal and anti-competitive market outcomes.

The purpose of the argument was not to advocate for disincentivising genuine innovation and the investment made towards it. Rather, the point being made was to prevent pharmaceutical innovators from having a second bite at a patent monopoly over substantially the same drug by repackaging it in a manner that does not enhance its therapeutic efficacy. Simply put, the patent regime of the country prevents the grant of a second patent on old wine in a new bottle in relation to any area of technology. With hubris-driven tariff sabre-rattling from certain quarters, this discussion assumes greater significance now since Bharat has not pressed into service all the legal and policy levers available to it to advance its public health goals as well as to deter abusive evergreening behaviour.

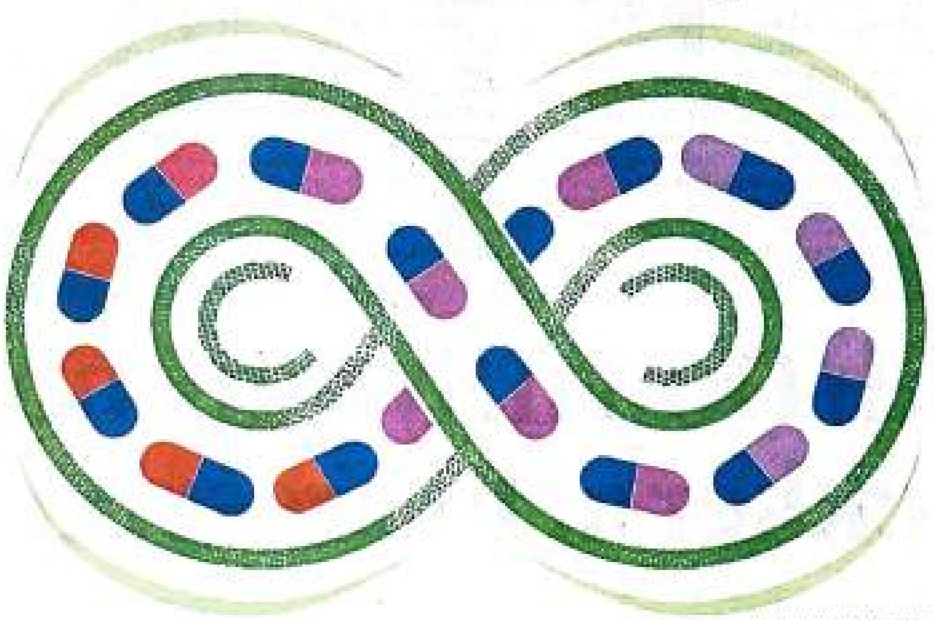


ILLUSTRATION: C R SASIKUMAR

Given that the conduct of so-called pharmaceutical innovators from the Global North has been called into question in their own countries, Bharat would be well within her rights under TRIPS to take a closer look at the conduct of the very same players within its territory and explore options under its patent framework.

Under Section 47(4) of the Patents Act, the government (central and state) does not need the consent of a patentee to import a patented drug from any jurisdiction for its own use or for distribution in any dispensary, hospital or other medical institution maintained by or on behalf of the government. It can, through gazette notification, extend the same facility to a non-governmental institution if the latter has a record of public service in the realm of healthcare. This wiggle room available under the Patents Act must be explored to ensure adequate availability of patented oncology drugs and the like, especially in rural areas where there is an acute paucity of quality tertiary, private healthcare. The prevalence of life-threatening conditions is no longer an urban phenomenon, nor is their affliction limited to the affluent or influential.

The patent regime prevents the grant of a second patent on old wine in a new bottle in relation to any area of technology. With tariff sabre-rattling from certain quarters, this discussion assumes greater significance

Next, under Section 66 of the Patents Act, the central government has powers of fairly wide amplitude to revoke a patent in public interest, after hearing the patentee, if the government is of the opinion that the patent or the mode in which it is exercised by the patentee is mischievous to the state or generally prejudicial to the public. To give effect to this power, the Centre may require the Patent Office to compile a list of patents that affect critical areas such as public health and agriculture, and examine such patents either for evergreening, or the manner of their enforcement or commercialisation to check if the patentee's conduct has been prejudicial to the consuming public. Such an exercise could obviate the need for protracted conventional adversarial proceedings by private parties for revocation of evergreening/abusive patents, or patents owned by abusive patentees in the pharmaceutical space.

Given that it has been the pharmacy of the Global South, especially Africa, under Section 92A of the Patents Act, Bharat could cater to the public health needs of African nations whose manufacturing capabilities in the pharmaceutical sector are either inadequate or non-existent. Simply put, it is possible for an Indian generic drug manufacturer to be granted a compulsory licence by the Indian Patent Office to manufacture the patented drug in Bharat for export to an African nation. Of course, the patentee may be compensated on reasonable terms for the issuance of the compulsory licence.

The Patents Act also has a provision for the application of the power of eminent domain. Under Section 102, it is possible for the central government, through a gazette notification, to acquire for public purposes a patent application or a patent over an invention. The compensation for such acquisition could be arrived at through mutual agreement between the government and the patent applicant/patentee, or a high court can determine such compensation in the event the parties fail to agree on the terms of the compensation.

In addition to such options under the Patents Act, it is also possible for abusive patentees to be hauled up for abuse of dominant position under the Competition Act 2002. With such a wide array of TRIPS-compliant powers which are statutorily available to cater to Bharat's public health needs, given the number of instances of patent abuse through evergreening by "innovators" from the Global North that have come to light in the pharmaceutical space through a spate of judgments, it is time for the central and state governments to draw up detailed patent policies as part of their public health frameworks. While one understands that the issue is not purely legal and there are considerations of optics and pragmatism from the point of view of investment and trade, a calibrated policy framework must be put in place to respond to abusive behaviour, and invoked in public interest against habitual offenders.

In the next article, I will discuss the other side of the equation — creating an ecosystem for innovation.

The writer is a senior advocate practising before the High Court of Delhi and the Supreme Court of India. He is the author of India that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilisation, Constitution, and India, Bharat and Pakistan: The Constitutional Journey of a Sandwiched Civilisation

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Wikipedia@25: Knowledge at the crossroads

Wikipedia—the world's most radical experiment in democratic knowledge—faces its greatest challenge yet. At 25, the platform that once reshaped how humanity learns must now redefine its relevance in a world increasingly mediated by AI and machines

SANTHOSH MATHEW

Just as human history is often divided into the eras B.C. and A.D., it is no longer unreasonable to imagine the Internet's story split between B.AI. and A.AI. — Before Artificial Intelligence and After Artificial Intelligence. In this dramatic transition, one quiet but revolutionary institution stands at a crossroads: Wikipedia, which turned 25 this January. Born in the age of dial-up modems and nurtured in the optimism of early cyberspace, Wikipedia now finds itself navigating the shadows — and possibilities — cast by AI.

When Wikipedia went online on January 15, 2001, it was the brainchild of two men who represented two contrasting intellectual temperaments of the digital age. Jimmy Wales, an internet entrepreneur with libertarian instincts, believed deeply in radical openness and crowd wisdom. Larry Sanger, a trained philosopher and Wikipedia's first editor-in-chief, worried that unfiltered openness could undermine neutrality and epistemic rigor. Their collaboration lasted barely a year, but the tension between openness and authority, participation and expertise, democracy and discipline continues to define Wikipedia even at 25. Yet, against all skepticism, Wikipedia survived — and triumphed. At a time when knowledge was either locked behind academic paywalls or curated by elite institutions, Wikipedia demolished the idea that information must have gatekeepers. It declared, boldly and unapologetically, that knowledge has no monopoly. Anyone could write. Anyone could edit. Anyone could correct. In doing so, Wikipedia became the most radical experiment in the democratisation of information in human history.

Today, Wikipedia exists in more than 300 languages, hosts over 60 million articles, and is among the most visited websites in the world. For students in rural India, activists in Africa, journalists in Latin America, and citizens everywhere, Wikipedia became the first port of call on the information superhighway. It flattened hierarchies of knowledge dissemination and transformed passive consumers into active participants. The traditional flow of information — from elite producers to mass audiences — was disrupted forever. But Wikipedia's silver jubilee arrives at a moment of profound uncertainty. Artificial Intelligence, particularly generative AI, threatens to redraw the architecture of knowledge itself. Tools powered by large language models no longer merely retrieve information; they synthesize, paraphrase, predict, and even "create" it. The question is no longer how humans access information, but whether humans will remain central to its production. Ironically, AI systems owe a significant debt to Wikipedia. Its freely licensed content has served as a foundational dataset for training AI models. In a sense, Wikipedia is both the parent and the prey of AI — nurturing the systems that may eventually overshadow it. Search engines already answer questions without directing users to Wikipedia pages. Chatbots summarize topics in seconds, eroding the incentive to consult original sources. The risk is not extinction, but invisibility.

TODAY, WIKIPEDIA EXISTS IN MORE THAN 300 LANGUAGES, HOSTS OVER 60 MILLION ARTICLES, AND IS AMONG THE MOST VISITED WEBSITES IN THE WORLD

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The Pioneer

This marks a shift from the age of information retrieval to the age of information mediation. Wikipedia was built for the former — a transparent, editable repository where users could see sources, debates, revisions, and disputes. AI, by contrast, often operates as a black box. It delivers confident answers without citations, context, or accountability. In doing so, it risks reversing one of Wikipedia's greatest achievements: making the process of knowledge creation visible. At stake is not just Wikipedia's relevance, but the very idea of democratic knowledge. Wikipedia's model assumes that truth emerges through collective scrutiny, disagreement, and correction. AI models, however, optimize for coherence rather than truth, fluency rather than fairness. They reflect existing biases embedded in training data and amplify dominant narratives — often from the Global North, in English, and from digitally privileged communities.

This is where Wikipedia's continued relevance becomes critical. In an AI-saturated ecosystem, Wikipedia remains one of the last large-scale, non-profit, human-curated knowledge platforms. It does not chase clicks, sell ads, or optimise for outrage. Its neutrality policy, though imperfect, is enforced through transparent rules and community deliberation. Errors are not hidden; they are corrected in public view. This ethos stands in sharp contrast to algorithmic opacity.

For countries like India, the stakes are even higher. Wikipedia has played a crucial role in vernacular knowledge dissemination, allowing histories, cultures, and perspectives outside Western academia to find space online. AI systems trained predominantly on English-language and Western-centric data threaten to marginalize these voices further. If Wikipedia weakens, so does the digital presence of the Global South. AI can assist editors by detecting vandalism, translating articles across languages, summarising sources, and identifying gaps in coverage.

Wikipedia's 25-year journey also offers a lesson for the broader politics of knowledge. In an era of misinformation, deepfakes, and epistemic chaos, trust has become the most valuable currency. Wikipedia earned trust not through authority, but through process — openness, verifiability, and collective responsibility. AI systems, if they are to be trusted, must learn from this model rather than undermine it. There is also a deeper philosophical question at play. Wikipedia represents the Enlightenment ideal that knowledge progresses through reasoned debate and shared inquiry. AI risks ushering in a post-Enlightenment moment, where answers are consumed without understanding and certainty replaces skepticism. In such a world, the danger is not ignorance, but uncritical acceptance. As Wikipedia steps into its second quarter-century, it must reassert its founding vision with renewed urgency.

The Internet may now be divided into B.AI. and A.AI., but Wikipedia must ensure that the human remains at the center of knowledge.

Its challenge is not technological obsolescence, but moral relevance. Twenty-five years ago, Wikipedia proved that knowledge does not belong to institutions, corporations, or experts alone. It belongs to humanity. In the shadow of Artificial Intelligence, that idea is more radical — and more necessary — than ever.

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The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

Indian Scholars Decode Dutch Records to Rewrite Kerala's Colonial Past

FAIZAL KHAN

Four students from India headed for the Netherlands under an agreement signed between the two countries to discover unexplored colonial history in the depths of an untouched archive.

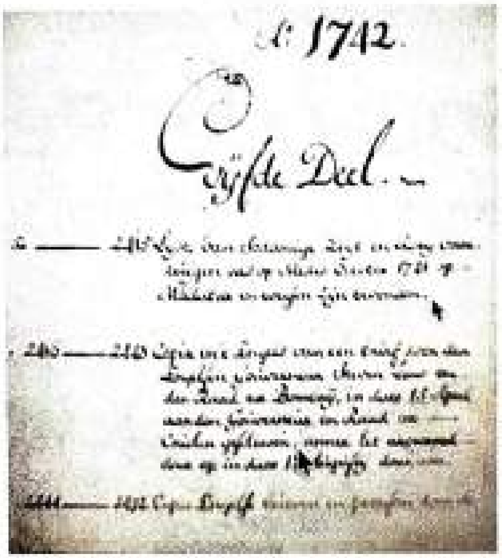
Cosmos Malabaricus, the Indo-Dutch project that the young students were entrusted with, was expected to rewrite the medieval history of the then Malabar region, providing rare insights into why the Kerala model of development experience was different from the rest of India and even the rest of the world.

Nearly two years later, fascinating tales from 1650 AD to 1800 AD, when present-day Kerala was under Dutch rule, have emerged from painstaking research by the Indian students who pored over tens of thousands of manuscripts from the period written in the old Dutch language.

"Four students from Kerala came to the Netherlands for studies. They learned old Dutch and were in an internship at the National Archives of the Netherlands. They had a very intensive course," says Jos Gommans, the Dutch historian behind the Cosmos Malabaricus project, named after Hortus Malabaricus, a botanical treatise of the Malabar coastal region by the 17th century Dutch Governor Hendrik van Rheede.

Neglected history

"The Dutch archive on Asia, especially on Kerala, is extremely rich, but it has been neglected for a very long time," explains Gommans, a Professor of Colonial and Global History at Leiden University in the Netherlands, who is a prominent speaker at the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF), beginning on January 15. The India-Dutch academic collaboration, which received the nod of the Ministry of External Affairs, is the result of a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Kerala Council for Historical Research and the 1575-founded Leiden University and the Hague-based National Archives of the Netherlands three years ago.



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Among the many discoveries made by the Indian students is how the Mukuva community, a fisher people's community in Kerala, was protected by the Dutch rulers. But the highlight of the studies is the story of a much-neglected Dutch translator who collected stories about Kerala's myths and history.

"So far, nobody has looked at this person, Van Meeckeren, a Dutch company employee and a diplomat who was one of the translators who served in Kerala for several decades and had a finger in every dish, almost," says Gommans, the author of several books on the cultural and intellectual exchanges between Europe and India. "Meeckeren's father was a Dutchman and probably his mother was from Kerala," he adds.

"Meeckeren was very much aware of what's going on. He also had this historical interest. So it was a really, very important figure that nobody knows about. He wrote a survey of Kerala history, and all that in the early 18th century. So I think he's really the kind of somebody we discovered in the archives, I have to say," adds Gommans, who has written extensively on Dutch colonial history, including the co-edited Exploring the Dutch Empire and co-authored The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600-1800.

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Gommans' latest book, Sun, Emperor and Pope: Neoplatonic Solar Worship in Mughal India and Barberini Rome, will be released at JLF. "Meeckeren's records are a massive source of history," says Gommans, who headed several programmes at Leiden University in the past two-and-a-half decades to equip over 150 students from Asia and South Africa with the skills to work with Dutch colonial archives, fostering a deeper integration of these sources into the regional histories of Asia and Africa.

Micro-level records

The Dutch, who defeated the ruling Portuguese in 1658, dominated the Malabar region before they were in turn defeated by the British. The Dutch empire in Asia, which was headquartered in Jakarta, Indonesia, spanned a vast geography, from Basra in Iraq to Deshima in Japan. Observant administrators of the Dutch East India Company kept daily records of economy, trade, judiciary and even places of worship up to the village-level.

While some Dutch records exist within India, most of the manuscripts of Dutch administrators were taken to the Netherlands, which are now housed in the National Archives in the Hague. "The Dutch records of Malabar are 100 metres long," says Gommans about the digitised manuscripts that contain little-known aspects of Malabar's history.

"The Dutch had a very deep interest in knowing what's going on, whether in a temple, who is the patron in what temple, what kind of political rivalry is going on in the patronage of a temple. So that all that information is in the Dutch archive," says Gommans, whose published works include two monographs on early modern South Asian history—The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire, 1710-1780 and Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire.

"I think there is a real gap, let's say, for the Dutch period," explains Gommans. "That's because the archive is in Dutch language and not many people know the Dutch language. So we have a period that is fairly well covered in the Portuguese period. Then we go into the 19th century, the early modern period, in which all these flourishing regional communities simply continue to exist, but we don't know what happened," he adds.

"The Dutch were really very much involved in various courts in Kerala. So they wrote very detailed reports about what was going on at these courts. The English period is better covered because of the access that people have to the English archive, because of the language and all these gazettes. The Dutch really have a huge gap. So, I think to go from the Portuguese to the English, that is the challenge, and therefore, you need the Dutch period materials," says Gommans.

The Indian students, who joined Leiden University for a Master's programme in Colonial and Global History and learning medieval Dutch, will complete their studies next week. "I think the project is over," says Gommans. "We don't have any funding anymore. We were already quite lucky with getting funding. It's partly funded by the Dutch government and partly by the Kerala government," he adds.

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The writer is a senior journalist with a focus on contemporary history, culture, and the arts.

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The Pioneer

NAV BHARAT TIMES (P-10), 19 JANUARY 2026

तकनीक तो ठीक है, पर किताबें भी पढ़नी होंगी

दिनेश प्रसाद सकलानी

यह अभूतपूर्व संभावनाओं का दौर है। ज्ञान, सूचना और तकनीक ने जीवन आसान बनाया है। डिजिटल माध्यम ने सीखने के द्वार खोले है। सूचनाएं तुरंत आ जाती है। मगर, इससे ध्यान-क्षमता कम होने वाली संस्कृति भी शुरू हो गई है। खासकर यह स्टूडेंट्स और किशारों के लिए बड़ी चुनौती है। इसमें सतही सूचनाएं तो रहती है, लेकिन विषय की गहराई से समझ की कमी है।

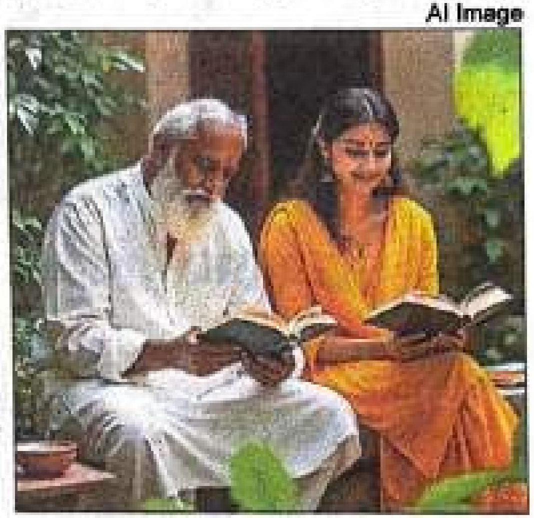
गहन चिंतन जरूरी

आज बच्चों का ज्यादातर समय मोबाइल, टैबलेट, लैपटॉप के सामने बीतता है। मां-बाप के लिए स्क्रीन टाइम सबसे बड़ी चिंता है। रील्स, शॉर्ट विडियो के जमाने मे दिमाग भी तुरंत संतुष्टि चाहता है। नतीजतन, आज के अधिकतर स्टूडेंट्स के लिए लंबे समय तक कोई चैप्टर पढ़ना, किसी विषय पर सोचना कठिन हो गया है। सोशल मीडिया पर ज्यादा समय बिताने से दिमाग की डीप अटेंशन क्षमता प्रभावित होती है। यही कारण है कि आज के बच्चे किताबों को पूरी तरह पढ़ने के बजाय समरी, नोट्स और विडियो के भरोसे रहते हैं। इससे न केवल परीक्षा के परिणाम पर असर पड़ता है, बल्कि यह सोचने-समझने की क्षमता भी प्रभावित करती है।

यही कारण है कि राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति 2020 मे शिक्षा को सिर्फ सूचना आधारित नही, बल्कि समझ आधारित बनाने पर जोर है। नीति का मानना है कि शिक्षा का उद्देश्य रटंत विद्या नही, बल्कि क्रिटिकल थिंकिंग, क्रिएटिविटी और समग्र विकास होना चाहिए। इसमे बचपन से ही पढ़ने की आदत विकसित करने पर जोर है।

प्रधानमंत्री नरेंद्र मोदी का परीक्षा पर चर्चा जैसा कार्यक्रम केवल परीक्षा के तनाव को कम करने का माध्यम नही है। इससे संदेश दिया जाता है कि शिक्षा का उद्देश्य नंबर नही, बल्कि समझ और आत्मविश्वास है। लेकिन, प्रधानमंत्री भी समय-समय पर डिजिटल उपवास पर जोर देते है। उनका मानना है कि आधुनिक तकनीक के साथ-साथ खेल, पुस्तक, संवाद और प्रकृति से जुड़ाव भी जरूरी है।

AI Image



हालांकि, इसका समाधान सिर्फ सरकार या नीति से नही होगा। मां-बाप और स्कूलों को भी आगे आना होगा। घर से पढ़ाई की शुरुआत होनी चाहिए। अगर घर मे किताबे नही होंगी, बच्चे अपने मां-बाप को पढ़ते नही देखेंगे, तो वे कैसे पढ़ेंगे। हम यह भी नही कह सकते कि तकनीक से पूरी तरह दूरी बना ली जाए। डिजिटल माध्यम ने ज्ञान को सर्वसुलभ बनाया है। प्रश्न तकनीक के होने या न होने का नही है, बल्कि उसके उपयोग का है। अगर स्क्रीन गहन पठन, शोध और संवाद का जरिये बने, तो अवसर है।

सोचने के लिए पढ़िए

स्क्रीन टाइम और ध्यान-क्षमता का प्रश्न केवल आज का मुद्दा नही है। यह उस पीढ़ी के भविष्य से जुड़ा है, जो कल समाज, अर्थव्यवस्था और लोकतंत्र का नेतृत्व करेगी। यदि वह पीढ़ी पढ़ना नही सीखेगी, तो वह सोच भी नही पाएगी। राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति 2020 और प्रधानमंत्री का संदेश इसी का संकेत है। अंततः सवाल यह नही है कि स्टूडेंट्स कितनी जल्दी पढ़ते हैं, बल्कि यह है कि वे कितनी गहराई से समझते है। इसलिए नीति कहती है कि –

शनैः पन्थाः शनैः कन्था शनैः
पर्वतलङ्घनम्। शनैर्विद्या शनैर्वित्त
पञ्चैतानि शनैः शनैः ॥

(लेखक NCERT के निदेशक हैं)

नभा/10

DECCAN HERALD (P-7), 20 JANUARY 2026

Book reading: Are we losing this essential skill?

SAHANA PRASAD

"Read pages 20-30 in detail. Absorb the ideas, make notes and let's discuss next week!" I closed the class and could see many looking concerned. "Read? A book? Wouldn't a YouTube video suffice? Or, better still, ask GenAI to summarise those pages?"

The students' reactions were not just about laziness; they were a symptom of a fundamental shift in how we process the world. We have become a "summary-first" society. We want the result without the process. We want the muscle without the workout.

When a student asks for a YouTube video instead of a chapter, they are asking to be "fed" information rather than "hunting" for it. In a video or a bulleted list, the synthesis has already been done for you by someone else—or worse, by an algorithm. You are consuming a pre-digested meal. While efficient, this bypasses the critical neural pathways that enable you to take disparate, difficult ideas and weave them into a coherent understanding of your own.

In an era of 15-second videos and AI summaries of text, the ability to sit with a single text for an hour is becoming extinct. When we read online, our brains are in "hunting" mode—looking for keywords and links. In a digital environment, your brain moves like a pinball: you read a sentence, click a hyperlink, check a notification, and skim a sidebar. This is nonlinear. Whereas "Linear thinking" is the ability to follow a single thread of thought from point A to point Z without the thread breaking. Deep reading in print or a dedicated e-reader forces the brain into "linear thinking"; by the time you reach the end of a chapter, you haven't just absorbed information—you have constructed a logical structure in your mind.

It's not just about absorbing information; it's about the conversation you have with the author in your head. It not only helps build mental stamina but also helps focus when there are difficult tasks at work or school that last longer than those of your peers.

Consider the concluding line of The Great Gatsby: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." Try reading it yourself. Do you feel the rhythmic, exhausting struggle? The inevitable force against human will? Now, ask an AI to summarise it. It gives you the "gist," but does it give you the emotion? Skimming strips away the sophisticated vocabulary and subtle nuances that make an idea resonate.

This "shortcut" culture isn't limited to literature. Prof. Anirudh, a music teacher, laments that his students now prefer "Shorts" to learn swaras, rather than studying them in detail to understand how they are modified and used across different compositions. In music, as in reading, the beauty and the skill lie in the transitions—the "in-between" moments that a 15-second clip simply cannot capture. By chasing the highlight reel, students miss the craft's foundational soul.

Dr Deepthi Das, Professor and Associate Dean, School of Sciences, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), has a strong case for reading books." Although digital devices such as tablets and mobile phones are widely used for reading, physical books remain essential. They provide a distraction-free environment, unlike screens, which often lead readers to browse or multitask. The tactile experience of holding a book further enhances comprehension and supports deeper engagement with the content.

Beyond the academic halls, this about-to-be-extinct skill is becoming a massive issue. In a corporate world drowning in surface-level communication, the person who can actually read a twenty-page technical brief without losing focus is the person who will lead. They will see the contradictions the AI missed and the strategic nuances the skimmers overlooked.

As Dr Deepthi Das suggests, the physical book is our last fortress against the fragmented, distracted mind. By choosing the page over the screen, we aren't just reading; we are reclaiming our ability to think for ourselves.

(The author is an academic)

ECONOMICS TIMES (P-8), 20 JANUARY 2026

Time to enable a transition from a public sector-led innovation ecosystem to a business-led one

Pvt India, You R&D or Not?

Amit Kapoor

As the global economy is reshaped by geopolitical tensions, tariff wars and AI, one certainty remains for economies: sustained investment in R&D is essential to drive innovation and productivity. This is critical for India. The issue isn't merely about improving rankings on the Global Innovation Index — where India has risen from 81st in 2015 to 38th in 2025 — but addressing its limited presence in global corporate R&D.

According to EU Industrial R&D Investment Scoreboard 2025, only 17 Indian companies appear in the world's top 2,000 R&D investors, compared with 674 from the US, 525 from China, 192 from Japan, and 318 from the EU. Together, these firms account for over 90% of global business-sector R&D. The US not only dominates the list — hosting more than twice as many companies as the EU — but it's also expanding R&D investment at nearly double the EU's pace.

A central weakness in India's innovation landscape is the dominance of public funding. Government accounts for about 64% of India's total gross expenditure on R&D (GERD) of about ₹1.27 lakh cr ($15-18 bn), while the private sector contributes only 36%. In contrast, developed economies see over half of R&D spending driven by business enterprises and higher education. It's unsurprising, then, that Indian firms have a limited presence in global innovation fora.

These fora are dominated by the world's most powerful firms — Amazon,

Go on, put your money where your mouth is

Alphabet, Meta, Microsoft, Apple, and Nvidia. These six US-based companies account for 15.7% of R&D spending among the world's top 2,000 firms. By contrast, India's total corporate R&D spending on the list is about $7 bn, or 0.44% of the global total. Corporate US spends about $680 bn, China (and EU countries together) around $500 bn, Japan about $186 bn, in comparison.

Between 2013 and 2022, Indian subsidiaries of US MNCs received about $40.6 bn in inflows from the US, while Indian MNCs invested $2.1 bn in their US affiliates. This asymmetry shows innovation leadership and tech disruption are not driven by market size or firm scale alone, but also by sustained investment in knowledge creation, new technologies and business models.

These investments determine which firms shape global economic trajectories, push the productivity frontier and strengthen the resilience of global value chains. It's also evident in the overall corporate R&D spending structure of 17 companies. Only one company, Tata Motors, which ranks 63rd globally, accounts for 58% of Indian corporate R&D. The other 16 companies are all ranked well beyond the global top 500, with a combined spend of around ₹28,271 cr ($3.1 bn), which is less than Tata Motors R&D spending of about ₹39,071 cr (about $4.3 bn).

India's corporate R&D profile is largely concentrated in automobiles and health-related industries. In other countries like China, R&D activity is more diversified, spanning ICT producers and services, construction and advanced manufacturing. Brazil's is heavily skewed towards energy and industrial sectors. Even though India's sectoral focus reflects participation in relatively advanced industries, diversification and tech intensity to drive global leadership are still missing elements in companies.

One company, Tata Motors, which ranks 63rd globally, accounts for 58% of Indian corporate R&D. The other 16 companies are all ranked well beyond the global top 500

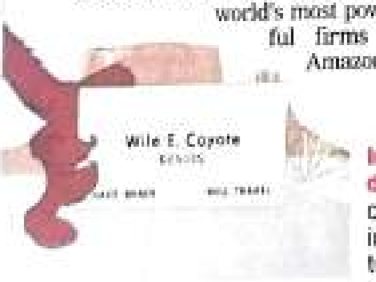
Beyond these statistics lies a deeper structural constraint: India is yet to reach the critical inflection point achieved by leading innovation economies. Global evidence shows that advanced economies build deep pools of skilled researchers, industrial capabilities and research funding until business R&D overtakes public spending and becomes the primary engine of innovation. This transition has occurred in the US, Japan, EU economies like Germany, and more recently in China, where sustained public investment in universities and research institutes was followed by rapid private-sector R&D expansion.

India remains far from this transition. While pressure on GoI to strengthen the research ecosystem persists — most notably through Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) — this alone won't suffice. Weak private-sector participation limits its ability to generate the scale of risk-taking and innovation-driven outcomes seen in leading economies.

For long-term competitiveness, this structural imbalance must be addressed, as it underpins India's persistent gap with the world's leading innovation economies. The gap is evident in lower patent intensity within innovation clusters, fewer high-impact scientific publications, limited venture capital investment and weaker overall innovation outcomes.

India doesn't lack capability to build a thriving, innovative ecosystem. It possesses all the right ingredients, be it human capital, startup landscape or grassroots innovators. But it still lacks private sector dynamism to turn knowledge inputs into outputs. The long-term consequence of this is that India's most promising talent seeks better opportunities abroad, as they prefer thriving, business-innovative ecosystems for career pathways.

The challenge for India is not to increase R&D spending relative to GDP to at least 2%, but to enable a transition from a public sector-led innovation ecosystem to a business-led one. The lessons from the world's most innovative companies are clear. Until we acknowledge current limitations, our presence in the innovation hierarchy will remain limited, regardless of our demographic dividend or growth potential, because innovation is the pivot on which a country's long-term competitiveness rests.



Innovation leadership and tech disruption are not driven by market size or firm scale alone, but also by sustained investment in knowledge creation, new technologies and business models

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The writer is chair, Institute for Competitiveness. Inputs from Sham Joshi

Wikipedia has 3,000 iPhones worth of content

It would take 38 years of continuous reading to finish every English article on the site

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

Wikipedia has amassed 775 terabytes of data, equivalent to the storage capacity of 3,000 iPhones, according to a recent Pew Research Center report. The site hosts over 7 million English articles, the language with the highest volume of content **(Chart 1)**.

As of 2025, Wikipedia features articles in 342 languages. However, much of the content in other languages may be generated by automated bots translating English entries. Cebuano – a language spoken in the southern Philippines – is a prime example; the vast majority of the millions of articles in Cebuano was created by bots.

Wikipedia averages 508 million daily views, with nearly half of that site traffic directed specifically towards the English edition **(Chart 2)**. Remarkably, web crawlers, automated bots, and non-human agents generated 88 billion page views throughout 2025. Meanwhile, organic human page views declined by 8% year-over-year during October 2025, likely influenced by automated summaries.

The Wikipedia article on U.S. President Donald Trump was the most viewed page between 2015 and 2025 **(Chart 3)**. During this decade, 46% of the most-viewed English Wikipedia articles focused on prominent personalities, while 14% involved the FIFA World Cup, and 38% were dedicated to TV shows or movies **(Chart 4)**. The list of WWE personnel was the most frequently edited information on the platform **(Chart 5)**.

The biography of American political activist Charlie Kirk received 15 million visits on September 10, 2025, the day he was killed. This is the highest single-day viewership for any page in the last 25 years. The article covering the 2005 London Bombings holds the record for the most edits in a single day.

How big is Wikipedia?

The charts were sourced from the Pew Research Center

CHART 1: Number of Wikipedia articles by language over time (in million)

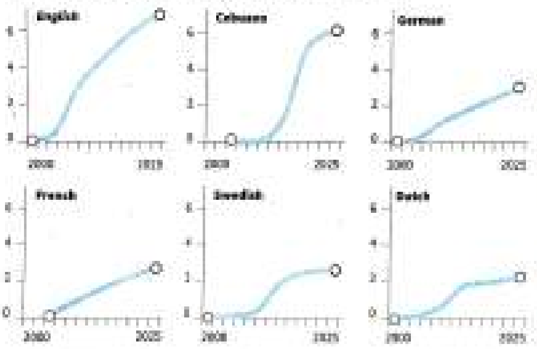


CHART 2: Percentage of all Wikipedia page views of articles written in the following languages (since 2015)

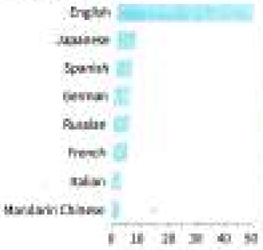


CHART 3: Most viewed English language Wikipedia articles, 2015-2025

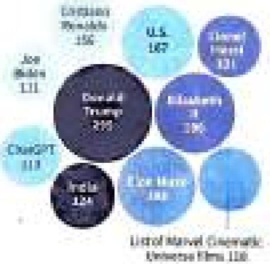
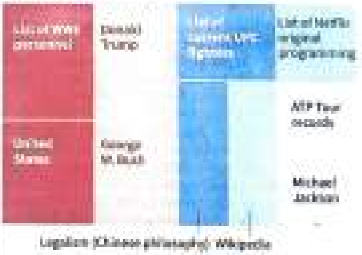


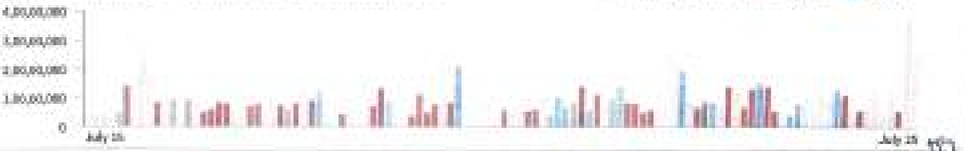
CHART 5: Most edited English language Wikipedia articles, 2015-2025, by total revisions



Many of the pages with the most revisions are also lists of regularly updated information, such as current UFC fighters, Netflix original programming and ATP Tour records.

The data for the charts were sourced from the Wikimedia analytics API, accessed by Pew Research Center.

CHART 4: Most viewed English Wikipedia article topics each month, 2015-2025



INDIAN EXPRESS (P-10), 20 JANUARY 2026

For weed-hit farms, science is surest antidote

WEEDS ARE a known threat to agricultural produce, growing at their expense by competing with them for nutrients, water and sunlight. Most of these unwanted plants are above the ground, making them amenable to manual removal. The problem is with weeds that attach to the roots of plants. By the time their shoots come out and are visible, the damage is done. Mustard farmers in Rajasthan and Haryana are now facing this with *Orobanche aegyptiaca*, a root parasitic weed that has become a major "hidden" threat to India's biggest edible oil crop.

The problem highlights the need for agricultural R&D as an imperative for the country's food security. The urgency is even more in the context of climate change and the emergence of new pathogens and weeds. If weeds cannot be removed by hand, and with labour becoming scarce, more efforts are required at breeding varieties or hybrids that can "tolerate" the application of herbicides. The Indian Agricultural Research Institute and Savannah Seeds have developed rice containing a mutated ALS gene, whose altered DNA sequence allows farmers to spray imazethapyr, a broad-spectrum herbicide that kills weeds without harming the standing crop. Mahyco has done the same for wheat, while some mustard farmers have planted a hybrid of Corteva Agriscience that can tolerate two other herbicides, imazapyr and imazapic. Whether this can control *Orobanche* remains to be seen. In all these cases, the herbicide-tolerance trait has been introduced through mutation breeding, not genetic modification (GM).

The Centre has done well to permit the commercial cultivation of non-GM herbicide-tolerant and gene-edited crops. But it mustn't close the door on GM. Delhi University scientists have developed GM mustard lines incorporating a foreign 'cp4 epsps' and a double-mutant ALS gene conferring tolerance to different herbicides. The potential for using several herbicides can address the resistance that can build up to a single molecule because of continuous application. Agriculture is too important a sector to not try out new technologies — or at least test their efficacy and biosafety through large-scale field trials.

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INDIAN EXPRESS (P-11), 20 JANUARY 2026

Reading India's political mood at the World Book Fair

DESHKAAL

BY YOGENDRA YADAV

A BREAKDOWN IS a moment of truth. A political crisis, therefore, is a very special opportunity for political thought, an occasion for deep reflection and long-term reset. It stands to reason, then, that the backsliding of democracy, challenges to the Constitution and to our civilisational values in India today should result in effervescence in political thinking.

I spent three days at the World Book Fair (WBF) in that expectation. With every passing year, WBF is less a mela of ideas and more an exhibition of power. You are less likely to encounter that odd little stall that stocks an out-of-print book or the corner for activist magazines, booklets and posters. Or, the instant calligrapher. You can look at giant images of PM Narendra Modi, Amit Shah or Dharmendra Pradhan, take selfies with their cutouts, or with real-life gun-wielding soldiers. (Don't ask me what they are doing in a book fair.) WBF is less chaotic, less lively, but not censored yet. The world of books is still a shade freer than that of TV and newspapers.

The search for the truth of our times drew me to shelves of poetry more than to those of politics. I picked up *Laanat Ka Pyaala* (Rajkamal Prakashan), the latest collection of the emerging young poet Adnan Kafeel Darwesh. Parag Pawan (*Jab Har Hansi Sandigdh Thee*, Rajkamal) and Vihag Vaibhav (*Morche par Vidageet*, Rajkamal) capture the political alienation and the angst of social marginalisation. Rajendra Rajan's *Yeh Kaun Si Jagah Hai* and Javed Alam Khan's *Saleeb Par Nagrikata* (both Setu Prakashan) capture everyday vignettes of the breakdown we are experiencing. The trouble, as Pratap Bhanu Mehta registers in the introduction to Apoorvanand's fine commentary on the troubled relationship between poetry and democracy in *Kavita Mein Janatantra* (Rajkamal), is that much of this is poetry of despair. It can occasionally inspire us, too, but cannot show the way.

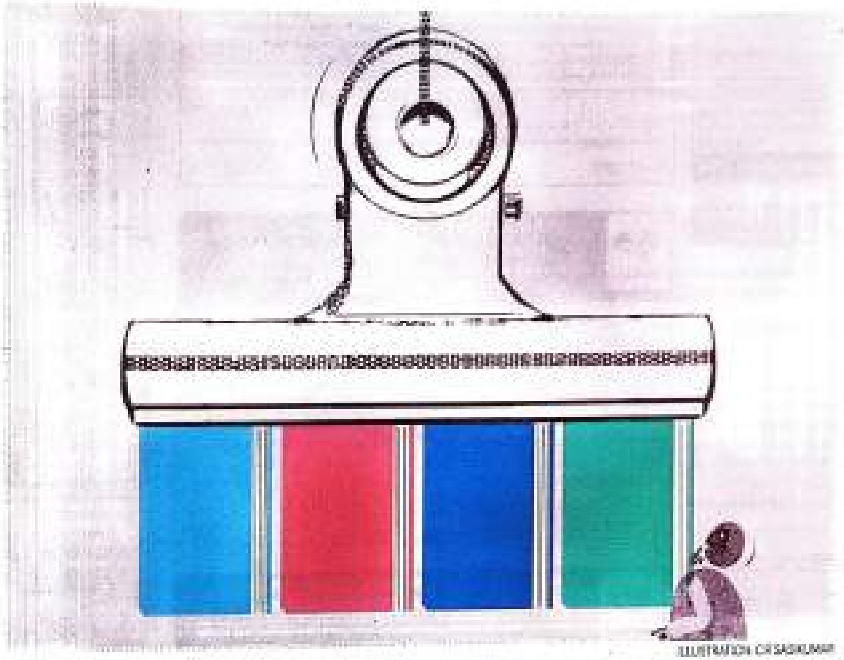

ILLUSTRATION: CR SASIKUMAR

You would turn to books on Political Science for that. I have already written in this column about Partha Chatterjee's *For A Just Republic* (Permanent Black), arguably the most comprehensive overview of how we have reached where we are today. Yet, the hints it offers for the way forward are too feeble, if not unhelpful. Perhaps we need a release from the "discipline" of Political Science. So I turned to biographies and reflections by activists. Professor-turned-parliamentarian Manoj Jha offers such a release in his *In Praise of Coalition Politics and Other Essays on Indian Democracy* (Speaking Tiger). Candid reflections by political leaders are rare in our public life, so I look forward to reading Mani Shankar Aiyar's trilogy that has concluded with *A Maverick in Politics* (Juggernaut).

Books on political history are more helpful. Orient Blackswan has come out with a "landmark" series of edited volumes reflecting on some important events in India's public life. Peter deSouza and Harsh Sethi's *50 Years of the Indian Emergency: Lessons for Democracy* is not just a leap forward in our understanding of that event but also helps us make sense of the present phase of authoritarianism. I look forward to reading *Raag Darbari: Polity as Fiction, Fiction as Reality* edited by Satyajit Singh, a book that marks 50 years of my favourite Hindi satire on village politics. I was pleasantly surprised to discover recent books on two less remembered political heroes — *Madhu Limaye: Pratirodh ka Parcham* (Setu) by Rajgopal Singh Verma and *Shankar Guha Niyogi: A Politics in Red and Green* (Orient Blackswan) by Radhika Krishnan. I wondered, though, if the values they stood for can still be held up in our times.

> With every passing year, WBF is less a 'mela' of ideas and more an exhibition of power. You can look at giant images of PM Narendra Modi, Amit Shah or Dharmendra Pradhan, take selfies with their cutouts

The fountainhead of these values is the Constitution of India. It is natural that the present assault on the architecture of the constitutional republic would invite vigorous attempts to research and defend the constitutional vision. Rohit De and Ornit Shani have come out with *Assembling India's Constitution: A New Democratic History* (Cambridge University Press) that reaffirms the democratic character of our Constitution by documenting popular participation in its making. *Ideas of the Indian Constitution* is a new series of books from Speaking Tiger that explicate and defend our constitutional values: *We, the People, and Our Constitution* by Neera Chandhoke, *Secularism: How India Reshaped the Idea* by Nalini Rajan, *Socialism and the Indian Constitution* by Prabhat Patnaik, *Liberty* by John Harriss, *Fraternity: Constitutional Norm and Human Need* by Rajmohan Gandhi and *Dalits and the Indian Constitution* by Anand Teltumbde. The political question that we face today is somewhat different, though: How much can we rely on the Constitution to defend our republic? Oddly, it takes a legal scholar, Gautam Bhatia, to place the legal-institutional language in a political context in his *The Indian Constitution: A Conversation with Power* (HarperCollins India).

A still deeper question is: How far can we rely upon constitutional values to shape the political morality of the citizens? I happen to believe that forging a new language that anchors our constitutional values in the multiple traditions of our civilisational heritage via the unique legacy of Indian nationalism is among the most pressing intellectual tasks of our time. I have outlined this case in my new book, *Ganarajya ka Swadharm* (Setu), which made its debut in the WBF. For those who wish to go deeper into how to gather intellectual equipment for this task, there is a new series *Unmochan* by Vani Prakashan, among the most intellectually ambitious projects in Hindi publication. This series includes the first volume of Abhay Dube's proposed trilogy *Upniveshvad ka Alaukik Swaraj*, a historical investigation of the colonisation of the mind. Balram Shukla's *Bharatiya Gyan-Parampara* seeks to expand upon how our *parampara* is not static and conservative but constantly renews itself. *Bharat Ki Saraswat Sadhna* by the renowned Sanskrit scholar Radhavallabh Tripathi is a badly needed introduction to some of the key thinkers and schools in the Sanskrit intellectual tradition.

Do these books match up to my expectation of offering fresh resources for responding to the present crisis? Let me read them and get back to you.

The writer is member, Swaraj India, and national convenor, Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan

Editor's TAKE

Are reading habits really dying?

The New Delhi World Book Fair stands as a compelling rebuttal to fears of the decline of books, yet it needs to be promoted and cultivated

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If anyone doubted the waning of reading habits, they only needed to visit the New Delhi International World Book Fair. The public response was overwhelming and so was publisher participation. The New Delhi World Book Fair 2026, the 53rd edition held from January 10 to 18 at Bharat Mandapam, had unprecedented footfall. One thousand publishers from more than 35 countries participated. The grand event had around 3,000 stalls showcasing books across languages and genres. The fair attracted an estimated over two million visitors-nearly a 20 per cent increase over the previous year. Besides the books on display, there were more than 600 literary and cultural events featuring about 1,000 speakers, along with themed pavilions, children's zones and international participation. Indeed, the occasion transformed into a bustling hub of debate, book appreciation and cultural exchange. It was indeed an occasion to reflect on the fact that books have their own place even in the digital age and that books have not lost relevance; they are only overshadowed by digital gadgets.

No doubt the digital age is here to stay and short text messaging has become the norm, but when you need to understand a subject or want to delve deeper into an issue, books are your best friends. Real knowledge still comes from reading books, not from scrolling WhatsApp messages or X posts, though they may be good to keep you updated, but they are no substitute for books.

However, the argument that books are losing their sheen is not without basis. Ubiquitous mobile phones have redefined how we interact with text and for how long. It is easier to watch a video than to read. Long-form reading competes with short videos, memes and bite-sized content engineered for instant gratification. The human attention span is reduced to that of a goldfish's nine seconds. Young people now associate reading with the syllabus rather than to quench their thirst for knowledge and curiosity. We are on the path to becoming a knowledge economy; paradoxically, we may end up with fewer truly knowledgeable individuals if long-form reading is not promoted and celebrated.

The New Delhi World Book Fair points to a very pertinent point that people would love to read books and engage with the in-depth content provided they have access to it. Children thronging the Kidz Express pavilion, dignitaries distributing books, and multilingual publishers doing brisk business all point to a resilient reading culture. Indeed, reading has not died, but it must be consciously defended and nurtured. People who read widely think deeply. For India, the stakes are especially high. A nation aspiring to global leadership cannot rely on surface-level knowledge. Encouraging reading in Indian languages alongside English is crucial, for language carries culture, memory and ways of thinking. Literature in Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Bengali, Urdu and other Indian languages connects readers to lived realities and indigenous knowledge systems that no algorithm can replace. A truly strong India must be a reading India-curious, informed and reflective.

Pcl 9b

TELEGRAPH (P-10), 20 JANUARY 2026

What is the future of literary fests?

Books and beyond

RUCHIR JOSHI

From the wall-sized window of my hotel room, I can see layers of the city stretching away in the morning light. Six floors below me, just across the road, are a few of the old handcarts that have plied in western Indian cities for decades. Behind them is a wall enclosing an open area smudged with the spiky umbrellas of large *khejri* trees, each tree flaunting the colourful kites it has captured during the recent Makar Sankranti festival. Beyond the trees are small brick structures of unplanned working-class houses and, then, the larger PWD buildings of some defunct institution built perhaps in the 1960s. In the middle distance spreads the mess of low-rise concrete you find in any medium-sized Indian city. Rising out of this are shiny, new Gurgaon-clusters — corporate and commercial buildings — their anodyne livery of glass blinking against the rise of ancient hills.

Jaipur as a city has grown and mutated massively since I used to pass through it in the 1970s. Bits of it are unrecognisable even from 14 years ago when I was here last. The literature festival has stayed constant, but again, not without changes and expansion, the transformations not loved by everybody who remembers the location and the scale of its iterations in the first decade of the century. "*Kumbha Mela* of literature, *thik i bolechhey ora!*" (the Kumbh Mela of Literature, they are right) mutters one Bengali fellow-writer as we juice ourselves through the press of the crowd. The festival is crowded from the first day itself and it gets more packed as the weekend unfolds, the people navigating among seven venues, the many handicraft stalls and food booths, and the massive bookstore that looks as though a dense section of Calcutta's *Boi Mela* has been transplanted here.

For us participants, there is the refuge of the exclusive Speakers' Lounge, which is actually a large courtyard with food counters, a coffee station and a bar, a place where writers, moderators, and the *karta-dhartas* of the publishing world get to mingle away from the heat-and-dust generated by *hoi polloi*. The food is from a top-level hotel, the bar is sponsored by famous brands of booze, and the hotel's own brand-roasted coffee is excellent. Moored around the tables in the courtyard you can see some of the most well-known writers and public figures from India, the UK, the US, and, to a lesser extent, other parts of the world. However, literature-types are not the only ones for whom the festival is a *tearth yatra*: on one day, the entourage of an ageing local royal might clear the way for 'HH' to come through; another day might see a fully-armed police escort twittering around some self-important looking White men in formal suits — the deputy prime minister of a European nation dipping into literature on his visit to our country; every now and then, some celebrity from Bombay might show up, or perhaps some glib-talking, orange-clad *baba* type, tonsured and oiled with karmic self-confidence, might bless you with his emanation, or a celebrity ex-CJI might make an appearance to pronounce on the importance of the Constitution.

Just when you begin to feel that all this is a little too much, you attend a session with some writers and you realise why the whole trip is actually worth it. Addressing a rapt audience of hundreds of people, Anuradha Roy and Stephen Alter discuss the Himalayas from their respective points of view. Suddenly Ranikhet and Mussoorie become vivid, the plants and the animals of the mountains come alive, and the relentless human assault on that environment becomes palpable. In one of the most beautiful and precious regions of the world, the high peaks are now black without their usual snow, the villages at high altitude are abandoned, the rivers are being strangled close to their birth points. And, yet, in that devastation, an unusual plant flowers, an animal looks back at you and changes how you see yourself, a trick of light reminds you this is the closest you will ever get to heaven.

In a completely different session, Arunava Sinha, Rita Kothari and Vivek Shanbhag take us into the fast expanding world of translations, from other Indian languages into English, from one regional language into another. Listening to them, you understand that it's not just the number and the quality of translations that matter but also the environment and ongoing dialogue between languages and writers that creates a contemporary readership, which unplugs the automatic privilege granted to English and Western literatures.

At the entrance of my hotel, three men in ragged, non-city clothes have set up a small stage under a kind of tent. They do *pranam* to each passing guest in the hope the visitor will ask them to perform. If commanded, these Bhats from Nagaur set their puppets dancing to drums and instruments; if not, they shiver in the cold and wait. The hotel gives them food but otherwise pays them nothing and they are solely dependent on the largesse of the tourists. As you visit other hotels and venues, you see these itinerant performers everywhere — puppeters, versions of Langas and Manganiyars, sarangi players, flautists, all placed as tokens, exiles in this harsh urban setting, trying to make a living in the ruins of their once vibrant traditions.

On stage at the festival, writers talk of the different kinds of exile they have experienced and depicted, about what exists between exile and belonging. On another panel, we approach the same theme from a different angle and talk about the spirit of place: what is it? How do writers evoke it? Is it linked to time? Across panels, themes begin to emerge: an acorn sent from England sprouts in the Himalayas, the child plant of the Buddha's *vriksha* grown in a far-off monastery; from other discussions, one collects fathers and the difficulties children, especially sons, have with them; on a third panel, two descriptions of two major railway stations speak to each other.

After the panels, the media and the social media machinery quickly kicks into place. In the media centre, there are booths where authors can give quick interviews to the 'legacy' organs and what I call the 'verticals' — those channels where the camera forms a vertical frame. Some of the questioners have no clue who they are interviewing while others are scarily well-versed in authors' works.

At the end of the day's events, there is the after-stuff — music, drinks, dinners. On the phone screen, a maze of Ubers trapped in the aspic of traffic. In the cocktail bars, parmesan-washed vodka mixed with a reduction of cherry tomatoes, a far cry from the illicit *gulabi* we schoolboys would drink on trips to Jaipur half a century ago. Across meals, a collection of Rajasthan's famous *Laal Maas*, the first and best one at the private dinner for the delegates, then the various ones in the restaurants and bars, then again, in the Speakers' Lounge, the top hotel catering actually serves *Laal Maas empanadas*.

After five days spent among serious crowds which include lots of young people actually there to listen as well as to pose for their Insta profiles, the thought arises: what is the future of literature festivals? Is it actually literature they will explore in the future or some other sense of community that merely uses books and literature as an excuse? At some point, the softly spoken words of the Australian novelist, Richard Flanagan, ring again as a rebuke to peacocking jurisprudence — choose love, suggests Flanagan to a young person with a question about how to live a life, choose kindness, he says, instead of the 'protestations of power'. It seems like a good message to carry away from this place.

Tel 20/10

TELEGRAPH (P-10), 20 JANUARY 2026

CAMPUS CRIME

The recently notified University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026 have replaced the 2012 anti-discrimination framework. The new rules attach serious consequences to non-compliance, including debarring institutions from offering degree programmes, withholding participation in UGC schemes, and their removal from the UGC's list of recognised HEIs. The regulations were prompted by judicial pressure after the death of students linked to caste harassment, such as that of Rohith Vemula — it is the 10th anniversary of his demise. A Supreme Court directive in January 2025 had also required the UGC to collate data on caste discrimination complaints under the 2012 rules. The data show why stricter regulations are crucial. Reported complaints of caste-based discrimination in HEIs rose by 118.4% over five years, from 173 in 2019-20 to 378 in 2023-24. Across 704 universities and 1,553 colleges, 1,160 complaints were recorded between 2019-20 and 2023-24. Pending cases climbed from 18 to 108 over the same period. The new regulations are thus timely. The notified rules also correct two serious flaws in an earlier draft. Other Backward Classes have been brought within the ambit of caste-based discrimination and the proposed deterrent against 'false complaints' has been dropped. These changes recognise a basic reality: marginalised students, already facing discrimination, being made to bear the burden of suspicion would have slowed the reporting of such crimes.

Yet the final rules still have gaps. The 2012 regulations had more concrete descriptions of discriminatory practices, including those pertaining to admissions and institutional treatment. The new framework offers broader definitions but omits several specific guardrails. Equity committees chaired by institutional heads risk becoming administrative instruments unless independence is built into appointments and reporting. Moreover, enforcement will require transparent timelines for inquiries, public disclosure of anonymised outcomes, and external audits. Further, faculty and staff also need to be trained to recognise caste biases. The new complaint mechanisms also fail to protect complainants from retaliation. Support structures outside the complaint pathway are equally important. The UGC's draft mental health policy for higher education, with counselling centres, helplines, and peer support systems, is an important step in this context. Emotional support, however, cannot be a substitute for institutional accountability or a firmer commitment to an inclusive, non-discriminatory campus.

TRIBUNE, (P-7), 20 JANUARY 2026

Name game is an insult to Dyal Singh's legacy

RAMULAL
EX-PRINCIPAL, DYAL SINGH COLLEGE, KARNAL

DYAL SINGH COLLEGE

FROM HISTORY: Dyal Singh College owes its identity to the esteemed philanthropist. [illegible]

SARDAR Dyal Singh Majithia (1848-98) was a great philanthropist, champion of intellectual freedom and social worker. He established three Trusts — the Tribune Trust, the College Trust and the Library Trust. He was also the founder of The Tribune (February 1881) and Punjab National Bank (May 1894).

Dyal Singh College, Lahore, was established in 1910 by the Dyal Singh College Trust Society as per the instructions in Article 8 of Majithia's will. Currently, it is known as Government Dyal Singh College, Lahore, and is among the best colleges in Pakistan.

After Independence, most of the assets of the Dyal Singh College Trust Society remained in Lahore. The Trust faithfully carried forward Majithia's legacy, will and ideology, establishing Dyal Singh College, Karnal (1949), Dyal Singh Public Library, Delhi (1954-58), and Dyal Singh Evening College, Delhi (1958). Dewan Anand Kumar, founding Vice-Chancellor of Panjab University, Chandigarh, played a crucial role in establishing these educational institutions. His father, Raja Narendra Nath, was Majithia's associate.

Facing a financial crisis, the Trust had to sell land of the Karnal college and establish Dyal Singh Colony. However, the crisis deepened. As a result, in 1978, Dyal Singh College (Morning and Evening) was transferred to Delhi University (DU) through an agreement, and the Trust did not receive any compensation in return. According to Clause 12 of the agreement, "the institution will continue to be known as Dyal Singh College". It is clear that no individual or government has the right to alter the terms of the pact.

As per data for the 2025-26 academic session, there are over 6,000 students in the morning college and around 3,000 in the evening college. The controversy surrounding the name change is not new. In November 2017, Amitabh Sinha, then Chairman of the Dyal Singh College Governing Body, announced that Dyal Singh Evening College would be renamed Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya College.

However, the proposal did not go through. On November 17, 2017, he succeeded in getting a proposal passed by the college's Governing Body to rename the institution as Vande Mataram Mahavidyalaya and turn it into a morning college; the final approval was to be given by the Vice-Chancellor of the university. The move triggered a controversy.

Leaders of the Shiromani Akali Dal, then a BJP ally, as well as the Congress, condemned the decision. Manjinder Singh Sirsa (an MLA who served as general secretary of the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee), and Tarlochan Singh, ex-MP, demanded that the proposal be withdrawn.

Avtar Singh Makkar, then president of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, also opposed the move. Akali leader Harsimrat Kaur Badal, then a minister in the BJP-led NDA government, said the proposed name was "unacceptable". Punjab's former Deputy CM Sukhbir Singh Badal called it "unnecessary and mischievous" and urged the Prime Minister to intervene.

Mobilising public opinion against the proposal to rename the college would be a true tribute to Dyal Singh Majithia

This decision was also slammed by academics and journalists. A meeting in this regard was convened on November 27, 2017, at Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib in Delhi, chaired by renowned journalist Kuldip Nayar. On December 8, 2017, we held a press conference and described this step as an insult to a great personality. I had a detailed telephone conversation with then Union Minister SS Ahluwalia regarding the college and he promised to escalate the matter.

On December 18, 2017, during Zero Hour in the Rajya Sabha, several MPs, including Anand Sharma, Ambika Soni, Oscar Fernandes, SS Dhindsa and BK Hariprasad, supported Naresh Kumar Gujral's proposal. The then Union Minister for Human Resource Development, Prakash Javadekar, told the MPs that the decision to rename Dyal Singh Evening College was not taken by the Central government. Therefore, he announced a stay on the Governing Body's decision.

On December 26, 2025, on the occasion of Veer Bal Diwas, DU Vice-Chancellor Yogesh Singh raised the issue of renaming Dyal Singh Evening College. He said, "We want to rename Dyal Singh Evening College after Banda Singh Bahadur."

He used the word "we", which implies that he is not the only player in this name-change game. DU officials argue that having two colleges named after Dyal Singh causes confusion among students. However, no such confusion has been witnessed for the past over six decades.

The current situation is completely different from that of 2017. At that time, the proposal to change the name came from the Governing Body of Dyal Singh Evening College, but the 2025 proposal is from the Vice-Chancellor, and its approval will be sought from the Delhi University Executive Council. Based on my long experience in the field of education, I have observed that most members of college and university executive councils are yes-men who have their own axe to grind.

The Dyal Singh Evening College Staff Association unanimously passed a resolution opposing the Vice-Chancellor's proposal. According to the resolution, "This college has long been associated with the esteemed Sardar Dyal Singh Majithia and his memory. All teachers, non-teaching staff and students are deeply attached to this name. We have to say that such an important decision has been taken without prior consultation with the stakeholders. This matter was neither discussed in the Staff Council nor shared with the Staff Association."

According to NN Vohra, former Governor of Jammu & Kashmir and Chairman of The Tribune Trust, any move to change the college's name would be "extremely inappropriate and ill-advised".

The government should establish a central university named after Banda Singh Bahadur, but changing the name of Dyal Singh Evening College would be an insult to his legacy. I appeal to all those associated with Dyal Singh institutions to mobilise public opinion and put pressure on the government to end this name-change exercise once and for all. This would be a true tribute to Dyal Singh Majithia.

Slashed NEET-PG cut-offs point to a larger absence

KINSHUK GUPTA

WHILE NEET-PG cut-offs have been slashed in previous years to fill vacant postgraduate seats, the move this year has whipped up a social media storm. A recent PIL in the Supreme Court by a group of doctors posits that this move risks compromising the integrity of the profession and threatens public health.

Critics argue that a disproportionate number of these vacancies exist in private medical colleges, and that lowering cut-offs risks allowing students with inadequate foundational understanding to enter postgraduate training. A zero percentile means that all students qualify, making mere appearance in the exam the only prerequisite. But it is quite another thing that erratic counselling schedules, sudden pattern changes, and delayed sessions in the past few years have rendered the exam a hollow ritual.

One of our surgery professors used to say, only in half-jest, that doctors are "glorified masons". The remark carried an important truth. Medicine is as much a craft as it is a science. With the current examination pattern, whether university exams centred on 10-20-mark questions or NEET-PG dominated by recall-based MCQs, can we seriously claim that these tests are reliable judges of clinical competence? In fact, the spectacle of students who have cleared the entire MBBS curriculum scoring less than -40 marks highlights the dichotomy that once plagued undergraduate entrance examinations, where entrance exams do not quite align with the school curriculum. Medical undergraduates are forced to choose between studying for university exams and studying for NEET-PG simply because the two differ in pattern and emphasis.

One of our surgery professors used to say, only in half-jest, that doctors are 'glorified masons'. The remark carried an important truth. Medicine is as much a craft as it is a science

Online coaching platforms like Marrow and Prepladder, which have capitalised on this divide, have further entrenched it. Watching undergraduate students sit through lectures with headphones on, tuned into Marrow, has transformed the classroom into a pantomime, leaving professors as dissatisfied performers armed only with the stick of attendance.

They may be able to identify the bulging fissure sign of *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, yet struggle to confidently diagnose a routine case of pneumococcal pneumonia or decide on the appropriate course of treatment. It brings to mind T S Eliot's famous lines: "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

This is where the proposed National Exit Test (NExT) holds promise. Envisioned as a common exit examination replacing both final-year university assessments and NEET-PG, NExT proposes a two-tier structure: A theory-based MCQ examination serving as a licentiate test, followed by a practical, clinical assessment. Perhaps what is needed is an even more comprehensive framework as is followed in the West — one in which each phase of undergraduate training carries meaningful weight in the final assessment. Such an approach may help draw students back to classrooms, both physically and mentally.

While the increase in postgraduate seats is a welcome development, it must be backed by stronger oversight and stricter provisions to ensure quality across medical colleges. Many institutions continue to struggle with faculty shortages, poor infrastructure, and compromised training quality. It is also worth acknowledging that a significant number of postgraduate seats, particularly in non-clinical and traditionally "unglamorous" branches, remain vacant. These are largely non-clinical and paraclinical disciplines that form the foundational base for more complex clinical specialties.

Leaving aside monetary considerations, these predominantly research- and laboratory-oriented branches have not been preferred by students largely due to chronic gaps in infrastructure, limited laboratory facilities, inadequate research funding, and unclear academic career pathways in many medical colleges.Recent efforts by the National Medical Commission to integrate research into the undergraduate curriculum are, therefore, welcome.

The present controversy should not be reduced to outrage over numbers. It should instead catalyse a deeper examination of what we value, how we assess it, and whether our current systems truly serve patients, students, or the profession at large.

Gupta is a doctor and writer

INDIAN EXPRESS (P-10), 21 JANUARY 2026

World Book Fair turns into Delhi Book Rush

WHEN TITLE inflation is rampant across so many industries, one should not begrudge the humble reader their wish for a promotion. This is a time of "voracious" readers (who presumably devour, rather than read, books) and Bookstagrammers. Dating apps have respectable populations of "sapiosexuals" revelling in their nerd cred. Books, for some, have become commodities, to be possessed, aesthetically displayed and perhaps, consumed in impressive quantities. Is it any wonder, then, that an opportunity to quickly grab a large number of them should lead to disorder?

Viral videos purportedly from the just-concluded World Book Fair in Delhi appear to show crowds of people rushing to grab books off the shelves and jostling each other. Some climb or jump up to a high shelf to literally knock books off. In the aftermath, social media has seen an outbreak of condemnation and pontification. The recurring villain in instances of poor public behaviour — Indians' lack of "civic sense" — was trotted out, together with stronger expressions (at least one "moral collapse" was spotted in the wild) and as-yet unconfirmed allegations of large-scale theft. And indeed, thoughts on the commodification of books.

According to some reports, the incident was triggered by a free book giveaway at a particular stall, which led to crowding, overwhelmed staff and general chaos. So, there may also be a point to make about organisation and crowd management here. On the theft allegations, more clarity and official confirmation is required before anything can be said. As for the books themselves, one hopes they end up in the hands of those who will read them, whether retiring bookworms or raucous book-hunters. A gold rush can trigger an economic boom in a region — let's hope the Delhi Book Rush of 2026 can at least inspire some minds.

TELEGRAPH (P-10), 21 JANUARY 2026

DRAFT PLAN

The survival of academic autonomy is becoming more difficult in India. The Indian Statistical Institute, founded by Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis over nine decades ago in Calcutta and reputed the world over, is now faced with the draft revised Indian Statistical Institute Bill, 2025 that aims to change its governance structure. The ISI is governed by its own society constituted by a state law. For administrative matters, it has a council composed of teachers, representatives from the non-teaching staff and the Centre, and an academic council composed only of teachers to decide on academic matters. This guarantees its autonomy with internal checks and balances. The Centre's draft bill proposes a board of governors made up of persons nominated by the Union government, to which the councils shall be subservient and which shall decide on all matters, including courses and the director's appointment. Whatever government representatives might say about ensuring greater autonomy and faster decision-making processes — which they have — this sounds like a takeover. The insistence on introducing what the government calls Indian Knowledge Systems into every institution is being perceived by the ISI's teachers and supporters as a way to dilute scientific rigour by injecting pseudoscience while controlling research and manipulating data for outcomes convenient to the government. The ISI's research into Indian economics may be proving uncomfortable for the Centre as may its researchers' ability to uncover fudging in statistical reports.

The desire to alter the ISI's governance structure and the expected attempt to introduce IKS bare the confluence of ideology and hijacking of autonomy that is manifested in the Centre's intervention in other educational institutions too. The ISI draft bill also shows the Centre's disrespect for state laws and, implicitly, of federalism. According to an economist, there might be more to the Narendra Modi government's intervention. The ISI focuses on pure theoretical research, whether in economics, mathematics or computers. This government thinks that pure theory is a waste of resources, without any awareness that theory is necessary for application in the future. If true, it would imply that the Centre's planned intervention aims at changing the character of the ISI's work and suggests that the government has a fundamental lack of understanding of learning or hostility towards it. Whatever is behind it, the draft ISI bill augurs ill for both academic autonomy and research in the country.

Tel 21/1

AI for all: Building an inclusive future for women, youth, and the workforce

KAVITA BHATIA

As India gears up to host the India-AI Impact Summit 2026, the most impactful stories are not about algorithms or automation, but about inclusion. The true promise of AI lies in amplifying human potential, especially among women, informal workers, and the youth who have long remained at the periphery of the formal economy.

Guided by the vision of 'Making AI in India and Making AI Work for India,' the Cabinet approved the IndiaAI Mission in March 2024. Under the leadership of Shri Ashwini Vaishnaw, Hon'ble Union Minister for Electronics and Information Technology, the IndiaAI Mission team began work on strategically designing and implementing key initiatives such as IndiaAI Compute Capacity, the IndiaAI Innovation Centre (IAIC), the IndiaAI Datasets Platform, the IndiaAI Application Development Initiative, IndiaAI FutureSkills, IndiaAI Startup Financing, and Safe & Trusted AI.

The Mission's focus on inclusive growth is strongly reflected in the IndiaAI Innovation Centre, which is developing multilingual Large Language Models and domain-specific foundational models tailored to India's diverse socio-economic contexts. These models, trained using the national GPU grid, are being designed to serve women entrepreneurs, farmers, gig workers, and small retailers through vernacular AI assistants, micro-advisory tools, and sector-specific knowledge engines.

While much of the global dialogue around AI has focused on productivity gains and competitiveness, in India, its most powerful impact may be its ability to democratise access to work, to learning, to safety, and to opportunity. This vision of AI as a tool for inclusion will be at the heart of the India-AI Impact Summit 2026, to be held in February. Bringing together policymakers, innovators and industry leaders, we aim to chart a discourse around how AI can be harnessed for People, Progress, and the Planet.

In India's expanding gig and platform economy, women are increasingly shaping a new digital workforce, one empowered by AI. Whether it is women entrepreneurs leveraging AI-driven marketplaces, or women drivers and delivery partners navigating safely through AI-powered safety systems, the technology is quietly reshaping agency and opportunity. Take, for instance, beauty and wellness platforms that use AI-based matching algorithms to pair customers with service professionals based on proximity, skill, and past performance. A majority of these professionals are women who now enjoy flexible hours, predictable income, and enhanced safety through AI-enabled verification and tracking. Similarly, ride-hailing platforms have integrated intelligent safety systems, from real-time location sharing to voice-activated emergency features, allowing women drivers to work with greater confidence and independence. While these systems existed before, AI has increased the safety, reliability and efficiency of these platforms.

In rural and semi-urban India, AI-enabled financial tools are promoting digital inclusion. Vernacular AI assistants and voice-based digital payment systems are helping women overcome literacy and language barriers, enabling them to manage finances independently and securely. For India's youth, AI is not merely a tool; it is an entry point into a new economy. Across states, government and private sector collaborations are building a pipeline of AI-skilled talent, from basic digital literacy to advanced machine learning. The Government of India has recently launched the YUVA AI for All National AI Literacy Campaign under the IndiaAI Mission. Anchored on National Youth Day, the initiative aims to create foundational AI awareness among lakhs of students and young learners through a short, self-paced "AI 101" course. By leveraging existing school, higher education, and digital learning ecosystems, YUVA AI for All seeks to democratise access to AI knowledge, positioning AI literacy as a core life skill rather than a specialised privilege, and ensuring that India's youth across regions, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds are prepared to participate meaningfully in the AI-driven economy.

AI's role in inclusion extends beyond employment into public welfare. Start-ups like MyGate and SafeHouse Tech use AI-driven analytics to strengthen safety for women in residential and workplace settings. AI-powered grievance redressal systems are being integrated into government helplines such as 112 India, enabling quicker response times and data-driven deployment of emergency services. In the agriculture sector, AI tools such as Kisan AI use machine learning models to predict pest infestations and weather-related risks, empowering women farmers to make informed, resilient decisions. Similarly, fintech innovators like Indifi and Kinara Capital are leveraging AI-driven credit scoring to extend credit to women-led enterprises that have historically lacked access to formal financial systems. This vision is also reflected in NITI Aayog's report, AI for Inclusive Societal Development. The report shows how AI can empower India's 490 million informal workers by expanding access to healthcare, education, skilling, and financial inclusion. It highlights how AI-driven tools can boost productivity and resilience for millions who form the backbone of India's economy.

As AI becomes increasingly integrated into economic and social systems, ensuring its ethical and inclusive use has become a national priority. Anchored in the principle of 'AI for All,' India's approach focuses on fairness, transparency, and accountability to ensure that technology amplifies opportunity rather than inequality. By embedding AI into everyday platforms, from payments and logistics to education and public services, India is building an inclusive digital ecosystem that empowers people at every level. India has also implemented the Digital ShramSetu, a national mission dedicated to integrating cutting-edge technologies into India's informal economy. The implementation model is built on four pillars: identifying key needs by sector or persona, empowering state governments for execution, creating an enabling regulatory environment, and forming partnerships to drive down costs and ensure broad access. It will bring together government, businesses, and NGOs, all operating under a rigorous system for measuring impact. This model of accessibility and equity offers a compelling blueprint for the Global South on how AI can enable large-scale social and economic transformation.

If the first wave of India's digital revolution, led by Digital India and UPI, connected citizens, the next must ensure that AI connects them to opportunity. That means designing systems that are multilingual, gender-sensitive, and accessible, where the rural woman entrepreneur, the data labeler from Nagaland, and the young coder from Bhopal all have a stake in India's AI future.

The power of AI in India will not be measured by the sophistication of its algorithms, but by its capacity to level the playing field. Women, youth, and informal workers are not passive beneficiaries; they are becoming the architects of a more equitable AI economy. As the world looks toward India at the India-AI Impact Summit 2026, it will see a nation proving that inclusion is not a byproduct of technology; it is its greatest innovation.

P:019

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DECCAN HERALD (P-8), 23 JANUARY 2026

A call for reform in higher education

The Supreme Court's directions issued while considering a report on student distress and suicides in universities highlight serious concerns around mental health and the gaps in supporting infrastructure in India's higher education institutions (HEIs). Based on an interim report by a Court-constituted task force, these directions are aimed at establishing preventive institutional mechanisms for student well-being. The Court noted that rigid attendance policies, issues related to curricula and exam assessment, inadequate placement processes, faculty shortage, and other factors create mental stress for students that needs to be addressed to ensure a productive academic life.

The Court issued the directions by invoking its powers under Article 142 of the Constitution. Seven of its nine directions pertain to record-keeping, reporting, and tracking suicides, while the other two are about filling up vacancies. The Court directed that vacant faculty positions, in both public and private HEIs, should be filled within four months. Appointments of Vice-Chancellors and Registrars must be made within a month of the posts falling vacant, as a matter of practice. It was pointed out in the task force's report that, according to the National Education Policy (NEP), leadership positions in HEIs should not be kept vacant for long periods, and the tenures of outgoing and incoming vice-chancellors may overlap for some time. The backlog of scholarship disbursements should also be cleared in four months. The Court observed that the "massification" and "privatisation" of higher education have placed India second globally in student enrolment, but the rush has left behind a trail of deaths, distress, vacancies, and exploitation.

> **Student well-being is at the centre of the SC's intervention that prioritises filling vacant positions**

Half of the top positions in the HEIs are considered vacant. They should be filled without delay, but the question that follows the Court's intervention is whether the appointments can be made in the short period prescribed for them. Appointments to top positions, including Vice-Chancellors and Registrars, are caught in a face-off between governments and Governors in states ruled by the Opposition parties. They involve legal and political challenges. Appointments of faculty members have to be made in compliance with UGC guidelines, and that cannot be done in a hurry, violating established norms. Budgetary considerations also influence these appointments. Qualified candidates for both administrative and faculty positions are not always readily available, especially on short notice. These are challenges, but there is a strong intent in the Court's directions that, with prompt follow-through action, can be a first step towards comprehensive reform in the sector.

ECONOMICS TIMES (P-8), 23 JANUARY 2026

R&Dy, Steady, Go, Let's Get Talent Here

The proposed Prime Minister Research Chairs (PMRC) in IITs are an effort to attract top Indian-origin researchers and scientists to the country. The plan to support 120 research fellows and chairs over 5 yrs acknowledges the central role that R&D and innovation play in driving economic growth. While the initiative is welcome, delivering results will require sustained commitment. This must include a drive to build and own fundamental R&D capabilities and a strong IP pipeline.

India has entered the global R&D and innovation race late and with a far smaller financial commitment than its competitors. A stagnant public expenditure of 0.64-0.66% of GDP on R&D is insufficient. The private sector's limited contribution — around 34% of R&D spending — reflects risk aversion and a focus on short-term returns. This must change. GoI has a critical role in shaping a supportive ecosystem for R&D and innovation, but its emphasis should be on policy, governance, and articulating a long-term vision. Public funding should be deployed toward foundational research, strengthening educational institutions, and enabling meaningful collaboration between academia and industry. Beyond a supply-side approach that funds research programmes, GoI must adopt demand-side, mission-driven, or 'moonshot' funding models. In such models, the state sets objectives, while industry, private capital and the research community deliver solutions.

Without a fundamental shift in approach to R&D investment, ownership of intellectual property, and mechanisms that leverage public funds to crowd in significantly larger volumes of private capital, initiatives such as PMRC risk falling short of their promise.

GT\8

MILLENNIUM POST (P-7), 23 JANUARY 2026

REASONED DISSENT

Reading as Resistance

From Ritwik Ghatak's cinematic warning to a British minister's contemporary alarm, the decline of reading is quietly eroding critical thinking, democratic disagreement and intellectual resilience

ADITYA GOLE

THE WRITER IS A COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONAL AND FORMER JOURNALIST

'Think, think, practise thinking' - When Neelkantha Bagchi from Ritwik Ghatak's *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* (Reason, Debate, and Deliberation) voiced these words of disconcerting honesty and dialectical wisdom, essential to a generation and a nation, the British Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson was not even born in the fragmented world of today. In fact, the brilliantly insolent cinematic genealogy of the maverick director has always argued, critiqued and interrogated, inspiring a bandwidth of critical thinkers who read, thought and questioned. Bridget has, in 2026, flagged what Ghatak did in 1974. Maybe contextually dissimilar, but seminally similar. In an article for a leading newspaper, Bridget equated the fall in reading habits to children falling for disinformation campaigns and highlighted the rising security concerns owing to it. According to her, Britain needs a generation of readers who can delve deep. She echoed, 'We need a generation of critical thinkers. We need a generation of problem solvers, equipped to dissect what lands in front of them, to value the truth and to reject the easy temptations of the online world. In short, we need a generation of readers.' In a world which snacks on propaganda in 30-second reels and 280-word posts, it is literally a silent crisis and a loud war for every nation. Are we ready for the reset?

Reading is not information intake; it is mental training. It builds patience, evidence-based reasoning and the capacity to live with complexity rather than flee from it

The crisis has been brewing for a long time. We, perhaps, underestimated the gravitas of it. It unfolded over the years quietly, screen-by-screen, scroll-by-scroll. Sustained and reflective reading has never been merely about gulping down information or boozing on random stuff. It is an act of mental training. It prepares minds to understand complexities, weigh evidence, recognise nuances and build arguments. When minds cease to ponder, the collective consciousness faces the potent danger of 'shallow certainty'. The remedy is not in denial, but in meaningful cognisance. Social media is ruthlessly aggressive, almost a marauding monster. The algorithm-driven contents are fast and furious as rash flings are vis-à-vis deep love. Here, reels replace reasoning. Opinions arrive gift-wrapped, emotionally charged and carefully designed to evoke reaction over reflection. The whole game is saucy and sexy. As fast food often is.

Without sustained reading, disagreement turns to outrage, weakening democracy as citizens lose nuance, plurality and reasoned argument

Reading is real-time cooking. It is slow, deliberate, sometimes messy - but deeply nourishing. When we cook, we engage with the ingredients. We understand proportions, experiment with flavours and learn from mistakes. Similarly, when we read original texts, research deeply and shape our own arguments, we engage with the ideas. We learn the process to conclude, not the conclusions. Social media is an ultra-processed meal, crammed with deadly preservatives which kill the probiotics of contrarian thoughts. It is someone else's digestion of ideas. It is high on flavour, low on substance.

India has always been a civilisation of texts. Reading has always shaped how we argue, question, and reimagine society. Yet, a quiet intellectual erosion is underway behind the veneer. We are reading less, thinking even less. It has nothing to do with so-called literacy. We have made significant strides in basic education and digital access. The problem is somewhere else. There has been a tectonic shift from profound reading to surface consumption. Information is moving, but understanding is not. The consequences are visible everywhere. Public discourses have grown louder, not wiser. Debates are more about outrage than reason. Propagandists, veiled or unveiled, are eating up malnourished minds. Even modern wars have adopted means of destabilisation through the colonisation of narratives. It perfectly suits absolutism over democracy in broader and expansive terms. We must relearn to agree to disagree. The right to disagree is the heart of democracy. Reading teaches us to hold a multitude of opinions and wrestle with contradictions. Yet, live beautifully with them.

The education structure, too, needs a shake-up. The entire rote culture has to be consciously discouraged, and focus should be on free and fresh interpretations. Exchange of ideas is where and what we can start with. Being a student of English literature at Ramakrishna Mission Vidya Mandira, we were never limited to set notes and set-piece question papers. The classroom was a thriving cauldron of contesting ideas courting each other with logic and grace. With artificial intelligence creepily crawling into every walk of life, we are losing originality. We are losing perspective. Ideation has its genesis in minds which straddle across science, history, non-fiction and fiction with ease. We cannot let ourselves cave into an age which is thick in technology and thin on imagination. Japan has woven reading into daily life. Finland has embedded it in rituals. Iceland has converted it into ceremonial gifting, and Singapore has created a national exercise of it. Uttar Pradesh has also introduced a 10-minute compulsory reading of newspapers in schools. We also can. In our own way, on our own terms.

Reading and critical thinking led to prejudices and flawed consensus in the past. Those were entrenched enough to be presumed as perennial. But, they were not. The movements of fundamental rights across the history of existence happened because we thought and we fought for our thoughts. Once, information was censored to resist readers and thinkers. Today, misinformation is let loose to influence them. Logical reasoning, except on banal papers of competitive exams, is a rarity in an age where artificial intelligence is the master key to all. Both construction and deconstruction are essential needs of a thriving society. Fluidity is a necessity. It can only come from education, which is incisive, from thoughts which can separate the wheat from the chaff. In the era of weaponised echo chambers, academic virtue will be a survival skill, individually and collectively. Martin Luther King Jr rightly argued, 'The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.' It's time to act on the clarion call. This is not a call for elitism. Reading need not be confined to classics or academia. What matters is depth, not pedigree. Whether it is science, literature, history, philosophy or authentic journalism, the choice to read remains an act of resistance. An act of conscientious rebellion against our own subjugated selves to read, think and write.

Views expressed are personal

National Handwriting Day: Is the pen losing to the pixel?

PRIYABRAT BISWAL

There was a time when handwriting was not merely read but felt-when the curve of a letter, the pressure of a stroke, and the rhythm of ink on paper revealed character, care, and conviction. From the elegant scripts of ancient manuscripts to Mahatma Gandhi's restrained yet resolute letters, handwriting carried meanings that extended beyond words. In today's screen-driven age, however, this deeply human expression appears to be fading, raising a vital question: is the pen finally losing to the pixel?

Once a marker of education and identity, handwriting now faces an existential challenge. Keyboards, touchscreens, and voice-to-text tools have quietly replaced pen and paper in classrooms, offices, and homes. Instant messaging and digital documentation prioritise speed over reflection, leaving handwriting confined to ceremonial uses or personal nostalgia.

Yet the story of handwriting is inseparable from the story of civilisation. Long before digital memory, humanity relied on written symbols to preserve knowledge and govern societies. In India, palm-leaf manuscripts in Brahmi, Devanagari, and regional scripts safeguarded philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and epics across centuries. Writing by hand was not only functional but sacred-an act of transmission across generations.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

Even technological revolutions of the past did not erase handwriting. The advent of printing expanded access to knowledge but did not diminish the importance of handwritten correspondence, education, or administration. From royal decrees to personal diaries, handwritten words shaped history, law, and culture. The Constitution of India itself began as a handwritten document, reflecting the gravity and permanence of the ideas it enshrined.

Modern neuroscience reinforces what tradition long understood. Writing by hand activates multiple areas of the brain simultaneously, improving memory, comprehension, and creativity. Children who learn handwriting early often demonstrate stronger language skills and deeper conceptual understanding. The physical act of forming letters creates neural connections that typing cannot fully replicate.

Handwriting also offers psychological benefits. Journalling by hand is widely used to manage stress, anxiety, and emotional trauma. The tactile intimacy of pen and paper provides a calming rhythm in an otherwise accelerated world. Unlike fleeting digital messages, handwritten words carry permanence and emotional weight.

Socially, handwriting conveys sincerity. A handwritten letter or note communicates intention and warmth that no emoji can replace. In an era of automated replies and Artificial Intelligence-generated text, handwritten communication stands out as authentic and deeply personal.

The digital tide, however, continues to rise. Children encounter tablets before pencils, examinations move online, and signatures are increasingly replaced by biometrics. Artificial Intelligence can now generate articulate text within seconds, raising concerns that future generations may rarely write by hand.

But what is lost when handwriting disappears? Beyond skill, we risk losing reflection, cultural continuity, and ownership of thought. India's linguistic diversity-expressed through scripts such as Hindi, Odia, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu-is sustained through handwriting. If these scripts fade from daily use, cultural memory itself is threatened. Encouragingly, revival efforts persist. Digital styluses, e-ink tablets, and hybrid tools now allow handwriting to coexist with technology. More importantly, initiatives that promote letter writing continue to nurture this tradition.

Handwriting may no longer dominate communication, but it continues to shape how we connect — with ourselves, with others, and with history. In a world racing towards digital uniformity, the handwritten word stands as a quiet rebellion, a deeply human act in an increasingly automated age. As long as there are ideas that demand depth, emotions that seek tenderness, and stories that deserve remembrance, handwriting will endure — not as an obsolete skill, but as an authentic expression of the human spirit.

On this International Handwriting Day, let us preserve it not out of nostalgia, but because it nurtures what makes us human. Slow, imperfect, and deeply personal, handwriting is not a relic of the past-it is a reservoir of meaning, identity, and soul.

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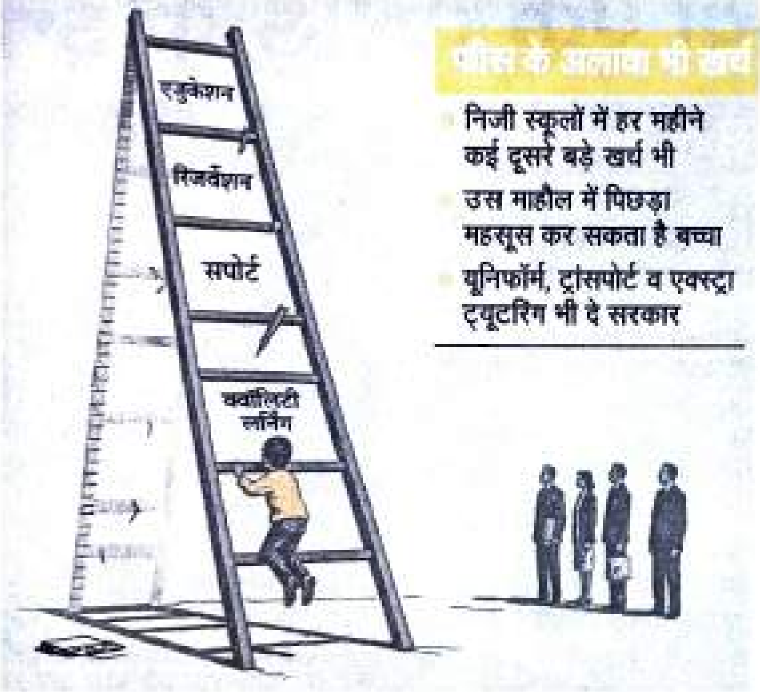
निजी स्कूलों में ग़रीबों के लिए आरक्षण सही, लेकिन और उपायों की है ज़रूरत

सिर्फ़ सीटें देने से नहीं आएगा चेंज

विमल कुमार

सुप्रीम कोर्ट ने हाल ही में याद दिलाया है कि शिक्षा के अधिकार कानून (RTE) के तहत निजी स्कूलों में 25% सीटें कमजोर वर्गों के लिए आरक्षित हैं। अदालत की यह टिप्पणी असल में हमारे सामाजिक विवेक को झकझोरने की कोशिश है। कानून का इरादा बिल्कुल नेक है - पढ़ाई वह भरोसेमंद टूल है, जिससे जीवन बदला जा सकता है। लेकिन अर्थशास्त्र का एक बुनियादी सिद्धांत है - किसी भी नीति का मूल्यांकन उसके नेक इरादों से नहीं, उसके अंतिम परिणाम से होना चाहिए। शिक्षा में परिणाम का मतलब है - क्या वह बच्चा वास्तव में सीख रहा है, क्या वह स्कूल में टिक पा रहा है, और क्या उसकी क्षमताएं उसे भविष्य के प्रतिस्पर्धी बाजार के लिए तैयार कर रही हैं?

AI Image



फीस के अलावा भी खर्च

- निजी स्कूलों में हर महीने कई दूसरे बड़े खर्च भी
- उस माहौल में पिछड़ा महसूस कर सकता है बच्चा
- यूनिफॉर्म, ट्रांसपोर्ट व एक्स्ट्रा ट्यूटरिंग भी दे सरकार

सीखने की लागत । समस्या यह है कि हम अक्सर शिक्षा को केवल 'सीट' या 'फीस' की बहस तक सीमित कर देते हैं। हम मान लेते हैं कि फीस माफ हो गई, तो शिक्षा मुफ्त हो गई। हकीकत में सीखने की कीमत सिर्फ स्कूल की फीस नहीं होती। अर्थशास्त्र में कहें तो हर परिवार को सीखने की लागत चुकानी पड़ती है। इसमें पैसा, समय, मानसिक तनाव और जोखिम - सब शामिल हैं।

बजट के बाहर । निजी स्कूल में दाखिला मिलने पर भी एक गरीब परिवार पर कई प्रत्यक्ष आर्थिक बोझ आते हैं - किताबें, यूनिफॉर्म, स्टेशनरी, प्रॉजेक्ट्स का सामान और ट्रांसपोर्ट का खर्च। इन सब का हिसाब लगाया जाए, तो महीने का अतिरिक्त खर्च 3 से 5 हजार रुपये तक पहुंच सकता है। एक दिहाड़ी कर्मचारी के लिए यह उसकी कुल मासिक आय का 40 से 50% हिस्सा है।

छिपी हुई लागत । इससे भी बड़ा खर्च समय और प्रक्रिया की जटिलता का है। दस्तावेजों को बनवाने की जद्दोजहद, पोर्टल की तकनीकी उलझनें और स्कूल के दफ्तरों के चक्कर। गरीब परिवार के लिए यह समय सीधे तौर पर उनकी 'रोजी-रोटी' का होता है। अर्थशास्त्री इसे 'अवसर-लागत' (Opportunity Cost) कहते हैं। यानी स्कूल की एक औपचारिकता पूरी करने के लिए पिता को अपनी एक दिन की दिहाड़ी छोड़नी पड़ती है। क्या हमारी नीति ने कभी इस 'छिपी हुई लागत' का हिसाब लगाया है?

मनोवैज्ञानिक दीवार । स्कूल केवल शैक्षणिक केंद्र नहीं, सूक्ष्म समाज भी है। वहां बच्चों के बीच खाने के टिफिन, कपड़े, ब्रैंडेड जूते, मोबाइल और यहां तक कि अंग्रेजी बोलने के लहजे को लेकर अदृश्य प्रतिस्पर्धा चलती है। जन्मदिन की पार्टियां या स्कूल ट्रिप जैसे 'रिचुअल्स' भागीदारी की एक ऊंची कीमत तय करते हैं। जब एक गरीब बच्चा रोज यह महसूस करता है कि वह सहपाठियों से अलग है या पिछड़ रहा है, तो उसकी सीखने की उत्पादकता (learning productivity) गिरती है। यह एक मनोवैज्ञानिक दीवार है, जो उसे कक्षा में मौजूद तो रखती है, लेकिन सीखने की प्रक्रिया से काट देती है।

परिवेश का अंतर । यही वह बिंदु है जहां 'पालिका स्कूल' और 'मॉडर्न स्कूल' की खाई साफ नजर आती है। एक आधुनिक निजी स्कूल का बच्चा जिस तकनीक, इंटरनेट और एक्सपोजर के बीच बड़ा हो रहा है, क्या 25% कोटे वाला बच्चा घर जाकर उसी परिवेश को पा सकता है?

लो-रिटर्न निवेश । सीखना एक उत्पादन-प्रक्रिया है। जैसे किसी फैक्ट्री में बेहतर उत्पाद के लिए केवल मशीन (सीट) काफी नहीं, बल्कि कच्चा माल, बिजली और कुशल कारीगर भी चाहिए, वैसे ही शिक्षा के लिए पोषण, सुरक्षित घर, अध्ययन का माहौल और अतिरिक्त सहायता जरूरी इनपुट हैं। अगर ये इनपुट गायब हैं, तो शिक्षा का 'आउटपुट' कम रह जाएगा और हमारी नीति एक 'लो-रिटर्न निवेश' बन जाएगी।

समाधान के रास्ते । पहला, सरकार को केवल फीस की भरपाई नहीं करनी चाहिए, बल्कि ऐसे बच्चों के लिए 'सपोर्ट पैकेज' (यूनिफॉर्म, ट्रांसपोर्ट और एक्स्ट्रा ट्यूटरिंग) का फंड भी देना चाहिए। दूसरा, स्कूलों के भीतर एक 'इनक्लूजन कल्चर' विकसित करना होगा। कुछ राज्यों के पायलट प्रॉजेक्ट्स बताते हैं कि जहां 'बडी सिस्टम' (अमीर और गरीब बच्चे की जोड़ी) और 'इनक्लूजन कोऑर्डिनेटर' नियुक्त किए गए, वहां इन बच्चों के सीखने के स्तर में 30% तक सुधार देखा गया।

सरकारी स्कूल सुधरें । तीसरा और सबसे महत्वपूर्ण - सरकारी स्कूलों की गुणवत्ता सुधारना ही 'फर्स्ट-बेस्ट' पॉलिसी है। जब तक सरकारी स्कूल निजी स्कूलों के बराबर खड़े नहीं होंगे, तब तक हम बच्चों को टुकड़ों-टुकड़ों में न्याय देने की कोशिश करते रहेंगे। लक्ष्य यह नहीं होना चाहिए कि बच्चा 'किस' स्कूल में बैठा है, बल्कि यह होना चाहिए कि वह 'क्या' सीख रहा है।

(लेखक IIT कानपुर के इकॉनमिक्स डिपार्टमेंट और वाधवानी स्कूल ऑफ AI में प्रफेसर हैं)

INDIAN EXPRESS (P-10), 24 JANUARY 2026

On the red carpet, the teacher

WHO WOULD Ryan Coogler have been if, long ago, a teacher had not recognised and encouraged his raw talent? Those who watched the filmmaker walk the red carpet at the National Board of Review awards in the company of his college professor Rosemary Graham — a week before his genre-bending vampire musical *Sinners* broke the record for most Oscar nominations — may well have mused on the "what if" scenario. Coogler, who credits Graham with changing his life by telling him to go to Hollywood, likely himself wonders where he would have been but for the clear-eyed view of one teacher.

Because often, that's all it takes for a life to be transformed and a different future to be written: A sympathetic teacher who shapes the child's plastic mind, stokes her curiosity and enlarges her reality. How well such a teacher — or guru or mentor — does can be seen most clearly in how well her pupils do; not just how successful they become, but how fully they're able to inhabit the promise that every individual holds. To become a teacher is, therefore, to enter a vocation where the usual yardsticks of productivity and efficiency, calculated in cold numbers, cannot apply. Where the sum of all that is owed to them goes far beyond the often paltry salaries they draw and the inadequate systemic support they get.

Reframe that first question, then, to this: What if there had been no teacher to see in Coogler the early sparks of a brilliant career? The filmmaker gets it right when he thanks his professor. Just as Albert Camus, freshly anointed a Nobel laureate, acknowledged in 1957 his debt to his own teacher, or when generations of students, year after year, express similar gratitude towards those who have taught and counselled them. Where, indeed, would anyone be without their guiding hand?

From skill India to an employment hub

Budget 2026 presents a unique opportunity to realign priorities and ensure that Skill India becomes a driving force for job creation, income generation, and inclusive development in the years to come

DINESH SOOD

With the Union Budget 2026-27 approaching on February 1, policy decisions will be critical in determining whether India's demographic advantage translates into tangible economic gains. Amid various priorities, the government's renewed focus on skills, employment, innovation, and start-ups is both timely and essential for achieving the vision of Viksit Bharat. However, policy intent must be matched by effective implementation. The central challenge is whether Budget 2026 can elevate Skill India from a training initiative into a robust engine for employment generation.

The emphasis on employment-linked skill development represents a significant strategic shift, particularly given that nearly 67 per cent of India's population is of working age. This transition, however, requires greater precision and a stronger focus on measurable outcomes. Welfare initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY), which provides free food grains to over 810 million beneficiaries at a cost of ₹11.8 lakh crore, have been vital in supporting vulnerable populations. Nevertheless, food security alone cannot replace the need for income security. Sustainable poverty reduction necessitates large-scale, productive employment facilitated by relevant, market-driven skills.

Prioritising skills development acknowledges India's growing skill deficit, especially in sectors such as health and wellness, manufacturing, logistics, electronics, green energy, and emerging digital fields. Collaboration between industry and academia, international partnerships, and technology-driven skilling models have the potential to position India within high-value services and advanced manufacturing. However, the full potential of these initiatives has yet to be realised.

Labour market realities underscore the urgency of reform. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the share of educated unemployed in India has risen alarmingly-from 35.2 per cent in 2022 to nearly two-thirds by 2030. Even more concerning is the persistently high proportion of youth who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). ILO estimates place this figure at over 40 per cent for the 15-24 age group, significantly higher than both South Asian and global averages. This reflects not just a lack of education, but a profound mismatch between education, skills, and employment.

The trajectory of the Skill India Mission, launched in 2015, provides valuable insights. The rebranding and revitalisation of the former National Skill Development Mission heightened expectations regarding scale and impact, including the ambitious goal of skilling 300 million individuals by 2024. Nearly a decade later, results remain inconsistent. Well-intentioned measures such as strict compliance requirements, rigid attendance policies, and centralised monitoring have unintentionally reduced participation and retention, particularly among economically disadvantaged youth who cannot afford to forgot daily income.

POLICYMAKERS FACE A CRITICAL DECISION: CONTINUE TRAINING MILLIONS WITHOUT GUARANTEED EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS, OR STRATEGICALLY ALIGN SKILL DEVELOPMENT WITH EMPLOYMENT, PRODUCTIVITY, AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

The writer is Co-Founder and Managing Director of Orane International, a Training Partner with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC)

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Though the India Skills Report (ISR) 2026 highlights a marginal improvement over previous years-from 54.81 per cent in 2025 to a projected 56.35 per cent in 2026-reflecting a shift towards a skill-based economy, employers continue to flag deficits in problem-solving ability, communication skills, digital literacy, and job readiness.

Degrees alone no longer guarantee employment, and skilling programmes that operate in isolation from industry demand risk becoming certification exercises rather than pathways to livelihoods.

Budget 2026 must therefore recalibrate its approach to skill development. There is an urgent need to expand skilling programmes and strengthen industry partnerships_to establish continuous learning pathways and improve employability, particularly for school dropouts and unskilled or semi-skilled workers who require income while participating in training.

The Union Budget 2022-23 included the announcement of 75 skilling e-labs to advance vocational education through simulated learning environments. While such virtual labs represent valuable innovations, the scale of India's skilling challenge is far broader. Technology-driven solutions, including API-based skill credentials and job discovery platforms, have limitations. Ultimately, large-scale, practical skill development rooted in local industry needs and supported by adaptable, worker-centric training models remains irreplaceable.

Apprenticeships represent a highly effective link between skill acquisition and employment. The proposed Right to Apprenticeship framework, designed to provide legal support for structured on-the-job training, is a positive development. However, its implementation has been slow and inconsistent. Given that India adds over 12 million young people to the workforce annually, expanding high-quality apprenticeships, particularly within MSMEs, manufacturing clusters, and the services sector, should be prioritised at the national level. Budget 2026 must also address the rapid evolution of India's labour market. The gig and platform economy has grown nearly eightfold between 2020 and 2024, attracting millions of young workers from Tier II and Tier III cities and rural regions. Despite this expansion, most gig workers remain confined to low-skill, low-wage positions with limited prospects for advancement. Targeted budgetary allocations for upskilling gig workers, portable certifications, and skilling linked to social security can transform this sector into a pathway for upward mobility.

Although initiatives such as virtual skilling labs, e-labs, and digital credentialing platforms are beneficial, they cannot replace the need for extensive physical training infrastructure. This is particularly important for school dropouts and semi-skilled workers, who constitute the core of India's informal economy. Technology should serve as an enabler, rather than a substitute, for strong local skilling ecosystems.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

India's ambition to become a $7 trillion economy by 2030 and the world's third-largest economy will depend on the effectiveness of Budget 2026 in narrowing the skills-employment gap. Achieving this objective will require significantly increased funding, enhanced employer engagement, adaptable delivery models, and a sustained emphasis on measurable outcomes rather than mere enrolment numbers.

Policymakers face a critical decision: continue training millions without guaranteed employment pathways, or strategically align skill development with employment, productivity, and economic growth. Budget 2026 presents a unique opportunity to realign priorities and ensure that Skill India becomes a driving force for job creation, income generation, and inclusive development in the years to come.

TRIBUNE, (P-7), 24 JANUARY 2026

Time to revisit premises of doctoral degrees

ABHINANDAN SATAPATHY

In India, and particularly in states like Odisha, pursuing a PhD has long been considered the highest academic achievement. A doctoral degree carries prestige, social respect, and the promise of intellectual contribution. However, an important question needs to be asked today: Are we truly nurturing researchers, or are we merely producing degree holders through rigid categories and traditional systems that often neglect the future of the scholar?

One of the most debated issues surrounding PhD admissions in India is the emphasis on category. Reservation policies based on social categories were introduced with the noble intention of ensuring social justice and equal opportunity. Undoubtedly, these policies have helped many deserving students from marginalized backgrounds to access higher education.

However, when category becomes more important than research aptitude, innovation, and vision, it raises concerns. Many talented students feel discouraged when merit alone is not the decisive factor. At the same time, some scholars enter PhD programmes primarily because they qualify through a category, without clear research motivation or long-term academic goals.

A PhD is not merely a continuation of postgraduate studies; it demands deep commitment, originality, and perseverance. The critical question is not which category a student belongs to, but whether the student can create knowledge that benefits society. A balanced system is required — one that upholds social justice while also prioritizing research quality and potential impact.

Another serious concern is that many students enrol in PhD programmes without a clear understanding of their prospects. In Odisha, as in many parts of India, PhD admission is often seen as a "safe option" when employment opportunities are limited. Students join doctoral programmes hoping that "something will work out" in the future - either a teaching position or a research role.

Unfortunately, the reality is harsh. Academic positions are limited, postdoctoral opportunities are scarce, and industry-linked research remains underdeveloped. Many PhD scholars spend five to seven years of their productive youth only to face unemployment or underemployment at the end.

This raises a fundamental issue: Is the system responsible for guiding scholars about career pathways beyond the PhD? At present, the answer is largely no. Career counselling, industry exposure, entrepreneurship training, and interdisciplinary skill development are mostly absent from traditional PhD structures.

The traditional method of pursuing a PhD in India emphasises coursework, literature review, data collection, thesis writing, and viva voce. While these elements are essential, the system often becomes rigid, outdated, and disconnected from real-world problems.

In many universities, including those in Odisha, research topics are repetitive, incremental, and sometimes irrelevant to societal needs. Scholars are encouraged to "play safe" rather than take risks or explore innovative ideas. Supervisors, overburdened with administrative work, may not always provide active mentorship. As a result, creativity is compromised.

Moreover, the traditional PhD system values quantity over quality — number of years, number of publications, number of formalities — rather than the actual contribution of the research. This leads to frustration among scholars and limits the global visibility of Indian research.

Perhaps the most painful truth is that the future of many PhD scholars is neglected. Financial insecurity, mental stress, delayed fellowships, and lack of recognition are common experiences. In Odisha, many scholars rely on limited fellowships that are often delayed, forcing them into personal and financial hardship.

After completing the PhD, the struggle does not end. With limited faculty positions and minimal research funding, scholars often feel abandoned by the system. Years of rigorous effort do not translate into stable careers. This situation not only wastes human potential but also discourages future generations from choosing research as a career.

PhD stands for "Doctor of Philosophy", derived from the Greek word philosophia, meaning "love of wisdom." A PhD scholar is expected to be a seeker of truth, a creator of new knowledge, and a problem-solver for society.

A true PhD would be:

- Conducting original research
- Creating new knowledge or new applications
- Addressing real problems of humanity
- Contributing to the progress, sustainability, and well-being of mankind

A PhD is not meant to be just a degree for promotion, salary increment, or social status. It is a responsibility to science, society, and the future.

To restore the true meaning of a PhD, reforms are urgently needed:

- **Merit with Equity:** Balance category-based access with rigorous assessment of research aptitude.
- **Career-Oriented PhD Programmes:** Integrate industry collaboration, startups, policy research, and interdisciplinary skills.
- **Outcome-Based Research:** Focus on societal impact, innovation, and real-world solutions.
- **Strong Mentorship:** Train and support supervisors to guide scholars effectively.
- **Future Security:** Create post-PhD pathways through research institutions, think tanks, and industry.

A PhD should not be a journey of uncertainty and neglect. It should be a platform for intellectual growth, innovation, and service to humanity. In Odisha and across India, we must move beyond rigid categories and outdated traditions to build a research ecosystem that values ideas, nurtures talent, and secures the future of scholars.

Only then will the PhD truly fulfil its purpose — to give something new to the world, to save and improve lives, and to benefit mankind.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, [illegible] College of Pharmacy)

TRIBUNE, (P-7), 24 JANUARY 2026

'Students must be employable'

At a time when higher education in India is being reshaped by policy reforms, technological disruption, and evolving industry demands, Panjab University (PU) stands at a crucial crossroads. Professor (Dr) Renu Vig, who is discharging the responsibilities of Vice-Chancellor of the university, spoke to **Anurag Kumar** on various issues, including balancing PU's rich academic legacy with the need for modernisation, aligning curricula with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, bolstering research and innovation, and navigating the complex dynamics of campus politics.

In this candid interaction, the professor also reflects on employability, student activism, and the challenges of leading one of the country's premier multidisciplinary universities.

Q: What is your long-term vision for Panjab University in an era of rapid changes taking place in higher education?

A: The mandate for any higher educational institution is to provide holistic education to the students. It is our mandate to ensure that, upon completing their education, students possess the necessary skills to be employable or financially independent. Plus, their value system should also be strong. So, we have to maintain a balance between these two.

Panjab University has departments in almost every field. We have science departments, engineering departments, law, pharmacy, medical science, social science, languages, and management.

As far as the students of management, engineering, pharmacy, and science are concerned, they can get jobs once they complete their degrees. There are some other departments, like languages and social sciences, where getting a job is not easy. The engineering, science, and management departments generally ensure that more than 80 per cent of the students graduate with jobs in hand.

Besides, higher education institutions have to focus on research and innovation, too. The faculty of Panjab University is involved in meaningful research. The students, as well as the faculty, are able to publish their research work in high-impact-factor journals. And they have collaborations with national as well as international research labs.

At present, Panjab University has around 100 successful start-ups on the campus.

Q: How do you balance Panjab University's rich legacy with the need for modern reforms?

A: Panjab University has always been upgrading its infrastructure. We have a sophisticated analytical instrumentation facility, which was set up by DST (Department of Science & Technology). There are 15 Sophisticated Analytical Instrument Facilities (SAIF) centres in the country. Panjab University's SAIF centre is the best.

We analyse the maximum number of samples in a year. We have a large number of users who are from the industry. We have sophisticated state-of-the-art instruments in our instrumentation facility.

We also have the Centre for Industry Institute partnership programme, which collaborates with the industry. We have a Technology Enabling Centre, which collaborates with the industry. They try to find out the problems of the industry. In fact, the Technology Enabling Centre has created a database of the problems that the industry is facing. And then we apprise the academia of those problems so that academia can give solutions for the problems the industry is facing.

Similarly, academia has also produced some technologies. They have some patents. We bring that to the knowledge of the industry. So, if the industry is willing to commercialise them or adopt those technologies, then they are also encouraged to do that.

The Engineering Institute was set up in 2002. The Dental Institute was set up in 2006. Then we have centres that are in emerging areas in sciences, like the Centre for Nanoscience and Nanotechnology. We have the Institute of Forensic Science. We have the Centre for Medical Physics. We have the Centre for Nuclear Medicine.

For these centres, we collaborate with medical institutes like PGI and Fortis, where, for some part of the programme, students are given theory lectures on the campus. And for practical work, they are going to the hospitals to gain practical knowledge. In our courses, we have a provision for an internship. Also, students can go and spend six months in the industry.

The Centre for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship regularly organises one-week and two-week programmes for the industry. They organise programmes on cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, machine learning, printed circuit boards, and how they are fabricated, and in the areas of finance and accounting. We ensure that the students are well-equipped with the techniques that the industry is using.

Q: How is Panjab University aligning its curriculum with the National Education Policy 2020?

A: Panjab University started with the adoption of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in 2023. From the 2023-24 session, we adopted the National Education Policy on the campus.

We changed our curriculum of undergraduate programmes according to the requirements of the National Education Policy. Right now, our curriculum for undergraduate programmes has different verticals, like we have majors, minors, multidisciplinary courses, ability enhancement courses, skill enhancement courses, and value-added courses.

We have taken care of all the verticals suggested in the NEP. Panjab University has around 200 affiliated colleges. We have implemented the National Education Policy in our affiliated colleges from the session 20-24 onwards.

We have given multiple entries and multiple exits to our students. So, they can exit the programme with a certificate, diploma, three-year degree, or they can continue with the honours programme for four years. So, all these options are there.

From the 2026-27 session, we are going to introduce a new curriculum for the master's programme.

We will have a provision of two two-year master programmes from the 2026-27 session onwards. And from the 27-28 session, we will also introduce a year-long master's programme.

So, we have integrated the UG, PG, and PhD programmes according to the National Education Policy 2020.

Q: Do you agree that the education system in India is very theoretical compared to Western countries and less practical? And as a result, we fail to inculcate skills in our youth.

A: Actually, you know, this debate has been going on, has been there since I started my career, I would say, in the early 80s. There is a lag between what we teach in our curriculum and what the industry is doing. And academia has maintained that our job is to build a strong foundation for the students.

So, we are doing that. And the skill requirement, I would say, of industry is different for different industries.

But now in the curriculum, as I mentioned earlier, we have this facility of a six-month apprenticeship or internship where the student can go to a research lab, research organisation, or industry.

Q: Should we allow elections in universities?

A: In technical institutes in India, there is no politics. There are no student elections. But in a multidisciplinary university like Panjab University, I feel that it is divided into two islands. On one island is this set of students who are into activism and politics. On the other island are students who are focused on learning, acquiring skills, and also contributing to community engagement.

In Panjab University, there is a student election, there is an election for the teachers' association, there is an election for the staff association, and there is an election for the governing body also. So, there is an election at all levels.

Q: Recently, Panjab University witnessed protests. Your comment on that.

A: I told you that in Panjab University, there is an island where students remain students for almost, you know, most of their life. Panjab University has produced many politicians who were also involved in student politics, and later on, they became politicians at the regional or national level.

I told you that for our governing body, there is also an election. There are some seats that are for the graduates of Panjab University. We call it the graduate constituency. Fifteen members of the governing body come from the graduate constituency.

There are some students whose agenda is to be a member of the governing body of Panjab University. The students with that kind of outlook were involved in the agitation because they wanted the system of election, especially from the graduate constituency, to be restored.

The reforms that took place with respect to our Senate - in those reforms, the graduate constituency seats were reduced to zero. And so, these graduates who want to be members of the governing body were basically protesting against the reforms.

The government agreed to their demands and withdrew the notification. And the election schedule has been announced.

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Mini Krishnan
[illegible]

Education must lend meaning to life

Pay attention to the hearts and minds of children; nurture a moral vision about the role of the self in the family, society, nation, and world

Some time ago, a few high-school students were asked to name their greatest fear. The answers included "being scolded for what I did accidentally", "being rejected by friends", "I will fail", "losing my temper", and "disappointing my parents".

Had these things been discussed in class? Silence.

Children need to share their worries and doubts, talk about why they get angry or cannot control themselves. Though every adult knows that an emotionally stable child will be a more focused student, such is the tyranny of expectation that most teachers are too hard-worked and weary to tell their institution managements that a child's understanding of herself is as important as her grasp of academic subjects.

When universal education based on textbooks was introduced into an oral and traditional culture like ours, it had no room for an attendant mentoring of the development of a student's personality. No one thought children needed anything other than order, discipline, and "lessons". The more the student studied, the more distanced she became from her natural environment, community, and native culture. This plan has continued as the entire training and testing are concentrated on the material world between the child's fifth and 15th years.

The higher order of thinking skills, dare one say spiritual growth, a zone of intimacy impossible to describe but in need of discussion, has faded. Education has become a way of life to pass examinations. Over the past decade or so, as teenage suicide and child-against-child violence began to rise, a question has repeated itself: on the road to academic excellence, did we miss something? We know that we cannot reverse this system, but surely we can modify it with the active support of teachers and other stakeholders who are all concerned about the future of our children.

In a civilised society (and we congratulate ourselves endlessly about our heritage), each generation is expected to make society better and safer for the next one. Hence the tremendous societal role schools have in our present and future. Training in understanding the value of cooperative growth, empathy and managing feelings and differences has to start early in life. Many hours have been spent discussing how personal and social transformation is possible through a well-designed course in social and personal ethics. Hardly anything is said about the training to be given to teachers to make them agents of awakening.

Not all grim

Recently, I watched a video describing millennials and their socio-emotional disabilities. The chilling list of flaws included entitlement, self-obsession, narcissism, low tolerance, and inability to focus on anything for any length of time. Now this might well be true of some of them, but not all. Many youngsters everywhere are responding warmly to outreach messages for help. Any request sent out on behalf of students in distress or appeals for food or donations to animal shelters is almost immediately met with a flood of calls and assurances. Some of the respondents are school-goers. What does that tell us? Someone inspired them. Something other than their textbooks brought out the best in them. A routine counter to the idea that values can be taught is that they can only be imbibed ("We learnt from our parents"). But what if family members are too busy to spend time with children? Whom will children talk to and learn from? A policy to foster the idea and importance of the self in harmony with wider and wider circles can be implemented through schools to influence at least those children who get to attend school and will one day lead their communities and society; they will write and teach, build cities, patent new medicines and technologies; they will enact policies and laws. This is especially important when millions of Indian children below the age of 10 have no hope of an education.

Disadvantaged by illiteracy, they are vulnerable to all the negative forces around them. Doesn't that leave the rest of us with a duty to overcome our limited knowledge based on traditions and prejudices? The intense competition that contemporary life fosters has already left many youngsters with no inner resources to counter anxiety, fear, and rage.

Some young children are so lonely and edgy they take their own lives when they fail in entrance exams, do not get the kind of clothes they want or feel inadequate in English-language classes. Educating for peace seeks to nurture a moral vision about the role of the self in the family, society, nation, and world. A six-year-old cannot understand the term social justice. A 14-year-old can and must. A six-year-old can be told that he must not stone a pup for fun. A 15-year-old understands that leaves, birds, insects, people, and climate are all linked.

If we are to survive on an impoverished planet that cannot manage its food-stocks or famines, its water resources or forests, we must, as quickly as possible, sensitise children to understand that what affects one group in one part of the world will eventually affect everyone everywhere else. We have already learnt how to make children healthier but we have paid less attention to their hearts and minds. Surely the goal of education is to equip people to lead meaningful lives and not just to make a living.

H/m?

STATESMAN (P-8), 25 JANUARY 2026

Thinking and AI

Thinking in the age of AI is not about competing with machines but about redefining what it means to be human. It calls for slowing down in a fast world, asking questions in an age of answers, and exercising judgment in a culture of automation. The future will belong not to those who think faster than machines, but to those who think more wisely, ethically, and imaginatively alongside them. AI may change how we think, but it need not change why we think. As long as humans continue to seek meaning, justice, and understanding, thinking will remain a distinctly human endeavour - one that no algorithm can replace

The age of artificial intelligence is not merely transforming machines; it is reshaping the very nature of human thinking. From search engines that complete our sentences to algorithms that recommend what we read, watch, and buy, AI has quietly become an invisible companion to everyday cognition. While earlier technologies extended human physical capacities, AI extends - and in some cases replaces - mental processes such as memory, pattern recognition, and decision making. This profound shift raises an urgent question: what does it mean to think in an age where machines also "think"?

Human thinking has traditionally been understood as an active, effortful process involving reasoning, imagination, judgment, and reflection. It is shaped by experience, culture, emotion, and ethical awareness. Artificial intelligence, by contrast, operates through data, algorithms, and statistical correlations. It does not think in the human sense; it computes. Yet because AI systems increasingly perform tasks once considered the exclusive domain of human intelligence - writing, diagnosing, predicting, even creating art - the boundary between human and machine cognition appears to blur.

One of the most immediate impacts of AI is on memory and knowledge. Search engines and digital assistants have become external repositories of information, reducing the need to memorise facts. This phenomenon, sometimes called "cognitive offloading," allows humans to focus on higher order thinking. However, it also risks weakening deep understanding. When information is instantly available, the temptation is to skim rather than reflect, to retrieve rather than internalise. Thinking becomes fragmented, driven by speed rather than depth.

Attention, a cornerstone of meaningful thought, is also under strain. AI driven platforms are designed to maximise engagement by analysing user behaviour and optimising content delivery. Notifications, recommendations, and personalised feeds continuously compete for attention, encouraging rapid consumption instead of sustained contemplation. In such an environment, thinking risks becoming reactive rather than reflective. The capacity for silence, boredom, and slow thought - conditions essential for creativity and critical insight - is steadily eroded.

AI also influences how we make decisions. Recommendation systems suggest routes, movies, news articles, job candidates, and even romantic partners. While these systems can improve efficiency, they subtly shape preferences and choices. Over time, individuals may begin to trust algorithmic judgment more than their own intuition or reasoning. This "automation bias" can dull critical thinking, making humans passive recipients of machine generated suggestions rather than active decision makers.

At the same time, AI challenges long held assumptions about intelligence itself. If a machine can write poetry or solve complex problems, what distinguishes human thinking? The answer lies not in speed or accuracy but in meaning, values, and consciousness. Human thinking is interpretive and ethical; it asks not only "how" but "why." It is capable of doubt, empathy, moral responsibility, and self reflection - dimensions that AI, however sophisticated, does not possess. Recognising this distinction is crucial to preserving human agency in an AI dominated world.

Education is one of the key arenas where the future of thinking is being negotiated. AI powered tools can personalise learning, automate assessment, and provide instant feedback. Used wisely, they can free teachers and students to focus on conceptual understanding and creative inquiry. Used uncritically, they risk reducing learning to optimisation and performance metrics. When students rely on AI to generate answers, essays, or solutions, the danger is not plagiarism alone but the gradual outsourcing of thinking itself.

RUDRASHIS DATTA

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The workplace, too, reflects this transformation. As AI automates routine cognitive tasks, human thinking is expected to shift toward problem-solving, adaptability, and ethical judgment. Yet this transition is not automatic. Without conscious effort, workers may find their roles reduced to monitoring and complying with algorithmic systems. Thinking, in such contexts, becomes constrained by predefined parameters set by machines, limiting innovation and autonomy.

There are also deeper philosophical implications. Thinking has always been linked to identity. The ability to reason, imagine, and choose is central to how humans understand themselves as moral and social beings. When AI mirrors human like outputs, there is a risk of overestimating machine intelligence and underestimating human uniqueness. This can lead to a subtle erosion of confidence in human judgment, fostering a culture where efficiency is valued over wisdom.

Yet the age of AI does not doom human thinking; it demands its renewal. AI can serve as a powerful cognitive partner rather than a substitute. By handling repetitive and data intensive tasks, AI can create space for humans to engage in deeper reflection, creativity, and ethical deliberation. The challenge lies in cultivating a conscious relationship with technology - one that enhances rather than diminishes our intellectual capacities.

Critical thinking becomes more important, not less, in an AI driven world. The ability to question sources, detect bias, understand limitations, and evaluate consequences is essential when interacting with algorithmic systems. AI systems are trained on data that reflect human prejudices and structural inequalities. Without critical scrutiny, these biases can be amplified and legitimised. Thinking, therefore, must include an awareness of how AI works and whose interests it serves.

Ethical thinking is equally vital. Decisions about data use, surveillance, automation, and algorithmic governance cannot be left solely to engineers or corporations. They require public reasoning, moral debate, and democratic participation. Thinking in the age of AI must extend beyond individual cognition to collective reflection on values, justice, and human dignity.

In the Indian context, these questions acquire particular urgency. With rapid digitalisation, large-scale data collection, and widespread adoption of AI driven services, the country stands at a crossroads. AI holds immense promise for healthcare, education, governance, and development. At the same time, it raises concerns about privacy, inequality, and exclusion. Cultivating a culture of thoughtful engagement with AI - rather than passive consumption - is essential for ensuring that technology serves social well being.

Ultimately, thinking in the age of AI is not about competing with machines but about redefining what it means to be human. It calls for slowing down in a fast world, asking questions in an age of answers, and exercising judgment in a culture of automation. The future will belong not to those who thin faster than machines, but to those wh think more wisely, ethically, and imaginativel alongside them. AI may change how w think, but it need not change why we think As long as humans continue to seek meanin justice, and understanding, thinking w remain a distinctly human endeavour - on that no algorithm can replace.

TELEGRAPH (P-12), 25 JANUARY 2026

PAGE PERFORMANCE

It is the season of book fairs and litfests. No less than eight major book fairs and 10 literary festivals take place across India in the month of January. The largest-visited book fair in the country, indeed all of Asia — the International Kolkata Book Fair — opened in the city this week and is expecting to draw well over two million people. But are visitors to these events readers in the conventional sense? The question is not irrelevant. At a time and in a global culture where attention is currency, reading is increasingly acquiring a performative edge and is being used to signal intellectual heft, especially on social media. The book, thus, is no longer just something that is to be read: it has become something to be displayed, flaunted, thereby functioning as a lifestyle prop and signal for public consumption on social media. There is hard evidence to suggest the rise of what is now called 'performative reading'. For instance, data from NielsenIQ BookData show that while the sale of physical books has increased in countries like the United States of America, the United Kingdom and even in India, the number of people who read for pleasure has dropped, as has the amount of time spent on reading. What is more, the rise in book sales is often driven by prominent authors or by those who trend on social media.

> In this season of book fairs and litfests, is reading being reduced to performance?

Social media — that usual suspect — has played a disproportionate role in transforming reading from pleasure to performance. 'Bookstagramming' — the ritual of reading out passages from books or reviewing books online — has, tellingly, become a force in book marketing: designers these days make book covers bolder and colourful, packing in more information for this very tribe. But there is a cultural signalling as well. An image or a post of a person surrounded by a neat pile of books and a steaming mug, or posing before a bookshelf, suggests cerebral depth and an intellectual life. None cares to find out if these books are actually read by this supposed lover of a life of ideas.

However, such is the dominance of performative reading that it often creates false binaries. The café reader is treated with suspicion, for instance, because it is assumed that his choice of reading in public is a strategic, as opposed to being an organic, act. Even those reading on public transport — a practice that predates social media rituals — can no longer evade similar scrutiny. Moreover, not everything about the act of reading online ought to be dismissed. After all, in the modern, fragmented, disjointed world, online reading groups can offer an effective substitute for the diminishing culture of informal literary conversations and book clubs. Most important, books are not inert creatures; they cast a spell. So even the performative reader has the hope of transitioning into a serious one at some point in time. Reading, whether private or social, is immensely valuable as long as a book is being read and not skimmed through for the sake of appearance.

HINDU (P-7), 26 JANUARY 2026

The present within our past

On India's 76th Republic Day, a look at how contemporary history makes its way into classrooms

Meghaa Gupta

"What is history?" I asked a group of eighth graders.

"Things that happened in the past," one volunteered.

"And what are these things?" I probed.

"Empires", "Kings", "Wars", "Freedom Struggle"...

The answers poured in. Answers I have heard in schools across the country while travelling as an author of a series of history books on Independent India. So, I ventured, "What about events that happened after Independence? Are they part of history too?" Some students nodded. Others looked unsure.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Moment of change

"For several decades, events after 1947 were considered too close to be included in school textbooks," says educationist Arvind Sardana, a member of the Social Science group at Eklavya, an NGO that develops and field tests innovative educational programmes. "This changed significantly in the 1980s through the Eklavya experiments and then in the 2000s through some state government initiatives."

A key shift came with the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, which pushed for learning that was connected to the home and the community life of a child. Anita Rampal, who was closely involved with the NCF and was Chairperson of the Primary Textbook Teams, says, "It was a watershed because this was at the national level and so it had a different legitimacy. A lot of people who may have been engaging [with contemporary issues] at different places, in different times and different scales came together... Anything you're doing... Physics or Social Studies, unless a student can relate with it, interrogate it, try to observe and see connections with her experiences, it's not going to make sense. A learner is not going to be able to construct her knowledge, which is important to develop an understanding, and does not happen only by reading or repeating what information may be thrown at you."

However, Rampal notes that contemporary issues within the social and cultural context of learners are currently being consciously kept aside, especially those considered 'taboo', such as caste, gender, poverty or religious minorities. Even within the Social Sciences (where they do appear), there are major erasures and distortions in the syllabi and textbooks.

A scattered narrative

Setu Rehan – who heads the Social Science Department at Mind Tree School at Panjokhra, Ambala, Punjab – finds that discourses on contemporary history are spread across so many different subjects that they don't register as a distinctive theme. Events like the Partition and the Non-Aligned Movement, for example, fall into History. In Civics, students study the making of the Constitution, elections and so on, while events like the Green and Milk Revolutions appear in Geography as well as Economics. Moreover, such topics don't usually carry much weight in examinations, which further limits the attention given to them.

Pushpalata Pooranan – director of the Pushpalata Schools in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu – adds that even though the syllabus includes several contemporary themes, "there is very little continuity or context-setting. Instead, students encounter stand-alone topics, which don't facilitate deeper understanding."

A vital discourse

In practice, meaningful engagement with contemporary history depends largely on the initiative of individual schools and teachers. Pooranan considers such engagement essential and actively encourages devoting time and resources to it. This includes designing lessons in ways that contextualise the past with the present, recommending supplementary readers, encouraging newspaper reading, and having at least one period every week for reading and discussions.

A growing challenge confronting educators is the sheer volume of information on contemporary history available to students online, where valuable scholarship competes with a flood of skewed and fake narratives. In such a situation, it has become even more important for schools to engage with this history.

Initiatives such as the History for Children project at the Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata, alongside a growing body of postcolonial non-fiction for children, attempt to address this challenge by offering supplementary teaching resources.

Historians Debarati Bagchi and Anwesha Sengupta, who worked on the History for Children project, describe their goal as creating space for questioning and helping children "doubt WhatsApp University knowledge and develop historical consciousness."

H/7

Bigger schools, better futures

Ashish Dhawan

Founder-CEO,
The Convergence
Foundation

Bikkrama Daulet Singh

Operating Partner,
The Convergence
Foundation

A recent visit to China offered a striking view of what scale and holistic school design can achieve. A Class 1-9 school there serves around 1,200 students, with K-12 schools averaging 2,800 students. This is in stark contrast with India, where an average government K-8 school has around 150 students. Although three times the size of India, China has only one-third the number of schools. While India has succeeded in ensuring access at the elementary level, China has used scale to strengthen quality. Its schools have specialised subject teachers, support staff, viable vocational laboratories, and counselling, sports, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) labs, and co-curriculars – the kind of holistic learning environment that the National Education Policy, 2020, envisions.

India has made enormous strides in enrolment and infrastructure, but the school network remains fragmented. There are about 5.6 lakh schools nationally, which enrol less than 50 students each. Over 1 lakh single-teacher schools cover 33 lakh students, making multi-grade teaching a necessity (UDISE 24-25). At secondary levels, the need for subject expertise and lab infrastructure becomes even more critical. Around 40% of government secondary schools have fewer than 100 students enrolled (across Classes 9-12), making such provision difficult. Today, only 19% of schools have functional ICT labs, 51% have integrated science labs; about 10% offer higher secondary classes; and just 6% provide vocational education (UDISE 24-25).

Experiments with schools

These gaps highlight the next phase of India's education reform: building school systems that address not only access, but also the quality of education. Several States have already experimented with different models of this. Rajasthan has established one upgraded, well-resourced government school in every Gram Panchayat, called Adarsh Schools. Over the past decade, the State has upgraded thousands of schools in a phased manner – improving infrastructure, staff deployment, and secondary-grade offerings. In Uttar Pradesh, Model Composite Schools (Class 1-12) have been approved in every district; these will have tech-based learning, including smart classrooms and WiFi. Madhya Pradesh has consolidated 36,000 under-enrolled schools under the NITI Aayog's SATH-E programme to create larger campuses with better facilities. In 2023, the Chief Minister announced the rollout of one 'CM RISE' school (now Maharishi Sandipani Schools) for every 25-30 villages to improve learning. Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Gujarat are also moving in this direction.

Composite and consolidated schools are not about efficiency alone; their core purpose is to create real learning environments, with one teacher per class and adequate subject specialists to support every child. Equity must remain paramount. This is enabled through decentralised decision-making, and supported by transport facilities so that no child loses access. Equally essential is thoughtful change management: engaging teachers, parents, and communities early to build consensus and ensure smooth, trusted transitions towards larger, integrated schools.

Drawing on these lessons, two clear directional goals can guide India's progress towards universal, high-quality school education by 2035. The first is to have one K-8 school in every Gram Panchayat. By 2035, India should transition towards K-8 integrated schools (elementary and middle) as the default elementary school model. If each K-8 school serves around 300 students, these campuses could collectively educate close to 8.1 crore children. This shift could allow each school to reach the minimum enrolment threshold required for one teacher per class, and better facilities, leading to a better learning environment. Second, only 87% of students transition from middle to secondary school, and this falls to around 75% from secondary to higher secondary. Too often, secondary education is delivered through fragmented, under-resourced campuses with limited subject teachers, weak lab infrastructure, and few pathways beyond board examinations. What India needs at scale are composite secondary schools.

By 2035, India is projected to have nearly 8 crore students in Classes 9-12. This scale creates the possibility of large, well-resourced secondary schools with the capacity to offer real-world, application-based learning, career guidance, subject specialist teachers and multiple academic and vocational pathways. Supported by transport facilities, such schools ensure that distance does not become a barrier to continuing education and allow secondary schooling to move beyond exam preparation.

Achieving these goals

India needs State-specific road maps that lay out how each State will move towards larger, well-resourced schools, grounded in local realities of population density, geography and existing school networks. States can consider the following levers while designing these road maps. The first is thoughtful teacher deployment so that there is one teacher per class and subject specialists. The second is localised planning and decentralised decision making. The third is coming up with transport solutions for students. States will need a mix of transport models to ensure that students can reach these schools. The fourth is providing funding for composite schools. Samagra Shiksha, supported by State funds and coordinated with other schemes, can finance these upgrades.

H/n

> The road to universal, high-quality school education runs through integrated schools

Time to deliver on promise of equality

HT catches up with Shailaja Paik, recipient of the 2024 MacArthur Fellowship, to explore her views on education, caste politics and her hope for the future of the republic

[illegible]

A [illegible]

[illegible]

Today, Shailaja Paik [illegible]

[illegible]

The Charles Phelps Taft Distinguished Research Professor of History at the University of Cincinnati, Paik was named last year as one of the recipients of the 2024 MacArthur Fellowship, a no-strings-attached $800,000 "genius grant" widely considered one of the toughest and most prestigious awards in academia. Over the course of a day, HT caught up with the [illegible] academic to explore her landmark work on caste, gender and sexuality through the lives of Dalit women, her views on contemporary debates in education and caste politics, and her hope for the future of the republic.

Education a force multiplier

[illegible]

Questions of identity

[illegible]

Not a homogeneous identity

[illegible]

Protecting yourself and thinking of yourself at all times without thinking of humanity and how it's been deprived of basic rights and human rights. That's vulgar to me.

[illegible]

[illegible]

Archive of oral histories

[illegible]

Everyone wants to be on the caste train and the Ambedkar train. But we need more than just symbolic gestures. We have to think about it with criticality. Work on ethics. Are you following his work, his teachings?

[illegible]

Privileged, yet victims

[illegible]

[illegible]

English versus vernacular?

[illegible]

"For me, English opened up a world for me, helped me gain higher education. Things were different because I knew English, I was confident."

Yet, she recognises the complexity. During her research, she worked mainly with Marathi sources from the 19th and 20th centuries, gaining a window into the Marathi world.

"When we study languages, there has to be balance [illegible] What is language doing? How are we treating it? These are questions we must ask."

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

"These people are also human, deserving a life of dignity and respect," she underlined, speaking of those relegated to the bottom of the caste hierarchy. "But they have not been really treated like that. It is the job of the republic to change that."

The Delhi government has announced that double-shift schools under its jurisdiction will be converted to single-shift ones in a phased manner. In these schools, girls study in the morning and boys in the evening, allowing them to work to support their families. *The Indian Express* speaks to students, teachers and experts on the pros and cons of the move

Tale of two classrooms

[illegible] leave for home in the afternoon; boys arrive for classes at the Northwest Delhi school. [illegible]

Sophia Mathew &
[illegible]
New Delhi, [illegible]

[illegible]

Morning vs afternoon

[illegible]

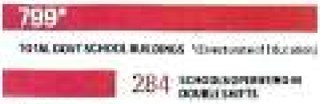
Cost of evening shifts

[illegible]

Expert speak

[illegible]

HOW THE SHIFT SYSTEM HAS FARED



SHIFT-WISE SCHOOL PASS PERCENTAGE (CLASS XII RESULT)

YEAR	MORNING	EVENING
[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]
[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]

[illegible]

A PLAN IN THE WORKS FOR [illegible] YEARS

[illegible]

MILLENNIUM POST (P-11), 26 JANUARY 2026

TALKING SHOP

Fading Alma Mater

India once crowned minds, its education system rivalling global-bests. Today, the once-empire of learning limps in prestige, rich in numbers but thin on heft

RAJEEV NARAYAN

THE WRITER IS A VETERAN JOURNALIST AND COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST

"Any country that neglects education undermines not only its economic future but the very foundations of its democracy."
— Amartya Sen

There is one space where India's glory can now be found only in the ancient. Long before colonialism reshaped the subcontinent, India's intellectual horizons were among the brightest on Earth. In those times, Takshashila and Nalanda were not quaint relics but bustling hubs where medicine, philosophy, mathematics and astronomy were taught with zeal and depth, drawing thousands from around the world. These were not narrow corridors of rote learning but crucibles of inquiry, debate and cultural exchange; the earliest embodiments of what the modern world would call "universities".

Education in India began as a civilizational instinct – open, contested, rigorous – long before today's modern nations learnt to manufacture universities. Such an inheritance should have anchored the republic. Instead, it serves only as a jarring reminder of how India has slipped. The regression is not just abstract. Across India, government schools (the first rung of learning for millions) are being shut down or merged out of existence, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. Classrooms are disappearing even as political speeches invoke demographic dividends and knowledge economies. A nation that closes its schools while celebrating its youth is not confused; it is in complete denial.

Yielding to Prejudice

More disturbingly, education is not only being neglected, it is increasingly being distorted. Recently, the Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Narayana Medical College lost recognition for reasons that had little to do with academics and everything to do with ideology. When institutions become collateral damage in cultural or political battles, the signal is unmistakable. Reason is yielding ground to prejudice and merit subordinated to impulse. This is not an isolated lapse, but part of a broader unravelling. Quite sadly, education is being stripped of autonomy, seriousness and moral authority. What is eroding is not just institutional quality, but the very idea of learning as a neutral and rational pillar of nation-building.

The consequences of this erosion are visible. According to the QS World University Rankings 2026, India does not have a single varsity in the Global Top 100. Not one. Even though it is the world's most populous nation, among the largest economies and home to one of the largest higher education systems on the planet.

The highest ranked Indian institution, IIT Delhi, stands at 123, followed by IIT Bombay and IIT Madras outside the top 150. More than 50 Indian universities appear in the rankings, giving India one of the largest national representations globally. Yet, none cross the threshold that signals genuine academic power. Numbers have grown. Standing has not. This absence is not symbolic. It is structural. It tells a story of universities that teach but do not research, that expand but do not deepen, that produce degrees without imparting knowledge. Rankings may be dismissed as 'West-centric', but they expose what students, employers and academics know. That India's education system has lost its edge.

We Used to Know Better

The decline is particularly galling because India once recognised education as 'strategic'. Post-1947, the establishment of IITs, IIMs and institutions like the Indian Institute of Science was not accidental. It reflected a realisation that a young and poor nation could not afford intellectual mediocrity. For decades, these institutions of learning delivered. Indian engineers, scientists and managers became global-bests. Until the 1980s and 1990s, becoming a doctor or an engineer was not merely a personal ambition, it was a national aspiration. Studying abroad was a choice of privilege, not a default escape.

Today, that confidence has evaporated. Middle-class families, once proud of Indian universities, now exhaust savings to send children overseas. This is no longer for prestige, but for 'degree credibility'. This exodus is the most damning referendum on India's education system. Nations do not lose faith in their universities overnight; they lose it when decline becomes habitual.

A reason for this slide is simple yet brutal: chronic underinvestment. India spends under 1 per cent of its GDP on R&D, a fraction of what top knowledge economies commit. The result is predictable. We have primary schools with no teachers, underfunded labs, skeletal doctoral programmes, toothless post-doctoral ecosystems and scant research impact. No education system can aspire to be world-class on aspiration alone. Research needs time, money, freedom of learning and institutional patience. Today, these are in short supply. Or no supply. Faculty shortage is endemic. Scores of colleges function with temporary or underqualified teachers, leaving little room for scholarship or innovation.

In India, display has replaced depth. Institutions of learning may be growing, enrolments rising and degrees multiplying, but the academic core is hollowing out. We may have built one of the world's largest higher-education systems, but we have allowed it to become the weakest in research intensity.

A Veritable (Fish)Market

As the state retreats, the private sector has surged. But these are hardly custodians of excellence, made up mostly of hard-nosed profiteers. Private colleges have proliferated in professional education, selling the promise of world-class learning at premium prices. In reality, many operate as credentials factories, optimised for margins rather than minds. Standards are diluted to keep passing rates high. Research is minimal or cosmetic, faculty overworked and underpaid. Regulation oscillates between neglect and arbitrary intervention, raising no bars and protecting no standards.

If you think of me as anti-private education, think again. In a country of India's scale, private colleges are inevitable and necessary. But when profit eclipses pedagogy and oversight is weak, education degenerates into a transaction, not a transformative process. This is being exacerbated by public institutions, especially schools and colleges serving poorer regions, being allowed (systematically forced?) to shut down. The result... The state withdraws. Market advances. Inequality deepens.

There is enough spiel on reform, but it only makes for guttural rhetoric. The National Education Policy 2020 promised renewal. Multidisciplinary learning, research focus, institutional autonomy and global integration were articulated. It was a thoughtful blueprint... on paper. In practice, execution has been hesitant and stuttering. Funding commitments have not matched ambition. Structural reforms remain delayed. Autonomy is promised but rarely trusted. Varsities remain entangled in bureaucratic and political oversight, undermining independence. Policy sans resolve leads to impotence. And neither education nor procreation can be managed on announcements alone.

What makes things perilous is the creeping intrusion of ideology into education. When schools are closed with a casual shrug, when universities are penalised for perceived identities rather than proven failures, and when intellectual spaces are coloured by political leanings, education stops being a national unifier. It becomes just another battleground.

No Mystery, No Option

No nation serious about its future can afford to undermine its education system and expect to rise. Universities are not ornamental or figurines. They are engines of thought. Schools are not expendable assets. They are foundations of citizenship. When these pillars weaken, the tremors are felt beyond classrooms. The path forward is not a mystery, and it leaves India with no option. Public investment in education and research must rise decisively, not incrementally or in bits and spurts. Education requires autonomy paired with accountability. Faculty recruitment must prioritise excellence over expedience. Research funding must reward originality and long-term inquiry.

End of day, the ultra-critical aspect. Education needs to be insulated from ideological caprice. Merit, inquiry and reason must be restored as non-negotiable and the only acceptable principles.

From Nalanda to IITs, India has known intellectual ambition. That tells us that the crisis we face today is not of capacity but of will, because the fall from grace is complete. Whether India chooses to climb back or continue its slide into educational irrelevance will determine not just its rankings, but its future as a nation. The choice is an easy one. Provided that we want the next generation to speak knowledge.

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Views expressed are personal

We have primary schools with no teachers, under-funded labs, skeletal doctoral programmes, toothless post-doctoral ecosystems and scant research impact. No education system can aspire to be world-class on aspiration alone

Whether we choose to climb or continue our slide into educational irrelevance will determine not just India's rankings, but its future as a nation. The choice is easy, provided we want the next generation to speak knowledge

TRIBUNE, (P-8), 26 JANUARY 2026

STEM roll call

Give women more role in careers, too

INDIA's claim to global leadership in female STEM enrolment is a welcome achievement in a landscape usually dominated by stories of gender gaps. With women accounting for about 43 per cent of STEM enrolments, well above the global average, the country has shown that policy interventions and social change can shift entrenched patterns. Equally important are changing aspirations — STEM degrees are increasingly seen by families as pathways to economic security and social mobility for daughters. The growth of women at postgraduate and doctoral levels further signals that academic barriers are slowly eroding.

However, enrolment numbers tell only half the story. The transition from education to employment remains a leaky pipeline. Women are still under-represented in core engineering roles, research leadership and technology decision-making. Career interruptions due to caregiving responsibilities, unsafe or inflexible workplaces and persistent gender bias push many qualified women out of the STEM workforce. The result is a mismatch between educational success and economic participation. There is also unevenness beneath the national average. Women are more concentrated in life sciences and medicine, while fields such as mechanical engineering, core technology and advanced manufacturing remain male-dominated. Regional disparities further complicate the picture, with some states lagging far behind in encouraging girls to pursue science beyond school.

The next phase must focus on retention and progression: flexible work policies, re-entry programmes after career breaks, safe campuses and workplaces, mentorship and transparent promotion pathways. Without these, high enrolment risks becoming a statistical comfort rather than a transformative force. The country has shown it can open the classroom door. The real test now is whether it can keep that door open all the way to the laboratory, the boardroom and the innovation economy.

DECCAN HERALD (P-12), 27 JANUARY 2026

The power of higher-order questioning in classrooms

Over time, students come to appreciate this method of learning, as it helps them deepen their knowledge, writes Alvina Clara

Higher-order questioning (HOQ) is a powerful pedagogical tool that moves students beyond rote recall into analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. As a teaching tool, HOQ engages learners, anchors understanding in real-world contexts, and cultivates skills they will need long after school.

In today's world, where information is abundant, the ability to think critically is more essential than ever. Higher-order Questioning serves as a powerful tool to compel learners to think more deeply, moving beyond mere reading or recall of facts, to analysis and evaluation of information. This, in turn, helps them arrive at proper solutions and take the right decisions.

In any learning environment, plainly memorising and parroting what is learnt on paper isn't enough. One needs to thoroughly understand the subject matter and think beyond. While a few learners are naturally gifted and can instantly connect concepts to real-world situations, the majority need teacher guidance to bridge the gap between theory and practice. This is where higher-order questioning and scaffolded tasks come into play.

Higher-order questions (HOQs) are questions that demand more than memorisation or simple recall of text. They demand higher cognitive effort, nudging students to think critically, analyse relationships between elements, and assimilate information from varied sources. HOQ prompts students to apply what they know, unleash ideas, compare concepts, question assumptions, predict outcomes, justify their reasoning with evidence, and make informed judgments. This helps learners make reasoned judgments backed by evidence. Examples include:

- How can you relate and connect these two concepts and explain the equation that connects them?
- What would happen if a key variable were changed in this scenario?
- Why is this solution effective, and what evidence supports your reasoning?

Shaping critical thinkers

By design, HOQ coaxes students to go beyond what is explicitly stated and to construct meaning from connections, implications, and applications. Research suggests that when teachers use a mix of higher-order questions, they help stimulate flexible, open thinking beyond routine thinking.

Using the HOT questions—What, How, What If, and Why—sparks reciprocal dialogue and reduces teacher talk, moving learning towards practical understanding and application of concepts. It helps students explore how a concept works in real scenarios and how they would respond in varied situations, bridging the gap between theory and real-life practice. With this framework supporting an inquiry-based, reasoning approach, educators can cultivate critical thinkers equipped to navigate the complexities of modern life.

Higher-order questioning in academics

Initially, posing many questions can be uncomfortable for students, but over time, they come to appreciate this method of learning, as it helps them deepen their knowledge and connect with the material being presented. When implementing higher-order questioning in the classroom, educators must use open-ended, provocative, and divergent questions to stimulate deeper understanding and engagement.

Teachers should lead students through the process of connecting one concept to another and arranging key elements and their connections into a hierarchy. Incorporate HOQ questions into lesson plans and Project-Based Learning initiatives to foster an environment where learners use prior knowledge and real-life experiences to develop insights and assumptions. Here are simple ways teachers can incorporate HOQs in daily lesson plans and delivery.

- Incorporate a conducive classroom environment — one where students are comfortable pondering, thinking, and guessing. Resolving the mystery, finding the missing connection or diving into the future are some ways to cultivate critical thinking every day.
- Incorporate "what if" questions into every lesson. Flip concepts on their heads, pose twisted questions or scenarios that push students to apply what they know to new situations, and ask them to map out outcomes, trade-offs, interconnections and consequences.
- Tie learning to life, people, and places. Connect conceptual learning with personal stories and local happenings. Questions like, "How does this connect to something you've seen or cared about?" make learning meaningful and personal. A specific strategy is to create a conceptual map or graphic organiser to outline the concept, its critical features, and its relationships with other elements.
- Bloom's Taxonomy model helps to remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate, create and shape learning goals across levels. Use higher-order prompts—compare, critique, design, and justify — to move students beyond recall toward deeper insight. Align activities and assessments with each level to nurture progression from foundational knowledge to creative, evidence-based output.
- Kick off projects with high energy. Start a project by asking something provocative questions like "How could we redesign this space to save energy? What will change if we change the adaptive features of this animal?" This will arouse students to test ideas and assess possibilities, making learning feel real and interesting.
- Encourage creative, wild answers — brainstorm with questions to generate many possible answers. Invite wild, unexpected ideas, and say, "What are all the possible paths/solutions we could take?" This encourages exploration beyond their imagination and creativity.
- Sprinkle reflective moments at key points. After an activity, ask kids to unpack their thinking: "What surprised you? What would you try differently next time?" Encourage evidence-based thinking and honest self-assessment.
- Allow pauses between questions. Allow time for "creative pauses" after posing questions to give students time to think and prevent them from raising their hands before they organise their thoughts.
- Build small inquiry teams with rotating roles. Create small learning circles (groups of 3-4 students) within the classroom. Assign roles like facilitator, questioner, and summariser. The questioner leads with big, higher-order prompts, while peers build on ideas together.
- Close with synthesis and key takeaways. End the lesson with tasks that blend and connect to real life. Ask, "How do these pieces fit together, and what new understanding do you take away?" This helps students transfer learning with key takeaways.
- Search for and use meaningful apps and tools that you can use to cultivate critical thinking.

When you create an environment where students have time to ponder and reflect on questions, it encourages them to think more creatively and more critically. And that's the kind of learning atmosphere that brings students to the highest levels of learning, attainment and progress in academic environments.

(The author writes on education)

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DECCAN HERALD (P-12), 27 JANUARY 2026

When students think with machines, what should a faculty do?

SAHANA PRASAD

"I have retired using the chalk and blackboard," I reflected as the time came to an end. The chalkboard has been replaced by the smartboard, and the chalk by the stylus. At first glance, this appears to be a simple technological upgrade. But beneath this visible shift lies a deeper transformation — one that challenges not just our tools, but our identity as educators.

We were once educators in the traditional sense, custodians of content and authority in the classroom. Over time, we became facilitators, guiding discussion rather than delivering monologues. Today, we stand at a crossroads. Our roles have undergone a quiet but complete shift. Faculty are no longer preoccupied with what to teach, but with how to evaluate the output of a young mind working alongside a machine.

Earlier, mistakes, incorrect assumptions, wrong methodology, and flawed hypotheses would be corrected, keeping in mind that a human brain is at work. Now, can we still accept students' work with the same neutrality? When an assignment is shaped — partially or substantially — by artificial intelligence, what exactly are we assessing? The final answer? The prompt engineering? Or the student's judgment in selecting, modifying, or rejecting the machine's output?

In this situation, the educator's role shifts from correcting errors to diagnosing thinking. For instance, when a student submits a perfectly structured answer but struggles to explain why a particular approach was chosen, the gap becomes visible. The issue is no longer correctness, but ownership of thought.

As Dr T Hongray, Dean of Student Affairs, R V University, succinctly puts it, the correct way for students to use AI is not as a substitute for thinking, but as a scaffold for it. He often reminds students that AI should help them build on what they already have — to corroborate or substantiate their ideas and gain clarity. He encourages students to follow up by prompting AI tools for references and citations wherever possible.

What AI should never be used for, he cautions, is creating or building something entirely new from scratch. It was never designed for original idea generation and, when pushed beyond its limits, it merely hallucinates. At its core, AI remains a brute-force pattern recognition machine operating at scale, constrained by the data on which it has been trained.

Echoing a complementary perspective, Dr Deepthi Das, Professor and Associate Dean, School of Sciences, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), argues that teachers must view students' use of AI as an opportunity to enhance learning rather than as a threat. Students, she emphasises, should be guided to use AI tools to understand concepts, clarify doubts, and expand their knowledge — not to copy answers.

At some universities, students are trained in the use of various AI tools alongside the ethics of responsible usage, ensuring they recognise both the benefits and the limitations of these technologies. As faculty, we deliberately design assessments to demand genuine thinking and creativity so that students engage meaningfully with the subject. After all, AI itself is a creation of human intelligence — intended to support us, not replace us.

Offering a more philosophical lens, Arun Vikram, a senior IT professional, observes that the rise of AI reopens an old question rooted in Darwin's theory of use and disuse. If certain cognitive skills are no longer exercised because machines perform them faster and more efficiently, do those skills weaken over time?

He suggests that intelligence in the age of AI may be measured less by the ability to generate answers and more by the ability to recognise when something is wrong. If a student or user can determine whether an output is biased, misleading, or contextually inappropriate, then that person is a perfect fit for the AI. Let's not debate whether AI should be accepted; it is too late for that. But as educators, we have to ensure that the core values of education, namely cultivating curiosity, responsibility, and sound judgment, are not compromised by the usage of AI.

In redefining how we assess learning, we may also be redefining what it means to think — together, with machines.

(The author is an academic.)

MILLENNIUM POST (P-7), 27 JANUARY 2026

DIGITAL PEDAGOGY

Teaching in the AI Age

As India embraces AI in education, the real challenge is not adoption, but designing systems rooted in scale, diversity and classroom reality

VINEET NAYAR

THE WRITER IS THE FORMER CEO OF HCL TECHNOLOGIES, FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN OF SAMPARK FOUNDATION

India has been here before.

When the country decided to build Aadhaar, scepticism was widespread. No nation had attempted identity on such a scale, across such diversity, and under such uneven infrastructure. The safer option would have been to copy smaller, proven global systems.

India chose a harder path.

What made Aadhaar transformative was not just its design, but its sustained application over time—accelerated further through the Digital India initiatives. It was imagined from first principles and then patiently embedded into real use cases, at scale, under real constraints. That decision reshaped public service delivery in ways few had anticipated.

India now stands at a similar inflexion point with artificial intelligence in education.

The question before us is not whether AI will enter classrooms. It already has. The more important question is whether India will use AI merely to digitise existing practices, or whether it will once again design from first principles, rooted in its own realities of scale, diversity and aspiration.

Moving Beyond Catching Up

Much of the global conversation on AI in education is shaped by systems very different from India's: smaller classrooms, uniform learner profiles, abundant resources, and stable infrastructure. These perspectives are valuable, but they are not universal.

India's opportunity is not to copy someone else's model. It is to build approaches native to its own context. When AI is approached as a replication exercise, it risks becoming cosmetic. When it is approached as a problem-solving tool, it can unlock structural change.

AI is not just another technology layer. It is a force multiplier. But force multipliers deliver value only when intent is clear, innovation is central, and use cases are grounded in classroom reality.

India's true AI legacy in education will be measured not by technology, but by the children and teachers it empowers at scale

Scale as a Strategic Advantage

India's education system is often described as too large to fix. That framing misses the point.

Scale, when paired with coherence, can become a strength—as India's IT industry demonstrated over the last three decades. India educates children across languages, geographies, and learning levels that often coexist within the same classroom. This complexity is usually seen as a constraint. It is also a powerful design opportunity.

AI systems shaped by this diversity have the potential to be among the most resilient and adaptable in the world. But that requires origination, not imitation. Solutions must be designed for environments where variability is constant, constraints are normal, and scale is unavoidable.

Public education systems are uniquely positioned to do this work. With the right policy direction, data governance, and institutional alignment, AI can help governments move from episodic interventions to continuous improvement.

Augmenting the Teacher, Not Replacing Them

A central concern in the AI debate is the role of the teacher. Will AI replace human judgment?

The more relevant question is how AI can strengthen it.

When thoughtfully designed, AI can reduce administrative load, surface learning gaps early, and make classroom instruction easier to deliver. If teachers had even 30 per cent more time to teach, learning outcomes would inevitably improve.

Experience shows that outcomes improve not when teachers are told more, but when they are helped more. AI's most powerful role in education is not automation, but enablement. Used well, it can restore the teacher's role as a professional decision-maker rather than reduce it to compliance.

Avoiding Superficial Transformation

Every technology wave brings temptation—speed over substance, visibility over value, pilots that look impressive but change little.

AI is no exception.

Sustainable impact comes when systems rethink how the education delivery cycle is organised, how pedagogical decisions are made, and how accountability for learning is structured. Data alone does not create understanding. Value emerges when data is combined with context, innovation, leadership, and intent.

This is where policy leadership matters. Governments have the ability to steer AI away from fragmented experimentation towards outcomes-aligned platforms that compound over time.

This is also where platforms such as the India AI Impact Summit (16–20 February 2026) play an important role—not as showcases of novelty, but as spaces for alignment where leaders can focus on first principles such as equity, scale, and human-centred design. Transformation, after all, is a collective endeavour.

Designing for the Last Child, the Indian Way

If India is to lead differently, one principle must remain central: AI must work for the last child, not just the most connected one.

Equally important, AI must enable teachers, not bypass them. Profit-driven, subscription-led models often sell the dream of a teacher-less classroom. In my experience of working for over a decade in rural education, meaningful learning happens only when teachers inspire it inside classrooms.

India has a rare opportunity to shape AI in education as a force that amplifies human potential rather than replaces it, strengthens public systems, and expands possibilities at scale. We saw this happen in Indian IT; it can happen in education, too.

When the future of education is written, AI should be remembered not for its sophistication, but for the children it helped us finally reach—by making teaching easier, more joyful, and more effective.

Views expressed are personal

As AI enters classrooms, India confronts a defining choice: imitate global models, or design solutions rooted in India's unique scale, diversity and educational realities

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DAINIK JAGRAN (P-6), 27 JANUARY 2026

यूजीसी के नए नियम

इससे बड़ी विडंबना और कोई नहीं कि उच्च शिक्षा संस्थानों में भेदभाव रोकने के लिए विश्वविद्यालय अनुदान आयोग यानी यूजीसी की ओर से लागू किए गए नए नियम इस कारण निशाने पर हैं कि वे बदले की कार्रवाई का जरिया बन सकते हैं। इसकी बड़ी वजह नए नियमों में भेदभाव को स्पष्ट रूप से परिभाषित न किया जाना तो है ही, झूठी शिकायत करने वालों के खिलाफ किसी तरह की कार्रवाई न करने का प्रविधान भी है। चूंकि इन नियमों को लेकर हो रहे विरोध का दायरा बढ़ता जा रहा है और विरोध करने वालों में सत्तारूढ़ भाजपा के नेता भी हैं, इसलिए केंद्रीय शिक्षा मंत्रालय ने इन पर नए सिरे से विचार-विमर्श शुरू कर दिया है। इसी के साथ इस पर राजनीति भी शुरू हो गई है और इसके तहत यूजीसी के नए नियमों को सामान्य बनाम अन्य के रूप में रेखांकित करने की कोशिश की जा रही है। इस क्रम में कुछ भ्रम भी फैलाए जा रहे हैं। यूजीसी के नए नियमों के अनुसार सभी शिक्षा संस्थानों को समानता अवसर केंद्र बनाने होंगे, जिनमें एससी-एसटी के साथ ओबीसी वर्ग के छात्र, कर्मचारी और शिक्षक भी अपने खिलाफ जातिगत आधार पर हो रहे भेदभाव की शिकायत कर सकते हैं। पहले के नियमों में केवल एससी-एसटी वर्ग के छात्र ही शामिल थे।

यूजीसी के नए नियमों के तहत नस्ल, पंथ, क्षेत्र, जेंडर, दिव्यांगता आदि के आधार पर भी किए जाने वाले भेदभाव के खिलाफ शिकायत की जा सकती है। विरोधियों का तर्क है कि इन आधारों पर तो किसी भी वर्ग के छात्र, कर्मचारी या शिक्षक के खिलाफ भेदभाव हो सकता है। चूंकि यह तर्क निराधार नहीं, इसलिए यह स्पष्ट करना आवश्यक है कि नए नियम केवल एससी, एसटी, ओबीसी वर्गों के लिए ही नहीं हैं। आखिर नए नियमों में यह प्रविधान शामिल करने में क्या कठिनाई है कि किसी भी वर्ग का छात्र, कर्मचारी या शिक्षक अपने खिलाफ भेदभाव की शिकायत कर सकता है? ऐसे किसी प्रविधान के न होने से यह ध्वनित हो रहा है कि भेदभाव तो केवल सामान्य वर्ग के लोग ही करते हैं। क्या इस धारणा को सही कहा जा सकता है? यूजीसी के नए नियमों को लेकर यह भ्रम भी दूर किया जाए कि समानता अवसर केंद्रों के सदस्य केवल आरक्षित वर्गों के लोग ही होंगे। इस सबके साथ ही सबसे अधिक आवश्यक यह है कि नए नियमों में झूठी शिकायत करने वालों को हतोत्साहित या फिर आवश्यक हो तो दंडित करने के भी उपाय किए जाएं, ताकि ऐसी शिकायतें न की जा सकें। इसकी अनदेखी न की जाए कि ऐसे कई कानून हैं, जिनका दुरुपयोग बढ़ता जा रहा है। इनमें एससी-एसटी उत्पीड़न के साथ दहेज और यौन हिंसा रोधी कानून प्रमुख हैं। यह ठीक नहीं कि समानता कायम करने वाले नियम समानता के ही सिद्धांत की अनदेखी करते दिखें।

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उच्च शैक्षणिक संस्थानों में समानता के लिए जारी नई गाइडलाइंस को लेकर सामान्य वर्ग आशंकित

UGC से यह गुस्सा सामान्य नहीं

उमेश चतुर्वेदी

विश्वविद्यालय अनुदान आयोग (UGC) की जनवरी में जारी गाइडलाइन के खिलाफ देशभर के छात्रों और शिक्षाविदों के एक बड़े तबके में भारी रोष दिख रहा है। Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026 को लेकर सामान्य वर्ग आशंकित है। उसका कहना है कि यह गाइडलाइन निष्पक्ष नहीं और इसके जरिए सामान्य वर्ग के छात्रों का उत्पीड़न हो सकता है।

विवाद इसलिए । नए नियमों में 'जातिगत भेदभाव' का मतलब केवल एससी, एसटी और ओबीसी के खिलाफ भेदभाव को बताया गया है। विरोध करने वालों का कहना है कि यह परिभाषा एकतरफा है, इसमें सामान्य वर्ग के खिलाफ भेदभाव या झूठी शिकायतों का कोई जिक्र नहीं है।

विस्तृत व्याख्या । इस मामले में चल रहे विवादों पर बात करने से पहले नए नियमों को समझना जरूरी है। इन नियमों में भेदभाव को पूरी तरह गलत और पक्षपाती व्यवहार माना गया है। प्रत्यक्ष या अप्रत्यक्ष ही नहीं, जाति, धर्म, नस्ल, लिंग, जन्मस्थान या विकलांगता के आधार पर भेदभाव भी गलत है। नियम यह भी कहते हैं कि शिक्षा में समानता रोकने वाला या किसी की गरिमा को ठेस पहुंचाने वाला हर काम अनुचित माना जाएगा।

समानता के लिए समिति । गाइडलाइंस के तहत हर उच्च शिक्षण संस्थान में समान अवसर केंद्र (EOC) बनाना अनिवार्य होगा। इस केंद्र का काम होगा संस्थान में बराबरी, सामाजिक समावेशन और सभी को समान अवसर देना। साथ ही, कैंपस में भेदभाव से जुड़ी शिकायतों का समाधान करना भी इसकी जिम्मेदारी होगी। हर संस्थान में EOC के तहत एक समता समिति बनानी होगी। इसका अध्यक्ष संस्थान का प्रमुख होगा। समिति में अनुसूचित जाति, अनुसूचित जनजाति, अन्य पिछड़ा वर्ग, दिव्यांग और महिला का प्रतिनिधित्व जरूरी होगा।

निष्पक्षता पर संशय । सामान्य वर्ग को आशंका है कि जिस तरह से एससी-एसटी एक्ट के गलत इस्तेमाल पर सुप्रीम कोर्ट तक टिप्पणी कर चुका है, वैसे ही UGC की गाइडलाइंस का भी दुरुपयोग हो सकता है। आलोचकों का मानना है कि समता समितियां शायद ही निष्पक्ष रह पाएं। उन्हें जो शक्तियां दी जा रही हैं, उनका सामान्य वर्ग के छात्रों के खिलाफ इस्तेमाल हो सकता है। गलत शिकायत पर सजा का प्रावधान भी नहीं है।

UGC काला
कानून वापस लो

विरोध की वजह

- नियमों में सामान्य वर्ग के साथ भेदभाव का जिक्र नहीं
- झूठी शिकायत के बाद भी सजा का प्रावधान नहीं है
- SC-ST एक्ट के दुरुपयोग के कुछ मामलों से डर

सामाजिक विभाजन का डर । सामान्य वर्ग के एक बड़े तबके को लगता है कि नए नियम सुधार के बजाय शैक्षणिक परिसरों में जातिवाद को बढ़ावा देंगे और इससे सामाजिक विभाजन को बढ़ावा मिलेगा। इन नियमों का उल्लंघन पाए जाने पर उनकी फंडिंग रोकी जा सकती है, उनका डिग्री देने का अधिकार छीना जा सकता है और गंभीर उल्लंघन की स्थिति में मान्यता भी रद्द की जा सकती है।

राजनीतिक फैक्टर । UGC का कहना है कि नए नियम साल 2012 के उसके भेदभाव-विरोधी ढांचे की व्यवस्था को ही मजबूत करते हैं। उसका तर्क है कि उच्च शिक्षा में जातिगत भेदभाव की शिकायतों में 2019 की तुलना में 2023 में 118.4% की वृद्धि हो चुकी है। हकीकत यह भी है कि यह निर्णय हैदराबाद विश्वविद्यालय में रोहित वेमुला की आत्महत्या की 10वीं बरसी और सर्वोच्च न्यायालय के 2025 के निर्देश के बाद आया है। रोहित वेमुला केस को लेकर उस वक्त देश के तमाम केंद्रीय विश्वविद्यालयों के कैंपस का राजनीतिक तापमान बढ़ गया था। विपक्ष ने इस मामले को BJP के खिलाफ राजनीतिक हथियार के तौर पर इस्तेमाल किया था। तब सामान्य वर्ग के स्टूडेंट्स ने BJP का साथ दिया था।

बढ़ता असंतोष । एससी-एसटी उत्पीड़न के कानून को चाहे जितना भी समानता लाने वाला माना जाता हो, लेकिन जिस तरह उसके फर्जी इस्तेमाल की घटनाएं बढ़ी हैं, उससे सामान्य वर्ग इसका विरोधी हो गया है। सुप्रीम कोर्ट की व्यवस्था के बावजूद नौकरियों और पढ़ाई में आरक्षण की व्यवस्था को लेकर क्षोभ व असंतोष अब भी ज्यादा है। UGC के नए नियमों ने उसी असंतोष को बढ़ा दिया है।

चुनावों पर असर । सामान्य वर्ग इस नियम के कितना खिलाफ है, इसे समझने के लिए सोशल मीडिया को देखना होगा, जहां #UGCRollback ट्रेंड करता रहा। करणी सेना सहित कुछ संगठन भी इस नियम के विरोध में उतर आए हैं। समाज के भीतर ही भीतर गुस्से की लहर है। इसका असर आने वाले दिनों में पश्चिम बंगाल और असम के चुनावों में दिख सकता है। BJP की ओर से इस विवाद को थामने की कोशिश अभी नहीं दिख रही। हालांकि, उसके सांसद निशिकांत दुबे प्रयास कर रहे हैं। उन्होंने सामान्य वर्ग के छात्रों को कोई नुकसान न होने का आश्वासन दिया है।

(लेखक वरिष्ठ पत्रकार हैं)

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HINDU (P-7), 28 JANUARY 2026

Future of work: India's youth under the new Codes

The four Labour Codes aim to promote formalisation of employment and improve ease of doing business; gap in coverage of benefits is a major challenge

DATA POINT

Devika Vinod
Meenakshi Shekhar

India's Labour Codes came into force in November 2025, marking the most significant labour law reform since Independence. By consolidating 29 central laws into four Codes, the reform aims to simplify compliance, universalise minimum wages, expand social protection, and modernise workplace regulation. Policy debates often portray the Codes as a balancing act between labour flexibility and worker protection.

Prior to the consolidation, India's labour regime was fragmented across multiple Central and State laws governing wages, industrial relations, social security, and working conditions. With labour on the Concurrent List, this resulted in uneven enforcement and wide inter-State variation. Crucially, most protections applied only to the formal sector, leaving informal, contract, and casual workers, who form the bulk of the workforce, outside the scope of regulation. Against this backdrop, the government introduced four Labour Codes between 2019 and 2020.

In 2024, India's median age was under 30, compared to around 40 in China and 50 in Japan. With nearly half the population still young, understanding how these changes affect youth employment is critical.

Despite its demographic advantage, India faces a pronounced youth employment crisis. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24, labour force participation among those aged 15-29 stood at 46.5%, far below the 76.4% observed among those aged 30-59. Youth unemployment is 10.2%, compared to less than 1% for older adults.

Gender disparities further widen these gaps. Only 28.8% of young women participate in the labour force, compared to 63.5% of young men. In urban areas, unemployment among young women reached 20.1%.

Across all PLFS rounds, young workers are more likely than adults to be unpaid family workers within self-employment. They are disproportionately concentrated in informal employment. In 2023-24, nearly 90% of young workers were informally employed. Even within regular salaried jobs, 60.5% of young regular workers lacked social security, compared to 50.5% among workers above 30.

Contractual insecurity is also higher among youth. In 2023-24, 66.1% of young regular workers had no written contract, versus 53.6% for older ones. Only 16.5% of young workers had long-term contracts exceeding three years, compared to 35.4% among adults.

Young workers are also overrepresented in platform-based gig work. A NITI Aayog estimate suggests that 77 lakh workers were engaged in the gig economy in 2020-21, a figure projected to rise to 2.35 crore by 2029-30.

Against this backdrop, the new Labour Codes aim to promote formalisation while improving the ease of doing business. The introduction of a statutory national floor wage could raise earnings for young workers clustered in low-paid, entry-level jobs. If firms increasingly rely on fixed-term contracts, the Codes mandate parity in wages and benefits with permanent workers.

The requirement of appointment letters for all workers and guaranteed wage payments, even during leave, strengthens baseline employment security. The Code on Social Security extends welfare schemes covering health, maternity, disability, education, and skill development to unorganised workers. Gig and platform workers are explicitly recognised in national law, with provisions for registration from age 16 and the creation of National and State Social Security Boards. Unlike the earlier Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act (2008), which had limited impact, the new Code offers clearer institutional mechanisms.

Labour market transparency is also enhanced through mandatory vacancy reporting to career centres. The Industrial Relations Code further affects youth employment by reducing hiring frictions through a higher retrenchment threshold. It provides legal clarity for contract labour and fixed-term employment categories dominated by young workers while extending benefits such as leave, health cover, social security, and gratuity to fixed-term employees after just one year of service.

However, several challenges remain. Many provisions for unorganised and gig workers mirror those under the 2008 Act, including a size-based definition of enterprises with fewer than 10 workers. PLFS 2023-24 shows that 42.7% of young workers lack written contracts, and nearly one-fifth of them work in enterprises with more than 10 workers, leaving significant gaps in coverage. Discretionary language in provisions for gig workers and weak statistical definitions of digital platform employment complicate coverage, especially given widespread multiple job-holding. Despite the Second National Commission on Labour having urged the government as early as 2002 to modernise labour protections in response to technological change and evolving work arrangements, two decades later, policy follow-through and statistical innovation have been slow.

These gaps point to an urgent need for stronger labour data systems and proactive worker registration. Identifying gig and platform workers in national surveys, instead of subsuming them under broad self-employment categories, would strengthen policy design and protection.

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Labour shift

Statistics used in this article are from Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)

Chart 1: Composition of employment among 15-29 year olds and 30-59 year olds across PLFS rounds between 2017 and 2024

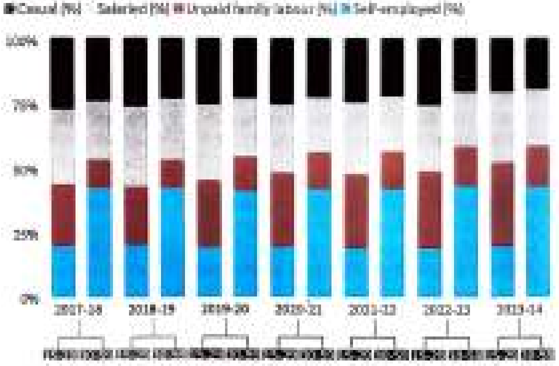
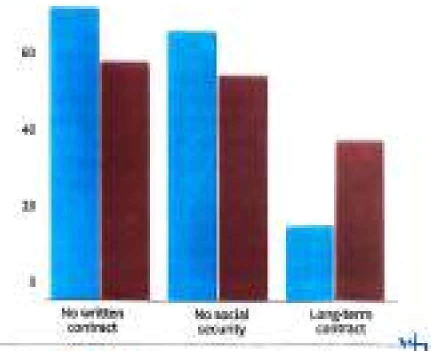


Chart 2: Types of informality of jobs among regular salaried workers in 15-29 and 30-59 age groups



Contractual insecurity is higher among youth. Only 16.5% of young workers had long-term contracts exceeding three years

INDIAN EXPRESS (P-10), 28 JANUARY 2026

What does merit mean in an unequal classroom?

ADITI NARAYANI PASWAN

WHEN I teach, I often begin by asking my students a simple question: What do you think of Ambedkar? It is painful how frequently students describe him as the man who "took away" their "merit" through reservation. The merit-versus-quota debate continues to divide the nation because we refuse to interrogate what merit means in an unequal society.

I often wonder how unequal social conditions can produce equal competition. I'm appalled by the level of discourse surrounding the UGC's Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026, which superseded the 2012 guidelines by the same name. The hue and cry over what might have been a run-of-the-mill revision is disheartening, if not surprising. What's more heartbreaking is that these sentiments are being echoed by so-called beacons of academia, who lament that these regulations will lead to discrimination against them.

It is preposterous to think that any regulation safeguarding the rights of the marginalised will in any way hamper the interests of the dominant castes. The criticism is premised on the assumption of the regulations' misuse by the 85 per cent — SC/ST/OBC — against the dominant caste groups. What this view fails to acknowledge is that the same 85 per cent are grossly underrepresented in education, whether as faculty or students. As per data presented in Parliament, of the 423 posts sanctioned for professors in central universities under the OBC category, only 84 have been filled. For the ST category, 83 per cent of posts are vacant as only 24 of 144 have been filled. In the SC category, 64 per cent of posts sanctioned are vacant, with only 111 of 308 being filled.

Data tabled in the Lok Sabha in December 2023 showed that more than 13,500 students from SC, ST and OBC categories had dropped out of central universities, Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) in the previous five years. When humiliation, excessive scrutiny, isolation and exclusion become routine, discrimination stops appearing extraordinary — it just becomes invisible. Dropouts, then, are not individual failures but a collective failure.

The tag of "not found suitable", rising cases of suicides in IITs and persistent criticism of reservation in employment and education has led to an environment in which efforts to bring parity and equity keep getting derailed. This begs also the question: Why have decades of reservation failed to bear any results in bringing parity in representations? How, despite quotas and allegedly watered-down merit lists, do we continue to be underrepresented in the media, judiciary and other corridors of power?

Equity is not merely about securing admission. It is about surviving the academic journey with dignity. Perhaps it cannot be enforced by UGC guidelines alone, but in seeking institutional accountability, these guidelines become moral signals that we cannot ignore.

> Equity is not merely about securing admission. It is about surviving the academic journey with dignity

The writer is assistant professor of Sociology, Lakshmibai College, Delhi University

I6/10

MILLENNIUM POST (P-7), 28 JANUARY 2026

CIVIC SENSE

One Rupee Revolution

A modest classroom question became a sustained experiment in social responsibility, showing how education, when rooted in sacrifice and continuity, can narrow India's rural–urban divide

CHERYL FRANCIS

THE WRITER IS THE DIRECTOR OF THE SOCIAL WORK DEPARTMENT AND NSS AT ST. XAVIER'S COLLEGE, KOLKATA

> A simple question inside a Kolkata classroom sparked a student-led movement that carried education across villages and eventually built a rural college campus

"If you cannot come to the college, the college will go to you." —The promise that transformed the landscape of South 24 Parganas.

The year was 2006. Inside the hallowed, high-ceilinged classrooms of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, a question was posed that would change the path of thousands of lives. The then Vice-Principal, Rev. Dr John Felix Raj, SJ, stood before a room of bright, ambitious students and challenged their sense of social responsibility.

"You all are the privileged ones sitting in this classroom," he noted, his voice echoing against the silence. "What can you do for those who cannot even dream of going to school?"

An uneasy quiet settled over the room. It was the silence of realisation—the recognition of a vast gap between the world of elite urban education and the stark reality of rural India. Finally, a student gathered the courage to ask: "Father, please tell us, what can we do?"

Fr. Felix Raj's response was not a request for a massive endowment or a complex policy change. Instead, he asked for a small, personal sacrifice. "Can you sacrifice one rupee a day? Can you save one rupee from your daily coffee or your samosas?"

The response was instantaneous and thunderous: "Why not? Surely we can."

With that simple affirmation, the "One Rupee Revolution" was born. This was the genesis of Prayas – College to Village, Village to College, a movement that proved that small, consistent actions, when multiplied by thousands, can move mountains.

The Architecture of Sacrifice

What started as a classroom challenge quickly gathered momentum. This was the brainchild of Fr. Felix Raj, whose vision as a visionary educationist has always been to channelise youthful energy into tangible social action. Under his guidance as the former Principal of St. Xavier's College and currently the Vice-Chancellor of St. Xavier's University, the project was institutionalised through the college's Social Work Department.

From one-rupee sacrifices to a university vision, Prayas shows how education can become a bridge between privilege and possibility

The students didn't just donate; they committed. Class representatives took up the mantle of coordination, ensuring that the collection of these single coins became a ritual of empathy. Initially, two villages—Pandua and Gurap—were adopted. However, the passion of the students was contagious. Within just three years, the map of Prayas expanded to include eight more villages: Debipur, Shalpukur, Ghostomath, Hogulkuria, Mirga, Jhantipahari, Bolorampur, and Sholakhali—the latter being a community severely ravaged by the AILA cyclone.

Fr. Felix Raj often reminded his students, "This money is not a donation; it is a sacrifice." By giving up a small daily luxury, the students were not just funding development; they were weaving their own lives into the fabric of the village community.

A Unique Pedagogy: The Three Stages of Prayas

Prayas is not a traditional charity; it is an educational pedagogy that functions on three distinct stages, connecting what Fr. Felix Raj calls the "Two Temples."

The Temple of Wisdom: The College, its Management, Faculty, and the students' families.

The Temple of Prosperity: The Village, its local administration, partners, and the rural families.

Stage I: The Planning Phase

Everything begins with dialogue. Before any action is taken, the college management and the village leadership collaborate. They identify the specific needs of the community—be it educational resources, health infrastructure, or social awareness. This ensures that the project is not "imposed" on the village, but rather "grown" from within.

Stage II: The Implementation Phase (The Heart of the Exchange)

This stage brings the "College to the Village." Every weekend, groups of college students leave the comfort of the city to live and work in these adopted communities. They conduct door-to-door surveys to understand demographics, host tutoring sessions for children, and organise sports and cultural activities.

But the movement is a two-way street: Village to College. Twice a year, the village children are invited to the city. For 3 to 4 days, they camp within the college walls. They are taken on city tours and campus walks. More importantly, they spend this time with their Dadas and Didis (elder brothers and sisters). In these few days, the college students become role models, showing the children that a future in higher education is not a distant myth, but a reachable reality.

Stage III: The Outcome – The Birth of a Rural Campus

The ultimate success of Prayas is perhaps best illustrated by the story of the Raghabpur Campus. During a meeting at Raghabpur, the village community shared a heartbreaking concern. They told Fr. Felix Raj, "If you ask us to encourage our children to pursue higher education, where is the college? Our children, especially the girls, have to travel more than 12 kilometres to find a college. We worry for their safety, and we cannot afford to send them to Park Street."

It was then that Fr. Felix Raj gave his famous response: "If you cannot come to the college, the college will go to you." In 2014, St. Xavier's College Rural Campus at Raghabpur was established. It was the fruit of years of hard work by students who had been tutoring these children since 2006. Today, it stands as a testimony to the power of a focused intention.

The Transformation of Hearts

The impact of Prayas is dual-pronged. While it has revolutionised rural education, it has also revolutionised the character of the urban student. Many students admit that they initially volunteered for the village camps to fulfil mandatory social credit requirements. However, they returned from the villages with something far more valuable: a transformation of heart.

They encountered "the real India"—the India of harsh challenges, poverty, and resilience. By stepping outside the "four walls of a classroom," they learned lessons in humility, love, and social justice that no textbook could ever provide. They didn't just teach the village children; they were taught by them.

From College to University: The Vision Scales Up

The "unstoppable visionary," as Fr. Felix Raj is often called, did not stop at a rural campus. In 2017, he paved the way for another landmark: the establishment of St. Xavier's University, Kolkata.

In just eight years, the University has become a premier destination for knowledge seekers. Naturally, the Prayas movement has evolved with the institution. What was once "College to Village" is now Village to University and University to Village. The scale has increased, but the core philosophy remains the same: education must be a bridge, not a barrier.

A Call to Every Citizen

The story of Prayas is a reminder that we are all participants in the building of our nation. We are born into a society that is often unjust, but we have a choice: we can leave it as we found it, or we can choose to be the "One Rupee" that starts a revolution.

The world is currently divided by walls of economics, geography, and opportunity. But as Fr. Felix Raj believes, "If it is God's work, it will continue." We must put our hearts and minds together to heal these wounds.

A nation can only be termed truly "developed" when every citizen, regardless of their birthplace, can live with a mind without fear and a head held high. We must promote this spirit of Prayas wherever possible, bridging the divisions to build a united, harmonious world.

Views expressed are personal

md/7

TRIBUNE, (P-6), 28 JANUARY 2026

School counselling

Implement revised norms in letter and spirit

THE decision of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) to make the appointment of socio-emotional and career counsellors mandatory in all affiliated schools is commendable. Schools now must appoint a wellness teacher and a career counsellor for every 500 students enrolled in Classes IX to XII. Qualification norms have been laid out and all appointed counsellors will have to complete a 50-hour training programme to maintain consistent standards. It may not be enough, but it is a step forward in providing a uniform mental health support framework and filling the gaps in the current arrangement. Implementing the new requirement in letter and spirit is now the big challenge. Much of it will depend on the approach of the school managements. They will have to make the leap from considering it as a diktat to be followed casually to enforcing it as absolutely essential for providing a more comprehensive school experience.

The CBSE move follows a public interest litigation filed before the Rajasthan High Court. It highlighted the rising mental health challenges among students, including academic stress and lack of structured career guidance. The high-pressure environment, it pointed out, requires both emotional and social support. The petitioners are hopeful of similar reforms in schools affiliated with state boards, and even in colleges and universities. Confidentiality forms a key part of the counsellors' conversations with students, parents and teachers, but as their role widens, they too need a support network. Provisions for feedback on case studies, regular seminars and upgraded training modules would help in what is an ever evolving learning process for all the stakeholders.

Sensitisation, coping strategies, skills for managing stress — counselling is a serious endeavour. Career guidance demands a perceptive outlook and informed insights. First and foremost, accord these professionals the respect they deserve.

Tr/6

NAV BHARAT TIMES (P-14), 28 JANUARY 2026

संतुलन की ज़रूरत

उच्च शैक्षणिक संस्थानों में समानता के लिए विश्वविद्यालय अनुदान आयोग (UGC) की ओर से जारी रेगुलेशंस पर विवाद बढ़ता जा रहा है। इस कानून को लाया गया है SC-ST और OBC स्टूडेंट्स की गरिमा व सम्मान की रक्षा के लिए, पर सवर्ण समाज इसे लेकर सशंकित है। नए नियमों की मंशा पर शायद ही किसी को शक हो, चिंता इसमें संतुलन की कमी को लेकर है। इसके खिलाफ सुप्रीम कोर्ट में भी याचिका दायर की गई है।

UGC के नए नियम

सवर्ण समाज की चिंता । Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations को UGC ने 13 जनवरी को नोटिफाई किया था। इसमें SC-ST और OBC स्टूडेंट्स के खिलाफ होने वाले भेदभावों की व्याख्या करते हुए इन्हें रोकने के इंतजाम किए गए हैं। इसके विरोधियों का कहना है कि इसमें उनके प्रति होने वाले भेदभाव को शामिल नहीं किया गया है और स्वाभाविक रूप से उन्हें ही दोषी मान लिया गया है।

अलग था ड्राफ्ट । इन रेगुलेशन को सालभर की जद्दोजहद के बाद लागू किया जा सका है। सुप्रीम कोर्ट ने जनवरी 2025 में UGC को नए नियम बनाने का आदेश दिया था। इसका जो ड्राफ्ट आया, वह फाइनल से बिल्कुल अलग था। ड्राफ्ट में झूठी शिकायत पर जुर्माने का प्रावधान था, पर दिग्विजय सिंह की अध्यक्षता वाली संसदीय समिति के सुझाव पर उसे खत्म कर दिया गया।

झूठी शिकायत का डर । समिति का तर्क था कि इससे पीड़ित शिकायत करने से डरेंगे। यह सोच सही हो सकती है, लेकिन झूठी शिकायतों से निपटने के कुछ उपाय तो किए ही जाने चाहिए थे। इसी तरह, पहले से यह मान लेना सही नहीं कि सवर्ण समाज के स्टूडेंट्स के साथ भेदभाव नहीं हो सकता।

भरोसा नहीं । नियमों के पालन और निगरानी के लिए संस्थान के स्तर पर समिति और उप-समितियां बनाने का प्रावधान है, लेकिन उनमें भी सवर्ण समाज की नुमाइंदगी नहीं रखी गई है। इन वजहों से नियमों के दुरुपयोग की चिंता है। हालांकि सरकार भरोसा दिलाने की कोशिश कर रही है, लेकिन BJP में भी स्थानीय स्तर पर कुछ नेताओं के इस्तीफे देने से लगता नहीं कि असर हो रहा है।

चिंताजनक आंकड़े । जातिगत आधार पर भेदभाव समाज की एक कड़वी सच्चाई है। आंकड़े बताते हैं कि 2019-20 में संस्थानों में ऐसी 173 शिकायतें दर्ज की गई थीं, जो 2023-24 में बढ़कर 378 हो गईं। इनको रोकने के लिए सख्त नियमों की जरूरत है, लेकिन उससे किसी वर्ग को ऐसा नहीं लगना चाहिए कि उसकी अनदेखी हो रही है।

नभा/14

NAV BHARAT TIMES (P-14), 28 JANUARY 2026

मैनपावर बढ़े, मेडिकल शिक्षा पर फोकस हो

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नई दिल्ली : आम बजट से पहले स्वास्थ्य क्षेत्र की नजरें सरकार की प्राथमिकताओं पर टिकी हैं। बीते कुछ वर्षो में डिजिटल हेल्थ, मेडिकल इंफ्रास्ट्रक्चर, घरेलू उत्पादन और सस्ती दवाओं को लेकर सरकारी फोकस लगातार मजबूत हुआ है। एक्सपर्ट्स का मानना है कि आने वाले बजट में इस दिशा को आगे बढ़ाते हुए अब सबसे ज्यादा जोर हेल्थकेयर मैनपावर और मेडिकल शिक्षा पर दिया जाना चाहिए, ताकि आम आदमी तक बेहतर और किफायती इलाज पहुंच सके।

काउंटडाउन
बजट 2026
स्वास्थ्य

आकाश हेल्थकेयर के मैनेजिंग डायरेक्टर डॉ. आशीष चौधरी के मुताबिक, आम लोगों के लिए अच्छा स्वास्थ्य सिर्फ अस्पतालों की संख्या से तय नहीं होता, बल्कि इस बात से तय होता है कि वहां कितने प्रशिक्षित डॉक्टर, नर्स और पैरामेडिकल स्टाफ उपलब्ध हैं। वे कहते हैं कि पिछले बजटों में इंफ्रास्ट्रक्चर और बीमा कवरेज को लेकर अहम फैसले हुए, लेकिन अब जरूरत ऐसी लंबी अवधि की स्वास्थ्य नीति की है, जो इमारतों के साथ-साथ लोगों में निवेश करे। ट्रेनिंग, निरंतर मेडिकल एजुकेशन को बजट में प्राथमिकता मिलनी चाहिए, ताकि देशभर में गुणवत्ता एक-सी हो।

एक्सपर्ट आशीष चौधरी मानते हैं कि टियर-2 और टियर-3 शहरों में मेडिकल सुविधाओं की कमी आज भी बड़ी चुनौती बनी हुई है। NBT

John J. Kennedy

Newspapers as part of education: Will Rajasthan move set off a trend in India?

A recent decision by the Rajasthan government to make reading of newspapers mandatory in government schools may seem ordinary at first. Ten minutes in the morning assembly. Two newspapers — one Hindi, one English. A few new words and a brief discussion on current events. However, behind this small reform lies a powerful idea — education must prepare students not only for exams and jobs, but for responsible citizenship in a democracy.

The practice itself is not new. For decades, many schools had encouraged newspaper reading informally. Students often read headlines during assemblies, reflecting an instinctive belief that current affairs mattered. What makes the Rajasthan initiative significant is its formal mandate. By institutionalising the practice, the state affirms that civic awareness is not optional, but central to schooling.

In recent years, education policy in India has focused heavily on employability, skills and rankings. While important, these cannot be the sole aim of education. A technically skilled yet socially indifferent youth is poorly equipped to serve society. This is where regular newspaper reading matters.

Newspapers expose students to real events — parliamentary debates, social movements, court judgments, global conflicts, economic decisions and everyday struggles. They help students see society not as a textbook idea, but as a living reality which is unfolding each day.

In a democracy, awareness is essential. Citizens have rights, but they also have duties. Voting, questioning authority, engaging in public debate, and holding politicians accountable require basic political knowledge. For first-time voters especially, political awareness is crucial. Without it, choices are often driven by emotion, identity or misinformation, rather than informed judgement. Reading newspapers from a young age will help students understand how policies affect lives and how decisions taken today shape tomorrow.

One of the worrying trends in many campuses today is political indifference. Many students feel politics is dirty, irrelevant or not worth engaging with. This cynicism does not emerge naturally. It grows from a lack of exposure and engagement. When political discussions are discouraged in schools and colleges in the name of neutrality or discipline, students graduate without the ability or the confidence to form independent opinions. Democracy weakens as a result. Educational institutions must therefore encourage informed debate and dissent. Avoiding so-called "controversial" topics may seem safe, but it comes at a cost. Students need spaces where they can discuss current events, debate ideas and even disagree, of course, peacefully and respectfully. Newspapers offer a safe entry point. An editorial discussion or a debate on a policy issue teaches students that disagreement need not lead to hostility, and that democracy thrives on dialogue.

At the heart of social and political awareness lies critical thinking. Reading news regularly trains students to compare perspectives, question narratives, and identify bias. It encourages them to ask: Why is this happening? Who benefits? Who is left out? Such skills are vital in an age of social media, where misinformation spreads faster than facts. Without critical thinking, students become easy targets for propaganda and polarisation.

Understanding social realities also requires historical and contextual knowledge. For instance, issues like caste inequality, gender discrimination and regional disparities cannot be understood in isolation. Newspapers often link present events to historical injustices and constitutional principles. Awareness about leaders like Dr B.R. Ambedkar and the struggles that shaped India's Constitution helps students appreciate why certain protections and policies exist. Ignorance of this context breeds prejudice and simplistic opinions. This becomes particularly important in debates around reservation and social justice. Many students oppose affirmative action without really understanding its historical necessity or contemporary relevance. Regular engagement with news exposes them to data on under-representation in education, bureaucracy and the judiciary. Informed opinions emerge only when students understand both privilege and disadvantage. The idea of "merit" itself cannot be understood without social awareness. Merit is often shaped by access to good schools, supportive environments and economic stability, not just by individual effort. Newspapers help students see how systemic barriers affect opportunities. Without this understanding, public debates become shallow, unfair and divisive.

Classroom learning must connect with what students see in real-world developments. As current affairs enter classrooms, learning becomes meaningful. Discussions on elections, budgets, social movements or court verdicts could build empathy and tolerance, helping students see how theory meets practice and how their lives are linked to larger social processes. Experiential learning, research shows, deepens this awareness. Volunteering, community engagement and service learning expose students to social realities firsthand. Paired with informed reading, these experiences turn knowledge into understanding and concern into responsibility.

Educational institutions carry a moral responsibility. Schools and colleges do not just train workers; they shape citizens. When social and political awareness is neglected, it often results in the erosion of rights, intolerance, and social fragmentation. The Rajasthan initiative acknowledges this duty by institutionalising a practice that once depended on individual schools or committed teachers, reviving an older educational tradition suited to today's democratic needs. Ten minutes with a newspaper may be among the most valuable lessons a school can provide.

The writer is retired professor and former Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at Christ University in Bengaluru

For more than 75 years, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) has played a foundational role in India's nation-building journey by strengthening financial governance, safeguarding public trust and enabling sustainable economic growth. Established by an Act of Parliament in 1949, ICAI functions as statutory body entrusted with regulating, developing and strengthening the Chartered Accountancy profession and operates under the Ministry of Corporate Affairs.

ICAI: Empowering India's Growth Story for Over 75 Years

In conversation with CA. Charanjot Singh Nanda, the 73rd President of ICAI—the World's Largest Professional Accountancy Body

How can the Chartered Accountancy Course transform the lives of India's youth?

[illegible]

Is there any scholarship scheme provided by ICAI to ensure that financial constraints do not stop deserving students from becoming CAs?

[illegible]

How is ICAI empowering women and helping them to join the mainstream while taking care of family responsibilities?

[illegible]

CA. Charanjot Singh Nanda, President, ICAI

How CAs are helping to Catalyze Tax Collection in India?

[illegible]

ICAI supports the government sector as a trusted knowledge partner by providing expert inputs for policymaking across key areas.

—CA. Charanjot Singh Nanda, President, ICAI

What career avenues are available after qualifying CA Course and what is the usual starting salary range?

[illegible]

What is ICAI's Role in Supporting Government Policy and Law-Making?

[illegible]

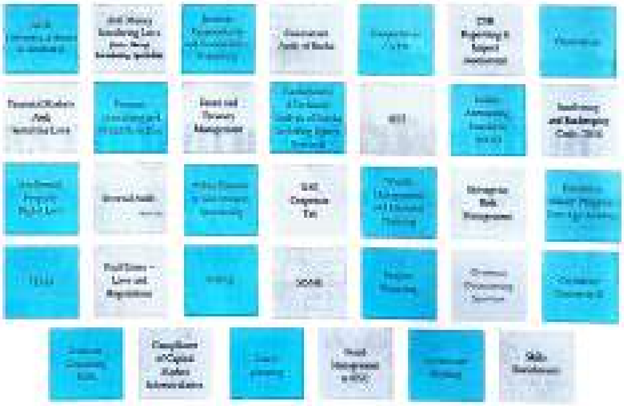
Elaborate on the role of ICAI as a standard setter across Accounting, Auditing, Internal Audit and Forensics.

[illegible]

What are the evergreen career opportunities for Chartered Accountants, including global demand, workforce shortages, and other requirements?

[illegible]

ICAI Certificate Courses for CA Members



Can students from small towns or non-elite schools truly build a successful future through Chartered Accountancy?

[illegible]

How is 'Practical Training' the differentiator of the course?

[illegible]

How is ICAI supporting the Government Sector?

[illegible]

How does ICAI advance societal well-being and sustainability through ethical financial governance and inclusive initiatives?

[illegible]

For more information, visit https://www.icai.org/

ICAI Council visit at Pahalgam on Independence Day 2025

HINDU (P-9), 29 JANUARY 2026

Who loses when teachers are attacked?

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Last October, at the University of Delhi (DU), a student union leader, accompanied by a group of supporters, slapped a teacher in the presence of the police, fellow teachers, and students. In a similar way, last year's student union leader reportedly went around several colleges, creating a ruckus and misbehaving with teachers, including a physically challenged teacher, and even with principals. Interestingly, these incidents are not outbursts of anger but calculated displays of power. There seems to be, perhaps, a competition of sorts to gain cheap publicity.

However, the purpose of this article is not to deliver moral sermons or indulge in emotional rhetoric such as "a society that disrespects teachers cannot progress" nor to recall Sant Kabir's dictum - "Without a teacher, knowledge does not arise." Instead, it seeks to reflect on what such incidents do to the process of teaching-learning, and most importantly, to the students who remain silent, thinking it is not their concern.

The focus here is certainly on DU, which, being one of the finest institutions in the country, has been relatively less affected by such acts of violence. Elsewhere, however, teachers have been killed, thrashed, or even had their hands chopped off for stopping harassment, preventing cheating in examinations, or setting questions deemed unacceptable by fundamentalists, respectively.

Implications of attacks

Those in the profession know that teaching is not a mechanical process one can switch on at will. It is a deep human exchange, sustained by trust, curiosity, and respect. More than the content, the quality of a lecture depends on the teacher's enthusiasm.

However, when a teacher's dignity is attacked, the teacher may continue to take classes, but without the same warmth, creativity, or emotional investment, and the act of teaching will turn into a mechanical exercise, performed merely because it is part of the job.

> Teachers learn to adapt and survive, as seen in many State universities, while continuing to draw their salaries. The real victims will be the students and their parents.

The second casualty is the fairness of student evaluation, which is one of the most crucial aspects of learning. Just as the judiciary cannot deliver justice under threat, teachers cannot assess students objectively when they fear public humiliation. To avoid confrontation, many begin grading leniently, blurring the line between effort and indifference, merit and mediocrity.

This trend dates back to the early 2000s, when Delhi University introduced a 30% internal assessment component (now about 43.75%) to promote continuous evaluation and reduce reliance on final examinations. Internal assessment allows students to see their marked scripts, often leading to unnecessary comparisons and demands for justification. To avoid frequent confrontations and disputes over marks, many teachers began awarding higher grades. The outcome was clear: average scores rose across undergraduate courses.

When marks lose credibility, employers lose faith in degrees, and students lose faith in the very value of learning.

The third casualty is the safety of students. Teachers are often the first people students turn to when something goes wrong. But the moment teachers themselves begin to feel unsafe, they naturally hesitate to get involved and start referring every issue to the police, and we all know how police administration usually functions. The exposure of young students to such an unjust system at an early age can have lasting consequences.

Fourth, history offers grim lessons, as seen in the exodus of students that follow when campuses turn violent. Once this culture seeps into educational institutions, it can take decades or become impossible to undo the damage. For instance, universities in West Bengal, Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, and until recently in Kerala were once among India's most reputed centres of learning. Today, students from these regions migrate elsewhere because of violent politicisation of campuses.

Are teachers to blame?

It is often argued that students' disrespect toward teachers stems from a decline in teachers' values and quality. But this view overlooks a larger truth: corruption has corroded almost every institution in the country, i.e., the bureaucracy, police, judiciary, politics, and the media. Everywhere, officials seize every opportunity to extract money from the public. And yet, public educational institutions have largely held their moral ground. Had the teaching community at DU been similarly corrupt, it could have monetised admissions or internal assessment marks; yet not a single incident supports such a charge. Despite holding immense power over students' futures, teachers have largely continued to uphold integrity and moral responsibility.

Who bears the burden most

Once a culture of violence takes root and teachers are forced to kneel, it is not the teachers who suffer most. They learn to adapt and survive, as seen in many State universities, while continuing to draw their salaries. The real victims will be the students and their parents, who will pay the ultimate price through poor-quality education, unsafe campuses, and the need to migrate elsewhere. However, given the increasingly hostile environment abroad, even that escape may no longer be available.

Even alumni who remain indifferent to what happens in their alma mater must realise that when a reputed institution loses its standing, the respect and credibility they command for having studied there also fade.

HINDUSTAN TIMES (P-14), 29 JANUARY 2026

UGC regulations against caste bigotry need tweaks

The Promotion of Equity in Higher Educational Institutions Regulations 2026 have multiple shortcomings that can fail the efforts to end discrimination on educational campuses

It is hard to imagine that Equity Committees will possess adequate understanding of the discrimination embedded in untouchability. HT ARCHIVE

Sukhadeo Thorat

Recognising the sad evidence on caste discrimination that had led to suicide by SC/ST students — at AIIMS in 2008 and, later, at other higher education institutions — the ministry of education had asked the UGC to frame regulations against discrimination. This led to the UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations 2012. Meanwhile, the mothers of Rohit Vemula, and Payal Tadvi who lost their children, filed petitions in the Supreme Court for strict implementation of the 2012 regulations. The Supreme Court asked the UGC to share the status of implementation. In response, the UGC informed the apex court that, among other things, it was revising the 2012 regulations to improve its provisions. It invited feedback on the revised regulations in January 2025, which were then notified this month. Unfortunately, the revised regulations, instead of making improvements, diluted the 2012 regulations. The regulator did make some improvements in the mechanism for sensitisation against discrimination on education campuses, but it also left behind significant shortcomings that needed correction.

First, its definition of higher education institutions (HEIs) is confusing. At one place, it refers to all HEIs. But when it comes to the definition, it says "higher educational institutions are those universities and colleges which are covered under section 3 of the UGC Act 1956" — that is, about 1,168 universities and 45,473 colleges. By implication, it excludes the 23 IITs, the 21 IIMs and around 12,002 standalone institutions. Both IITs and IIMs are Institutions of National Importance; the former have been established under the Institute of Technology Act 1961, and the latter are governed by the 2017 IIM Act.

Similarly, the standalone institutes, namely polytechnics, teacher training, and nursing institutes, are independent bodies recognised by AICTE, NCTE, and INC. The IITs, IIMs and standalone institutes need not be recognised under section 3 of the UGC Act. They are directly funded by the ministry. This means that the revised 2026 regulations presumably exclude a vast section of educational institutions. Since all these are under the ministry of education, it would be better if all educational institutions in the country were brought under the ministry's regulations.

The second-most serious limitation of the proposed regulations is that, unlike the 2012 regulations, these omit specifying the forms of discrimination. The 2012 regulations, imitating the Untouchability Offence Act 1955, and Atrocity Act 1989, list about 28 forms of discrimination related to admission, evaluation, teaching, sports, social life, hostel, and dining halls, among others. Given the deep-rooted nature of untouchability, the Untouchability Offence Act 1955 identified about 17 and the Atrocity Act 1989 about 40 forms of discrimination. Going against the spirit of the 2012 regulations, for reasons best known to it, UGC leaves this task to the equity committee, saying that it has "to prepare and disseminate an illustrative list of acts that shall be construed as discrimination". It is difficult to imagine that the equity committee possesses adequate understanding of the deep-rooted discrimination embedded in untouchability.

The Supreme Court, while referring to this complexity at the time of the framing of the Atrocity Act 1989, observed, "The offences of atrocities are committed to humiliate and subjugate the SCs and STs with a view to keep them in a state of servitude. Hence, they constitute a separate class of offences and cannot be compared with offences under the Indian Penal Code." It involves deep contempt, hatred, most sickening, pernicious, and meanest behaviour. One example from a survey at IIT Mumbai gives an idea of the sick minds of the caste discriminators. To Dalit girls, a high caste student asked, "*Quota se ayee ho ya kothe se ayee ho?* (Are you here through quota or from a brothel?)". Because of its wretched nature, the forms of discrimination are specified by the government in the two Acts. The equity committee in the education institution is not competent to specify the many forms of discrimination. Besides, if identifying these is left to individual education institutions, the forms of discrimination will differ and create legal confusion. Therefore, the UGC should follow the procedure adopted in the 2012 regulations and specify the forms of discrimination, which will be uniformly applicable to all educational institutions in the country.

Another limitation of the 2026 regulations relates to the composition of the equity committee, whose task will be to enquire into the complaint and recommend action to the head of the institute. Strangely enough, the head of the institute has been made ex officio chair of this committee. The head of the institute will, thus, sit on both sides of the table — as one who participates in making recommendations, and as the person who makes the decision based on these recommendations. This will cause a conflict of interest. The head of the institute, who takes the final decision, should not be part of the recommendation committee.

Lastly, about the SC/ST/OBC representation in the committee, it mentioned only about their "representation", which is unfair. It should be at least 50% of the committee to enable them to have an effective say in decision-making.

The UGC must remove these anomalies in the new regulations for true promotion of equity in educational institutions and to deliver justice to the parents who lost their children to the evil of caste discrimination.

Sukhadeo Thorat is former chairman, UGC. The views expressed are personal

UGC regulations force a needed reckoning

THE UNIVERSITY Grants Commission's new regulations against discrimination in higher education — the UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026 — are significant and welcome. They have sparked protests on the grounds of overreach and there are accusations that it ignores upper-caste concerns. Yet, the context that produces them shows why they are much needed. UGC data provided to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education in 2025 shows that over the last five years, the number of reported complaints of caste-based discrimination on educational campuses has gone up exponentially — from 173 in 2019-20 to 378 in 2023-24. It makes the regulations, which replace those from 2012, both urgent and necessary. If the 2012 regulations officially recognised social discrimination, the new ones call out caste discrimination in classrooms by its name and move the needle by institutionalising mechanisms of redress.

Certainly, the framework they put in place is not beyond critique. Despite Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's assurance that misuse will "not be allowed against anybody", there will be challenges. The inclusion of Other Backward Classes (OBC), while welcome, will need to be addressed with rigour. Concerns have also been raised about the possibility of false complaints of discrimination, and over the feasibility of timelines prescribed for inquiries, which may strain under-resourced institutions. The threat of punitive action for non-compliance, including derecognition, has stoked anxieties. For the regulations to succeed, checks and balances and safeguards against misuse, and a commitment to due process, will be critical.

The backlash against the regulations, however, cannot mask the reality that had forced an overdue recognition in the Mandal moment. The fact is that privilege reproduces itself through access, language and cultural capital, that inequality is often due to historical exclusion. Ever since the implementation of affirmative action, classrooms have become more diverse. But caste prejudice still operates in covert and less recognisable registers. The UGC's new regulations are not perfect, but they force a reckoning with that reality. Addressing entrenched inequities always provokes discomfort. But pretending they no longer exist would mean shirking the constitutional obligation of equality for all.

INDIAN EXPRESS (P-11), 29 JANUARY 2026

New UGC regulations make the invisible visible

SATISH DESHPANDE

THE EXPRESSION "the elephant in the room" has an interesting entry in Wikipedia that links it to (among others) the writers Fyodor Dostoevsky and Mark Twain. It is used to refer to "an obvious problem or difficult situation that people do not want to talk about". Judging by the reports of widespread protests against it, the University Grants Commission's "Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Regulations, 2026" seem to have ended the long ignorance of the social discrimination "elephant".

Until the 2010s, no national policy document on education ever mentioned discrimination in the sense that the 2026 regulations use it. The Radhakrishnan Commission on university education (1948-49) uses it, but in a sense that would be called "reverse discrimination" today, to object to a reservation policy involving "the rationing of seats among members of different communities" in effect in the (then) Madras state. The Kothari Commission only uses the word discrimination to speak about unfair treatment of different levels of teachers, or in the older sense of considered judgement. In these two documents, concern for social justice is expressed in a mostly economic sense.

Though it came much later, the Yash Pal Committee (2009), too, uses "discrimination" only to speak of unfair distinctions made between different kinds of universities. The 1986 National Policy of Education does not use the word at all. It is only in 2012, in the UGC Regulations on equity in higher education (which the current regulations replace) that social discrimination first finds official mention.

The absence of discrimination from early official policy documents is not surprising for two reasons. The first is that post-Independence policy focus was on enabling access to education. Discrimination within higher education was not an issue because (barring exceptions) it was confined to a tiny, socially homogeneous, privileged minority. The vast majority of India's newly created citizens — especially women, lower castes, tribals, the poor, the disabled, and even most upper-caste men — were unable to access higher education in any meaningful sense.

ILLUSTRATION: [illegible]

The second reason concerns the ideological strategies of the nationalist movement. Led almost entirely by affluent upper-caste Hindu men, Indian nationalists sought to downplay divisions and inequalities in the effort to unite the masses for nation building. Divisions were repositioned as "diversity" — something to be celebrated — and inequalities were renamed "backwardness" — something that the "weaker sections of society" unfortunately suffered from.

This nationalist ideology lost credibility from the late 1960s onwards. By the 1970s, issues of caste, communal and gender discrimination and oppression began to become visible. Moreover, beginning in the 1990s and into the 2000s, higher education experienced a truly astonishing expansion of enrolment, which, together with the extension of reservation to the OBCs, completely transformed its social composition. But it was not until the 2010s that discrimination in higher education received sustained attention.

In the space of less than two decades, Indian higher education has gone from being a relatively small, homogeneous space dominated by a privileged minority, to becoming a vast, socially diverse mass of young adults. Conflicts around discrimination are part of the spectrum of social frictions that such momentous and rapid changes inevitably bring.

The new regulations must be welcomed not for what they do or don't do but for the crucial shift they mark, perhaps unknowingly. Whatever be its sins of omission and/or commission, the new statute signals the end of the era of regrettable "backwardness" and virtuous "diversity" as euphemisms for social discrimination of various kinds. These euphemisms either simply masked discrimination (diversity) or made it into an act of nature, a crime without a perpetrator (backwardness). This allowed for the deliberate misrecognition of policies aimed at redressing discrimination (like reservation) as welfare policies. More crucially, it made the agents, the doers of discrimination, vanish from view.

Making a complex, entrenched problem like social discrimination visible is a necessary step without which solutions, even partial ones, are impossible. It is certain to make our immediate future more contentious and fraught. The only thing worse than taking this step forward is to not take it. Despite its vexations, a visible elephant is infinitely better than an invisible one.

RAISING CHILDREN FOR CAREERS THAT DON'T EXIST YET

DR SANKU BOSE

If you are a parent in 2026, chances are you are carrying a quiet but persistent worry. You watch your child study, enroll, explore, hesitate and change their minds, and you wonder whether all this uncertainty will lead to a "stable" career. It is a fair concern. The truth is that the career map you grew up with no longer exists and trying to force your child to navigate the future using yesterday's directions will only increase anxiety, not security.

For most who are parents now, careers once followed a reassuringly linear path. One chose a degree to pursue early after high school, stuck to it, found a job, and then built a life around that identity. The world of work rewarded predictability and punished deviation. Today, that model is dissolving rapidly. Careers are no longer ladders to climb but portfolios built from skills, projects, short stints, reinvention, and continuous learning. This shift can feel highly unsettling for those who equate stability with permanence. Yet for your child, adaptability will be the new stability.

The rapidly evolving global employment landscape makes this clear. According to the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Future of Jobs Report, millions of roles will be disrupted by the end of this decade by the powerful forces unleashed by Artificial Intelligence (AI). But millions of new ones will also be created, resulting in a net gain of jobs though not the same jobs, and not requiring the same skills. What this means for parents is simple but profound: the future is not jobless, it is different. The danger lies not in change itself, but in being unprepared for it.

Education systems in India are already responding to this reality. Under the UGC's NEP-aligned undergraduate frameworks, universities are moving away from rigid, single-discipline degrees towards multidisciplinary pathways that allow students to combine interests, technology with psychology, economics with data analytics, science with entrepreneurship, humanities with digital skills. This reflects the real world, where problems are rarely confined to one domain and employers increasingly value those who can think across boundaries.

Schools, too, are slowly shifting away from rote learning towards competency-based evaluation and application-oriented thinking. Affiliation boards like the CBSE are trying not merely to reduce syllabus load, but to reduce fear. Yet despite these changes, parental anxiety has arguably never been higher. Unfortunately, fear does not remain contained. Children absorb it, silently and deeply.

What often gets drowned in this noise is the fact that while tools and technologies change, certain human capabilities never go out of demand. Critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, ethical judgement and emotional resilience remain irreplaceable. AI can process information faster than any human ever will. It cannot build trust, navigate ambiguity with empathy, or take responsibility for decisions that affect people. These qualities are learned over time, through experience, encouragement, and psychological safety.

So what does wise parental support look like in 2026? It begins by shifting the conversation. Instead of obsessing over which job your child will get, focus on which skills they are developing that will remain valuable over decades. Encourage them to build a portfolio identity rather than a single-label career. Respect structured exploration like internships, short courses, volunteering and research projects as legitimate steps toward clarity, not signs of confusion.

Equally important is what parents must avoid. Constant comparison with peers erodes confidence. Dismissing new or unfamiliar career paths closes doors before they are even explored. Pursuing only "stability" at the cost of mental wellbeing often backfires. Above all, letting parental fear dictate a child's future does more harm than any market disruption ever could.

> **PARENTS NEED** TO MAKE PEACE WITH THE FACT THAT THEIR CHILD'S CAREER WILL NOT BE LINEAR, BUT IT CAN BE MEANINGFUL, RESILIENT AND FULFILLING. ADAPTABILITY IS NOT FAILURE, IT IS TODAY'S FUNDAMENTAL REQUIREMENT FOR SUCCESS

Parents need to make peace with the fact that their child's career will not be linear, but it can be meaningful, resilient, and fulfilling. Adaptability is not failure, it is today's fundamental requirement for success. In a world of constant change, the greatest gift a parent can offer their child is emotional stability, faith in their abilities and pursuits, and encouragement to experiment and evolve.

The world of work will keep transforming. Technologies will advance. Changes shall be disruptive. But children raised with confidence, curiosity and character will always find their way. The best parenting approach is to become a stability provider, offering emotional safety and encouragement to build real skills, and to learn continuously. And when parents stay calm, children learn perhaps the most important career skill of all, how to face uncertainty with courage.

The author is the Vice Chancellor of Sister Nivedita University and Group CEO, Techno India Group. A visionary leader, he is shaping future-ready institutions and inspiring students to lead with purpose

EDUCATORS BAT FOR AI, RESEARCH FUNDING, SKILLING & START-UP SUPPORT

OUR CORRESPONDENT

From enhanced investment in research, innovation, and digital infrastructure, emphasis on funding for higher education, especially in emerging domains such as artificial intelligence and clean energy and thrust on vocational and skill-based education through national programmes and structured funding, the educationists have strong expectations from the Union Budget 2026. Education is one of the important sectors that creates the foundation of the talent pool which drives other sectors. Before Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presents the Budget on February 1, 2026, at 11 am, marking her ninth consecutive budget, the education sector expects the minister to look into the key areas to empower India's learners and innovators.

According to Dr Nipun Sharma, CEO, TeamLease Degree Apprenticeship, the Budget should position apprenticeships as a core driver of India's workforce and economic growth strategy. "Through structured, high-quality experiential learning, apprenticeships align India's skilling ecosystem with productivity growth and the objectives of SDG 4, strengthening long-term employability and economic resilience," he said. He also mentioned that additional incentives for engaging women apprentices can strengthen workforce diversity and improve female participation in the labour market.

> BUDGET 2026 SHOULD FOCUS LESS ON LAUNCHING SCHEMES AND MORE ON BUILDING CAPABILITY, INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE, FACULTY TRAINING, AND DIGITAL SYSTEM INTEGRATION MUST BE TREATED AS CORE INVESTMENTS

Many educationists believe that the Budget must prioritise the systems that turn student interest into lasting outcomes and attracting international students is surely the first step. "The NITI Aayog roadmap rightly emphasises quality and governance. What India now needs are robust recruitment, conversion and academic delivery mechanisms that give students confidence that studying in India leads to meaningful academic and professional returns," said Aritra Ghosal, Founder and CEO, OneStep Global. Educators are also of the opinion that the Budget must present an opportunity to strengthen India's position as both a source and destination for global talent. Targeted funding for merit-based scholarships, joint research pathways, and international faculty and student exchange programmes can help retain knowledge, drive innovation, and deepen global collaboration. This can happen with sustained public-private partnerships and outcome-linked investments and the Budget can play a defining role in positioning India not just as a talent supplier, but as a global education and assessment hub. Prof Indranil Manna, Vice Chancellor, Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra, looks forward to measures that enhance investment in research, innovation, and digital infrastructure in India's education system. He also mentioned that the Budget should emphasis on funding for higher education, especially in emerging domains such as AI, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing will be critical to building future-ready talent. "Continued support for start-up incubation and industry-academia collaboration can further allow students and researchers to shape ideas into scalable, real-world solutions. At the same time, focused allocations for scholarships and skill development will help ensure equitable access to quality education across regions. Today, more students in India study in private universities and colleges than in government-funded institutions. Hence, the government must provide them with identical opportunities and support in the forthcoming budget," he said.

Many like Arti Dawar, CEO, Shiv Nadar School, believe that India's education sector is at an important juncture, with nearly 50 percent of the country's 1.4 billion population under the age of 25. This demographic dividend calls for sustained and strategic investment. The target of increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio from 28.4 percent to 50 percent by 2035 reflects a commitment to expanding access. "Continued progress will depend on faster implementation of NEP 2020, supported by teacher training, institutional capacity building, and outcome-driven reforms. It will also require universal digital infrastructure to bridge the urban-rural divide, deeper collaboration between industry and academia, and sustained investment in skills development and research," she said.

Shweta Sastri, Managing Director, Canadian International School, Bangalore, also echoed similar sentiments. According to her, sustained investment in teacher training, modern learning spaces, and technology-enabled classrooms is essential to fostering inclusion, curiosity, and critical thinking. "There is also a timely opportunity to strengthen STEM education and skill-oriented, application-based learning from an early stage, helping students develop and strengthen future-ready skills," she said. The educator also expects the Budget to lower interest rates on education loans, which can further ease financial pressures on families and improve access to quality higher education options. Prof (Dr) Davinder Narang, Director, Jaipuria Institute of Management, believes support for MSMEs, startups, and digital infrastructure can further boost innovation and job creation and expects the Union Finance Minister to consider these crucial areas. At the same time, he mentioned rational taxation and inflation control, which are essential to provide relief to the middle class and sustain consumption. "A balanced, reform-oriented budget can accelerate economic growth while ensuring long-term stability," he said.

SCHOLARSHIPS

TRIBUNE, (P-6), 29 JANUARY 2026

Eminence on hold

Flagship schools expose execution gaps

PUNJAB's Sikhiya Kranti was projected as a turning point for government education. It was a campaign that would combine upgraded infrastructure with improved learning outcomes. But the non-functioning of two Schools of Eminence in Ludhiana exposes a contradiction: reform driven more by visibility than by preparedness. These schools, envisioned as flagship institutions for meritorious students from modest backgrounds, have buildings in place but lack teachers, laboratories and basic academic infrastructure. Years after construction, classrooms remain empty. This is not an isolated lapse. Across Punjab, chronic teacher and principal shortages have been reported.

Hurried inaugurations that often precede readiness on the ground seem to have taken precedence. The emphasis on ceremonies and plaques has drawn political criticism, with opposition parties calling Sikhiya Kranti a publicity exercise. Even within the education system, teachers have flagged how routine academic work and enrolment drives were disrupted during the 54-day campaign. Such concerns underline a deeper issue: education reform cannot be reduced to infrastructure rollouts or festival-style launches. There are also signs of policy inconsistency. Admissions policies and alleged discrimination within Schools of Eminence reveal unease among teachers and parents. When elite tracks are created within government schools without adequate staffing or clarity, the promise of equity — central to public education — risks being diluted.

Governance transitions cannot be an excuse. Projects initiated under previous governments must be completed with urgency, not allowed to drift in administrative limbo. Children cannot afford political pauses. Each academic year lost weakens trust in the government school system and pushes families towards private alternatives. If Sikhiya Kranti is to live up to its name, the state must recalibrate its priorities — from optics to outcomes. Filling vacancies, ensuring operational readiness and instituting accountability are less visible than inaugurations, but far more transformative.

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ASIAN AGE (P-5), 30 JANUARY 2026

New UGC rules open to misuse, rethink needed

The Supreme Court order staying the implementation of the the University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, holding its language "vague" and its sections capable of "being misused" has come as a serious setback to the attempts to right some of the grievous wrongs committed on our campuses in the name of caste. The Union government must act expeditiously, addressing the concerns the apex court has raised with a view to making it a fool-proof document that all right-thinking Indians can welcome.

The court has observed that the Regulations, which sought to address the issue of discrimination of students from the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes face on campuses, "will divide society and will leads to many very dangerous impact". The court has also pointed out they have no safeguards against potential misuse as in the case of several other such laws.

The order has come even as some parts of the country have been witnessing protests against them in a re-run of the events that unfolded after the then Union government decided to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission that provided for reservations in government jobs and admissions in educational institutions for people from the Other Backwards Classes in 1990. The whole episode reflects the reality that even 75 years as a democratic republic have not doused the flames of casteism and attempts to do the same still face serious challenges.

The regulations stem from an earlier Supreme Court directive to create a "very strong and robust mechanism" for tackling real incidents of discrimination that have had fatal consequences. The apex court had suggested its formation while hearing a public interest litigation moved by the mothers of Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi, two students who committed suicide unable to stand the acts of caste-based discrimination they suffered on their campuses.

While the concerns the apex court has flagged may be left to the political class to address, the government must move to set up a committee of experts to relook at the Regulations at the earliest

The Regulations, notified on January 13, require all higher education institutions in India to form Equity Committees to eradicate discrimination against all stakeholders by taking appropriate preventive and protective measures. They will be formed with the heads of the institution at the chair and representation from various stakeholders, including from the communities the regulations seek to protect, and are vested with powers to enforce its decisions. Failure to comply with the regulations will attract punitive action from the UGC.

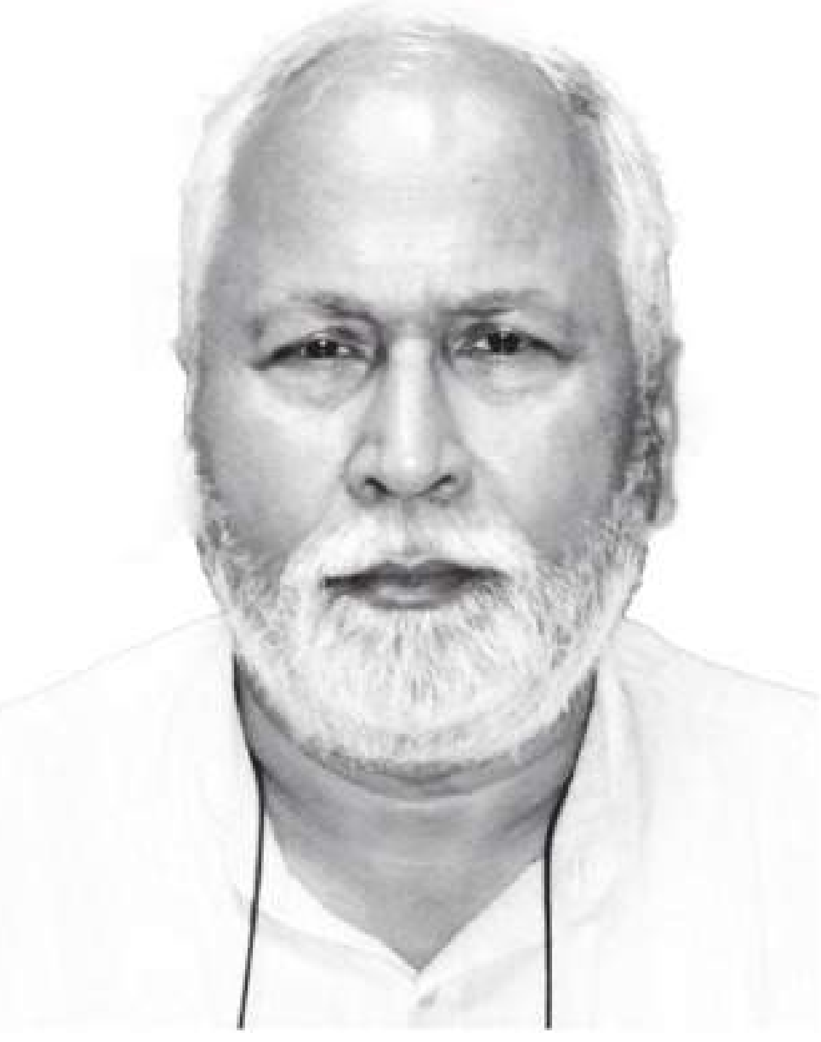
Two sections in the Regulations have triggered protests. They are Regulation 3(c) which defines "caste-based discrimination" as discrimination faced only by members of the SC/ST/OBC community, as it excludes general category stakeholders saying they can also face caste-linked bias; and Regulation 3(1)(f) that defines "discrimination" as any unfair, differential, or biased treatment or any such act against any stakeholder on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, gender, place of birth or disability as it does not cover people from higher castes. The representation given to the SC/ST/OBC communities in the Equity Committees is discriminatory, the protesters held.

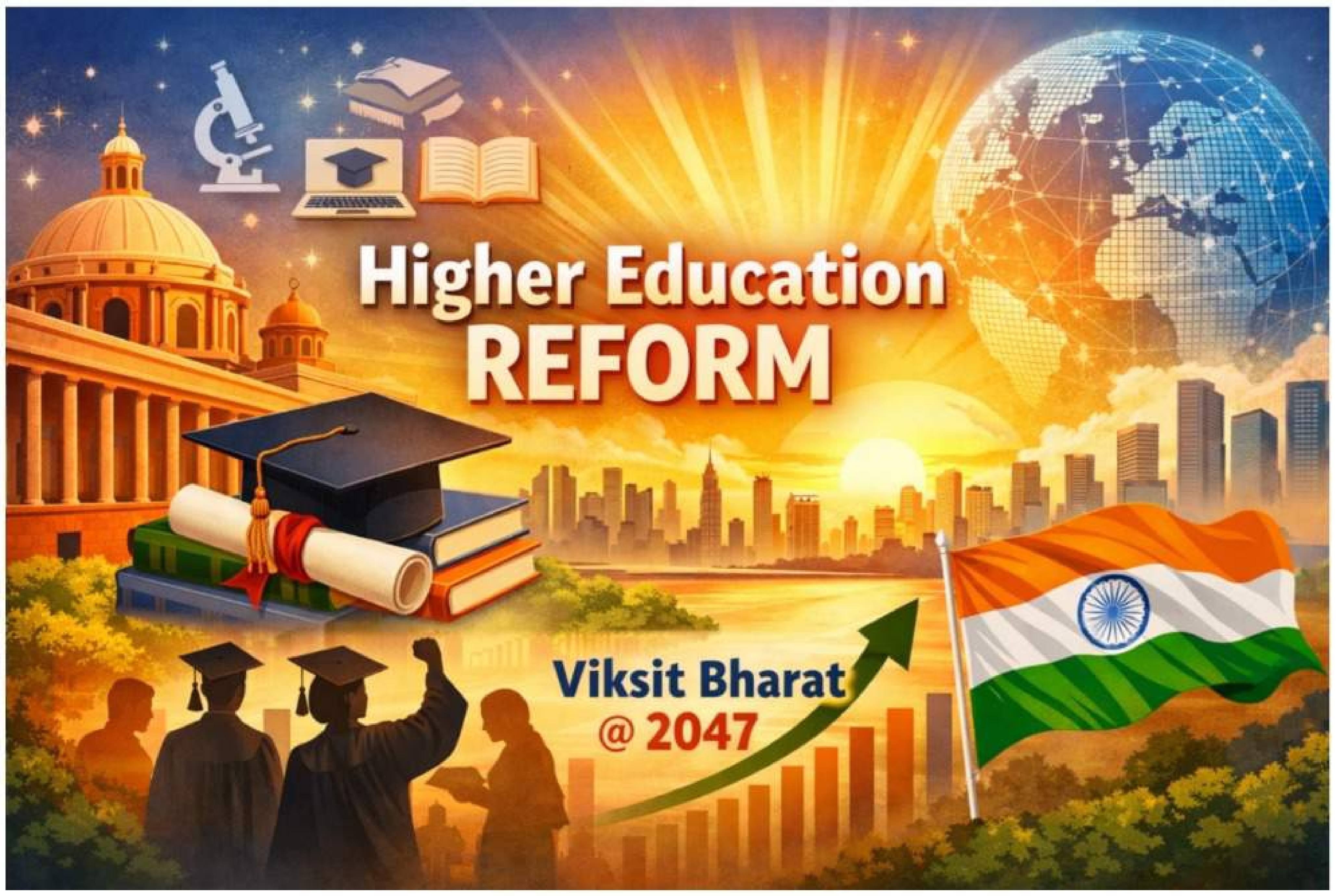
While the societal concerns the apex court has flagged may be left to the political class to address, the call for setting up a committee of experts to take a relook at the Regulations and introducing safeguards against its misuse is a workable suggestion which the Union government must take up at the earliest. Equity safeguards, as Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin said, are not a matter of choice but an unavoidable necessity.

VBSA BILL: THE CASE FOR STATUTORY REFORM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

OPINION

PROF. RAGHAVENDRA P. TIWARI





India's current higher education system is large, ambitious, and structurally stalled. With over 1,100 universities and tens of thousands of colleges, it has achieved scale without coherence and access without excellence. Decades of reform have expanded enrolments but left governance largely untouched. The result is a system where ambition is plentiful, but institutional capacity to deliver it is weak. It is from this context, not ideological preference, that the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Anusthan (VBSA) Bill, 2025 arises. To treat it as an unnecessary centralising impulse is to ignore the depth of the failures it seeks to address.

The VBSA Bill represents a deliberate break from India's compliance-heavy, permission-driven higher education regime. By creating a new class of autonomous, research-led institutions, it shifts authority away from bureaucratic control towards outcome-based accountability. The premise is straightforward: globally competitive universities cannot function when academic decisions are entangled in regulatory approvals, procurement delays, and fragmented oversight. Innovation thrives on speed, clarity, and responsibility, not circulars.

At the heart of the Bill is a redesigned governance architecture. The proposed institutional structure vests authority in compact, expert-led boards with a clear majority of eminent academics, researchers, and domain specialists, alongside limited government representation to safeguard public purpose. This is not ambiguity; it is intent. Regulator-driven micromanagement is replaced with professional governance, clear executive authority, and transparent accountability. In brief, VBSA institutionalises autonomy rather than dispensing it administratively.

Critics invoke federalism, but India's problem today is not excessive coordination, it is incoherence. Universities operate within a maze of regulators, ministries, funding agencies, and compliance regimes, often receiving contradictory signals and facing prolonged delays. Accountability is diffused, outcomes are unclear, and autonomy remains more rhetorical than real. Faculty vacancies of 30–40 per cent persist not due to lack of talent or funding, but because recruitment decisions are trapped in multi-layered approvals. Research grants go unspent as procurement stretches into years, rendering laboratories obsolete before they become operational. These are not marginal inefficiencies; they are structural pathologies. Defending them in the name of federal balance reduces federalism to a procedural veto rather than a framework for effective governance.

For too long, reform has been pursued through schemes rather than statutes. Centrally sponsored initiatives have delivered episodic gains but little institutional continuity. Without legal backing, priorities shift with administrative discretion. Universities remain governed more by circulars than by law, more by compliance than by performance. The VBSA Bill seeks to correct this by placing reform on a statutory footing, ensuring durability, clarity, and accountability.

This statutory clarity matters because India's educational expansion has far outpaced its capacity for knowledge creation. Despite accounting for nearly a fifth of the world's college-age population, India produces a disproportionately small share of global research output and hosts only a handful of globally competitive universities. Public investment in research remains stuck around 0.7 per cent of GDP, but funding alone is not the binding constraint. Research remains institutionally marginal, administratively constrained, and poorly integrated with national priorities.

The National Education Policy 2020 correctly diagnosed these failures and articulated a vision of multidisciplinary universities, research-led teaching, institutional autonomy, and outcome-based governance. Yet implementation has been uneven precisely because the institutional scaffolding was never fully rebuilt. Without statutory reinforcement, reform risks administrative drift. VBSA seeks to supply the missing architecture to a vision already endorsed in principle. Without it, NEP risks joining the long list of Indian policy documents admired for aspiration rather than execution.

Federal critics argue that national coordination threatens diversity and autonomy. In reality, diversity is already constrained, by fragmentation. Universities today align curricula and research agendas not with regional needs or academic strengths, but with eligibility criteria for centrally designed schemes. This is central influence without accountability. Properly designed coordination, backed by law and evaluated by outcomes, can reduce regulatory clutter and expand genuine institutional autonomy.

International experience offers perspective. Systems in Germany, the UK, and China have used national coordination to pool resources, set strategic research priorities, and reduce duplication, without collapsing into uniformity. The lesson is not that coordination is harmless, but that its impact depends on design, safeguards, and accountability. India's current model combines weak coordination with heavy procedural control, a worst-of-all-worlds arrangement.

India produces nearly a million STEM graduates annually, yet continues to lose a significant share of its most promising researchers to systems that offer clearer governance, faster decisions, and genuine autonomy. In a world where knowledge production is a strategic asset, delay is not neutral. It carries real costs, in talent flight, underperforming institutions, and diminished global influence.

The choice before Parliament is therefore not between reform and federalism, but between managed change and prolonged paralysis. Federal systems endure not by freezing reform, but by shaping it through law, oversight, and democratic accountability. Proceeding with the VBSA Bill, while strengthening safeguards, is not recklessness. In India's higher education landscape, the greater risk today lies not in reform undertaken carefully, but in reform deferred indefinitely.

Views are personal

Prof. Raghavendra P. Tiwari, Vice Chancellor, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda

Principal of Bhainswal Kalan Government College, Suraj Prakash Yadav, teaching final year students in a classroom of the Government Senior Secondary School, Bhainswal Kalan village, in Sonipat district of Haryana. ASHOK KUMAR

Colleges within schools

From just a couple of government colleges in 1966, the year Haryana was formed, the State now has 186. The policy of every school graduate having access to a college within 20 km propelled Haryana into number-driven growth over the past five years. On ground though, Ashok Kumar finds that many colleges are run from school buildings, there are few courses on offer, and an acute shortage of teaching staff leaves students at a disadvantage

When Himanshi, 20, finished school, her heart was set on pursuing a degree in the sciences. But her parents were hesitant to let her go to a college in Haryana's Gohana, around 15 km from their village, Bhainswal, in Sonipat district. The commute, they felt, was a concern. Himanshi was forced to enrol in Bhainswal Kalan Government College. It offered only a BA programme.

Her classmate Ritu, 21, had hoped for a BA degree with Geography as one of her subjects, but, to her dismay, the college didn't offer it. Her parents too were uncomfortable with the idea of her travelling beyond a few kilometres to study.

When they joined, Himanshi and Ritu found themselves back in a school building. The co-educational college in Bhainswal village, just about 80 km from Delhi, has been running from four rooms on the premises of the Government Senior Secondary School in the village for the past six years.

It has a total strength of 81 — 49 girls and 32 boys — and offers BA programmes in Hindi, English, History and Political Science. All students opted for a degree in History, but the college does not have a History teacher.

When Haryana was carved out of Punjab on November 1, 1966, the State had just one university and two government colleges. Now, Haryana has 38 universities, including 10 State and 24 private universities, 186 government colleges, 97 government-aided colleges, and 94 self-financing colleges. These have helped students, especially women, access education, but the lack of infrastructure and an acute teacher shortage have impacted the quality of higher education.

After the National Education Policy 2020 was unveiled, the Haryana government, in a press release, stated that the gross enrolment of girls in higher education in the State was 32%. To meet the national goal of 50% by 2030, they aim to have a college within a 20-km radius of each home, so access is easier, especially for women. Bhainswal College itself caters to just around six villages.

> When the college does not have a campus of its own, students are deprived of many facilities. They don't have a playground, a library, or a laboratory
>
> **ASHWANI KUMAR**
> Assistant professor, Bhainswal Kalan Government College, Sonipat

Posts waiting to be filled

The college principal, Suraj Prakash Yadav, says he wrote many letters to the Director General of Higher Education (DGHE) seeking a History teacher, but all went unanswered. So for the past two years, Yadav, who holds an MPhil in Mathematics and a postgraduate diploma in Computer Science and Applications, has taken it upon himself to teach the subject to students.

"It was a question of the students' future," says the mild-mannered Yadav. He fiddles with a partially torn book – A History of the Modern World – on a table before him in his dimly lit office, which also serves as a library and a staff room.

With him are his two assistant professors, Manjit Singh, who teaches Computer Science and Ashwani Kumar, who teaches Political Science. The three sit in the staff room that has the logo of both the school and the college. Rajender Singh Malik, the principal of Bhainswal's Government Senior Secondary School, from whose premises the college runs, is also there.

"*Ye padh kar phir padhate hain. Raat ko khud padhte hain, phir subah bachchon ko padhate hain* (He studies himself first, then teaches. He studies at night, and then teaches the children in the morning)," Singh chimes in. He and Kumar are the only teachers of the 17 sanctioned posts.

Yadav says he had made a request to the District Higher Education Officer for a History teacher on deputation, but there are only two or three subject teachers in the entire district. In fact, across Haryana, there are only 169 teachers against 250 sanctioned posts. An increased workload demands 445 posts, as per government estimates.

Yadav, who is an associate professor of Computer Science, is not new to this 'out of syllabus' teaching. A few years ago, he taught Mathematics and Statistics to undergraduate students during his posting at a government college in Gurugram, when the subject teacher's post was vacant. "When the post was filled, I began teaching Commerce students Accounts," he says, laughing.

School principal Malik says the shortage of teachers was never allowed to cause any "academic loss" to the students. The staff from both institutes "work together like a family", he emphasises. "The History teacher from our school pitches in whenever they need an extra hand at the college, and the professors from the college return the favour when we need them," he says.

Singh is grateful that the college "at least has a full-time 'principal'", because of which they've managed to run the classes despite the challenges. "When professors visit the placement cell or women's cell, we request them to also hold classes in their respective domains for our students. They oblige out of sheer respect for the principal," he adds.

In 2025, advocate Aman Dahiya filed an application under the Right to Information Act asking for details on teaching staff in government colleges in Haryana. The government's response revealed that there are only 3,334 teachers against 7,986 sanctioned posts in all government colleges and universities. Up to 2,087 guest lecturers bridge the gap between sanctioned and vacant posts. As per an estimate by the Department of Higher Education, the number of sanctioned posts should be revised to 8,572 according to the workload in 2024-25. Dahiya says the higher education system in Haryana has "collapsed". He was shocked to find that a girls' college in Karnal's Nigdhu was functioning from inside a temple. "The government is running away from its responsibility to ensure quality education in schools and colleges. It is instead pushing for privatisation of education," alleges Dahiya.

In the Bhainswal Kalan Government College staff room (left to right): Government Senior Secondary School principal Rajender Malik, assistant professor (Political Science) Ashwani Kumar, assistant professor (Computer Science) Manjit Singh, principal Suraj Prakash Yadav. ASHOK KUMAR/THE HINDU

Colleges without campuses

The land for the Bhainswal College, which has an abandoned primary health centre on it, was allocated six months ago. The building is expected to be ready in a couple of years. Singh says every new college in Haryana runs from school buildings as a stopgap arrangement for a few years, before it gets its own campus.

Political Science professor Kumar says almost half the government colleges in Haryana that came into existence after 2018 don't have their own campuses. In Sonipat itself, he says, the colleges in Baroda, Bhainswal, Ganaur, and Jakhauli, to name a few, are running from school buildings. In Mohana, construction work for the new college building has now begun, he adds.

"When the college does not have a campus of its own, students are deprived of many facilities. They don't have a playground, a library, or a laboratory. At a meeting last year, the DGHE pointed out the gaps in infrastructure in these colleges and directed officials to make up for the shortcomings," says Kumar, who attended the meeting in October 2025.

Echoing his views, Singh adds that the lack of physical infrastructure impedes extracurricular activities such as sports meets, youth festivals and talent search programmes.

Yadav attributes the poor strength in colleges to the lack of infrastructure. He shares an example from his experience: a college in Gurugram saw a surge in admissions after shifting to its own building. "It had only 25 to 30 students in its BA programme till it was in a makeshift building. Students coming to us for admission would say that it does not even look like a college. But when it moved to its own building near Kanhai village, all 160 seats were filled. The building makes a big difference. It changes how students and parents perceive the institute," he explains.

Yadav has an additional charge of three more colleges: Government College (Co-ed), Ganaur; Hindu College of Education, Sonipat; and Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Kharkhoda. The college in Ganaur that came into existence three years ago has 360 students, but no sanctioned posts. The District Higher Education Officer has assigned teachers from different colleges to Ganaur on deputation for three days a week.

"Deputation is a hassle for both teachers and students," says Kumar, citing his own experience of teaching on deputation at the Ganaur college two years ago. He would travel 75 km daily, thrice a week, which took a toll on him physically and mentally. "Deputation disrupts the teacher-student bond. A regular teacher strikes a bond with the students, who show him respect. This bond is missing when someone is deputed for a short time. Both know it is a temporary arrangement," he says.

In fact, the Bhainswal college's two other teachers, of Hindi and English, are on deputation from another college. "They came for only three days a week till last July. Now they come all six days of the week," says Ritu.

Decrease in women's gap years

The Government Girls College in Mohana, around 10 km from Bhainswal, has 10 appointed teachers against 15 sanctioned posts. It came into existence in June 2019, but the college still runs from seven rooms within the premises of a senior secondary school. The construction for the building is under way, and the college administration hopes to start the new academic session in July 2026 for a few classes in its own building. It offers Arts and Commerce streams with a total strength of 160 against 240 seats.

Principal Sandeep Khasa says that despite the criticism and shortcomings, government colleges in rural areas – established over the past decade – are a blessing for women students. He's been involved with the college since its inception and notes that about a fourth of the women students in the first year had come back to education after a few years of graduating from school.

Khasa explains: "When an Arts stream student takes a break after senior secondary, it's often due to non-academic reasons. Six years ago, when this college started, about a fourth of the girls had a one- to two-year gap after school. Parents were hesitant to send them to city colleges due to safety and transport concerns, or they couldn't afford private colleges close to their villages."

Where a private college charges ₹20,000 annually for an Arts course, a government college charges less than one-fourth of that. "These colleges have made a difference. Many girls wouldn't have studied further otherwise." He adds that the number of girls with gap years has steadily decreased. Mohana, Khasa says, is witnessing industrial growth similar to the neighbouring Kharkhoda and Kundli areas in Sonipat, and with the surge in migrant populations, the college intake is sure to rise steadily.

Government aided college challenges

The 97 government-aided colleges in Haryana – privately managed institutions that receive financial grants from the State government to cover staff salaries and other expenses – are grappling with an acute staff shortage.

Surender Singh Rana, general secretary, Government Aided Colleges Principals Association, says that almost 50% of the seats of teaching and non-teaching staff and principals are vacant as per the information gathered by the association from colleges in October 2025.

Of the 97 posts of principal sanctioned by the government, 50 are vacant. Similarly, 1,394 sanctioned teaching posts – out of 2,831 – are vacant. Also, 785 non-teaching posts are vacant out of 1,608 sanctioned. Rana says requests seeking permission to fill the vacancies are turned down by the authorities.

"Aided colleges offer significantly lower fees compared to private institutions. So it becomes difficult for them to hire teachers on their own when the government backs down. For instance, Chhotu Ram Arya College of the Tika Ram Education Society (in Sonipat) has 52 posts, but 44 are vacant. We hired staff for the vacant posts from our own resources, though we are not able to pay them anywhere on a par with regular faculty," says Rana, principal of the Tika Ram College of Education, Sonipat.

He claims that the higher education scenario in the State has deteriorated over the past decade, with the University Grants Commission and the Haryana government tightening the noose around funds to aided colleges, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. Haryana's financial allocation to education in 2013-14 was 14.77% of the budget. For 2024-25, this dropped to 10.39%.

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EDITORIAL

THE CAMPUS QUESTION

The new Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026, notified by the University Grants Commission, have reopened a sensitive but unavoidable national conversation: how should India confront discrimination inside its universities without deepening new fault lines in the process? The regulations replace a largely advisory 2012 framework with a binding compliance regime and have triggered protests, litigation, and political reassurance in equal measure. The government argues that the rules are meant to institutionalise equity and provide enforceable protection against discrimination. Critics fear the architecture may inadvertently create new exclusions while attempting to remedy old injustices. At stake is not merely a regulatory tweak but the moral grammar of Indian higher education — how campuses define fairness, grievance, and belonging in a society still negotiating the afterlife of caste.

The intent behind the regulations is difficult to dismiss. India's universities have long struggled with the reality that formal equality does not automatically translate into lived equality. The tragedies associated with Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi exposed not only individual acts of cruelty but structural silences in grievance redressal. The Supreme Court's insistence that the UGC revisit its framework was itself an acknowledgement that advisory guidelines lacked teeth. The 2026 regulations attempt to correct that by mandating equal opportunity centres, equity committees with representation from historically disadvantaged communities, online reporting portals, and helplines. They impose accountability on institutional heads and threaten sanctions for non-compliance. In a country where administrative indifference often dilutes progressive policy, enforceability is not a trivial improvement. The message is clear: discrimination is no longer a matter of campus culture alone; it is a regulatory violation.

Yet regulation in a plural society demands precision. The controversy has emerged primarily from the definition of caste-based discrimination and the composition of equity committees. The petition before the Supreme Court argues that by limiting explicit institutional protection to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, the regulation adopts a narrow understanding of caste injury. Critics contend that discrimination is not always unidirectional and that a framework built to correct historical injustice must still preserve procedural neutrality. The anxiety expressed by sections of the unreserved category is not merely about representation; it is about the fear that grievance mechanisms may become asymmetrical in perception, if not in law. Whether those fears are exaggerated or grounded in experience is a matter the Court will examine. But the process reveals a deeper unease: equity policies must be seen as instruments of justice, not instruments of faction.

This tension reflects a larger philosophical dilemma in Indian public policy. Equity is not the same as sameness; it is a corrective tool meant to compensate for entrenched disadvantage. But corrective policy must constantly negotiate legitimacy in a democracy where every citizen demands recognition. Universities are particularly fragile ecosystems in this regard. They are spaces where social hierarchies are both reproduced and challenged, where young citizens learn the grammar of dissent, and where institutional trust is easily eroded. If grievance structures are perceived as exclusionary, they risk losing the moral authority necessary to function. Conversely, if they dilute their focus in the name of universal appeasement, they risk abandoning the very communities they were designed to protect. The challenge is not choosing between inclusion and fairness; it is designing a mechanism that convinces all stakeholders that inclusion itself is a form of fairness.

The government's reassurance that the regulations will not be misused is politically necessary but administratively insufficient. Any regulatory framework dealing with discrimination must anticipate misuse, not because complainants are suspect but because institutions require procedural safeguards to maintain credibility. Clear definitions, transparent inquiry processes, and appellate mechanisms are essential. The regulations gesture toward enforcement but leave room for interpretational ambiguity. In practice, much will depend on how equity committees function: whether they become bureaucratic checklists or living forums for dialogue. The success of the framework will not be measured by the number of complaints filed but by the confidence communities place in the system. Trust is built through fairness that is visible, not merely promised.

Indian higher education system stands at an inflection point. Expanding access, demographic diversity, and social mobility have made campuses mirrors of a restless republic. Regulatory intervention was inevitable. The question is whether this intervention can rise above the binary politics that now surround it. A mature democracy must accept that equity frameworks will provoke discomfort; discomfort is often the first sign of institutional change. But discomfort should not harden into alienation. The Supreme Court's scrutiny offers an opportunity to refine the language of the regulations without diluting their purpose. A carefully calibrated framework — one that protects historically marginalised communities while reaffirming universal procedural fairness — can transform protest into participation.

Universities cannot become arenas where competing identities seek bureaucratic victory over one another. They must remain spaces where the idea of justice itself is debated and deepened. The 2026 regulations are an imperfect but necessary attempt to confront discrimination structurally. Their future will depend less on political rhetoric and more on administrative wisdom. If implemented with transparency, humility, and willingness to evolve, they could mark a turning point in how Indian campuses understand equity. If mishandled, they risk becoming another chapter in the politics of grievance. The choice lies not only with the UGC or the courts, but with the institutions and communities that must live with the consequences.

DAINIK JAGRAN (P-10), 30 JANUARY 2026

सुप्रीम कोर्ट की सही रोक

सुप्रीम कोर्ट ने उच्च शिक्षा संस्थानों में जातिगत भेदभाव रोकने के लिए विश्वविद्यालय अनुदान आयोग यानी यूजीसी की ओर से लाए गए नए नियमों पर रोक लगाकर कलह और अविश्वास के वातावरण को ही दूर करने का काम किया है। सुप्रीम कोर्ट ने प्रथमदृष्ट्या यह पाया कि नए नियमों में अस्पष्टता है और इसके कारण उनका दुरुपयोग होने की आशंका है। अच्छा होता कि इसे यूजीसी की ओर से ही भांप लिया जाता और उसकी ओर से ऐसे नियम बनाए जाते, जो दुरुपयोग की आशंकाओं को जन्म नहीं देते। इससे इन्कार नहीं कि उच्च शिक्षा संस्थानों में यदा-कदा भेदभाव के मामले आ जाते हैं, लेकिन उन्हें रोकने के लिए यूजीसी ने जो नए नियम बनाए, उन्हें देखकर ऐसा लग रहा था, जैसे शिक्षा संस्थानों में बड़े पैमाने पर भेदभाव हो रहा था और एससी-एसटी-ओबीसी वर्गों के लाखों छात्र पीड़ित हो रहे थे। निःसंदेह ऐसी स्थिति नहीं थी। सच यह है कि शिक्षा संस्थानों में जातिगत भेदभाव की कुछ ही शिकायतें सामने आती थीं और उनमें भी चुनिंदा ही सही पाई जाती थीं। आखिर ऐसे में ऐसे नियम क्यों बनाए गए, जो यह प्रतीति करा रहे थे कि शिक्षा संस्थान जातिगत भेदभाव के गढ़ बन गए हैं? जब नियम-कानून बनाते समय कोई समस्या अतिरंजित दिखाई जाती है तो समाज में गलत संदेश तो जाता ही है, राजनीतिक रोटियां सेंकने वालों की भी पौ बारह हो जाती है। यूजीसी के नए नियमों के मामले में भी ऐसा ही हुआ। इन नियमों को लेकर विभाजनकारी राजनीति होने लगी और आरक्षित एवं सामान्य वर्गों को एक-दूसरे के खिलाफ खड़ा करने का काम होने लगा।

आखिर यूजीसी ने यह आभास क्यों नहीं किया कि समय के साथ जैसे सार्वजनिक स्थानों और कार्यस्थलों पर जातिगत भेदभाव कम हुआ है, वैसे ही शिक्षा संस्थानों में भी स्थिति सुधरी है? यह समझना भी कठिन रहा कि नए नियमों में भेदभाव को जाति-आधारित भेदभाव क्यों कर दिया गया और झूठी शिकायतों के लिए सजा के प्रविधान को क्यों हटा दिया गया? फिलहाल कहना कठिन है कि यूजीसी के नियमों में किस तरह के संशोधन-परिवर्तन होंगे, लेकिन यह ध्यान रखा जाए तो बेहतर कि किसी भी तरह के भेदभाव रोकने के उपाय ऐसे नहीं होने चाहिए, जो समाज को जाति के खांचों में विभक्त दिखाएं। इस संदर्भ में सुप्रीम कोर्ट ने यह सही कहा कि हमें उस स्थिति में नहीं जाना चाहिए, जहां भिन्न-भिन्न वर्गों के लिए अलग-अलग शिक्षा संस्थान हों। देश को ऐसे वातावरण की ओर बढ़ना चाहिए, जिसमें कहीं भी किसी तरह के भेदभाव के लिए कोई गुंजाइश न रहे और यदि कहीं कोई समस्या सामने आए तो उसका समाधान इस तरह किया जाए, जिससे सामाजिक सद्भाव को बल मिले। शिक्षा संस्थानों में तो ऐसा वातावरण होना और भी आवश्यक है।

NAV BHARAT TIMES (P-10), 30 JANUARY 2026

सुधार का मौक़ा

सुप्रीम कोर्ट ने UGC के नए नियमों के खिलाफ दायर याचिकाओं पर सुनवाई करते हुए जो टिप्पणियां कीं, वे सवर्ण समाज की चिंताओं की पुष्टि करती हैं। शीर्ष अदालत ने अगले आदेश तक इन नियमों पर रोक लगा दी है। देशभर में हो रहे विरोध-प्रदर्शन और नियमों के दुरुपयोग की आशंकाओं को देखते हुए यह रोक लगाई गई है।

दुरुपयोग की आशंका । UGC ने शैक्षणिक परिसरों में समानता के लिए Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations को लागू किया था। लेकिन, इसमें जातीय भेदभाव की जिस तरह व्याख्या की गई है और निगरानी समितियों का जो स्ट्रक्चर तय है, उसने सवर्ण समाज के एक धड़े में गंभीर चिंता को जन्म दे दिया। इसी के खिलाफ याचिका दायर की गई थी और सुप्रीम कोर्ट ने भी माना कि नियम अस्पष्ट हैं और इनका दुरुपयोग हो सकता है।

UGC नियमों पर रोक

बहस और विवाद । शैक्षणिक परिसरों में होने वाले भेदभाव चिंताजनक हैं, लेकिन नए नियमों के रूप में इसका जो समाधान पेश किया गया था, उसमें संतुलन और समग्रता की कमी थी। एक वर्ग को सुरक्षित महसूस कराने के लिए किसी दूसरे वर्ग को असुरक्षित नहीं किया जा सकता। नियम लाए गए थे समानता के लिए, पर इनके लागू होते ही बहस और तीखी हो गई। मुक्त, समावेशी और सभी के साथ समान व्यवहार करने वाले जिस कैंपस की कल्पना UGC ने की थी और जिसे सुप्रीम कोर्ट ने भी अपनी टिप्पणी में जिक्र किया है, वह ऐसे माहौल में नहीं बन सकता।

कैंपस की संवेदनशीलता । शैक्षणिक परिसर सबसे संवेदनशील जगहों में से एक हैं। यहां की घटनाएं उन स्टूडेंट्स पर असर डालती हैं, जिन्हें आगे चलकर देश और समाज की दिशा तय करनी है, तो यहां कोई भी बदलाव सोच-समझ कर और उसके प्रभाव का आकलन करने के बाद लागू होना चाहिए। अदालत ने ठीक कहा कि देश की एकता शैक्षणिक संस्थानों में दिखनी चाहिए।

सभी शामिल हों । इस मामले में केंद्र व UGC से जवाब मांगा गया है और एक्सपर्ट कमिटी बनाने का सुझाव है। सुप्रीम कोर्ट की चिंता साफ झलकती है कि देश को जातिविहीन समाज की ओर बढ़ना चाहिए, न कि पीछे की तरफ। UGC नियमों पर रोक किसी की हार या किसी की जीत नहीं, बस सुधार की कोशिश है। जिन पहलुओं पर अंगुली उठाई गई है, उन्हें सुधारने और जिनको नजरअंदाज किया गया है, उन्हें शामिल करने का एक और मौका है। इस बार इस प्रक्रिया में सभी वर्गों को जगह मिलनी चाहिए।

NBT/10

UGC
छात्रों के भविष्य से समझौता नहीं!

Students protesting against the 2026 UGC regulations at Delhi University. [illegible]

Cracks on campus

Students from the general category or upper castes believe that the UGC's 2026 regulations, introduced mainly to address caste discrimination on campuses, will create a divide and villainise them. They worry about several of its provisions, including the lack of protection against false complaints. While the Supreme Court has stayed the regulations, anger has not yet subsided, report **Abhinay Lakshman** and **Mayank Kumar**

On a crisp January morning, 22-year-old Amit Mishra from Ballia, a first-year student at Lucknow University, marched from the faculty of law to gate number 3 of the campus – a 1.5-kilometre walk. He was joined by 60 others. The banners they carried did not bear logos of political parties or student groups or associations.

The students had come together to protest the 2026 regulations of the University Grants Commission (UGC), a statutory body that regulates higher education in India. Called the Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026, these rules were introduced primarily to address caste discrimination on campuses across the country.

As protests at the university picked up, demonstrations against the UGC's new regulations intensified – not only in parts of Uttar Pradesh, but in Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttarakhand as well. Claiming that the regulations would "divide" campuses along caste lines and "villainise general category students," the agitators demanded that they be rolled back immediately.

"We cannot permit the future of our upcoming generations to be jeopardised," Mishra said.

Delhi
Lucknow
INDIA

What the new regulations say

The 2026 UGC regulations, notified in early January, replaced the version in effect since 2012. In the new regulations, the UGC, for the first time, introduced the term 'caste-based discrimination', defining it as discrimination on the basis of only caste or tribe against members of "Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs)". This was also the first time that the UGC was explicitly protecting OBC students from caste discrimination. The representation of OBC students on campuses has been rising ever since reservations for the category were introduced in higher education in 2006 and [illegible] in the subsequent years.

The UGC introduced this term, along with stricter provisions for grievance redressal mechanisms and institutional accountability, to address concerns that the previous regulations had been inadequate. In 2019, the mothers of Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi – students from marginalised caste and tribal backgrounds, who had died by suicide in 2016 and 2019, respectively, alleging caste discrimination – had approached the Supreme Court. They had emphasised that it was essential to revisit the 2012 regulations.

After seven years of hearings in the Supreme Court, the UGC notified the new regulations on January 13, 2026. Immediately, protests broke out. Students belonging to the general category principally took issue with the definition of 'caste-based discrimination' and the removal, from the final draft, of provisions to act against complaints believed to be false. They argued that the UGC's definition of caste-based discrimination made clear who could be a potential 'victim'. This, they claimed, also indirectly painted 'general category' or 'upper caste' students by [illegible] them [illegible]. Several leaders from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) also opposed the regulations.

Petitions were filed in the Supreme Court of India, challenging the regulations. On January 29, [illegible] of the [illegible], a Bench led by the Chief Justice of India, Justice Surya Kant, stayed the regulations, calling for the UGC to revert to the 2012 rules.

> "I entered DU with a score of over 90%. I was told I had grabbed up a seat because I had availed myself of SC reservation."
>
> ANIKET GAUTAM
> Student, Delhi University

But by this time, the regulations and the discussions around them had already exposed a crack across campuses along caste lines. Widening for over a decade, this crack simply culminated in a flashpoint this January.

Rising anger

One morning, outside the Delhi University (DU) Arts Faculty building in north Delhi, students shouted, "Tum jaatiyon se todoge, hum rashtravad se jodenge (You break us with casteism, we will unite us through nationalism)". With more than a dozen officers of the Delhi Police keeping watch from across the road, students, mostly men studying law, began gathering at the gate. One of them held up a copy of the new regulations, explaining why these should be protested.

Naman Pandey, a third-year LLB student at DU's Law Centre 1, pointed to the definition of caste-based discrimination in a copy of the new regulations. "Does the UGC mean to say that caste discrimination is always going to be committed by general category students," he asked. "Are they saying that general category students do not face caste discrimination?"

Another student said, "This will only create further divisions on campus. Reading this, students from the general category may hang out only with other students from the same category, fearing false complaints."

In front of Lucknow University's Vivekananda Dwar, 400 km away, Mishra said, "These regulations allow swift action against accused students without sufficient safeguards. Our concern is not with acting against genuine offenders; it is that in the absence of provisions, those making false allegations will not be penalised."

Vishal Singh, a sociology student at Lucknow University, added, "As per the regulations, a [illegible] identity will be kept confidential if requested. This is a big loophole. It will be exploited by divisive elements on campus. It is against the principle of natural justice."

In front of DU too, protesters argued that the secrecy of the complainant's identity would prevent them from defending themselves.

Students agitating against the regulations in Delhi, Lucknow, Varanasi, Allahabad, Gorakhpur, and Meerut said that the protests began to take shape after solidarity groups emerged online and [illegible] on platforms, including WhatsApp, Telegram, and X, where a "simple gist of the loopholes in the UGC regulations and their likely adverse consequences" was shared.

Outside the DU's Arts Faculty gate, Pandey pointed to one such chat group. "We left access to the group open so that students from all walks of life could join the protests," he said. "But let me show you what happened within hours of setting it up." He scrolled through the chat till he arrived at one message. It read, *[illegible]* [illegible] a Dronacharya."

Pandey looked up. "What would you call this," he asked. "Is this not caste discrimination against those of the general category and upper castes?"

The message referred to the parable told by Dronacharya, a master archer and teacher of warcraft, in the Hindu epic, Mahabharata. Dronacharya was precluded from teaching anyone but the royal Kshatriyas of the kingdom of Hastinapur. The obligation forced him to refuse teaching to Eklavya, who belonged to a caste considered lower than the Kshatriyas.

He then scrolled further till he found another message, by a fellow student of the law course, mocking the reservations for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), introduced in 2019 by the Union government. Pandey said, "They call it the Sudama quota and make fun of us by calling us 'Sudama quota wale'. (Sudama, a poor Brahmin, is known as Lord Krishna's childhood friend in the Mahabharata.) Can we file a complaint against this under 'caste-based discrimination'?"

In one of the petitions filed before the Supreme Court challenging the 2026 regulations, Mritunjay Tiwari, a post-doctoral researcher at the Banaras Hindu University, has cited slogans and graffiti in higher educational institutions as signs of caste discrimination against general category students or upper castes. The petition referred to slogans such as 'Brahmins leave the campus' being graffitied in December 2022 on a wall inside Jawaharlal Nehru University, and 'Brahmin-Baniyawad Murdabad (Down with Brahmanism-Baniyawad)' being raised at Ashoka University in Haryana in 2024.

It also recalled chants by the Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students' Association in Jawaharlal Nehru University last year, echoing the Mandal era slogan "Tilak, tarazu aur talwar, inko maaro joote chaar" – which means that the tilak representing Brahmins, the balance scale representing the Baniya or trading community, and the sword representing the Kshatriyas or warrior class should be hit with shoes.

"I can promise you that the students chanting these slogans do not understand the difference between Brahmanwad (Brahmanism) and Brahmins," Pandey said, asserting that there is only one way of perceiving these slogans – hostility towards upper caste people. "How will these regulations help us report these complaints as caste-based discrimination?"

Neha Upadhyay, a first-year LLB student at DU, who was among the few women at the protest, added that these new regulations "are further dividing the campus into caste categories". Explaining why she was at the protest, Upadhyay pointed to an incident she had seen on social media. "At Shri Ram College of Commerce (SRCC), a reserved category student complained of caste discrimination when a general category woman he had asked out on a date rejected him. How is this okay," she asked.

On January 20, the SRCC put out a public statement. Acknowledging the rumours circulating on social media, it clarified that "no such alleged act/incident has been reported to the college".

Being 'casteist'

While the protests highlight the divide between the reserved and unreserved categories, the rift has been shaping experiences of students across higher education campuses for a few decades now. The death of Vemula in 2016 galvanised the formation and activism of student groups such as the Ambedkar Periyar Phule Student Circle, which advocate for stricter implementation of the 2012 anti-discrimination guidelines.

Even at DU, Lucknow, and Meerut, students narrated their lived experiences of caste discrimination – manifested in derision towards reserved categories, caste-based name-calling, and "casteist" remarks passed off as "mere jokes" – those from the reserved category, or students from the general category or upper castes, said that it is they who are facing discrimination on campuses.

A 2019-20 student survey conducted among about 300 undergraduate students at the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, had found that [illegible] of respondents across the SC, ST, OBC, and general categories reported [illegible] professors or administrative staff who had made casteist remarks. The survey added that [illegible] general category respondents, [illegible] of OBC respondents, and 26% of SC and ST respondents had reported this.

Observing the protests [illegible] outside the DU campus, Aniket Gautam, a postgraduate student in the political science department, said, "I come from an SC background. I entered DU with a score of over 90%. I remember the remarks I had received for 'grabbing up a seat' because I had availed myself of the reservation. Some people even said they wished they could get SC certificates to enter college campuses."

Gautam, who is associated with the Students' Federation of India, a Left-affiliated outfit, added, "If they want to label these casteist remarks 'banter,' should we also say that referring to a 'Sudama quota' is banter? How is the EWS quota anything but a reservation for upper castes?"

Yet, a few dozen metres away, Pandey asked, "With these new regulations in place, would we ever be able to have free and democratic political discourse? We are terrified of what will happen in an atmosphere like DU [illegible] student union elections. Will allegations made by some general students in the heat of campaigning be understood as caste discrimination?"

Drawing comparisons

While the agitation largely centred on the claim that the 2026 regulations divide campuses, some protesting students have also called for explicit representation of the general category in the monitoring and accountability mechanisms that the UGC plans to establish as part of the regulations.

> "They (students who are not in the general category or who are not upper caste) call the quota for Economically Weaker Sections the Sudama quota and make fun of us by calling us 'Sudama quota wale'. Can we file a complaint of caste-based discrimination?"
>
> NAMAN PANDEY
> Student, Delhi University

However, largely, the protesting students said that the 2012 regulations are better than the 2026 ones. Other sections of society also believe this, though for the opposite reason. They argue that the new regulations have diluted the definition of 'discrimination,' leaving its determination open to interpretation.

The 2012 regulations had defined 'discrimination' and covered varied forms of it, including specific types of discrimination faced by SC and ST students. On the other hand, the 2026 regulations have introduced the term 'caste-based discrimination' and shortened the definition of 'discrimination'. They have eliminated a sub-section on the types of discrimination faced by SC and ST students at various stages of their university education, such as admissions and interviews.

The 2026 regulations have provided for institutions to set up equity squads and equity committees, calling for the representation in these mechanisms of SCs, STs, OBCs, minority groups, women, and persons with disabilities. The 2012 regulations had provided for the appointment of just one official as a liaison officer on campuses to monitor implementation of regulations.

The 2026 regulations also have stricter accountability measures, prescribing punishments for institutions found not following these rules. These include loss of recognition and barring them from offering degrees. These provisions were absent in the 2012 version.

While hearing petitions seeking the strengthening of the 2012 regulations, the Supreme Court was informed about the status of their implementation, including the establishment of SC/ST Cells and Equal Opportunity Cells (EOCs). According to an affidavit submitted to the Court by the UGC, only [illegible] higher educational institutions out of more than 50,000 in India had responded to the regulatory authority's call for reporting. Of these, [illegible] had set up an EOC and [illegible] had set up an SC/ST Cell.

But even as the Court stayed the 2026 regulations, the anger has not subsided. There are calls for a Bharat Bandh, or nationwide strike, on February 1, demanding a full rollback of the 2026 regulations. This anger has largely been directed towards the BJP by upper caste groups in parts of north India, particularly U.P., which is heading towards Assembly elections in 2027.

As [illegible], a Lucknow-based political observer, noted, "Upper castes are the core vote base of the BJP and the key drivers of the party's success in the State. [illegible] office bearers of the party have so far resigned from party posts in some districts, expressing displeasure with the UGC regulations. If they think the ruling party is not protecting their broader interests, it may seriously impact the BJP in U.P."

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Protests against the regulations in Lucknow. [illegible]

TRIBUNE, (P-7), 31 JANUARY 2026

Faith-based science limits

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THE recent revelations about a decade-long government-funded *Panchagavya* research project on cancer at Nanaji Deshmukh Veterinary Science University, Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, raise concerns about public accountability, scientific rigour and responsible use of taxpayers' money. An official probe indicates that Rs 1.9-3.5 crore was spent on cow dung, cow urine, raw materials and travel expenses, though the market value of the materials was far lower. Also, there was little to show in terms of credible scientific outcomes after 10 years of work.

At a time when India's health system is facing challenges, research funds should be used transparently and efficiently. Research must have a scientific basis. Fundamental disease treatment research requires strict methodology, peer review and evidence-based frameworks. The substantial spending on air travel, vehicles and non-essential equipment under this project suggests poor judgment as well as possible mismanagement of public resources, especially when basic cancer research demands robust laboratory capacity.

Clear hypotheses and rigorous oversight are needed. Research projects must also have transparent reporting and measurable results. In this case, after years of funding, tangible research outputs are missing. There is also no evidence of effectiveness against cancer. This calls the project's initial approval and oversight into question.

The controversy underscores the need for stricter research governance, independent audits and a reaffirmed commitment to evidence-based science over speculative or symbolic pursuits. Nanaji Deshmukh Veterinary Science University's defence that all purchases were made according to procedure does not fully address the deeper issue: whether this project met the basic standards of credible scientific research worthy of significant public investment or it succumbed to the difference between science and pseudoscience.

How to distinguish science from pseudoscience? 'Falsifiability' is one of the criteria. The research in question or such research cannot be 'falsified' by another laboratory research. Ad hoc hypotheses used in such research keep them out of the purview of scientific testing. For example, the relation between treatment of cancer and cow dung/cow urine will remain susceptible to one's faith and belief in the karma theory of diseases and diagnosis and the wrath of Sitala Mata. In this case, there is also another belief about religious sanctity accorded to the cow and cow dung; the same status is not accorded to other members of the cow family (Bovidae) or to their dung. This is called the 'protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses', which is not from science but religion and mythology. The cow will be hailed as 'gau mata'.

There cannot be a clear demarcation between science and pseudoscience, but fuzzy boundaries (cow or desi cow?), an indefinitely extendable indicator list (first urine or dung of the morning or the later ones) and an unclear nature (age of the cow, does it matter or dairy cows or not?). This research is a project of pseudoscience.

Ancient Indian health science and indigenous practices will lose credibility due to such research. Only the rigour of systematic review of literature and asking the right questions can take the 'Indian' science to greater heights. But to assert this, we also need to acknowledge that 'science' will remain science only if no adjectives of black or Indian or Hindu or Islamic are added to it. The method of science and science as a discipline are two distinct domains; one may apply the method of science to study a religion, but when science is confined to a region or religion, it will only produce another dogma.

> Only the rigour of systematic review of literature and asking the right questions can take the 'Indian' science to greater heights.

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UGC equity regulations & the controversy

AKSHEEV THAKUR

AMID an uproar by students and political parties, the Supreme Court on Thursday ordered that the University Grants Commission's (UGC) recently notified Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026, be kept in abeyance. The regulations, aimed at preventing caste-based discrimination in higher education institutions, have triggered protests from a section of students, and also left the ruling BJP divided.

A draft of the regulations had been placed in the public domain for feedback in February last year. The document was issued following directions from the Supreme Court while hearing a plea filed by the mothers of Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi, who had questioned the implementation of the 2012 UGC regulations on caste discrimination.

WHAT THE NORMS SAY

The UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, were notified on January 13. According to the UGC, these seek to eradicate discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, gender, place of birth, caste or disability, particularly against the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, socially and educationally backward classes, economically weaker sections and persons with disabilities, and to promote equity and inclusion among all stakeholders in higher education.

The regulations stipulate that no higher education institution shall permit or condone any form of discrimination. It places the responsibility on the head of the institution to ensure strict compliance, granting them all powers necessary for this purpose.

> Supreme Court intervention comes following protests and concerns over their structure and enforcement

IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISM

Every higher education institution was mandated to establish an Equal Opportunity Centre, an Equity Committee and Equity Squads to oversee policies and programmes for disadvantaged groups. The 10-member Equity Committee must include representation from Other Backward Classes, persons with disabilities, SCs, STs and women.

Aggrieved individuals may report incidents of discrimination through an online portal, in writing, or via email to the coordinator of the Equal Opportunity Centre. The Equity Committee is required to convene within 24 hours of receiving a complaint and submit its report to the head of the institution within 15 working days. Equity Squads are tasked with regularly visiting vulnerable spots on campus and submitting reports to the Equal Opportunity Centre.

DEMAND FOR WITHDRAWAL

A section of students, along with BJP office-bearers in Lucknow, have called for withdrawal of the regulations, alleging that they discriminate against students from the general category. They argue that the rules could lead to the "harassment" of general category students and deepen caste-based divisions.

One of the key points of contention is the absence of provisions for penalising "false complaints of discrimination". Protesters have also flagged that institutions face punitive action for non-compliance, which they claim could foster mistrust in classrooms and further polarise students along caste lines.

CONTESTED ASPECTS

While the stated intent of the regulations is to curb caste-based discrimination, these place SCs, STs, OBCs, economically weaker sections and persons with disabilities under a single equity framework. Academicians have questioned this approach, arguing that equating caste-based discrimination with challenges faced due to disability or economic disadvantage is conceptually flawed, as the nature and history of caste oppression are distinct.

DIFFERENCE FROM THE 2012 REGULATIONS

The 2012 UGC regulations did not spell out punitive action against institutions for non-compliance. Under the 2026 regulations, higher education institutions fall under the scrutiny of a UGC-appointed monitoring committee.

If non-compliance is established, institutions may be barred from participating in UGC schemes, offering degree programmes, and running online or distance learning courses.