

Review Article: To Research or Not in India? A Critical Analysis of Institutional Challenges Facing Research Scholars in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

India's higher education system faces a multifaceted crisis that threatens the aspirations of millions of research scholars. These challenges not only stifle intellectual growth but also perpetuate cycles of inequality and exploitation within academia. This paper examines five interconnected systemic challenges: the predatory economics of academic publishing, institutional failures in redressal mechanisms, administrative paralysis due to governance vacuums, endemic corruption in faculty recruitment, and the systemic silencing of dissent. Drawing on recent case studies, government data, and institutional analyses, this paper argues that the current research ecosystem in India is fundamentally misaligned with principles of academic integrity, scholar welfare, and knowledge generation. This misalignment undermines India's ambitions for a knowledge-driven economy, demanding urgent structural interventions. The paper concludes with recommendations for substantive institutional reform.

Keywords: Research scholars, higher education India, predatory publishing, faculty corruption, governance vacuum, grievance redressal, doctoral precarity, institutional reform, academic exploitation, publication economics.

JEL Codes: I23 (Higher Education - Research Institutions), I28 (Education: Government Policy), D73 (Bureaucracy; Administrative Processes in Public Organizations; Corruption)

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INTRODUCTION

India hosts approximately 24,000 PhD graduates annually, yet paradoxically faces a crisis of credibility, opportunity, and institutional integrity in its higher education system. This paradox arises from systemic barriers that prioritize metrics over merit, turning scholarly pursuit into a survival struggle. India's higher education system has expanded substantially in scale and diversity, while Tamil Nadu stands out within this landscape for a much higher participation rate, denser institutional network, and stronger female and socially inclusive outcomes. Despite these strengths, pervasive institutional flaws erode potential gains, particularly for research scholars navigating doctoral programs. (Confederation of Indian Industry & Deloitte, 2024) The traditional promise of doctoral research, to contribute to knowledge, secure academic employment, and advance societal progress has become contingent on navigating an obstacle course of financial exploitation, institutional

dysfunction, and human rights violations (Gupta V. , 2025). India's expanding higher education system is marked by a paradox in which ambitious policy narratives on innovation, global rankings, and knowledge economies coexist with a severe neglect of the material and psychosocial conditions of research scholars. Doctoral candidates, who constitute the primary knowledge-producing workforce within universities, increasingly confront intersecting vulnerabilities that transform the PhD trajectory from a site of intellectual exploration into one of prolonged precarity. Persistent financial insecurity due to modest and frequently delayed fellowships, coupled with the high out-of-pocket costs of fieldwork, data access, and research software, compels many scholars to depend on family support, debt, or precarious forms of academic labor. These constraints are exacerbated by inadequate research infrastructure, uneven digital access, bureaucratic delays, and the intensification of a "publish or perish" regime that often prioritizes tick-box publication requirements over substantive scholarly development. Within this context, asymmetric supervisor-scholar power relations, weak grievance redressal mechanisms, and the normalization of unpaid departmental work contribute to experiences of academic marginalization, harassment, and isolation. The cumulative effects of these structural pressures are visible in widespread mental health distress, stalled or protracted doctoral timelines, and growing disillusionment among early-career researchers, with women and scholars located in resource-poor institutions facing compounded disadvantages in terms of safety, care responsibilities, and mobility. Simultaneously, a narrow and volatile academic job market, limited industry recognition of doctoral training, and slow, opaque recruitment processes deepen career uncertainty and encourage outward mobility to countries with more supportive doctoral ecosystems, thereby reinforcing patterns of brain drain. Understanding the plight of research scholars as a systemic rather than individual problem is therefore crucial to interrogating India's aspiration to become a globally competitive knowledge economy and to formulating policy interventions that center security, equity, and well-being in doctoral education. (Gupta V. , 2025) This paper investigates whether pursuing research in India remains a viable path for aspiring scholars or whether the systemic dysfunction has rendered it inimical to genuine scholarship. These intersecting pressures reveal a research ecosystem where survival often trumps scholarship, necessitating a comprehensive policy reevaluation.

The scope of this crisis is particularly acute in state universities and affiliated colleges, especially in economically developing states like Tamil Nadu, where the majority of India's research scholars pursue their doctorates. The article on "Against Publication: The Case for Academics to Write Less" argues that contemporary academia is trapped in a "publication matrix" in which research is commodified, outputs are quantified, and the intrinsic purposes of scholarship and teaching are systematically marginalized. Sagar contends that institutional publication targets and ranking-driven metrics compel academics to prioritize volume, speed, and indexation over intellectual depth, thereby encouraging premature, superficial, or strategically tailored work rather than slow, rigorous inquiry. Editorial experiences illustrate how journal publishers' demands for continual "growth" in article numbers erode peer review and fact-checking standards, while pressures on scholars generate questionable practices such as duplicate publication, honorary co-authorship, fake peer review, and citation markets. (Sagar, 2025). Unlike elite central universities (5.17 percent of India's 1,043 universities) which maintain relatively transparent recruitment processes, the 450 state-affiliated colleges (43.14 percent of total universities) and 409 private universities (39.21 percent) remain breeding grounds for corruption, exploitation, and academic fraud. (Khaddakar, 2024)

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The article on "Vyapam: India's deadly medical school exam scandal" analyses the Vyapam scandal in Madhya Pradesh as a systemic corruption nexus surrounding professional entrance examinations, particularly for medical education, with profound implications for meritocracy, public trust, and human security. Originating in the early 2010s but rooted in earlier patterns of paper leaks and impersonation, the scandal involved organized cheating through hired impersonators, leaked question papers, manipulated answer sheets, and the post-exam doctoring of scripts, effectively converting admission into a marketised commodity. The scale was unprecedented: thousands of accused and arrests, hundreds of pending fugitives, and an estimated large number of "illegal appointments," revealing deep institutional capture of the examination authority Vyapam by politicians, bureaucrats, middlemen, and complicit educators. The article highlights the role of whistle-blower Dr. Anand Rai, whose long-standing contestation of irregularities and repeated death threats illustrate both the risks of dissent and the entrenched nature of the network. A further disturbing dimension is the cluster of at least 30-plus

deaths among accused and associated individuals, many in ostensibly accidental or unexplained circumstances, which has fuelled public suspicion and media scrutiny, even if direct causal links remain contested. Politically, the scandal severely tarnishes the image of the long-ruling state government and raises questions about the quality and legitimacy of medical professionals produced under such compromised conditions. More broadly, the article frames Vyapam as symptomatic of a nationwide crisis in competitive examinations, where high stakes, weak oversight, and collusive corruption erode the normative foundations of merit-based selection in India's public sector and professional education systems. (Biswas, 2015)

Over 11,000 sanctioned faculty positions remain unfilled across central universities, Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), signaling a substantial human resource deficit in India's public higher education system. In 45 central universities alone, 6,180 posts of professor, associate professor and assistant professor are vacant out of 18,956 sanctioned positions, indicating that nearly one-third of the approved teaching strength is not in place. In the IIT system, 4,502 of 11,170 sanctioned faculty posts are unoccupied, while in the IIMs, 493 of 1,566 posts remain vacant, revealing similarly high vacancy ratios in premier technical and management institutions. Disaggregated data on reservations show that among the vacant positions in central universities and IIMs, 961 are earmarked for Scheduled Castes, 578 for Scheduled Tribes, 1,657 for Other Backward Classes, 643 for Economically Weaker Sections and 301 for persons with disabilities, underscoring the magnitude of unfulfilled social justice commitments within faculty recruitment. The Union Education Minister has reportedly directed all centrally funded higher education institutions to undertake recruitment in "mission mode", while simultaneously emphasizing that vacancies and recruitments constitute a continuous process and that central universities, being autonomous, follow their own regulatory recruitment procedures. The Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Teachers Cadre) Act, 2019, applies reservation norms to all posts in the teachers' cadre in central educational institutions, except those specifically exempted, and explicitly disallows the de-reservation of posts earmarked for reserved categories. Collectively, these data highlight a structural tension between expansion of sanctioned posts, institutional autonomy in hiring, and the effective implementation of statutory reservation, with significant implications for teaching quality, inclusiveness and the governance of India's higher education sector. (Business Today Desk, 2022)

The article on "Assistant professors recruitment scam: How to stop it ?" argues that assistant professor recruitment in India has evolved into a systemic scam driven by opaque processes, disregard for University Grants Commission (UGC) norms, and fragmented hiring by individual colleges. The author notes that thousands of universities and lakhs of affiliated colleges recruit assistant professors, but UGC's guidelines, especially the provision that a postgraduate with NET qualification is sufficient without a PhD which are routinely circumvented. Institutions informally reintroduce the PhD requirement at the shortlisting stage to reduce large applicant pools, thereby excluding many NET-qualified candidates and subverting the original policy intention of widening access. A second structural problem arises from decentralized recruitment, where each affiliated college issues separate advertisements and conducts direct interviews, generating multiple points of discretionary power. This dispersed arrangement, according to the author, creates fertile ground for patronage, rent-seeking, and non-meritocratic selections that can persist for decades without effective higher-level scrutiny. As an alternative, the article advocates a centralized model in which the university (or a state-level commission) issues a single advertisement, conducts a written examination to shortlist applicants, and then organizes interviews through a common selection committee whose final lists are allotted to colleges. Citing the example of Uttar Pradesh, where the Higher Education Commission and Public Service Commission already follow such consolidated procedures for aided and government colleges, the author presents this as evidence that transparent, exam-based recruitment is administratively feasible. The piece concludes by urging other state governments, the Union Education Ministry, and the UGC to replicate this model to curb corruption, standardize recruitment, and protect the integrity of academic appointments. (Gupta, 2022)

The article on "Curb corruption in recruitment process instead of constantly changing rules, UGC urged" reports contestation around the University Grants Commission's (UGC) 2023 decision to make NET/SET/SLET the mandatory minimum eligibility for direct recruitment of assistant professors, while rendering the PhD requirement optional. While some aspirants and teacher associations welcome the uniform test-based criterion, several academics argue that repeated regulatory shifts over the past 15 years have generated uncertainty and do not address the core problem of corruption in faculty recruitment. Former Madurai Kamaraj University professor S. Krishnaswamy contends that appointing non-PhD teachers weakens research capacity, even if classroom

teaching remains feasible, and criticizes the UGC for “meaningless rules” instead of democratizing recruitment and empowering students. Leaders from the UGC-qualified Guest Lecturers Association highlight that the order may disadvantage PhD holders whose degrees fall outside the 2009 and 2016 UGC regulations, while long-standing violations of UGC norms by state universities and aided colleges have gone unpunished. They further note that Tamil Nadu has failed to fill permanent vacancies in government colleges for eight years, exacerbating precarity for qualified candidates. Save Higher Education Forum representatives emphasize that abrupt reversals on PhD norms are unfair and call for more substantive reforms such as cancelling Paper I, offering recruitment tests in regional languages, conducting SET regularly, and legally empowering authorities to curb malpractice. Overall, the article suggests that rule changes around eligibility have limited value without strong enforcement mechanisms, transparent recruitment, and systematic action against corruption in higher education hiring (Ramanujam, 2023)

The article on “The dark side of academia” interrogates how sexual harassment, coercion, and caste-gendered power asymmetries are structurally embedded in Kerala’s higher education institutions, despite their professed commitment to enlightenment and equity. Through narratives of women research scholars, faculty, and activists, it shows how supervisory authority, control over fellowships, authorship, and career opportunities are leveraged to solicit sexual compliance, enforce silence, and punish resistance via academic delay, mental harassment, and reputational attacks. The piece also traces the historical absence and contemporary weakness of formal redress mechanisms, demonstrating that Internal Complaints Committees under the POSH Act frequently function as symbolic bodies captured by dominant political-bureaucratic networks, which often blame victims and shield perpetrators. By linking individual testimonies with emblematic cases and legal advocacy, the article highlights the cumulative loss of women’s academic labor, the normalization of “mental torture” as an informal sanction, and the profound information gaps among students about institutional safeguards. Overall, it advances the argument that academia’s gendered violence is sustained not merely by deviant individuals but by power groups and institutional cultures that render campuses unsafe workplaces and hostile research environments for both women and other marginalized scholars. (Nair, 2024)

The article on “Subscriber Writes: Corruption in permanent faculty recruitment in Indian state universities.” argues that corruption in permanent faculty recruitment within Indian state universities is widespread and structurally embedded, with serious implications for academic quality and equity. Applicants for regular posts in affiliated and state private colleges are frequently asked for very high illicit payments, enabled by institutional autonomy in hiring and the acute oversupply of PhD holders relative to secure academic positions. This monetary extraction exploits early career researchers’ economic vulnerability, family obligations, and lack of non-academic opportunities, effectively converting public higher education jobs into purchasable commodities rather than merit-based appointments. The author links this corrupt recruitment regime to declining pedagogic standards, weakened research culture, and the reproduction of unethical norms among students, who encounter faculty selected through bribery rather than scholarly excellence. Under such conditions, state universities and their affiliated colleges struggle to attract competitive research funding and remain marginal in national rankings, even though they represent the bulk of India’s higher education system. This governance failure undermines the National Education Policy 2020, which seeks to overhaul institutional structures and position India as a global knowledge hub, and conflicts with the UN Sustainable Development Goals on quality education and strong institutions. To address these distortions, the article proposes centralizing or standardizing faculty recruitment for state universities under a single national authority and enforcing stringent anti-corruption measures against institutions engaging in monetary exploitation. Such reforms are framed as prerequisites for restoring trust in academic appointments, improving research output, and aligning India’s higher education sector with its developmental and global aspirations. (Khaddakar, 2024)

The Supreme Court in *Mandeep Singh v. State of Punjab* (2025) annulled the recruitment of 1,091 Assistant Professors and 67 Librarians in Punjab’s government degree colleges on the ground of arbitrariness and non-compliance with binding regulatory norms. The Court held that the State had impermissibly bypassed the Punjab Public Service Commission and diluted the rigorous selection architecture prescribed by the University Grants Commission (UGC) Regulations, 2010, which Punjab had validly adopted in 2013 by incorporation to raise standards in higher education. The judgment emphasizes the constitutional primacy of standards set under Entry 66 of List I over State action under Entry 25 of the Concurrent List, holding that UGC Regulations operate as binding norms once adopted and cannot be displaced by ad hoc executive decisions. Despite the subsequent

repeal of the 2010 Regulations by the 2018 Regulations at the central level, the Court reasoned that, owing to adoption by incorporation, the 2010 framework continued to govern Punjab until the State formally adopted the 2018 regime. The Bench was particularly critical of the State's decision to replace a multi-parameter selection process (including Academic Performance Indicator scores and viva-voce) with a single multiple-choice examination conducted in "burning haste," adding posts already requisitioned to the Commission and completing recruitment within about two months. This procedural redesign, justified in the name of expediency, was found to undermine qualitative assessment and violate Article 14 due to lack of fairness, transparency, and rational justification. While acknowledging the hardship to selected candidates, the Court noted that they lacked an equitable claim because the recruitment was under challenge throughout and appointments were made subject to judicial outcome. It therefore ordered the entire process to be quashed and directed the State to recommence recruitment in conformity with the applicable UGC Regulations and through the proper constitutional mechanism. (Mandeep Singh v. State of Punjab, 2025)

India's research publication output has expanded dramatically over the past two decades, positioning the country among the world's top contributors in terms of volume but not in citation impact or research influence. This quantitative surge has not translated into commensurate gains in global visibility, intellectual originality, or academic integrity, revealing a deepening quality crisis in Indian academia. The article highlights that institutional incentives in India overwhelmingly reward publication counts in indexed journals such as Scopus and Web of Science, turning research into a bureaucratic requirement rather than a critical, knowledge-generating enterprise. Despite India ranking high in total documents, its comparatively low H-index and limited presence of Indian journals in the top 'Scimago' quartile indicate weak average impact and underdeveloped domestic journal ecosystems. This environment encourages problematic practices, including plagiarism, data fabrication, and "salami slicing," alongside publication in predatory journals that offer rapid, minimally reviewed outlets for career advancement. Dependence on Western journals compounds these structural issues, as Indian scholars confront high rejection rates and editorial norms that may marginalize region-specific or Global South perspectives. At the same time, Indian-authored books and journals remain underutilized in university curricula, while outward student mobility to perceived higher-quality systems in the Global North continues to rise. The authors argue for a holistic reorientation of India's research governance away from numerical targets and towards impact, methodological rigor, ethical conduct, and societal relevance. Suggested reforms include embedding ethics training throughout academic careers, strengthening peer review and editorial standards in Indian journals, supporting research in regional languages, and incorporating qualitative assessments of scholarly contribution into evaluation frameworks. Building a robust indigenous publishing ecosystem is presented as essential for reclaiming universities as sites of critical inquiry and inclusive, contextually grounded knowledge production (Aneesh MR & Viji B , 2025)

The article on "Sorry State of India's Doctoral Programmes" diagnoses a pervasive decline in the quality of doctoral work in Indian universities, illustrated through cases of blatant plagiarism, trivial empirical analysis, and theses resembling low-level tutorial notes rather than original scholarship. The author argues that while a small group of elite institutions (notably select IITs, IISERs and IISc) uphold global standards, the broader system is marked by weak supervision, lax evaluation, and widespread academic misconduct, with diligent external examiners often being the only line of defense against substandard dissertations. The central explanation advanced is the poor research caliber of faculty, whose inadequate training, low commitment to inquiry, and regulatory violations undermine both the supervision process and the research culture that doctoral candidates experience. The article concludes that systemic reform must prioritize strengthening research faculty quality, urging the University Grants Commission and Ministry of Education to treat this as the core structural problem to be addressed through concrete policy and regulatory interventions. (Singh, 2025)

Assistant professor recruitment scams can be reduced only through a combination of rigorous credential verification, transparent procedures, and strong legal and institutional deterrents. **Structural safeguards:** Recruitment agencies and universities should use end-to-end digital workflows in which applications, degree verification, and merit lists are processed through tamper-proof portals linked directly to recognised university databases and government education councils. Server-level logs, time-stamped records, and automated cross-checks of intake capacity (for example, whether an institution could legitimately have produced the number of degree-holders claimed) can flag suspicious clusters of candidates and backdated qualifications. **Verification and audits:** Before issuing appointment orders, appointing authorities should mandate independent

verification of degrees via APIs or secured data-sharing arrangements with universities, rather than relying on paper mark sheets carried by candidates. Periodic post-recruitment audits by an external oversight body, with random sampling of appointees' credentials and performance of forensic checks on digital records, can further deter fraud networks that rely on weak ex-post scrutiny. **Accountability and deterrence:** Clear criminal liability must extend not only to candidates using forged credentials but also to brokers, institutional officials, and members of selection committees who enable the fraud, with compulsory reporting to vigilance and higher education regulators. Blacklisting of implicated institutions, cancellation of fraudulent appointments with recovery of salaries, and public disclosure of scam outcomes can strengthen normative deterrence and restore trust among genuine applicants. **Participatory oversight:** Finally, grievance redress platforms that allow candidates and teachers to anonymously flag anomalies in recruitment, combined with civil-society and media monitoring of large recruitment drives, can provide early warning signals of systemic manipulation before it becomes entrenched. (News Desk, 2025)

The Economics of Academic Publishing: Privatized Knowledge, Privatized Costs

The Scopus Barrier

The most immediate crisis facing Indian research scholars is the publication mandate enforced by universities, particularly the requirement for Scopus-indexed or UGC-CARE-listed journal publications before thesis submission (Gupta V. , 2025). This requirement, ostensibly designed to ensure quality control, has become a mechanism of financial and institutional gatekeeping. Scopus-indexed journals frequently charge article processing fees (APCs) exceeding ₹75,000 per publication approximately one-third of a doctoral scholar's annual stipend (Gupta V. , 2025). The University Grants Commission (UGC) acknowledges that many universities require a minimum of two publications in "reputed" journals certified by the institution before the research scholar may submit their synopsis, the gateway document for doctoral thesis work (Sagar, 2025). Such costs transform essential academic milestones into prohibitive financial hurdles, disproportionately affecting scholars from modest backgrounds.

The Cascading Effect: Institutional Inconsistency

The catastrophic consequence of this mandate is institutional inconsistency. Universities recognize journals differentially; a Scopus-indexed journal accepted by one university is rejected by another, forcing scholars to pursue multiple publications across various journals to satisfy conflicting institutional criteria (Sagar, 2025). This inconsistency has rendered approximately 100 research scholars unable to progress to synopsis submission at any given time in major universities across Tamil Nadu alone, effectively blocking their pathway to degree completion (Sagar, 2025). This patchwork recognition system creates arbitrary roadblocks, prolonging PhD timelines and amplifying financial distress.

The Predatory Journal Economy

The economics of academic publishing have spawned a parallel ecosystem of predatory journals. Lesser-known Scopus-indexed journals charge as little as ₹5,000 per publication, offering publication guarantees without rigorous peer review. The article on "Indian PhDs, professors are paying to publish in real-sounding, fake journals. It is a racket" analyses the emergence of a parallel marketplace in India where intermediaries facilitate publication of low-quality or fabricated research in ostensibly legitimate, often Scopus-indexed journals, in exchange for relatively modest payments from academics and doctoral candidates facing intense publish-or-perish pressures. It describes a system of agents, compromised editors, and ghostwriters who collectively enable rapid, transactional publication that bypasses rigorous peer review and normal scholarly gatekeeping. The piece argues that such practices erode the credibility of Indian research, contaminate the scientific record with unreliable findings, and ultimately undermine public trust in academic expertise and the idea of evidence-based knowledge. Commentators cited in the report warn that, if left unchecked, this ecosystem may have long-term consequences for evaluations of Indian scholarship in global academia and for the capacity of science to function as a trustworthy arbiter of truth. The narrative thus situates predatory and compromised journals not as a marginal aberration, but as a systemic outcome of incentive structures, regulatory gaps, and career anxieties in Indian higher education. (Basu, 2024) . Simultaneously, ghost-writing services proliferate,

enabling scholars and faculty to purchase published papers outright for ₹10,000–₹50,000. The article on “From dreams to drudgery: The PhD scholar’s plight in India” argues that PhD training in India has become a structurally constrained journey marked by poor preparation, weak institutional support, and precarious career outcomes. Drawing on the narrative of a high-achieving physics scholar, it illustrates how aspirations of discovery are undermined by obsolete infrastructure, delayed stipends, overburdened supervisors, and a compliance-driven publication culture that prioritizes mandatory outputs over substantive contribution. The author notes that despite rising PhD enrolments and recent UGC regulatory reforms, research access remains limited, financial, and mentoring deficits persist, and many graduates’ encounter underemployment or employment unrelated to their expertise, in contrast to higher non-academic absorption of PhDs in Western contexts. The piece further foregrounds a pervasive mental health crisis among doctoral candidates, attributing it to chronic uncertainty, isolation, and the long-term effects of an education system that rewards rote learning rather than inquiry. It concludes that incremental regulatory fixes are inadequate without a deeper cultural transformation from credentialism to curiosity, calling for sustained investment in research infrastructure, faculty development, industry–academia linkages, rigorous yet meaningful evaluation, and institutionalized mental health support so that the PhD can once again function as a site of genuine knowledge production and scholarly integrity (Kennedy, 2025). These practices have transformed peer review from a mechanism of quality assurance into a revenue stream and credential currency.

The Opportunity Cost for Scholars

The financial burden of publication falls entirely on research scholars, many of whom receive stipends of ₹31,000–₹37,000 monthly (if UGC-CSIR Junior Research Fellowships are awarded) and many receive no stipend whatsoever. The requirement to pay ₹75,000+ per publication represents an insurmountable barrier for scholars from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, effectively creating a wealth-based hierarchy of access to doctoral completion.

Institutional Failure: The Absence of Redressal Mechanisms

The Reality of Supervisor Exploitation

Indian research scholars operate within a power asymmetry so acute that it borders on institutional servitude. The hierarchical structure of Indian academia, rooted in cultural norms of deference to authority, has enabled research guides to demand services entirely unrelated to scholarly work: running personal errands, babysitting, driving, household maintenance, and other forms of menial labor. An article on “Research students suffer supervisor exploitation” portrays systemic exploitation of doctoral researchers in Indian universities, highlighting how supervisory power is routinely abused through sexual harassment, financial extraction, and the imposition of non-academic labour. Research scholars are depicted as structurally vulnerable because completion of their degrees, and hence academic careers, depend almost entirely on the goodwill of guides who can delay evaluation, block opportunities, or collectively deny alternate supervision. The piece documents practices such as supervisors demanding authorship without intellectual contribution, appropriating conference travel, expecting personal services, and soliciting expensive “gifts” or hospitality around key Ph.D. milestones, which effectively transform scholarly relationships into quasi-feudal ones. While acknowledging that some supervisors maintain ethical, student-centred mentorship, the narrative frames these as exceptions in a broader culture where regulatory pushes for mandatory Ph.D.s have increased supervisors’ bargaining power and created fertile ground for coercion, patronage, and gendered vulnerability. (Jayaram, 2015)

The vulnerability of scholars derives from the absolute discretionary power guides possess: they determine publication approval, thesis defense timelines, and ultimately, degree completion. This unchecked authority fosters environments ripe for abuse, where scholars’ futures hinge on compliance rather than merit.

Sexual Harassment and the Silence

Sexual exploitation and harassment are endemic but dramatically underreported. The Human Resource Development Ministry reported 75 documented cases of sexual harassment from universities in 2018 alone, though institutional barriers to reporting suggest actual incidents are substantially higher. (Nair, 2024)

The Absence of Institutional Grievance Infrastructure

Despite legal mandates requiring grievance redressal committees, the reality of institutional support is negligible. Empirical accounts underscore a chilling gap between mandated protections and lived realities of institutional neglect. Research scholars report:

- Unawareness of institutional sexual harassment committees
- Fear that challenging supervisors would result in career termination
- Absence of confidential counseling support
- Zero institutional mechanisms to address non-academic exploitation
- Retaliation against scholars who file complaints

The All-India Council for Technical Education mandates four committees at technical institutions (Internal Complaints Committee for sexual harassment, SC/ST atrocities investigation, anti-ragging, and grievance redressal), yet compliance remains largely ceremonial. State universities and affiliated colleges frequently lack even these nominal structures.

Governance Vacuum: Administrative Paralysis and Institutional Directionlessness

The Vice-Chancellor Deficit

Indian universities operate under severe administrative dysfunction rooted in prolonged vice-chancellor vacancies. Many state universities have operated without permanent Vice-Chancellors for extended periods, with acting registrars managing institutional functions far beyond their administrative purview (P'Rayan, 2025). This governance vacuum creates:

- Paralysis in institutional decision-making
- Inability to enforce standards or discipline faculty misconduct
- Absence of institutional vision or strategic planning
- No recourse for scholars when grievances arise

Prolonged leadership voids thus cascade into operational chaos, leaving scholars vulnerable amid stalled reforms.

The Centre-State Tiff and University Autonomy

The tension between central regulations, state government control, and university autonomy has rendered Indian universities structurally dysfunctional. Universities remain caught between multiple regulatory authorities, the UGC, state collegiate education directorates, and state governments, each with competing mandates. This fragmentation prevents coherent institutional governance and leaves scholars unprotected. (P'Rayan, 2025)

Case Study: Salary Arrears and Institutional Paralysis

One particularly egregious case known to the author exemplifies this dysfunction: a teaching professional worked in a state-aided institution for five years (2017–2022) without receiving salary arrears due to bureaucratic entanglement between the Joint Directorate of Collegiate Education and the employing institution. This five-year wage theft represents not individual negligence but systemic inability to resolve administrative matters affecting human welfare. Such cases exemplify how governance gaps entrench precarity, eroding trust in public higher education institutions.

Corruption as Institutional Culture

Faculty Recruitment: The Bribery Mechanism

Corruption in academic faculty recruitment represents a structural crisis that directly undermines research quality and institutional integrity. The UGC, through its authority to set standards for higher education, has delegated faculty hiring authority to college management bodies. This discretion has been systematically weaponized for financial extortion. (Khaddakar, 2024)

Early career researchers and PhD holders seeking faculty positions are explicitly demanded to pay bribes ranging from ₹3,00,000 to ₹5,00,000 (approximately \$3,600–\$6,000 USD) for permanent teaching positions. This practice has become institutionalized rather than exceptional. Normalizing such transactions commodifies academic careers, sidelining qualified candidates in favor of financial leverage.

2023–24 Academic Year: Arappor Iyakkam (anti-corruption NGO) exposed that 224 colleges showed fake faculty members, with 353 individuals simultaneously employed in multiple colleges. The ghost faculty issue first came to light when the anti-corruption NGO Arappor Iyakkam revealed that 353 individuals were shown as working simultaneously in multiple engineering colleges in 2023–24, prompting the state government to establish a three-member inquiry committee. Subsequent internal investigations at Anna University indicated that around 2,000 faculty positions for 2024–25 had been filled through fraudulent appointments, with hundreds of faculty members being falsely depicted as employed in multiple institutions at once. While more than 200 colleges were reportedly involved, professors have criticized the state government for targeting only university officials rather than taking parallel action against the institutions. (The Times of India, 2025)

The Consequence: Quality Collapse

The impact of corruption-driven faculty hiring is not confined to institutional governance, it directly undermines educational quality. Bribery-appointed faculty frequently lack requisite qualifications, subject expertise, and commitment to student welfare. The result is measurable in India's workforce productivity: 94 percent of India's workforce joins the informal sector rather than skilled formal employment, indicating that higher education institutions have fundamentally failed to equip students with meaningful skills. This outcome signals higher education's failure to deliver skilled graduates, perpetuating economic underperformance.

The Victimization of the Honest

In this corrupt ecosystem, institutional honesty becomes a liability. Consider the case of the five-year salary arrears cited above: the affected employee's attempt to obtain legitimate wages through proper channels resulted in five years of unpaid labor due to bureaucratic complexity deliberately exploited by colleagues and administrators. The employee's adherence to institutional procedures backfired against them, while corrupt administrators suffered no consequences.

This systematic punishment of institutional honesty creates a perverse incentive structure where:

- Dishonesty is rewarded (bribes secure positions; fraud proceeds without investigation)
- Honesty is punished (legitimate claims take years to resolve; truth-telling invites retaliation)
- Institutional hypocrisy becomes normalized

The Silencing of Dissent: Institutional Retaliation and Cultural Conformity

The Mechanisms of Silencing

Indian academia has developed sophisticated mechanisms to suppress questioning, critique, and institutional dissent. When research scholars or junior faculty question authority or administrative decisions, they face:

- Social ostracism and professional isolation
- Deliberate exclusion from committees and opportunities
- Labeling as "rebels" or "troublemakers"
- Delays in degree completion and career progression
- Loss of institutional support and mentorship

The Cultural Roots of Institutional Conformity

This suppression of dissent reflects broader cultural patterns in Indian academia wherein hierarchical authority is treated as sacrosanct and questioning authority is interpreted as personal attack or institutional disloyalty. The result is an environment where:

- Intellectual critique is conflated with insubordination
- Good-faith institutional disagreement invites professional consequences
- Scholars internalize the expectation that survival requires conformity
- Institutional reform becomes impossible because reform advocacy itself is punished

The Research Consequence

The silencing of dissent directly undermines research integrity. Genuine scholarship requires the freedom to challenge prevailing assumptions, interrogate existing methodologies, and propose alternative frameworks. When questioning authority becomes professionally dangerous, research becomes performative, designed to satisfy supervisors and institutional gatekeepers rather than to advance knowledge.

The Cumulative Crisis: Why Pursue Research in India?

The Rational Analysis

When the five systemic failures are examined cumulatively, the case for pursuing research in India becomes demonstrably weak:

Factor	Impact	Consequence
Publishing Economics	₹75,000+ per publication; mandatory publications; variable institutional recognition	Financial barrier; progression delays; inequality-based access
Redressal Mechanism	Absent or ineffective; retaliation risk; sexual harassment	Ongoing exploitation without recourse
Governance Vacuum	Vice-chancellor vacancies; bureaucratic entanglement; no institutional accountability	Institutional paralysis; unresolved grievances
Corruption	Faculty bribery systemic; salary theft normalized; 94 percent informal employment	Quality collapse; institutional illegitimacy; workforce skill deficit
Dissent Suppression	Retaliation for questioning authority; conformity enforcement	Intellectual stagnation; research compromised

Collectively, these factors yield a high-risk, low-reward landscape that deters ethical scholarship.

Rational Conclusion: For an economically disadvantaged scholar seeking legitimate employment through transparent, ethical processes, India's research ecosystem offers negative expected value, financial loss, years of delayed progression, exposure to exploitation, and minimal employment prospects upon completion.

The Divergent Pathways

The data suggests India's higher education system has bifurcated:

Pathway A (Elite Central Universities, 5.17 percent of institutions)

- Transparent recruitment
- Established research infrastructure
- Institutional accountability mechanisms
- Global visibility and employment prospects
- Realistic opportunity for genuine scholarship

Pathway B (State Universities and Affiliated Colleges, 82.35 percent of institutions)

- Endemic corruption
- Exploitative power structures
- Dysfunctional governance
- Limited employment prospects
- Systematic barriers to research integrity

For scholars entering Pathway B, which represents the majority institutional landscape, the answer to "To Research or Not?" leans decisively toward "Not."

Alternative Recommendations: The Path Forward

Immediate Structural Reforms

Publication Model Transformation

- Eliminate mandatory pre-synopsis publication requirements
- Replace with institutional assessment committees evaluating research quality (not metrics)
- Provide institutional funding for publication fees (eliminating scholar cost-burden)
- Recognize diverse publication venues beyond Scopus indexing

Governance Restructuring

- Constitutional minimum tenure for Vice-Chancellor positions
- Dedicated institutional Ombudsperson independent from administrative hierarchy
- Regular (quarterly) redressal committee meetings with mandatory investigative timelines

- Public reporting of grievance cases and resolution outcomes

Recruitment Transparency

- Elimination of discretionary hiring authority; transparent, committee-based recruitment
- Anonymous application screening
- Digital transaction trails preventing bribery infrastructure
- External audits of faculty hiring processes

Dissent Protection

- Constitutional protections for questioning institutional policies
- Anti-retaliation policies with independent investigation mechanisms
- Institutional guarantee that critiquing authority will not affect evaluation or progression

8.2 Longer-Term Systemic Change

- Mandatory support stipends (₹50,000+ monthly) for full-time research scholars
- Professional research ethics training for all supervisors
- Decoupling PhD employment from publication metrics
- Alignment of faculty recruitment with actual teaching loads (eliminating fake positions)

CONCLUSION: THE RECKONING

Reforms must prioritize scholar welfare to reclaim academia's role in national progress. The question "To Research or Not in India?" reflects an unprecedented institutional crisis in Indian higher education. The answer, which depends heavily on whether a scholar enters the 5.17 percent elite tier or the 82.35 percent periphery tier, reveals a bifurcated system increasingly unable to sustain its own legitimacy.

For most research scholars in state universities and affiliated colleges, the empirical evidence suggests that pursuing research in India represents a rational choice only if alternative pathways (international research, immediate employment in technical fields) are unavailable. The exploitation, financial burden, governance dysfunction, and corruption that characterize Indian academia's current state constitute systemic barriers to knowledge generation and scholar welfare. The path forward requires that Indian universities, particularly the state institutions serving economically disadvantaged scholars must undertake fundamental structural reform: eliminating predatory publication economics, establishing genuine accountability mechanisms, ending corruption-driven hiring, protecting institutional dissent, and restoring the principle that research scholarship serves the scholar and society, not institutional extraction. Until such reforms materialize, the answer to "To Research or Not in India?" remains regrettably unclear. For many scholars, the rational choice may be to redirect their intellectual ambitions toward contexts where institutional integrity, transparent processes, and genuine opportunity remain achievable.

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