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The Silent Erasure: How India's Education System is sacrificing Liberal Arts at the altar of Commercialization

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

India's higher education landscape is witnessing an unprecedented transformation, marked by aggressive commercialization and an overwhelming obsession with technical and management education.

This research article examines how the relentless pursuit of immediate employability and profit margins has systematically marginalized liberal arts and humanities education, despite mounting evidence that these disciplines cultivate critical competencies essential for holistic development and long-term career success.

Drawing on recent enrolment statistics, employability data, and institutional trends, this paper argues that India's educational priorities are creating a generation of technically trained yet intellectually underdeveloped professionals, with serious implications for democratic discourse, innovation, and societal progress.

Keywords: social science, liberal arts, liberal arts education, commercialisation of education.

Introduction: The Great Divergence

At the intersection of India's economic aspirations and educational reality lies a troubling paradox. While the country positions itself as a knowledge economy and innovation hub, its education system has become increasingly transactional, treating learning as a commodity rather than a transformative experience. The commercialization of education—where profit motives supersede pedagogical values—has created a hierarchy of disciplines where engineering, MBA programs, and technical fields reign supreme, while liberal arts and humanities are relegated to the margins.

According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22, while Arts and Humanities constitute 34% of undergraduate enrollment at first glance, employability statistics reveal a grim reality: only 47.1% of Bachelor of Arts graduates were employable in 2024, down from 49% in 2023. Meanwhile, approximately 76% of MBA aspirants come from engineering backgrounds, and over 1.29 million students enrolled in computer science engineering alone in the 2022 academic year.

This article contends that the systematic devaluation of liberal arts education stems from the dangerous confluence of three forces: aggressive commercialization of education

through privatization, cultural obsession with perceived "safe" career paths in technology and management, and the failure of educational institutions to demonstrate the tangible value of humanistic education.

More critically, it argues that students graduating from tech-heavy and MBA-focused programs without exposure to liberal arts are experiencing measurable deficits in critical thinking, communication, adaptability, and ethical reasoning—skills that ironically determine long-term career success.

The Commercialization Machine: Education as Profit Center

The transformation of Indian education into a commercial enterprise began in earnest with economic liberalization in the 1990s. What followed was a systematic shift where education moved from being a social good to a marketable commodity. Today, 78.6% of colleges in India are privately owned, and the distinction between education and business has become increasingly blurred.

The commercialization of education manifests in multiple ways. Private liberal arts colleges like Ashoka University charge approximately $11,683 annually for undergraduate programs—a sum that, while lower than international counterparts, remains prohibitive for the vast majority of Indian families where the average annual per capita income is around $2,080. More troublingly, many private institutions charge fees touching Rs 10 lakh annually for basic BA degrees, creating what critics describe as "education shops" designed primarily for profit extraction.

The Supreme Court of India has repeatedly attempted to curb commercialization through landmark judgments. In Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka (1992), the court ruled that charging capitation fees violated the fundamental right to education. However, subsequent judgments like T.M.A Pai Foundation v. State of Karnataka (2003) adopted a more liberal approach, allowing private institutions considerable autonomy in fee determination. This judicial ambivalence has enabled the proliferation of high-fee institutions that prioritize profit over pedagogical excellence.

The Structural Consequences

The commercialization imperative has restructured institutional priorities. Between 2019-20 and 2023-24, engineering programs sanctioned 6.49 million undergraduate seats but filled only 4.55 million, leaving 1.94 million vacant. Yet institutions continue expanding capacity, driven by enrollment-based revenue models rather than actual demand or quality considerations. This oversupply in technical fields coexists paradoxically with the systematic defunding and closure of humanities programs.

Universities increasingly invest in STEM facilities, research infrastructure, and faculty for technical programs while humanities departments face budget cuts, reduced course offerings, and declining faculty positions. This resource allocation reflects a fundamental misunderstanding: institutions view education through a return-on-investment lens that privileges immediate placement percentages over long-term graduate outcomes.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, while promoting multidisciplinary liberal education rhetorically, has simultaneously facilitated privatization through mechanisms like the Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA)—a partnership between Canara Bank and the Ministry of Education that shifts funding from non-repayable grants to loans. This financial engineering effectively privatizes public education funding, compelling institutions to prioritize programs with immediate financial returns.

The Cultural Obsession: Engineering and MBA as Default Choices

India's cultural fixation on engineering and management education has created a mono-channeled pathway that millions follow with almost religious fervour. The Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) Main, gateway to premier engineering institutions, has become a rite of passage that defines adolescent worth. Success in engineering is followed almost automatically by an MBA, creating what scholars call the

"engineering-MBA industrial complex."

In 2022, over 1.29 million students enrolled in computer science engineering disciplines alone. Following graduation, 76% of MBA aspirants come from engineering backgrounds, with only 5% coming from arts backgrounds. The total MBA intake across India reached 5.97 lakh students, creating a conveyor belt of technically trained managers who often lack broader humanistic understanding.

This monoculture has devastating consequences. Recent data reveals that 83% of engineering graduates in 2024 graduated without job offers or internships, while nearly 50% of MBA graduates faced similar outcomes. Between 2019-20 and 2022-23, only 47.7% of the 3.43 million engineering graduates secured placements. These employment failures occur despite—or perhaps because of—the singular focus on technical training without complementary liberal arts education.

The cultural obsession with technical and management education stems from multiple sources. Families connect educational success exclusively with financial security, viewing liberal arts as impractical luxuries. In a deeply stratified society with limited social mobility, professional degrees represent certainty in uncertain times. A computer science degree or MBA becomes social capital, a marker of achievement that transcends actual learning or capability.

This mentality creates immense pressure on students. The decision to pursue humanities is often met with familial disapproval, peer ridicule, and social stigma. The common refrain—"you'll end up as a barista with a humanities degree"—reflects deep-seated anxieties about economic precarity. Ironically, research shows that liberal arts graduates, while earning less initially, catch up to their technically trained peers over career spans and report higher job satisfaction.

The education system reinforces these biases structurally. High schools increasingly offer Advanced Placement courses in STEM subjects, allowing students to test out of general education requirements in college. This means fewer students are exposed to humanities courses that might spark interest in these fields, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of decline.

The Vanishing Humanities: Enrollment Decline and Institutional Abandonment

While AISHE data shows that Arts nominally constitutes 34% of undergraduate enrollment, this figure masks troubling realities. Many "Arts" programs are pre-professional certificates at community colleges, not genuine liberal arts education. More significantly, the quality of humanities education in most non-elite institutions has deteriorated to the point where these programs serve as default options for students who couldn't secure admission to professional programs, rather than destinations of choice.

Globally, the humanities face existential threats. Between 2012 and 2020, the number of humanities graduates in the United States fell by 16-29% depending on classification, reaching levels not seen since 2002. In OECD countries, humanities enrollment dropped by 50% over the past three decades. In India, while precise longitudinal data is limited, qualitative evidence suggests similar trends: reduced course offerings, elimination of language programs, consolidation of humanities departments, and declining faculty positions.

The employment crisis for humanities graduates exacerbates the decline. With only 47.1% employability—the lowest among degree holders—and decreasing further year-over-year, liberal arts faces a perception crisis it struggles to overcome. This creates a vicious cycle: declining enrollments lead to reduced institutional investment, which further degrades program quality, which reinforces negative perceptions, which drives more students away.

Institutional Responses: Closure and Consolidation

Educational institutions respond to declining humanities enrollment through elimination and consolidation. Universities across India and globally have shuttered language departments, consolidated fine arts programs, and eliminated specialized humanities

majors. At Central Michigan University, French, German, and Spanish programs were eliminated. The University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point proposed cutting English, German, Spanish, and History majors despite these being foundational disciplines.

These closures create disciplinary monocultures where students have increasingly limited exposure to diverse modes of thinking. As humanities faculty retire, positions go unfilled. The prediction from education analysts is stark: "We're unlikely to have as much regional coverage or coverage of the world as we might have had in the past." The systematic elimination of humanities expertise creates knowledge deserts where entire domains of human understanding become inaccessible to future generations.

In India, the National Testing Agency's Common University Entrance Test (CUET) has further standardized and commodified humanities education, reducing literature, history, and philosophy to testable content rather than immersive intellectual experiences. This examination-focused approach reinforces memorization over critical thinking, precisely the opposite of what liberal arts education should cultivate.

The Deficit Effect: What Students without Liberal Arts Education Lack

The irony of India's technical education obsession is that employers consistently report that engineering and MBA graduates lack precisely the skills that liberal arts education cultivates. A 2024 report found that 83% of engineering graduates and 50% of MBA graduates were deemed unemployable or struggled to find positions, not primarily due to technical deficiency but because of fundamental gaps in communication, critical thinking, adaptability, and interpersonal skills.

Research consistently demonstrates that employers value liberal arts competencies above technical knowledge. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), 93% of employers prioritize critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills over an applicant's undergraduate major. An analysis of job postings found that 64% required at least one of five core liberal arts competencies: communication, critical thinking, teamwork, empathy, and mindfulness.

The World Economic Forum's list of top 10 skills for 2025 includes only two focused on technical capabilities; the remaining eight emphasize problem-solving, self-management, and interpersonal abilities—all hallmarks of liberal arts training. Yet India's education system produces graduate ill-equipped in precisely these domains.

Communication and Critical Thinking Deficits

Students graduating from purely technical programs often demonstrate alarming deficits in written and oral communication. They can write code or analyse spreadsheets but struggle to articulate ideas persuasively, construct logical arguments, or communicate across cultural contexts. In professional settings, these graduates falter when required to present to non-technical stakeholders, write clear reports, or navigate complex organizational politics.

Critical thinking—the ability to analyse information, identify assumptions, evaluate evidence, and construct reasoned arguments—represents another crucial deficit. Technical programs teach algorithmic thinking and problem-solving within defined parameters but rarely cultivate the ability to question frameworks, identify hidden biases, or think across disciplinary boundaries. This creates professionals who can solve problems but struggle to identify which problems need solving.

One engineering graduate's testimony captures this deficit: "The AI course was more affordable and offered better job prospects, but now I realize I can't think beyond my technical specialty. I struggle in meetings because I can't understand the broader business context or communicate with non-engineers."

Emotional Intelligence and Adaptability Gaps

Liberal arts education cultivates emotional intelligence through exposure to

literature, history, philosophy, and arts—disciplines that require understanding human motivation, cultural context, and ethical complexity. Students who bypass these disciplines often demonstrate limited empathy, poor interpersonal skills, and inability to work effectively in diverse teams.

The rapidly changing technological landscape demands adaptability—the ability to learn new skills, pivot careers, and apply knowledge in novel contexts. Liberal arts graduates excel in this dimension because their education emphasizes learning how to learn, transferring skills across domains, and integrating diverse knowledge sources. Technical graduates without this foundation become trapped in narrow specializations that age out as technologies evolve.

Research confirms these patterns. While technical graduates may earn higher starting salaries, liberal arts graduates frequently catch up over career spans, advance to management positions more often (except business majors), and report higher job satisfaction. The initial salary advantage of technical degrees masks long-term career limitations created by skill deficits in communication, critical thinking, and adaptability.

The Systemic Costs: What Society Loses

The decline of humanities education threatens democratic functioning. History teaches citizens to understand institutional development and societal change. Philosophy cultivates ethical reasoning and logical argumentation. Literature develops empathy and cultural understanding. Political science explains governance structures and power dynamics. Without these disciplines, societies produce citizens who lack tools for informed democratic participation.

India's democratic institutions require citizens capable of critical evaluation of political rhetoric, understanding historical context for current events, and engaging in reasoned public discourse. The systematic elimination of humanities education creates populations vulnerable to manipulation, unable to distinguish fact from propaganda, and ill-equipped for the complex negotiations that democracy requires.

Innovation and Cultural Production

Paradoxically, the obsession with technical education may undermine innovation itself. Major technology companies have discovered that liberal arts thinking strengthens their organizations. Google, Amazon, and Microsoft actively recruit liberal arts graduates because they bring creative problem-solving, user empathy, and interdisciplinary synthesis that pure technologist's lack.

Cultural production—literature, arts, philosophy, historical analysis—requires humanities training. As these disciplines decline, societies risk losing the capacity to understand themselves, preserve cultural memory, and generate meaningful artistic expression. India's rich intellectual traditions in philosophy, literature, and arts face endangerment when institutions systematically devalue these domains.

Economic Costs of Skill Mismatches

The overproduction of narrowly trained technical graduates creates economic inefficiencies. With 1.94 million vacant engineering seats annually and 83% of graduates' unemployed or underemployed, India invests massive resources in training that doesn't align with actual economic needs. Meanwhile, skills gaps in communication, critical thinking, and creative problem-solving—precisely what employers need—persist because these capabilities aren't systematically cultivated.

The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce found that liberal arts colleges generate median lifetime returns of $918,000—25% higher than overall college medians and comparable to engineering ($917,000) and business programs ($913,000). This data suggests that the perceived financial disadvantage of humanities education is largely mythological, yet it drives educational choices with significant economic consequences.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Educational Balance

India's educational crisis is fundamentally a crisis of values. The commercialization of education has reduced learning to economic transactions, while cultural anxiety has channeled millions into narrow pathways that fail to serve either individual flourishing or collective prosperity. The systematic marginalization of liberal arts and humanities creates professionals with technical capabilities but limited capacity for the critical thinking, ethical reasoning, cultural understanding, and adaptive learning that define true competence.

The evidence is overwhelming: students graduating without liberal arts education demonstrate measurable deficits in communication, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and adaptability—precisely the skills employers most value and long-term career success requires. Meanwhile, the broader society loses citizens capable of democratic participation, cultural production, and the integrated thinking necessary for addressing complex challenges.

Reversing these trends requires fundamental shifts. Regulatory mechanisms must curtail commercialization while preserving educational quality. Cultural attitudes must recognize that immediate employment differs from sustained career success. Institutions must demonstrate the tangible value of humanistic education through curriculum innovation and clear articulation of learning outcomes.

Most critically, India must recognize that the choice between technical training and liberal arts education is false. The most valuable graduates combine technical capabilities with humanistic understanding—engineers who can communicate, managers who think ethically, technologists who understand human contexts. True educational excellence produces not narrow specialists but integrative thinkers capable of navigating complexity with both technical skill and humanistic wisdom.

The question facing Indian education is not whether liberal arts matters but whether society can afford to continue marginalizing the disciplines that cultivate the very capabilities—critical thinking, communication, adaptability, ethical reasoning—that determine whether technical knowledge becomes genuine human flourishing or merely expensive credentialism. The answer will shape not just individual careers but the nation's democratic vitality, cultural richness, and capacity for meaningful innovation in an increasingly complex world.

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