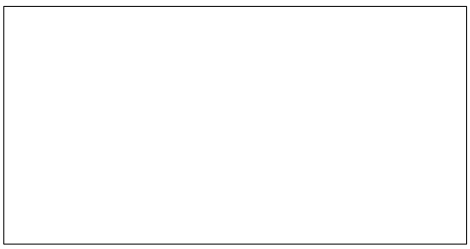

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Globalisation, Societies and Education

ISSN: 1476-7724 (Print) 1476-7732 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cgse20

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To cite this article: Emma Louise Donaghy & Dan Davies (12 Jan 2026): Stratified massification: higher education expansion and social (in)justice in India, Globalisation, Societies and Education, DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2025.2608681

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2025.2608681

Published online: 12 Jan 2026.

GLOBALISATION, SOCIETIES AND EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2025.2608681

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Stratified massification: higher education expansion and social (in)justice in India

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ABSTRACT

This review examines whether India's transition from elite to mass higher education (HE) can advance social justice, or whether expansion under current structural conditions reproduces entrenched hierarchies. Drawing on a structured review of scholarship across HE policy, sociological stratification and language politics, the analysis employs a triangulated theoretical framework integrating Bourdieu's theory of practice, institutional isomorphism and Gramscian hegemony. The review is situated within reforms associated with India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The analysis shows that while massification has broadened participation numerically, inequalities in cultural, linguistic and epistemic capital remain intact. Institutional isomorphism and global academic hierarchies pull Indian HE towards English-medium, research-intensive and internationally ranked models aligned with Western epistemic norms, privileging urban, English-speaking, middle-class and upper-caste groups. By contrast, students and institutions rooted in regional languages, rural contexts and marginalised castes face structural and symbolic barriers that constrain their capacity to benefit from expansion. The review argues that unless epistemic, linguistic and infrastructural inequalities are addressed, massification risks intensifying stratification rather than promoting equity. It contributes to debates on globalisation, postcolonial inequality and the social justice implications of HE massification in the Global South.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 9 September 2024
Accepted 16 December 2025

KEYWORDS
Massification; social inequality; higher education; India; National Education Policy

SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION
Sociology

Introduction

Global participation in higher education (HE) continues to expand, with enrolments projected to reach half a billion by 2035 (Calderón 2018). Participation has more than doubled in the past twenty years, yet expansion remains uneven: in 2022, the gross enrolment ratio was 9% in sub-Saharan Africa compared with 74% in Northern America and Europe (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] 2024). Growth will be driven largely by the Global South, especially South and West Asia, where demographic shifts and rising aspirations are reshaping access patterns (Calderón 2012). However, massification does not automatically reduce inequality; evidence from long-established high-participation systems shows that class-based disparities persist, with expansion often deepening stratification (Marginson 2016; Reay 2001; 2012; Trow 2007).

India represents a critical case within this global landscape. Participation has increased, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to raise the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher

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education to 50% by 2035; however, expansion occurs within entrenched social hierarchies. Caste, class, gender norms, linguistic hierarchies, and rural – urban divides continue to shape opportunities (Lewis and Lockheed 2007; Mohanty 2010; Nambissan 2017). India's Gross Enrolment Ratio rose from 24.6% in 2014/15 to 28.4% in 2021/22 (Government of India 2015, 2024), but gains have disproportionately accrued to urban, English-speaking, middle-class and upper-caste groups (Kamal and Roluahpuia 2024). India, therefore, exemplifies a form of 'stratified massification' (Marginson 2016; Trow 2007), shaped by global forces including English-language dominance (Annamalai 2001; Mohanty 2010), elite transnational mobility (Altbach 2016) and isomorphic convergence driven by rankings and 'world-class' models (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Hazelkorn 2015).

The NEP 2020 builds on a long lineage of reforms aimed at expanding participation and modernising governance within HE. Yet, as Ayyar (2019) argues, these initiatives have unfolded within a deeply unequal system, raising questions about whether large-scale expansion alone can address entrenched structural barriers. While existing scholarship focuses largely on policy design, regulation and labour-market alignment (Agarwal 2006; Tilak 2020; Varghese and Malik 2021), far less attention has been paid to the societal consequences of India's massification trajectory and to how longstanding inequalities shape who benefits from expansion.

This current review asks whether India's transition from elite to mass HE can mitigate inequality or whether, under current structural conditions, it is more likely to reproduce existing hierarchies despite increased participation. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1990); combined with institutional isomorphism to interpret pressures toward convergence (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) and Gramscian hegemony to analyse the reproduction of cultural and linguistic power (Gramsci 1971), the review examines how inequality is mediated through mechanisms of capital, institutional conformity and ideology.

Consequently, by foregrounding these social and epistemic dynamics, the paper moves beyond descriptive accounts of expansion to examine whether India's massification trajectory can fulfil the equity aspirations of NEP 2020, or whether it risks consolidating a globally oriented elite whose advantages intensify social polarisation.

Method

This review examines the social justice implications of HE massification in India through a structured review of academic and policy literature. The review draws on transparent search procedures and predefined inclusion criteria (Gough, Oliver, and Thomas 2017) to identify scholarship addressing the expansion of HE and its relationship to inequality. Searches were conducted across databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ERIC and Google Scholar search engine using the following terms:*'massification', 'higher education India', 'caste and HE', 'inequality', 'English-medium instruction', and 'globalisation and HE'*.

Studies were included if they: (1) were peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, or official policy documents; (2) were published between 2000 and 2024[1]; and (3) addressed HE expansion, inequality, policy reform, globalisation, or social stratification. Studies not directly relating to massification or inequality were excluded. To achieve this, a two-stage screening process was followed, consisting of a title and abstract review, followed by a full-text review (Mateen et al. 2013).

This process produced a corpus spanning research on social stratification (Naidoo 2004; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009), caste-based inequality (Kamal and Roluahpuia 2024; Nambissan 2020; Velaskar 1990), gendered access (Lewis and Lockheed 2007), linguistic hierarchies (Annamalai 2001; Mohanty 2010), decolonial and epistemic justice perspectives (Andreotti 2011; de Sousa Santos 2014), and analyses of HE policy across the Global South (Agarwal 2006; Altbach 2016; Bhattacharya 2024; Connell 2007). This literature forms the basis for the theoretical and analytical framework developed in this review.

Theoretical framework

The analysis draws on three complementary perspectives – Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), and Gramscian hegemony (Gramsci 1971) – to examine how massification in India may reduce or reproduce inequality. Together these frameworks offer a theoretically triangulated approach (Denzin 1978; Jick 1979) that grounds the analysis conceptually.

Bourdieu's theory of practice, operationalised through the concepts of habitus, capital and field provide the primary lens for understanding how advantage is reproduced in HE systems (Marginson 2014; Naidoo 2004; Reay 2004). Habitus illuminates why HE is experienced as familiar for some and alienating for others (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Reay 2004), while forms of capital – economic, cultural, social and symbolic – shape access to valued resources such as English proficiency (Annamalai 2001; Mohanty 2010) and professional networks (Bourdieu 1977). These dynamics are especially salient in India, where caste, class, gender and language influence the distribution of educational opportunity (Naidoo 2004; Nambissan 2020).

Institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) provides a second lens for understanding the global pressures shaping Indian HE. Coercive, mimetic and normative forces encourage convergence toward internationally dominant models, including English-medium instruction, standardised quality assurance, and 'world-class' status as measured by global ranking metrics (Marginson and van der Wende 2007; Meyer and Rowan 1977). This framework helps situate the NEP 2020 within the wider global pressures toward standardisation.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Gramsci 1971) adds a critical dimension, explaining how dominant groups maintain cultural and linguistic authority through consent rather than coercion (Apple 2004). In India, the dominance of English and the over-representation of upper-caste groups within elite institutions illustrate how linguistic and cultural capital shape opportunity structures (Annamalai 2001; Mohanty 2010). From a Gramscian perspective, these hegemonic arrangements shape the terrain on which expansion occurs, and massification can generate tensions as marginalised groups challenge dominant norms and seek more equitable and decolonised forms of knowledge (Andreotti 2011; Connell 2007; de Sousa Santos 2014).

Consequently, these perspectives provide a layered framework for analysing the social justice implications of India's massification trajectory.

India's massification and structural challenges

After gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1947, education featured as a key driver of social change in India (Jayaram 1979), with HE expanding rapidly as part of a broader nation-building and development agenda (Agarwal 2006). The expansion of HE in India over the last 20 years has been shaped by private sector expansion (Agarwal 2006), population growth, economic development, and rising educational aspirations. Yet this growth has unfolded within a system marked by longstanding governance and quality challenges. Several scholars describe Indian education as experiencing a structural crisis (Hill 2012; Tilak 2016), characterised by surging demand, inadequate institutional supply, fragmented regulatory arrangements and inconsistent quality assurance – a pattern that reflects wider global massification pressures highlighted by Calderón (2012).

Over the past two decades, successive national initiatives have attempted to modernise and rationalise the sector. The National Knowledge Commission (2006) called for a significant expansion of universities to build a 'knowledge-based society', emphasising universal access, improved regulation and stronger equity measures. The Tandon Committee (2009), appointed to review the rapidly increasing number of deemed universities, identified serious governance and quality concerns – particularly among private institutions – including inadequate faculty capacity, weak infrastructure and governance practices that compromised academic standards (Vaidyanathan

2011). The Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) launched in (2013) aimed to address these system-level weaknesses by strengthening state universities through performance-based funding, accreditation reforms and enhanced institutional autonomy, with a focus on improving quality and equity across the system.

Despite these reforms, demand has consistently outpaced supply within a fragmented infrastructure (Agarwal 2006). The number of universities and colleges has grown substantially, but remains insufficient to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding youth population (Varghese 2015). Rapid expansion has also raised concerns about sustainability, with evidence that quality often suffers when systems grow faster than regulatory and governance structures can support (Trow 1987). As Bazaz and Akram (2020) argue, growth has produced uneven outcomes: while opportunities have widened, inequalities in quality and institutional capacity have been reproduced or intensified.

It is within this historical landscape that the NEP 2020 attempts to steer India towards mass participation. The policy proposes increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) from around 28% to 50% by 2035 (Government of India 2020), a shift that will require a substantial expansion of institutional capacity across the sector. Historically, regulatory oversight in Indian HE has been fragmented across bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), resulting in uneven governance and quality assurance (Agarwal 2006). The policy aims to enhance institutional autonomy and strengthen accreditation and quality assurance (Hota and Sarangei 2019; Varghese and Malik 2021).

Together, these reforms articulate an ambitious vision of a more inclusive, flexible and globally competitive HE system. However, the NEP is being implemented within a system marked by deep structural inequalities that complicate these aspirations. States with large rural populations – such as Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh – have some of the lowest rates of school completion (ASER 2013). In 2004, only 44% of the population in Uttar Pradesh (north India) completed primary schooling, compared with 76% in Kerala (south India) (Asadullah and Yalonetzky 2012). These disparities in foundational education feed directly into unequal patterns of HE participation, entrenching north – south and rural – urban divides (Lewis and Lockheed 2007; Nambissan 2020). India continues to experience some of the highest levels of educational inequity globally, with limited improvement over three decades of tertiary expansion (Asadullah and Yalonetzky 2012; Nambissan 2017). Bazaz and Akram (2020) argue that rapid expansion has widened opportunity numerically but has not meaningfully reduced entrenched caste, class or regional disparities.

National education policy 2020

The NEP 2020 articulates a strong normative vision. It frames universal access to 'quality education' as foundational for economic growth, social justice, equality, scientific advancement, national integration and cultural preservation (Government of India 2020). The policy proposes restructuring the sector around large, multidisciplinary universities and degree-granting colleges, with at least one HE institution in every district. These institutions are intended to offer flexible curricula, holistic education and increased provision in local languages, supported by scholarships and expanded online delivery. The NEP presents this reform agenda as aligned with an 'Indian tradition' of educating well-rounded, innovative individuals whose formation is intellectual, moral and spiritual; graduates are expected to cultivate pride in Indian heritage alongside commitments to sustainable development, human rights and global wellbeing, becoming 'truly global citizens' (Government of India 2020, 6, 34). This emphasis on indigenous traditions echoes Connell's (2007) argument for recognising Southern knowledge traditions as legitimate sources of educational thought. However, as Andreotti (2011) cautions, efforts to revitalise local or indigenous knowledge traditions often encounter a HE landscape in which Western epistemologies continue to define dominant standards of legitimacy. This tension complicates the NEP's attempts to centralise Indian intellectual traditions within an international system shaped by longstanding epistemic hierarchies.

In addition to its normative vision, the NEP proposes wide-ranging structural reforms. These include creating a single Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) to replace existing fragmented regulatory bodies, introducing a new accreditation and quality assurance framework, and phasing out the long-criticised college affiliation system in favour of autonomous, degree-granting institutions. The policy also introduces major curricular reforms – such as flexible four-year undergraduate degrees, multiple entry – exit points, an Academic Bank of Credits and an expanded emphasis on experiential learning and research. Together, these reforms aim to modernise governance, improve quality, and align institutional structures with the NEP's goal of delivering holistic, flexible and inclusive HE.

However, these aspirations are set within a system characterised by uneven institutional capacity, chronic under-funding, variable quality and weak regulatory frameworks (Kulal et al. 2024). Many institutions – particularly state universities and colleges – struggle with inadequate resources, high student – staff ratios and fragile governance structures (Agarwal 2006; Hota and Sarangei 2019). The NEP itself acknowledges systemic obstacles, including underdeveloped institutional leadership and an ineffective regulatory environment (Government of India 2020). While Kulal et al. (2024) highlight these structural and implementation challenges, they also note that NEP analyses have tended to prioritise governance, curriculum and regulatory reform rather than engaging with the deeper social inequalities – such as caste, class, language and rural disadvantage – that shape who can benefit from massification. These patterns reflect the broader dynamics identified by Connell (2007), who argues that systems marked by long-standing social and epistemic hierarchies cannot easily transform through policy design alone. The central challenge, therefore, is not only to expand participation but to do so in ways that enhance quality and reduce, rather than reproduce, existing inequalities.

Globalisation, rankings and English

India's massification project is also shaped by powerful global pressures. Over the past two decades, Indian HE has been deeply influenced by globalisation (Altbach 2016; Kamalakar and Kamala 2022), including the diffusion of neo-liberal policy norms, market-oriented reforms and international quality assurance frameworks (Tilak 2016). These dynamics have encouraged institutional convergence toward Western models of 'world-class' universities (Marginson 2022b; Zapp and Ramirez 2019), illustrating the mimetic and normative forms of institutional isomorphism described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983).

International rankings play a particularly significant role in this process. India's position within global HE cannot be separated from its history as a former British colony, where English-medium education, credential hierarchies and institutional templates were shaped by colonial governance and continue to structure contemporary notions of prestige and legitimacy (Annamalai 2001; Mohanty 2010; Phillipson 1992). Although widely critiqued, rankings operate as a global script that shapes national priorities and institutional strategies (Hazelkorn 2015; Sauder and Espeland 2009). Their influence reflects broader patterns of policy convergence and organisational isomorphism, as institutions adapt to globally dominant norms of evaluation, performance and excellence (Marginson and van der Wende 2007; Shin and Toutkoushian 2011; Zapp and Ramirez 2019). India's absence from the global top 100 of major international rankings has been a recurring national concern (Tilak 2016), and NEP 2020 explicitly references aspirations to enhance India's global visibility, competitiveness and international standing. Consequently, massification unfolds not only as a domestic reform agenda but also as a response to transnational pressures that privilege particular epistemic norms, performance metrics and institutional models (Altbach 2016; Bhalerao et al. 2023). Global HE rankings have also been critiqued for reproducing epistemic hierarchies rooted in empire by privileging Anglo-American research norms and English-language publication (Connell 2007; de Sousa Santos 2014; Hazelkorn 2015; Marginson 2022a).

Language policy further complicates India's massification trajectory. English has long functioned as the dominant global language of science, research and academic mobility (Coleman 2010; Marginson 2006) and as a key marker of privilege and access to elite opportunities within Indian HE (Annamalai 2001; Mohanty 2010). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 commits to expanding provision in local and regional languages, which could widen participation for rural, first-generation and marginalised learners who have not been educated in English-medium systems. At the same time, the policy also emphasises the importance of English proficiency and endorses its continued role in higher education, particularly for global engagement.

However, this dual ambition sits uneasily alongside the persistent premium placed on English for admission to elite institutions, participation in global knowledge networks and access to high-status employment (Dearden 2014; Phillipson 2009). Consequently, students educated through regional-language pathways may gain entry to HE but face reduced academic and economic mobility, reinforcing – rather than disrupting – existing hierarchies of advantage (Annamalai 2001; Mohanty 2010; Panda and Mohanty 2020). This tension illustrates a core challenge for India's massification agenda: expanding access through multilingual provision while operating within a global HE field that continues to reward English-dominant academic capital.

Uneven uptake and persistent inequities

Despite decades of rapid expansion, participation in Indian HE remains profoundly unequal. The combined effects of demographic pressures, deeply unequal school systems, significant infrastructural weaknesses, and globalisation have meant that the benefits of massification in India have been distributed highly unevenly (Agarwal 2006; Asadullah and Yalonetzky 2012; Kamalakar and Kamala 2022; Nambissan 2020; Tilak 2016). Expansion so far has primarily benefited urban, middle-class and upper-caste groups with the economic, cultural and linguistic capital to navigate competitive admissions and succeed in high-status institutions (Asadullah and Yalonetzky 2012; Bazaz and Akram 2020; Kamal and Roluahpuia 2024). By contrast, marginalised populations – including the rural poor, lower-caste communities, girls, some religious minorities and people with disabilities – continue to face compounded barriers related to poverty, weak local schooling, digital exclusion and social discrimination (Asadullah and Yalonetzky 2012; Nambissan 2020; Singh 2023). The growing financial burden of attending university further restricts participation, placing HE increasingly beyond the reach of poorer households – a trend noted early by Agarwal (2006), who argued that rising costs and uneven public investment have deepened socio-economic stratification in access. As UNESCO (2020) observes, 'Disadvantaged young people face multiple obstacles in gaining access to tertiary education, including information and networking barriers. Counsellors and advisers are particularly important for these learners, yet minorities, students with disabilities, those living in rural or poor areas and other disadvantaged students are often the least likely to receive adequate counselling on higher education opportunities' (240).

The Covid-19 pandemic starkly exposed and intensified existing educational divides, as the rapid move to online learning disproportionately disadvantaged students from rural areas and low-income households with limited or no internet access (ITU 2020; Singh 2023; UNESCO 2021). These disruptions added new layers of inequality to an already stratified system, reinforcing Naidoo's (2004) observation that HE fields tend to reproduce advantage for those already equipped with valued forms of capital. Although new policies and institutions have aimed to broaden opportunity, there is little evidence that structural disparities in access and outcomes have significantly narrowed (Nambissan 2017; 2020). Instead, tertiary expansion has often enabled already advantaged groups to consolidate their position while large segments of the population remain excluded from the transformative possibilities associated with HE (Kamalakar and Kamala 2022; Mathew 2022; Nambissan 2017). As several scholars note, the future landscape

of opportunity risks becoming increasingly polarised if foundational inequalities remain unaddressed. As Hota and Sarangei caution: 'Those with a larger repertoire of skills and a greater capacity for learning can look forward to a lifetime of unprecedented economic fulfilment. But in the coming decades the poorly educated face little better than the dreary prospects of lives of quiet desperation' (2019, p. 50).

Inequality reproduction in India's expanding HE system

When examined through the combined perspectives of Bourdieu's theory of practice, institutional isomorphism, and Gramscian hegemony, India's massification trajectory reveals systematic patterns of inequality reproduction. Although aggregate enrolment has grown, the benefits of expansion remain concentrated among social groups already equipped with the forms of capital most valued within HE, including English proficiency, academic literacy and institutional networks. This section analyses how advantage is reproduced, how newcomers experience exclusion, and how global and national dynamics shape the field of Indian HE in ways that risk deepening stratification.

Reproducing advantage: capital, habitus and social stratification

Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus illuminate why the gains of massification accrue disproportionately to middle- and upper-class, urban, English-speaking and upper-caste groups (Kamal and Roluahpuia 2024; Nambissan 2020; Tiwari, Anjum, and Khurana 2013). Economic capital continues to shape who can access HE, as families with stable incomes are better positioned to afford private schooling, coaching centres, counselling, technology, residential mobility and the escalating costs associated with competitive entrance examinations (Agarwal 2006; UNESCO 2024). These material advantages significantly increase the likelihood of securing a place in HE but cannot, on their own, explain why such students tend to thrive once there; as Reay (2004) and Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009) show, cultural capital and a middle-class habitus that aligns with the norms and expectations of the academy play an equally decisive role.

Habitus – shaped by early socialisation, family expectations and prior schooling – helps explain differential experiences and outcomes within HE (Bourdieu 1977; Reay 2004). Students from privileged backgrounds typically arrive with dispositions that align with the dominant norms of HE: confidence in academic settings, familiarity with independent learning, fluency in English and comfort with the pedagogic styles and expectations of westernised institutions (Ayyar 2019; Bourdieu 1977; Reay 2004). By contrast, many who are first in family to attend university, or who come from marginalised caste, class or linguistic backgrounds, encounter HE as culturally unfamiliar or intimidating. These mismatches between habitus and institutional culture can generate feelings of misfit, self-doubt and exclusion that constrain participation and success (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Burke 2012; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009).

Burke (2012) emphasises that these accumulated advantages are frequently misrecognised as 'merit', masking the social labour and inherited privilege required to acquire them and legitimising unequal outcomes as natural or deserved. This misrecognition reinforces hierarchies of caste, class and gender. While gender gaps have narrowed overall, women remain under-represented in elite institutions and STEM disciplines (Times Higher Education 2019), reflecting continuing patterns of patriarchal constraint, differentiated schooling and uneven social expectations (Lewis and Lockheed 2007). Taken together, these structural patterns suggest that massification has widened numerical access without disrupting the social mechanisms that channel the greatest benefits toward already privileged groups – a tendency amplified by a policy environment in which expansion is often driven by populist pressures, institutional competition and private-sector growth rather than redistributive reform (Agarwal 2006; Tilak 2016).

Field reproduction: hierarchy within expansion

HE in India operates as a stratified field in Bourdieu's sense – a social space structured by competition, hierarchy and unequal access to legitimate forms of capital (Bourdieu 1990; Naidoo 2004). Fields privilege the dispositions and capitals of dominant groups, marginalising those who do not 'fit' the implicit norms of the field or who cannot 'play the game' (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). Building on this, Andreotti (2011) emphasises that fields are also shaped by deeper epistemic hierarchies rooted in colonial histories, which position certain forms of knowledge, language and identity as more legitimate than others. A Gramscian perspective further highlights how these hierarchies are sustained through cultural and ideological forms of consent, as dominant groups exercise hegemony by establishing their worldviews as the 'common sense' of the field (Burke 2012; Gramsci 1971). Burke's (2012) argument that inherited advantage is misrecognised as 'merit' aligns closely with this Gramscian account, illustrating how such norms become accepted as natural and legitimate – an everyday form of hegemonic consent. Connell (2007) reinforces this by showing how global knowledge production is organised through centre – periphery structures that privilege Northern epistemologies, so institutions derive legitimacy not only from economic or cultural capital but from alignment with globally dominant forms of knowledge (Connell 2007; de Sousa Santos 2014).

Within this field, elite institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and top-ranked private universities function as powerful gatekeepers of symbolic capital. Admission into these institutions provides not only credentials but also access to influential networks, high-status employment, and transnational mobility (Marginson 2014). As the field expands, its hierarchical differentiation intensifies: high-status institutions consolidate their prestige while mass-enrolment colleges absorb the majority of students, often with more limited resources, weaker academic preparation, and lower labour-market returns (Tilak 2016). These dynamics are reinforced by processes of institutional isomorphism, as elite institutions align themselves with globally dominant norms of quality, selectivity and English-medium academic cultures, thereby reproducing the status hierarchies that the wider system aspires to emulate (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Marginson and van der Wende 2007). This pattern mirrors global experiences of massification, where expansion tends to intensify stratification and reproduce entrenched status hierarchies (Marginson 2016; Trow 2007). In India, these hierarchies mirror caste, class, gender and language inequalities, reinforcing historical forms of stratification under new conditions that are also shaped by global and neo-colonial dynamics (de Sousa Santos 2014; Nambissan 2017; Nambissan 2020; Velaskar 1990).

Habitus, misalignment and symbolic violence

For students from rural, low-income, or marginalised caste backgrounds, entering HE often entails navigating a field whose implicit norms align with the dispositions of more privileged groups (Deshpande 2011; Nambissan 2020; Reay 2004). Habitus refers to the deeply embedded dispositions and expectations formed through early socialisation, which align some students more closely than others with the cultural and behavioural norms of HE (Bourdieu 1977). This mismatch generates experiences of relational and emotional dislocation – what Reay (2004) describes as habitus misalignment – which hinder students' capacity to participate fully or confidently, particularly when they have not learned the tacit 'rules of the game' that underpin successful navigation of the field (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). Burke (2012) extends this by showing how institutional practices often misrecognise working-class, female and students from certain ethnic groups as lacking aspiration, confidence or academic potential, thereby reproducing deficit narratives that obscure structural inequalities. Such misrecognition reinstates symbolic hierarchies by valuing the cultural and symbolic capital associated with dominant groups and naturalising exclusion. Institutional norms around language, pedagogy and academic behaviour tend to assume an 'ideal' student aligned with middle-class, urban and English-speaking habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990;

Mohanty 2010; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). Where students lack the cultural or linguistic or symbolic capital taken for granted by dominant groups, they may encounter symbolic violence: subtle forms of misrecognition and devaluation that naturalise social hierarchy (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Mohanty 2010). In India, this may manifest as caste-coded assumptions about academic ability (Deshpande 2011; Nambissan 2017; Nambissan 2020), disparagement of local dialects (Annamalai 2001; Mohanty 2010), or differential expectations for women in male-dominated disciplines (Lewis and Lockheed 2007; Velaskar 1990). Symbolic violence operates not through overt discrimination but through norms that legitimise the dispositions and symbolic capital of those already aligned with the field (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Burke 2012; Naidoo 2004; Reay 2004). Such mechanisms reproduce inequality even when formal access increases (Burke 2012; Reay 2012).

Language, capital and epistemic hierarchy

Language constitutes one of the most powerful dimensions through which inequality is reproduced in India's massified system. English functions as both cultural and symbolic capital: it grants access to competitive entrance exams, elite institutions, global scholarship, and high-status employment (Marginson 2006; Marginson 2022b; Mohanty 2019). Whilst the NEP recognises the importance of English proficiency for global competitiveness and academic mobility, its emphasis on regional-language instruction has raised concerns. Singh Kaurav et al. (2021) argue that students educated in regional languages may be disadvantaged later in their studies because most academic materials, assessments and scholarly resources remain predominantly in English. Students from rural government schools are therefore likely to enter HE with significant disadvantages in English proficiency, which can shape academic performance, confidence and labour-market outcomes (Asadullah and Yalonetzky 2012).

Connell's (2007) centre – periphery analysis helps explain why English operates as a dominant linguistic hierarchy in Indian HE, reflecting global patterns in which metropolitan languages govern access to legitimate knowledge and academic authority. The NEP's emphasis on expanding Indian-language provision may widen access for learners marginalised by the dominance of English. However, English continues to function as a gatekeeping credential linked to global mobility and elite opportunity (Annamalai 2001; Mohanty 2019; Phillipson 2009).

As a result, language policy risks entrenching a two-tiered system in which English-medium pathways retain higher symbolic and economic value, re-inscribing stratification even when framed as democratising access (Mohanty 2019; Phillipson 1992; Tollefson and Tsui 2004). This mirrors wider critiques within critical language-policy scholarship, which caution that widening linguistic access can paradoxically reproduce hierarchies if underlying power structures remain unaltered (Tollefson and Tsui 2004).

Material conditions and unequal capacity to benefit

In addition to cultural, linguistic and institutional mechanisms of advantage, inequality in Indian HE is also reproduced through the material conditions under which massification unfolds (Agarwal 2006). As outlined, massification in India has occurred within a context of deep structural inequalities in educational infrastructure. Many rural and marginalised regions continue to face persistent shortages of qualified teachers, inadequate facilities, weak governance and limited access to digital resources (Agarwal 2006; Nambissan 2020; Varghese 2015). Digital capital – the skills, devices and internet access required for meaningful engagement – has become increasingly important in shaping who can access and benefit from HE. Research on India's digital divide shows entrenched inequalities in device ownership, internet connectivity and digital literacy (ITU 2020; Laskar, Kaushik, and Barman 2023; UNESCO 2021). These infrastructural disparities shape not only entry into HE but also the capacity to succeed once enrolled. Unequal access to devices, internet

connectivity and digital learning environments also produces uneven forms of 'digital habitus' – the embodied dispositions, literacies and confidence required to navigate increasingly digitalised academic fields (Laskar, Kaushik, and Barman 2023; UNESCO 2021). Even as new institutions have been established, significant gaps persist in quality, governance and resources (Altbach 2016; Ayyar 2019; Tilak 2016), increasing the risk that massification expands the system without reducing the divide between high- and low-quality provision, with predictable consequences for graduate outcomes and mobility.

Isomorphism, hegemony and the reproduction of advantage

Beyond internal stratification, India's HE system is shaped by global pressures that reinforce existing hierarchies. Institutional isomorphism encourages universities to emulate globally dominant models associated with English-medium instruction, research-intensive prestige, and standardised quality assurance (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Marginson and van der Wende 2007; Meyer and Rowan 1977). International rankings further intensify these pressures by drawing upon a narrow set of 'world-class' indicators and rewarding institutions already able to meet global performance metrics (Hazelkorn 2015; Tilak 2016). The global rankings industry thus operates as a mechanism of institutional isomorphism, promoting a research-intensive, English-language, internationally networked model of excellence and incentivising alignment with Western epistemic and organisational norms (Altbach 2016; Hazelkorn 2015; Marginson and van der Wende 2007).

These global pressures translate into domestic stratification, disproportionately advantage well-resourced, urban, English-medium institutions that can address the metrics embedded in global standards, while marginalising institutions and students whose linguistic, cultural or economic capital diverge from these norms (Carvalho 2021). Burke (2012) highlights how hegemonic norms shape institutional judgments about 'excellence', 'quality' and 'legitimacy', privileging the capitals and dispositions of dominant groups while marginalising alternative knowledges and ways of being. Connell (2007) similarly argues that global HE is structured through a centre – periphery hierarchy in which knowledge produced in the Global North is positioned as universal, while Southern knowledge traditions are subordinated. This dynamic sits uneasily alongside the NEP's emphasis on revitalising Indian intellectual and cultural traditions, which must compete for legitimacy within a global HE field that continues to privilege Western epistemic norms. In this context, massification amplifies the value of globalised forms of capital – particularly English proficiency, international networks and research outputs oriented toward Western epistemic centres.

This raises a core tension for the NEP. Although the policy strongly promotes India's intellectual traditions, regional languages and locally grounded knowledge systems (Government of India 2020; Mohanty 2018; Panda and Mohanty 2020), its implementation unfolds within a global HE field structured around English-medium publication, Western research paradigms and internationally recognised indicators of academic prestige (Altbach 2016; Connell 2007; de Sousa Santos 2014; Hazelkorn 2015). Andreotti (2011) similarly argues that global education systems privilege Eurocentric epistemologies, rendering alternative or Indigenous knowledge traditions less legitimate and reinforcing these hegemonic value structures. As a result, the NEP's epistemic aspirations coexist uneasily with external pressures – especially rankings and global quality assurance regimes – that continue to pull institutions toward standardised models of 'world-class' excellence (Marginson and van der Wende 2007; Tilak 2016). The challenge, therefore, is not simply to widen participation but to do so in a context where prevailing criteria of legitimacy remain misaligned with the NEP's vision – illustrating Gramsci's (1971) point that education organises consent even within hierarchies beyond the state's control. Gramscian hegemony deepens this analysis by explaining how certain ideas come to be viewed as natural or inevitable, such as the belief that elite, English-medium, research-intensive institutions represent the pinnacle of academic excellence (Apple 2004; Giroux 2014; Gramsci 1971). Through hegemonic processes, global academic values become internalised as 'common sense', legitimising the dominance of groups who possess the capitals that align with these

norms (Apple 2004; Giroux 2014; Gramsci 1971). These norms include assumptions about who qualifies as an 'ideal' academic subject, what counts as legitimate knowledge and which languages and worldviews carry intellectual authority (Connell 2007; de Sousa Santos 2014).

Hegemony thus obscures the structural constraints faced by students from marginalised castes, rural regions or non-English-speaking backgrounds, by recasting structural inequalities as individual deficits rather than systemic barriers (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Burke 2012; Lukes 2005; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Connell (2007) cautions that expanding access without altering epistemic hierarchies risks reinforcing – rather than disrupting – existing power relations. These hegemonic dynamics are not limited to institutional structures; they also shape the cultural and linguistic hierarchies that organise everyday experiences within Indian HE. Language materialises a broader epistemic order that defines which identities, knowledges and academic practices are recognised as legitimate, and becomes internalised within students' habitus as a marker of belonging or exclusion (Connell 2007; de Sousa Santos 2014; Marginson 2006). Understanding how linguistic hierarchies operate is therefore essential to tracing how hegemony shapes student subjectivity, aspiration and belonging (Annamalai 2001; Panda and Mohanty 2020).

Such hegemonic processes do not operate abstractly but shape the structure of the field itself, conferring symbolic authority on institutions that align with dominant norms and marginalising those that do not (Bourdieu 1990; Burke 2012; Gramsci 1971). In India, these dynamics are evident in the prestige economy surrounding elite technical institutes (IITs), management schools (IIMs) and high-profile private universities, which function as powerful gatekeepers of symbolic and material advantage. As Chakrabarti (2017) argues, these institutions embody the global imaginary of excellence and attract disproportionate public attention, private investment and international partnerships, reinforcing a vertically stratified system (Mathew 2022; Tilak 2016). Their alignment with global hegemonic norms reinforces a hierarchy in which English-medium, urban, globally networked institutions sit at the apex, while the majority of regional and rural colleges – often serving first-generation, lower-caste and low-income students – are positioned as peripheral or inferior (Mathew 2022; Nambissan 2020). These institutional hierarchies also structure the cultural and linguistic norms that students must navigate, intersecting with the earlier dynamics of habitus misalignment. As a result, even when students from marginalised backgrounds access elite institutions, the dominant norms of these spaces may limit their capacity to participate on equal terms (Burke 2012; Nambissan 2020; Reay 2004). Connell's centre – periphery model helps explain why these institutions maintain disproportionate symbolic authority: they align most closely with the epistemic norms recognised by global centres of knowledge production. Massification unfolds within this hegemonic structure, meaning that access expansion can still reproduce inequality by pushing different social groups into differently valued tiers of the system (Marginson 2016).

Thus, massification in India occurs within a global hegemonic order that privileges specific identities, languages and epistemologies while rendering alternatives less visible or legitimate (Connell 2007; de Sousa Santos 2014; Mohanty 2010; Phillipson 2009). Without explicit efforts to address these linguistic and cultural inequalities, HE expansion risks reinforcing rather than reducing entrenched power relations (Marginson 2016; Nambissan 2020; Trow 2007). The intersection of isomorphic pressures and hegemonic authority underscores why numerical expansion alone cannot deliver the NEP's aspirations for equity and social justice (Marginson 2016; Nambissan 2020; Tilak 2016).

Populism, polarisation and the politics of inequality

These dynamics have implications not only for social mobility but also for widening social and political polarisation. As access to elite, globally oriented HE remains concentrated among a relatively small, privileged stratum, those excluded from its benefits may come to view universities and graduates as distant, elitist or insufficiently responsive to local concerns – echoing patterns of anti-expert and anti-institutional sentiment observed in other contexts (Giroux 2014; Lauder 2022; Mudde and

Kaltwasser 2017). Unequal distributions of educational opportunity can interact with wider grievances linked to rural – urban divides, economic insecurity and cultural marginalisation, providing fertile ground for populist narratives that frame 'educated elites' as detached from 'ordinary people' (Jokila, Jauhiainen, and Peura 2022; Rizvi and Lingard 2009). As Burke (2012) notes, when educational systems legitimise certain identities as meritorious while positioning others as deficient, these judgments not only reproduce inequality but also intensify feelings of exclusion and mistrust, fuelling broader political and cultural polarisation.

Adding a decolonial perspective, de Sousa Santos (2014) argues that modern HE systems reproduce 'epistemologies of the North', marginalising Southern ways of knowing and rendering alternative intellectual traditions invisible or inferior. Connell's (2007) centre -periphery analysis similarly shows how Northern epistemic frameworks achieve universal authority, while Southern knowledge traditions are positioned as particular or less legitimate. This dynamic complicates the NEP's efforts to elevate Indian intellectual and linguistic traditions, as these reforms unfold within a global epistemic order that assigns greater symbolic value to Western paradigms. Consequently, India's struggles with inequality under massification reflect not only national structural barriers but also the broader coloniality of global HE norms, which can intensify feelings of alienation among students and institutions whose epistemic and linguistic repertoires are undervalued within the global field.

Contemporary analyses increasingly argue that hegemonic processes operate in ways that resemble a form of institutional gaslighting: they reshape perceptions of reality so that structural inequalities appear natural, inevitable or even self-inflicted (Burke 2012; Lukes 2005). When students and communities internalise these narratives, grievances about exclusion or marginalisation can become redirected into broader anti-elite or anti-institutional sentiment – conditions that have fuelled populist reactions across diverse national contexts (Giroux 2014; Lauder 2022; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). In this sense, the normalisation of inequality within HE does not merely reproduce stratification; it can also generate political and cultural polarisation that further destabilises the prospects for equitable reform.

Conclusion

This review examined whether India's transition from elite to mass HE can reduce inequality or whether it risks reproducing it. The analysis demonstrates that while massification has increased enrolments, it has not disrupted the underlying social and institutional logics that determine who enters, succeeds within and benefits from HE. Persistent inequalities in capital, habitus, caste, class, gender, language, infrastructure, and global epistemic power continue to structure opportunities, limiting the democratic potential of expansion.

The review contributes to current debates by centring the social implications of massification – an aspect often overshadowed by policy narratives focused on economic growth, skills and labour-market outcomes. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, institutional isomorphism and Gramsci's theory of hegemony, it demonstrates how privilege is reproduced through the accumulation and recognition of capital, the alignment of middle-class habitus with dominant academic norms, and the hegemonic acceptance of English-medium, globally oriented models of excellence as 'common sense'. Together, these mechanisms naturalise and legitimise existing hierarchies, allowing inequality to persist even as participation widens.

This analysis also clarifies the structural tensions facing NEP 2020. Although the NEP articulates ambitious goals – economic development, social justice, scientific advancement, national integration and cultural preservation – their realisation requires disrupting the deeper hierarchies embedded in India's HE system. Without such transformation, expansion risks deepening stratification by enabling already advantaged groups to consolidate their dominance within high-status institutions.

Here, Connell's (2007) intervention is particularly instructive. If global HE is organised through a centre – periphery hierarchy in which Northern epistemologies are treated as universal and Southern knowledge traditions as particular or lesser, then massification alone cannot deliver social justice. However, India's scale, linguistic diversity and intellectual traditions place it in a unique position to challenge this hierarchy. With tens of millions of new entrants to HE over the next decade, the NEP 2020 could serve not only as a domestic reform agenda but also as a vehicle to legitimise and elevate Southern epistemologies, strengthening the global visibility of Indian intellectual, linguistic and pedagogic traditions. Doing so would extend the NEP's social justice ambitions beyond access to a deeper project of epistemic transformation – one that could genuinely widen participation by validating the knowledge repertoires of the majority rather than privileging those aligned with Anglophone, metropolitan norms.

Consequently, by foregrounding the social, rather than merely the economic, consequences of massification, this review highlights the limits of access-driven reform in a system shaped by entrenched inequalities and global epistemic asymmetries. Future research must examine how NEP reforms unfold across diverse contexts, and whether they can meaningfully alter the distribution of capital, recognition and opportunity that currently define India's massified HE landscape. Ultimately, India's massification trajectory continues to be shaped by long-standing structural inequalities – and, as Agarwal (2006) observes, a policy environment marked by populism and weak data systems – which together limit the possibility of informed public debate and constrain the NEP's aspirations for equity and social justice.

Note

1. Foundational theoretical and empirical works published before 2000 (for example Trow 1973; Bourdieu 1977; Velaskar 1990) were also included where they remain widely cited and directly relevant to contemporary debates on massification and inequality.

Acknowledgements

OpenAI ChatGPT (version 5.1) was used only for language editing and improving clarity. All analysis, interpretation and substantive content were produced by the authors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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