

STALIN IAS ACADEMY - BEST IAS COACHING IN CHENNAI

12/24, Muthurangan Muthali St, West Tambaram, Chennai - 600045

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The IITs are overcommitted, in crisis

The Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) are globally recognised as the crown jewels in India's higher education system. Indeed, they are often the only Indian higher education institutions known internationally at all. They have produced leaders in high tech and related fields in India and abroad. The IITs may be the most difficult higher education institutions to gain entry in the world – with more than a million students appearing for the entrance examination each year and competing for 17,385 places in the 23 IITs. Yet, the IIT system is in serious trouble at the same time that some of them are building campuses abroad as part of India's soft power efforts. It is worth taking a careful look at current realities to understand a looming crisis.

Foreign adventures

A branch campus of IIT-Madras has just opened in Zanzibar and IIT Delhi will be launching programmes from its Abu Dhabi campus in 2024. The tiny first entering class of 70 students has been accepted. How many of the faculty are from the Chennai campus – and will they stay in Zanzibar (frequently a problem for branch campuses of western universities)? The admission standards are not like those at home. Admission is based on the IIT Madras Zanzibar Selection Test (IITMZST) 2023 screening test followed by an interview. Some of the screening test centres offered to potential applicants were located not only in Tanzania but also in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and the United Arab Emirates (which has a strong presence of the Indian diaspora).

Initially the Zanzibar campus is offering only two programmes: a Bachelor's Degree (BS) in Data Science and Artificial Intelligence and M. Tech in Data Science and Artificial Intelligence. They are open to students from across the globe. The annual tuition fee is \$12,000 for the BS



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programme and \$4,000 for the M.Tech programme and as noted, only 70 students have signed up. Reports say that the rules and regulations of the IITM Zanzibar campus will be based on the existing norms of IIT Madras.

Apparently, the campus is under renovation. Are there appropriate laboratories, access to IT, and related amenities? In other words, has IIT-Madras jumped into the international arena too soon – or should it be jumping at all? What are its motivations for this adventure? What is the purpose of this enterprise – to earn funds for the home campus? To expand India's soft power? And quite important – who is investing the significant sums required to start up a branch campus? And, of course, this, and other Indian overseas efforts, must be of high quality.

Overexpansion at home

The first IIT was established in 1950 at Kharagpur in West Bengal, with four more following in a decade. Most of these partnered with top foreign technological universities in the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and Germany to get started, and they quickly achieved both excellence and top reputations. They hired Indians trained at the best foreign universities who were eager to contribute to national development. But these were small institutions – the total student enrolment was about 20,000 in the original six IITs.

After 2015, the government expanded the IIT system, adding seven institutions in the following decade, most located away from major metropolitan centres. These new IITs have struggled to meet the high standards of the traditional institutes. Some were created by upgrading existing institutions such as the Indian School of Mines Dhanbad, while others were "greenfield" start-ups. Top professors are often unwilling to work in isolated places, and the best students are also hesitant to enroll. In 2021-22,

361 undergraduate, 3,083 postgraduate and 1,852 PhD seats were empty in the new IITs. There should not be several tiers of IITs, with varying standards and levels of prestige.

But the system is doing something right – enrolment in all the 23 IITs has expanded to more than 1,20,000, with 25,237 students graduating in 2022-23, a clear indicator of more access and opportunity.

Faculty challenges, future prospects

At the heart of any academic institution are the professors. Attracting the best and the brightest is increasingly difficult. Salaries are dramatically below international standards. Foreign trained Indians are generally reluctant to return to uncompetitive salaries, often inferior work environments, and more academic bureaucracy (even though the IITs are less constrained than the rest of the academic system). Top Indian talent is increasingly attracted to the burgeoning IT sector, emerging biotech, and related fields – and not to academe – both within India and abroad.

There is now a severe shortage of academics in the IIT system. In 2021, out of the 10,881 of the sanctioned posts 4,370 were vacant.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the IITs are in crisis. Building quality in the new IITs is a significant challenge, and in the long run if this is not done, the prestige of the entire system will suffer. Maintaining faculty quality and attracting young professors committed to the IIT idea and to India's development are both serious tasks. Expanding the system domestically may not have been a wise idea – and building overseas branch campuses is highly problematical. One might question if overseas expansion is a good idea under any circumstances, but in the context of the domestic challenges facing the system, such expansion seems particularly ill-considered.

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A narrative of 'roti, kapada aur makaan' under the NDA

A masterpiece film, *Roti, Kapada Aur Makaan* (translated as Food, Cloth and Shelter), produced and directed by Manoj Kumar in 1974, depicted the severe deprivation and devastation of a man for whom living honestly became a will-o'-the-wisp. Deprivation sometimes exacts an exorbitant price that is borne over a lifetime. Undernourished children, for example, are more likely to be stunted. Stunting has long-term effects on individuals, including poor cognition and educational performance, low adult wages, lost productivity and, when accompanied by excessive weight gain later in childhood, a higher risk of nutrition-related chronic diseases in adult life (the World Health Organization, 2015).

The objective in this article, therefore, is to examine whether some of these deprivations, especially a lack of food and shelter, rose or diminished during the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime. As Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen emphasised in his classic study of famines (1981), starvation is caused not so much by a shortage of food supply as by a lack of entitlements/real income to buy food. Similarly, a lack of shelter is not due to an inadequate supply of houses but stems from a lack of real income to rent or buy a house. The Gallup World Poll Survey for India/GWP focuses on a lack of money to buy food, and rent or buy a house. The period covered in our study is 2018 to 2021.

Exaggerated claims versus deprivation

As India aspires to be the fastest-growing economy among the seven largest emerging market and developing economies (EMDEs), tall claims are made about growing affluence and, more worryingly, about an astonishing reduction in the Multidimensional Poverty Index of nine percentage points between 2015-2019-21. In sharp contrast to these exaggerated claims, we draw attention to pervasive and growing deprivation of access to food and shelter.

About 40.2% of respondents reported not having enough money for food, while 34.7% of respondents reported not having enough money for shelter in 2018. The former rose to 48%, and the latter to 44.3% in 2021. It may seem obvious but raises a concern that the highest proportion of those without enough money to buy food is among the first per capita income quintile/the

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Extremely high trust in the ruling dispensation has aggravated the deprivations of food and shelter, as study between 2018 to 2021 shows

poorest and lowest among the fifth quintile/the richest throughout the period. To illustrate, while nearly 22% of the poorest lacked enough money to buy food, barely 14% of the richest experienced this deprivation in 2021.

A similar picture emerges of the lack of money for shelter. The highest proportion of those lacking money for shelter is found among the poorest and the lowest among the richest during the period 2018-21. To illustrate, over 20% of those who lacked money for shelter were among the poorest, while the corresponding share among the richest was over 15% in 2021.

Although income growth has been sluggish, it has barely trickled down to the poorest. The extraordinary push to highly visible infrastructural projects such as bullet trains, international airports, highways, and the consequent neglect of agriculture and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, and the weakening of social safety nets are key contributory factors.

The caste factor

That the recent brouhaha about a caste census and in particular, deprivation of Other Backward Classes (OBC) is not mere political propaganda in the run-up to State and national elections in 2023-24 but entrenched in persistent economic and social deprivation is corroborated by our analysis. Using the GWP caste classification, we find that among those lacking money for food, the highest proportion was of OBCs (34.2%) in 2018, followed by Scheduled Castes, or SCs (32.3%), and then Unreserved (23.6%). Scheduled Tribes (ST) have the lowest share as a large segment is confined to remote forest and mountainous habitations and consume local foods. Between 2018 and 2021, the OBC share declined (31.5%) but remained highest, followed by SCs also witnessing a reduction (29.9%) while that of Unreserved rose sharply (30.8%). While political lobbyists played a role in diminishing the deprivation of OBCs and SCs, the unreserved largely fended for themselves.

Deprivation of shelter is not dissimilar. While SCs displayed the highest share of those lacking money for shelter (32.5%) in 2018, closely followed by OBCs (31.6%) and the lowest by Unreserved (23.9%), excluding STs. The share of SCs fell but that of OBCs rose slightly; further, that

of Unreserved surged. Perhaps the lobbyists paid greater attention to deprivation of food among OBCs, and less so to their deprivation of shelter.

Among those lacking money for food and shelter, the highest share (about 50% or more in both cases) was among those between 25 to 45 years old in 2021. We surmise that low wages/salaries constrain expenditure on food and shelter.

The rural-urban contrast

Among those lacking money for food, a vast majority is concentrated in the rural areas, i.e., well over 80%, with a low fraction in the urban (under 20%). While the rural share has fallen, the urban has risen. The urban in fact has doubled. A similar rural-urban contrast is observed in the deprivation of shelter. A vast majority of those lacking money for shelter are in rural areas, and this share reduced while the corresponding urban share rose. After COVID-19, it is not unlikely that resumption of rural-urban migration in search of better employment and growth of slums is key to greater urban deprivations.

Stark failure in promoting industrial and agricultural growth and in employment was sought to be mitigated by half-hearted and weak support for the Public Distribution System. Unsurprisingly, it does not have a significant effect on access to food. The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, on the other hand, reduced by a significant extent deprivation of shelter but the economic magnitude was small.

Trust in the NDA remained high, driven as it was by Hindutva, excess centralisation, and a massive personality cult. In fact, going by our analysis, extremely high trust in the NDA has aggravated the deprivations of food and shelter. Reversal to protectionist policies, announcement of job fairs/*rozzgar mela* with perverse incentives for the labour market (for example, discouraging job search), politically determined location of mega projects and granting of lucrative contracts to a few "loyal" investors are major policy aberrations. Together with consequent neglect of employment generating activities and weakening of social safety nets stark irregularities in their funding may well be disastrous for the polity and the economy.

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