

The Urgent Necessity for Central People's Universities: Re-Engineering Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

Despite the remarkable quantitative expansion of India's higher education landscape over the past two decades—encompassing over a thousand universities and tens of thousands of colleges and standalone institutions—this growth masks deep structural inequities regarding access, quality, and regional distribution. This paper argues that establishing 'Central People's Universities'—defined as publicly funded, Parliament-mandated, and community-centric institutions of higher learning—presents a vital strategic imperative for India's democratic, social, and economic advancement. Drawing upon extensive scholarship published across international, national, and regional journals, alongside critical insights from major national newspapers, this paper examines the conceptual framework of a 'people's university' and traces the historical evolution of central universities in India. It offers a critical appraisal of persistent deficiencies in geographic coverage, social equity, research output, faculty strength, funding adequacy, and institutional governance. Ultimately, the paper outlines a comprehensive, actionable policy framework aligned with the National Education Policy and United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, strongly advocating for the creation of at least one Central People's University in every aspirational district of India to inform and guide policymakers, educational administrators, civil society, and the international academic community.

Keywords: Central Universities, Higher Education India, Educational Equity, Community Engagement, Regional Development.

1.0 Introduction

While contemporary India celebrates an unprecedented quantitative expansion in higher education—boasting over 1,168 universities, 45,473 colleges, and more than 12,000 standalone institutions (**GoI, 2025**)—this growth masks deep, structural, and historically entrenched inequities in access, quality, and regional distribution. To address these systemic crises, this paper advocates for a paradigm shift: the implementation of 'Central People's Universities' (CPUs). These are publicly funded, Parliament-mandated, community-centric institutions designed to bridge the gap between elite academic excellence and grassroots societal needs by integrating regional aspirations, indigenous knowledge, and local development into their core architecture. Globally, the "People's University" traces its lineage from the 19th-century Danish folk high school movement to early 20th-century European worker-education faculties. In India, this egalitarian vision is deeply rooted in the anti-colonial philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi (*Nai Talim*), Rabindranath Tagore (Visva-Bharati), Savitribai Phule, and Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who viewed higher education as the primary engine to dismantle historic socio-spatial knowledge monopolies (**Patnaik, 2018; Thorat, 2014**). However, post-independence policy execution created a fragmented, dualistic hierarchy where central funding favoured elite, urban institutions, creating what some term an "academic apartheid" that systematically underfunded state universities and rural colleges (**Drèze and Sen, 2002; Menon, 2021**). This elite-mass binary was severely exacerbated by 1990s neoliberal shifts and rampant privatisation, which skewed tertiary seats toward market-driven professional courses, inflated fees, and intensified the social exclusion of marginalised communities (**World Bank, 2012; Das and Dehejia, 2017**). Despite warnings that India's demographic dividend could falter without rapid public capacity expansion, reliance on commercialised "deemed" and private universities led to acute quality crises and left rural-tribal belts as

educational deserts (GoI, 2006; Kumar, 2023). Today, premier public institutions remain clustered in affluent urban corridors, forcing unsustainable migration from over 112 lagging districts that completely lack high-quality public infrastructure (Himanshu, 2021; NITI Aayog, 2024; Agarwal, 2018). Compounding this spatial disparity is a severe funding asymmetry; public spending stagnates between 3.0 per cent and 3.8 per cent of GDP, forcing state universities—which enroll 90.0 per cent of students—to freeze recruitment, accept 40.0 per cent to 60.0 per cent faculty vacancy rates, and rely on underpaid, insecure ad-hoc teachers (Rangarajan, 2022; OECD, 2023; Rukmini, 2024; Mehta, 2023). Furthermore, global ranking pressures push research toward international journals, completely alienating academic output from local ecological, agrarian, and socio-economic crises (Bhaduri, 2019). The proposed CPU framework directly aligns with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020—which promotes Special Education Zones and multilingual instruction—as well as United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and environmental mandates for localised human development (Kasturirangan, 2021; UNDP, 2023; UNEP, 2024). Operating on four core pillars, a CPU mandates community-centric governance featuring local panchayat, tribal, and civil representatives (Yadav, 2024); prioritizes localized research over purely western paradigms to solve regional ecological and economic crises (Narain, 2023); ensures accessible pedagogy through bilingual instruction and vocational-academic integration (Devy, 2020); and reclaims higher education as a fully state-funded public good that eliminates financial barriers for SC, ST, and EWS students (Sen, 2015). Ultimately, this paper establishes the conceptual blueprint for a comprehensive policy framework elaborated across subsequent sections: tracing the historical trajectory of central institutions (Section II), diagnosing contemporary disparities via AISHE data (Section III), detailing the organizational architecture of CPUs within NEP 2020 zones (Section IV), simulating financial feasibility through corporate social responsibility and education cess pools (Section V), and offering a definitive roadmap for educational democratization (Section VI).

1.1 Conceptual Foundations of a ‘People’s University’

The structural crisis confronting contemporary global higher education, particularly within post-colonial democracies like India, stems from a conflict between an ivory-tower enclave for elite reproduction and an egalitarian engine of democratic transformation. In today’s knowledge economy, market-centric state policies and global rankings increasingly treat knowledge as a private commodity rather than a collective public good. To counter this neoliberal commodification, this paper reconstructs the "People's University" concept into a proposed Central People's University (CPU) model, which combines the federal funding and academic freedom of a central university with a legally binding commitment to community engagement, multilingual pedagogy, and localised research. This framework builds upon global educational philosophies, notably John Dewey’s pragmatism (Dewey, 1916), which posits that universities must function as miniature democratic communities integrated with social practice, and Paulo Freire’s radical critique (Freire, 1970), which rejects top-down "banking" education in favour of problem-posing dialogue where communities co-create knowledge.

Table 1: Comparative Philosophical Foundations of Inclusive Education

Philosophical Dimension	John Dewey: Pragmatism and Democratic Schooling	Paulo Freire: Critical Pedagogy and Epistemic Liberation
Core Concept	Progressive Education and Learning by Doing	Critical Pedagogy and Problem-Posing Dialogue
Institutional Role	Miniature democratic communities integrated with social practice.	Sites of liberation where the oppressed decode their material realities.
Pedagogical Structure	Rejects the separation of abstract theory from manual practice.	Dissolves the authoritative line between teacher and student.
Knowledge Generation	Continuous transformation of personal and hands-on experience.	Egalitarian dialogue focused on real-world "generative themes."
Social Objective	Fostering cooperation, communication, and shared living.	Awakening critical consciousness (<i>conscientização</i>) for political action.

Sources: Dewey (1916 and 1938), Freire (1970,1973 and 1998), Westbrook (1991)

These emancipatory models are supported by international findings showing that unequal tertiary systems deepen socioeconomic polarisation (World Bank, 2012; UNDP, 2023). In India, this model challenges the colonial epistemic framework inherited from Wood’s Despatch (1854) and the Universities Act (1857), which explicitly created an alienated class of English-educated intermediaries cut off from agrarian realities. To dismantle this monopoly, the CPU draws from an indigenous tradition of liberation: **Mahatma Gandhi’s Nai Talim:** Grounded in the philosophy that intellectual and manual labour must be integrated within the village economy to build self-reliant rural societies (*Journal of Rural Studies and Rural Sociology*, 2016).

Dr B.R. Ambedkar’s Emancipatory Command: The core directive to "Educate, Agitate, Organise" frames higher education as a vital democratic weapon to smash caste-based knowledge monopolies and secure social dignity (Thorat, 2014).

Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati: A pioneering institutional experiment that combined global humanism with practical rural reconstruction (**Bhattacharya, 2021**).

Systemic privatisation since the 1990s has aggravated these historical gaps by reframing higher education as a non-merit private good (**Tilak, 2018**). This policy shift triggered a decline in state funding and fueled an explosion of private institutions that cluster around profitable professional streams, completely abandoning fields of high social utility like ecological conservation and public health (**Das and Dehejia, 2017**). Consequently, commercialised fee structures act as a mechanism of social exclusion that prices out Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), trapping them in underfunded state colleges or sub-standard "degree mills" (**GoI, 2006; Kumar, 2023**). To operationalise equity, the Central People's University model rejects isolated, market-driven academic structures in favour of a framework resting on four separate, interdependent structures of CPU. The first one is a dedicated **Parliamentary Mandate**, which guarantees secure, non-discretionary funding directly from the central exchequer under Entry 66 of the Union List within the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution of India. This statutory protective layer insulates peripheral campuses from the chronic fiscal crises, cost-recovery fee recovery schemes, and hiring freezes that routinely compromise state-level university networks. The second one establishes **Cognitive Justice** by dismantling historical monolingual filters. It implements a systematic, dual-medium instructional architecture that delivers academic courses, scientific research, and lecture evaluations simultaneously in regional Scheduled Languages and English, eliminating linguistic gatekeeping while fostering deep conceptual clarity among first-generation vernacular learners. The third reorients institutional validation by prioritising **Contextual, Regionally Relevant Research**. Rather than forcing faculty to align with Eurocentric index-paywall algorithms to satisfy commercial global ranking metrics, the academic core is structurally directed toward action research, participatory rural appraisal, and local innovation. This reorientation weighs institutional advancement on direct, district-level structural solutions designed to solve immediate environmental, agrarian, and socio-economic crises within the surrounding ecosystem. The fourth and final anchor of the university is through **Democratic Governance**, establishing a participatory administrative matrix that rejects top-down central control. By utilising statutory foundational charters, this model reserves legally binding co-decision seats on executive syndicates, university courts, and academic councils for local Panchayati Raj Institution representatives, traditional tribal elders, civil society advocates, and rural cooperative aggregates, ensuring continuous institutional responsiveness and bottom-up accountability to the community. **Parliamentary Mandate:** Provides stable, non-discretionary funding under Union List Entry 66 to insulate institutions from the chronic fiscal crises common to state universities (**Rangarajan, 2022**). **Cognitive Justice:** Implements a systematic, dual-medium instructional framework in both regional languages and English to ensure deep conceptual clarity for first-generation learners (**Devy, 2020**). **Contextual, Regionally Relevant Research:** Prioritizes localized scientific solutions for environmental, agrarian, and economic crises over abstract global citation metrics (**Bhaduri, 2019; Narain, 2023**). **Democratic Governance:** Bypasses detached bureaucracies by reserving statutory seats on executive councils for panchayat leaders, tribal representatives, civil society actors, and agricultural cooperatives to maintain direct community accountability (**Mehta, 2023**). Ultimately, the CPU framework provides an actionable blueprint that directly fulfils national and global policy imperatives, acting as the multidisciplinary anchor for the Special Education Zones envisioned by India's current educational mandates (**Kasturirangan, 2021**) while pioneering a scalable public-sector model for inclusive human development and regional equity (**UNEP, 2024; Yadav, 2024**).

1.2 Historical Trajectory of Central Institutions

The contemporary structural crisis confronting India's central universities stems from an unresolved historical dualism that balances a colonial legacy of elite containment and top-down control against a post-independence democratic mandate for mass empowerment, geographic equity, and socio-economic integration (**Chakrabarty, 2023**). This spatial clustering and regional disparity are deeply rooted in the long-term legislative design of the state, tracing back to the British Raj's formal entry into university management via Wood's Despatch of 1854 and the subsequent Universities Act of 1857, which established the first presidency universities in Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras, followed by Allahabad in 1887. As instruments of imperial hegemony, these institutions relied on a rigid affiliating system designed not for community development or deep inquiry, but to produce an English-educated, culturally assimilated class of local intermediaries for the lower bureaucracy while filtering access to advanced Western knowledge to insulate the regime from mass social unrest (**Agarwal, 2006**). This established an explicitly urban, exclusionary spatial logic clustered around imperial capitals and anchored by English as an absolute linguistic gatekeeper, creating a "split consciousness" that separated formal learning from rural material realities (**Siddiqui, 2011**). Post-independence, the Radhakrishnan Commission (1948–49) and the Kothari Commission (1964–66) attempted to reorient public universities as catalysts for social justice, leading to the University Grants Commission (UGC) Act of 1956 to secure central funding and national academic standards. Although the 42nd Constitutional Amendment of 1976 moved education to the Concurrent List to give the centre asymmetric regulatory power (**Tilak, 2017**), financial resources remained heavily concentrated in an exclusive tier of urban central institutions like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi University (DU), and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), alongside specialised Institutes of National Importance. This left state university systems underfunded and structurally weak, creating a deep institutional divide where premier

central hubs enjoyed subsidised intellectual freedom while regional colleges faced decaying infrastructure (Sharma, 2025). To address these widening spatial imbalances and the emergence of vast "educational deserts" in lagging belts, the Central Universities Act of 2009 was enacted as a watershed policy intervention, establishing fourteen new central universities across various states to equalise the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) (Siddiqui, 2011). However, a persistent gap remained between legislative intent and real-world execution because the state imported the same rigid, urban, top-down administrative frameworks and curriculum guidelines rather than tailoring the new campuses to local socio-economic and ecological environments. Built in isolated rural areas far from regional economic corridors, these new campuses suffered from high faculty vacancies and poor local integration, operating as detached academic enclaves rather than vibrant engines of regional transformation. Today, India's public higher education grid includes 56 central universities, yet their cartography remains deeply skewed toward political and administrative centres. Resolving this structural tension requires an institutional evolution beyond the traditional, ivory-tower central university paradigm and toward the Central People's University (CPU) framework.

1.3 Demographic Diagnostics and Contemporary Disparities

The Spatial and Geographic Gap: The geography of higher education in a post-colonial, developing economy reflects state priorities, historical privileges, and ongoing uneven development, operating through an unequal, asymmetric landscape where the benefits of expansion pool in specific urban centres while other territories remain structurally marginalised (Sarma, 2011; Das, 2025). In India's public policy architecture, the spatial clustering of the 56 central universities marks a severe structural divide, concentrating premier public knowledge assets in wealthy metropolitan areas and political capitals while leaving vast, socio-economically lagging regions as "educational deserts." Grounded in the political economy of urban-regional structures and human capability development, this core-periphery asymmetry forces periphery regions—consisting of rural areas, tribal hinterlands, and economically lagging districts—to rely on underfunded facilities or accept complete institutional deficits, which serves as a major driver of overall national and inter-generational income divides (Chatterjee, 2025). When applied to unequal cognitive cartography, this concentration restricts human agency and narrows opportunities for basic development. Wealthy urban households leverage their disposable incomes to access these heavily subsidised public spaces, reinforcing structural privileges across generations, whereas rural and marginalised youth face a double barrier: they are cut off from high-quality local options and priced out of migrating to distant urban nodes, violating the principles of social justice (Jan, 2025). This cartography of hegemony is evident in the National Capital Territory of Delhi alone, hosting seven premier central universities—including DU, JNU, Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI), and Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)—which absorb a massive share of direct budgetary allocations to feature advanced scientific laboratories, well-stocked libraries, and subsidised housing. Conversely, populated, socio-economically lagging states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh contain only one or two poorly resourced central campuses plagued by high faculty vacancies (Nayak, 2026). This geographic gap severely restricts social mobility, as advanced urban regions achieve a GER well over 40.0 per cent or 50.0 per cent while states like Bihar struggle below 15.0 per cent, reinforcing deep regional wealth inequalities (Bose et al. 2022; Bharti, 2018). This sharp geographic concentration serves as a visible manifestation of uneven regional development, reproducing intense socio-spatial hierarchies of educational opportunity and turning premium public knowledge spaces into exclusive channels for urban advancement. In stark contrast, demographically critical states such as Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, and Maharashtra are left underserved with only one or two central universities each, while Goa remains a unique institutional anomaly without any central university grid allocation (Agarwal, 2009). This spatial distortion compels talented youth from rural, tribal, and semi-urban backgrounds to undergo an unsustainable, forced educational migration to metropolitan nodes like New Delhi or historic centres like Varanasi at an enormous personal and economic cost, frequently trapping rural families in long-term debt through informal, high-interest loans to cover urban rent, food, and maintenance.

Aspirational Districts as Educational Deserts: The spatial distribution of public infrastructure in modern India mirrors structural priorities; while urban corridors morph into high-technology clusters, peripheral zones face severe cognitive isolation and geographic exclusion (Himanshu, 2021). To correct these structural imbalances, the Government of India introduced the Aspirational Districts Programme under NITI Aayog, identifying 112 districts lagging across composite developmental parameters (NITI Aayog, 2018). Paradoxically, not a single one of these 112 lagging districts hosts a functioning public central university. This institutional void transforms vast agrarian, tribal, and border zones into "higher education deserts," areas where residents reside beyond commuting distance from any public institution of higher learning (Hillman, 2016). This severe maldistribution reinforces existing social stratification, turning higher education into a mechanism for elite reproduction rather than mass social emancipation (Tilak and Choudhury, 2022). This socio-spatial deficit is stark across the **Central tribal forest belts:** Bastar, Kalahandi, and Palamu. **Lagging agrarian plains:** Araria, Shravasti, and Nuapada. **Border terrains:** Kupwara, Chamba, and frontier zones like Ladakh. This total lack of premier public facilities forces a dependency on unregulated private providers (GoI, 2006). Driven by a three-decade state retreat from funding public education (Tilak, 2018), predatory private capital clusters exclusively around high-fee professional courses, completely abandoning foundational sciences, humanities, or low-yield, socially vital fields like public health and dryland agriculture (Bhaduri, 2019). These low-quality private institutions operate as "degree mills" that issue credentials

without adequate laboratory infrastructure, functional libraries, or regularly paid faculty, trapping first-generation learners in severe family debt and precarity (**Kumar, 2023**).

Regional Geopolitical and Tribal Frontiers

North-East India Case Study: The North-Eastern region of India occupies a highly sensitive geopolitical frontier, sharing over 99.0 per cent of its borders with international neighbours. It is isolated by the narrow Siliguri Corridor, a geography that frequently leaves remote borderlands structurally marginalised by the uneven layouts of post-colonial capitalism (**Sarma, 2011; Das, 2025**). This spatial divide is highly visible in its tertiary network, where the presence of central institutions masks deep structural capacity constraints and cultural alienation (**Borgohain, 2021**). Imposing monolithic English-medium structures creates intense epistemic alienation for indigenous students, pushing native oral histories, custom languages, and biodiversity skills to the margins as "unscientific." Furthermore, top-down textbook structures erase localised realities by dismissing shifting cultivation (*Jhum*) landscapes without scientific study, ignoring indigenous pharmacology pools vulnerable to biopiracy, and failing to understand custom community-based natural resource management systems.

Tribal and Scheduled Area Provisions: The democratic legitimacy of India depends on delivering structural justice to Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis), who face severe socio-spatial isolation and exclusion from the premier higher education network (**Vakulabharanam, 2024**). While Articles 46 and 275(1), alongside the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution, impose a strict obligation on the state to fund and protect the educational interests of Scheduled Areas, a wide gap remains between legal mandates and real-world access (**Fernandes, 2018**). Managed primarily for raw material extraction, resource-rich tribal corridors suffer from a core-periphery asymmetry where economic surpluses flow to urban industrial cores, leaving local populations with deep institutional deficits. Historically, the Kothari Commission (1966) attempted to resolve this by recommending "Rural Universities" integrated with agrarian economies, vernacular pedagogy, and manual labour, but this vision was systematically marginalised to fund elite urban enclaves. Initial legislative responses under Union List Entry 66, such as the Indira Gandhi National Tribal University (IGNTU) and the Central Tribal University of Andhra Pradesh, represent a major scale deficit; expecting a few campuses to serve over 700 distinct tribal communities across thousands of kilometres is mathematically unviable (**Kaur and Dani, 2020**).

1.4 Intersecting Axes of Exclusion

Caste, Class, and Gross Enrolment Realities: In a deeply stratified society like India, public higher education serves as a vital battleground for social dignity, historic representation, and structural equity rather than a neutral engine of social mobility, as unregulated systems often reinforce caste, class, and gender hierarchies (**Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Das, 2025**). While India's 56 central universities carry a direct parliamentary mandate under Union List Entry 66 to function as equalising spaces, rapid quantitative expansion has masked persistent social filters—such as hyper-selective entrance examinations and absolute English language hegemony—that isolate these institutions as elite urban enclaves that exclude rural, tribal, and economically weaker youth (**Himanshu, 2021**). Dominant classes cluster in affluent urban zones, capture heavily subsidised seats, and weaponise an institutional narrative of "castelessness" to dismiss demands for affirmative action as violations of pure merit (**Deshpande, 2016**). According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), the national Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) stands at 28.4 per cent, but drops significantly to 23.4 per cent for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and an alarming 18.0 per cent for Scheduled Tribes (STs), leaving rural tribal women with the lowest access ratios in the country (**GoI, 2022**). This failure to guarantee equitable tertiary access locks the economy into a low-skill equilibrium and expands inter-generational wealth divides. Interpreted through the lens of cultural capital, universities are not neutral spaces of merit evaluation; they actively reward the linguistic and social dispositions inherited by the urban elite, forcing marginalised youth to compete under a structural disadvantage. Furthermore, centralised testing regimes like the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) act as informal economic filters, favouring high-cost urban coaching industries over raw cognitive talent, threatening a deep polarisation that locks marginalised groups into deteriorating local colleges (**Varghese, 2019**). Even when Dalit and Adivasi students enter elite public campuses, they encounter a deeply hostile institutional environment; traditional central universities routinely enforce monolingual English gatekeeping that induces severe academic anxiety and epistemic marginalisation among vernacular-medium learners. This compounding alienation, combined with a total lack of administrative anti-discrimination mechanisms, has triggered a tragic pattern of institutional suicides among SC, ST, and minority students (**Thorat and Newman, 2010**).

Gender and Intra-Household Rationing Barriers: The spatial and structural expansion of public higher education in post-colonial India presents a profound paradox; while aggregate national statistical breakthroughs show the female GER at 28.5 per cent slightly overtaking the male GER of 28.3 per cent, deep diagnostics reveal that this quantitative growth has failed to dissolve entrenched patriarchal barriers governing the everyday lives of female learners (**GoI, 2022**). Intersecting with caste hierarchies, rural geography, and economic precarity, the physical university operates as a gendered space where baseline administrative frameworks and safety

parameters reinforce a patriarchal *habitus* that views the ideal academic subject as unencumbered, urban, and male (**Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977**). This matrix of exclusion functions through spatial segregation, epistemic erasure, and admissions coercion. Elite institutions cluster in metropolitan corridors, forcing a choice for women between precarious educational migration and underfunded local options, while hyper-selective testing regimes act as powerful filters favouring high-cost urban coaching industries (**Chanana, 2007**). These imbalances are exacerbated by a three-decade neoliberal state retreat from funding public education, which reframes tertiary learning into a private consumer asset and triggers destructive intra-household resource allocation; faced with high fee-recovery models, low-income families routinely ration resources to fund the education of male children while forcing daughters into predatory, off-campus commercial "degree mills." Within traditional public central universities, women confront pervasive architectural barriers, including an acute deficit of safe, affordable hostel infrastructure. Restrictive and discriminatory curfew hours that disrupt night-time laboratory and library access. Widespread sexual harassment and non-functional Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) managed by male administrators (**Mehta, 2023**). Standard education templates compound this by erasing women's contributions to agricultural labour and community ecosystem management from the curriculum.

Persons with Disabilities and Ableist Layouts: The democratisation of higher education across developing economies routinely ignores students with disabilities by operating through an ableist *habitus* that treats public infrastructure as a physical archive of exclusion rather than a universally accessible space. While India's central universities carry a direct parliamentary mandate to act as engines of social equalisation, their actual physical layouts and educational models present an intense policy-practice implementation gap that relegates disabled learners to the absolute margins of campus life (**Bhatnagar, 2020**). For disabled students from rural, tribal, and economically weaker backgrounds, this marginalisation is multi-layered; class, caste, and spatial interactions concentrate premium infrastructure within metropolitan corridors. Although the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016 explicitly mandates a minimum 5.0 per cent statutory reservation for benchmark disabilities along with barrier-free learning environments, these spaces routinely lock out disabled youth via: Inaccessible multi-level heritage libraries lacking elevators. High-workstation science laboratories that cannot accommodate wheelchair users. Broken or non-existent tactile transport loops (**Nayak, 2026**). Beyond physical segregation, disabled learners confront intense epistemic exclusion via hyper-selective standardised entry regimes like the CUET, which rely on rigid, timed print models that privilege high-cost urban coaching over raw cognitive talent. This sensory and linguistic filter is further codified by absolute English-medium gatekeeping, inducing severe academic anxiety and high attrition rates.

Linguistic Hegemony and First-Generation Anxieties: The expansion of post-colonial higher education systems encounters a silent structural gatekeeper that routinely filters out vast portions of the population: the linguistic medium of instruction, which transforms university frameworks into archives of elitism geared toward the language of metropolitan capital. Traditional educational layouts actively enforce an absolute English-language hegemony that relegates vernacular-background students to the margins of campus life. These mainstream institutions actively reward the specific linguistic dispositions of the urban elite while treating local languages as unscientific media incapable of expressing advanced technical thought. This monolingual framework stands in stark contrast to India's vast demographic landscape, where over 80.0 per cent of students complete their schooling in one of the country's 22 Scheduled Languages or 1,600 mother tongues rather than English (**GoI, 2022**). Forcing these learners to acquire complex scientific or humanistic concepts through an unfamiliar language violates fundamental pedagogical principles, inducing intense academic anxiety and accelerating attrition rates (**Pattanayak, 1981; Mohanty, 2019**). These linguistic divides are severely exacerbated by private, self-financed universities that treat the translation of technical media and regional textbook development as unnecessary capital liabilities. Vernacular students are routinely labelled as unacademic, creating a severe deficit of administrative support grids within the contemporary public university machinery. Leaving academic support to be retrofitted as an afterthought creates severe epistemic exclusion, resulting in a high concentration of student attrition within the first two semesters (**Rani and Kumar, 2022**). First-generation learners are forced to navigate an unsupportive academic culture that rewards elite, urban social networks, trapping them in underfunded provincial colleges or predatory private "degree mills." To establish true cognitive justice and support retention, first-generation learners require comprehensive academic scaffolding, systematic mentoring, and localised career guidance that traditional public institutions fail to provide (**Bhatnagar, 2020**).

1.5 The Institutional and Staffing Vacuum

Faculty Vacancies and the Academic Precariat: The structural integrity and intellectual vitality of any higher education system depend fundamentally upon its academic core, yet a multi-decade quantitative expansion of campuses has masked a severe collapse of institutional capacity within India's central universities. This system-wide faculty crisis is characterised by chronic vacancy rates routinely hovering between 40.0 per cent and 60.0 per cent of all sanctioned chairs, particularly across the 112 Aspirational Districts and borderlands like the North-East, Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh (**Borgohain, 2021**). A landmark Parliamentary Standing Committee report exposed that an astonishing 56.0 per cent of sanctioned professor posts across central institutions remain completely vacant, leaving over 5,400 empty faculty desks nationwide (**Parliamentary Standing Committee Report, 2024**). To maintain basic functions, university administrations increasingly rely on a precarious, hyper-exploited workforce of temporary guest

lecturers and ad-hoc staff to fill the widening gaps in the academic layout. This structural deficiency has created a severe staffing grid crisis across public institutions, where regular permanent chairs remain 40.0 per cent to 60.0 per cent vacant due to frozen recruitment pipelines and bureaucratic delays. To prevent a complete institutional shutdown, campuses have established an extensive academic precariat line. This expanding secondary tier of the workforce is composed entirely of temporary guest lecturers and insecure ad-hoc staff who are severely underpaid, denied fundamental employment benefits, and cut off from departmental governance, ultimately compromising long-term pedagogical continuity and structural equity. This chronic under-staffing breaks pedagogical continuity for vulnerable learners, halts long-term research, and effectively eviscerates affirmative action by stalling the recruitment of reserved SC, ST, and OBC chairs (**Rani and Kumar, 2022**). This capacity drain traps regional economies in a low-skill, low-productivity equilibrium. Stripped of basic employment security, paid a minor fraction of permanent civil-service salaries, denied research time, and excluded from departmental governance, these scholars form a vulnerable "academic precariat" (**Bhattacharya, 2021**). Legally barred from supervising doctoral scholars or building advanced laboratories, this reliance on unprotected labour lines bypasses the legal benefits guaranteed by statutory reservation frameworks. Driven by aggressive cost-recovery mandates and hiring freezes, this budgetary retrenchment has triggered an acute brain drain toward corporate entities and highly capitalised private universities that offer multiple times the financial compensation of compressed public-sector civil-service pay scales (**Rangarajan, 2022**). The remaining faculty are drowned in non-academic bureaucratic tasks, causing rapid intellectual burnout and institutional stagnation (**Jan, 2025; Nayak, 2026**).

The Global Ranking Metric Disconnect: Remaining permanent faculty face an oppressive incentive system prioritising abstract global citation indices over localised problem-solving, rendering them detached from regional crises. Mainstream evaluation models rely on narrow, borrowed Western research metrics prioritising Scopus-indexed publications, global citation ranks, and international corporate grants. This qualitative obsession enforces a managerial audit culture that penalises faculty for dedicating temporal resources to intensive undergraduate teaching lines, first-generation student mentorship, or writing peer-reviewed textbooks in regional vernaculars (**Powar and Bhalla, 2020**). This research disconnect effectively bypasses faculty who collaborate on localised agro-ecological interventions or design decentralised water-harvesting tools for regional Panchayats, favouring instead abstract theoretical models designed for Western publication houses (**Bhaduri, 2019**). This hollowing out tracks a three-decade neoliberal public spending retreat that reframed higher education from a public good into a private consumer asset, forcing public institutions to implement aggressive cost-recovery mandates. Concurrently, this budgetary retrenchment has been accompanied by a tightening of administrative control over campus speech; service rules treat faculty critique as a violation of civil-service codes, inducing a profound chilling effect marked by politically motivated dismissals, institutional suspensions, and bureaucratic blocks on campus seminars.

Epistemicide and the Omission of Local Expertise: The expansion of post-colonial public higher education systems is routinely celebrated as a milestone for democratic massification, yet diagnostic evaluations expose a structural omission that entrenches old hierarchies by systematically excluding indigenous knowledge and regional expertise from the formal curriculum. Anchored in colonial epistemologies, these mainstream networks view local agronomy, sustainable water management, and traditional community governance as primitive anomalies that must be eradicated by modern corporate training paths (**Patnaik, 2018**). Leaving local knowledge validation out of higher education creates what educational theorists define as *epistemicide*—the systematic erasure of subaltern ways of knowing (**Hall and Tandon, 2017**). This cognitive exclusion forces tribal and rural youth into a state of cultural displacement, replacing ancestral science with market-driven theoretical frameworks that fail to prepare them for the regional economy. Furthermore, remaining faculty face an oppressive academic incentive structure that alienates advanced science from immediate geographic realities like soil degradation or groundwater depletion (**Narain, 2023**). This hollowing out compounds campus alienation and triggers an acute crisis of student attrition, exposing a profound lack of anti-discrimination mechanisms and localised support grids.

1.6 Conceptual Blueprint of the Central People's University (CPU) Model

To resolve these multi-layered geographic, social, and academic crises, this paper presents an actionable public-sector strategy to achieve United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and secure cognitive justice through the systematic rollout of the Central People's University (CPU) framework. Reclaiming higher learning as an essential public good through nominal fees and non-discretionary scholarships, the CPU model intentionally embeds itself within underserved geographies (**Sen, 2015; Yadav, 2024**). The CPU framework is built upon four interdependent structural columns designed to correct systemic imbalances:

Unified Constitutional and Legislative Foundation: The establishment of new Central People's Universities utilises an unalterable legislative foundation through parliamentary legislation under Entry 63 of the Union List within the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution of India, which grants Parliament exclusive power to establish universities declared by law to be institutions of national importance (**GoI, 2009**). Drawing on the legislative templates of the *Central Universities Act 2009* and the *Indira Gandhi National Tribal University Act 2007*, a new, standalone *Central People's Universities Act* must be crafted specifically to enshrine community

engagement, social equity, and regional development as unyielding statutory missions. This provides a stronger and more enduring mandate than the conversion of existing state universities or the creation of institutions under executive order (**Singh and Bhatt, 2023**).

Multi-Modal, Decolonised, and Bilingual Pedagogy: The CPU framework rejects optional post-admission remedial adjustments. Instead, it integrates mother-tongue-based multilingual education into its core institutional architecture, delivering lectures, course modules, and digital repositories simultaneously in local Scheduled Languages and English (**Devy, 2020**). To support retention, the CPU model integrates a mandatory, credit-bearing Foundation Year into its core undergraduate curriculum, combining critical thinking and scientific inquiry with systematic bilingual scaffolding. Furthermore, the CPU model incorporates a radical four-year undergraduate framework holding embedded multi-entry and multi-exit lines under NEP 2020 guidelines, completely immune to administrative penalties or arbitrary credit forfeiture, enabling students to pause studies for seasonal agricultural labour without losing academic capital (**Panigrahi and Panigrahi, 2021**). The CPU armature guarantees seamless real-time integration with the National Academic Depository (NAD) and Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) via blockchain-secured transcript pathways (**Mishra and Panda, 2020**).

Reorientation of Research: Local Innovation Hubs: A CPU completely restructures the academic ecosystem by institutionalising a dedicated second tier of research production focusing on locally relevant, socially impactful development fields, deploying open-source computational hubs, bidirectional technology translation frameworks, and district agro-ecological laboratory grids to monitor regional crop distributions and groundwater matrices (**Bhaduri, 2019**). It establishes statutory Community Innovation Hubs at district and block levels, co-managed by regional Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), alongside full statutory integration with the Honey Bee Network and National Innovation Foundation (NIF) networks to scale up subaltern engineering (**Gupta, 2006**).

Faculty promotion metrics are reversed: advancement is weighted on direct, district-level structural interventions and open-source manual production distributed directly to local Panchayats and cooperatives, bypassing abstract global citation indices (**Narain, 2023**).

Participatory Governance and Democratic Accountability: The CPU framework establishes an inclusive administrative matrix, completely restructuring governance via a participatory armature charter where elected student representatives, faculty union lines, local PRI leaders, forest cooperative managers, and regional experts hold mandatory, binding co-decision seats across all executive councils (**Pusser et al. 2012**). To eliminate external political interference, senior academic appointments and executive searches are made via fully transparent, public-facing processes subject to direct confirmation votes by the University Senate and Student Assembly (**Singh, 2011**). Furthermore, to eliminate patriarchal and ableist layouts, the CPU model mandates that at least 50.0 per cent of executive board, academic council, and student senate seats be reserved for women and transgender individuals, alongside legally mandated representation for persons with disabilities (**Mehta, 2023**). Academic freedom is robustly protected by untying faculty security from civil-service codes and establishing an absolute legal immunity for speech, routing all disciplinary actions through an independent Academic Freedom Tribunal.

1.7 Macroeconomic Realities and Financial Feasibility

The structural sustainability of public higher education in post-colonial systems serves as a primary baseline for a state's commitment to democratic capitalisation and cognitive justice, yet quantitative institutional expansion across India's central universities is routinely hollowed out from within by a severe, system-wide fiscal crisis. Mainstream funding patterns rely heavily on block grants routed through the UGC for maintenance expenditure, yet recent federal allocations highlight a severe mismatch between political rhetoric and fiscal reality (**Tilak, 2021**). The Union Budget allocates approximately ₹44,094 crore to the Department of Higher Education—a figure that appears substantial in isolation but reveals an acute per-student expenditure deficit that works out to a mere fraction of what comparable public knowledge institutions spend in emerging economic giants and advanced industrialised nations such as China, South Korea, or Germany (**World Bank, 2012; OECD, 2023**).

To fund a scalable, sustainable network of Central People's Universities without overwhelming the central exchequer, this paper outlines a robust multi-stream macroeconomic funding architecture. This integrated financial framework replaces a total reliance on direct block grants with a diversified multi-stream funding matrix designed to maximise fiscal stability. The first stream establishes a mandatory state-matching funding model by adapting the PM-USHA framework to utilise a 60:40 or 90:10 centre-state sharing formula to seed new campuses in underserved interiors. The second stream leverages Section 135 Corporate Social Responsibility pools by implementing a modified Fraunhofer applied research contract template, which legally binds private corporate finance to regional developmental projects while protecting public patent ownership. The third stream channels long-term external development investments into an independent, non-discretionary multilateral aid fund to build physical and digital assets in peripheral landscapes. Finally, the fourth stream secures generational self-reliance by cultivating organised subaltern alumni

networks under underwritten statutory frameworks, triggering a 1:1 or 2:1 exchequer-matching formula to build permanent sovereign capital reserves.

Restructuring the PM-USHA Framework: The CPU model leverages the Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA), the successor to the RUSA framework administered by the Government of India (**Chattopadhyay, 2022**). It implements a crucial policy amendment enabling competitive grants to be steered directly toward seeding entirely new de-commodified campuses in underserved interiors via a mandatory 60:40 or 90:10 state-matching contribution formula. This builds fiscally sustainable public assets directly within the 112 Aspirational Districts, protecting institutions from provincial fiscal crises while ensuring stable, non-discretionary Union-tier capitalisation under Entry 66 (**Rangarajan, 2022**).

Channelling Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Pools: The CPU model outlaws traditional corporate consultancies that compromise autonomy, establishing instead an industry partnership framework modelled on the German Fraunhofer Institutes' applied research contract template (**Sharma, 2020**). While Section 135 of the Companies Act (2013) legally mandates corporate entities to spend 2.0 per cent of net profits on CSR initiatives, current trends show these funds bypass regional spaces to flow toward elite urban endowments. The CPU framework legally binds technical and environmental problem-solving contracts with local firms, channelling Section 135 CSR funds into regional R&D while legally guaranteeing that the university retains absolute data commons and patent ownership (**Yadav, 2024**).

Mobilising Multilateral Aid and Development Capital: The framework incorporates a radical international aid model that pools long-term external investments from agencies like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and UNESCO into a dedicated statutory fund. While programs like the World Bank's Technical Education Quality Improvement Programme (TEQIP) demonstrated that structured external funding can substantially upgrade institutional capacity (**Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018**), traditional capital flows are routinely captured by elite metropolitan centres. The CPU framework channels multilateral finance directly into the physical and digital infrastructure of peripheral interiors, embedding global benchmarks of procedural transparency and rigorous evaluation from day one.

Self-Sustaining Endowment Building and Subaltern Alumni Networks: The CPU framework incorporates a values-driven endowment armature built on cultivating highly organised alumni networks from their very first graduating cohorts, structurally locked into a 1:1 or 2:1 statutory exchequer-matching fund formula to build self-sustaining sovereign capital reserves over two to three decades (**Kapur and Crowley, 2008**). By providing nominal fees and comprehensive scholarships for SC, ST, and EWS students, the CPU fully de-commodifies learning, ensuring that regional financing is insulated from the unstructured whims of commercial philanthropy and cost-recovery fee hikes.

1.8 Strategic Policy Roadmap: The OADOPU Framework

To deliver an evidence-based operational blueprint, this article proposes a phased '**One Aspirational District, One People's University**' (**OADOPU**) programme as the centrepiece of a national policy for expanding Central People's Universities (**NITI Aayog, 2018; Yadav, 2024**). This ten-year roadmap ensures a structured rollout that allows for programmatic learning, capacity adjustments, and administrative fine-tuning between implementation phases:

Table 2: The Two-Phase OADOPU Phased Deployment Schedule

Implementation Phase	Timeline	Target Deployment	Institutional Priority Criteria	Strategic Policy Target
Phase I	2025–2030	20 New CPUs	Lowest higher education GER, highest SC/ST proportions, and greatest geographic distance from existing universities.	Establishing stable public assets in the most educationally disadvantaged aspirational districts.
Phase II	2030–2035	40 New CPUs	Completion of the remaining aspirational districts and peripheral sub-regions.	Achieving the national mandate of establishing at least one Central People's University in every aspirational district.

Sources: Chattopadhyay (2022), GoI (2020 and 2022), NITI Aayog (2018), Tilak and Choudhury (2022) and Varghese (2015).

To bypass the severe administrative bottlenecks that historically crippled the central universities established in 2009—several of which took over a decade to become fully operational due to land acquisition disputes—the OADOPU framework institutes a proactive federal management protocol (**Kumar, 2017**). This strategy resolves spatial frictions by institutionalising clear Centre-State MoA lines, which balance real estate logistics with academic access. Within this structural arrangement, the state government

holds the statutory responsibility to provide encumbrance-free land and baseline connectivity infrastructure directly to the new campus grid. In reciprocal alignment, the Union exchequer secures permanent, stable public capital reserves derived from an Entry 66 parliamentary mandate. This centre-state interaction operates dynamically through a legally protected domicile seats quota, establishing a bidirectional exchange where local land investments are directly compensated with guaranteed higher education opportunities for regional students. Through this framework, a new Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) is fully institutionalised, creating a robust system of shared ownership, reciprocal federal incentives, and joint accountability between Union and state governments (Panigrahi and Panigrahi, 2021).

1.9 Monitoring, Accountability, and Structural Quality Control

Because the history of Indian higher education is littered with well-intentioned policies that failed at the execution phase, effective monitoring and evaluation of the Central People's University programme requires independent, credible institutional assessment mechanisms (Powar, 2019). To enforce structural accountability and prevent systemic hollowing, the framework institutes a rigorous triple-layer quality control matrix:

Annual Parliamentary Accountability Audit: Mandatory annual parliamentary reports must be submitted to review explicit key performance indicators, including faculty vacancy rates, enrolment profiles broken down by social category, research output metrics, and community engagement indicators (Yadav, 2024).

Independent Third-Party Accreditation: The framework establishes an independent, third-party National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) equivalent accreditation pathway specifically engineered for people's universities. This pathway explicitly discounts Eurocentric commercial metrics in favour of an alternative contextually appropriate evaluation framework—an *Indian Social Impact Ranking*—that measures universities against criteria directly relevant to the country's developmental aspirations and subaltern capability enhancement

Participatory Community Feedback Loops: Institutionalised community satisfaction surveys are conducted periodically to give direct administrative voice to the populations these campuses are meant to serve (Panigrahi and Panigrahi, 2021). To sustain this data infrastructure, a **National Centre for People's University Research and Evaluation**—modelled on the institutional architecture of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA)—is established to provide the empirical backing required for evidence-based programme management and macro-fiscal compliance. Furthermore, to dissolve internal institutional corruption, the CPU framework implements a comprehensive anti-corruption and trust grid designed to restore public confidence in academic administration. This protective framework replaces opaque offline processing systems with a multi-layered digital and legal structural grid. The first layer mandates that 100.0 per cent of university procurement and resource acquisition be executed through the electronic protocols of the Government e-Marketplace (GeM), subject to independent concurrent audits conducted by CAG specialists and local PRI leaders to eliminate financial leakages. The second layer enforces an absolute proactive disclosure model under Section 4 of the RTI Act (2005), ensuring that all institutional scores, ledger items, and administrative decisions are automatically published onto open-access networks within 24 hours of execution. The third layer establishes an autonomous, non-institutional Ombudsman Office led by retired Supreme Court judges and civil society advocates, holding independent statutory punitive authority to suspend corrupt officials and recover misappropriated public assets. Finally, the fourth layer eliminates vendor-driven examination vulnerabilities and paper leaks by securing admissions and test logs through a decentralised, double-blind, blockchain-verified student registration matrix delivered in bilingual vernacular media, converting advanced knowledge spaces into an authentic, highly transparent engine for social equity and structural social transformation.

Procurement Transparency: Mandates that 100.0 per cent of university procurement be executed through the digital protocols of the Government e-Marketplace (GeM), subject to concurrent audits by Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) specialists and local PRI leaders.

Proactive RTI Disclosure: Auto-publishes all marks, admissions decisions, administrative ledger entries, and financial lines within 24 hours of execution under Section 4 of the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2005.

Autonomous Ombudsman Office: Establishes an independent oversight desk led by retired Supreme Court judges and civil society advocates, holding direct statutory punitive authority to suspend corrupt officials and recover public funds (Singh, 2011).

Decentralised Double-Blind Evaluation: Entirely bypasses high-leak commercial vendor testing models by utilising a decentralised, double-blind, blockchain-verified student registration and examination matrix delivered in bilingual vernacular media, completely protecting the integrity of statutory SC, ST, and OBC reservation grids against malpractices (Rajeev Kumar, 2024).

1.10 Comparative Models and Global Learning

In executing this public expansion, India is not alone in grappling with the challenge of making higher education genuinely universal, structurally resilient, and socially accountable (Altbach et al. 2009). Instructive models, cautionary tales, and selective lessons can be drawn from global structural interventions, which must inform every stage of programme design and community-anchored implementation:

Table 3: Global Institutional Frameworks and Instructive Policy Lessons

Global Institutional Model	Host Nation	Primary Operational Strategy	Core Instructive Policy Lesson for India's CPUs
REUNI Programme (2008–2012)	Brazil	Mass expansion of physical federal university campuses across geographically isolated, low-income interior terrains (de Novaes and de Oliveira, 2021).	Automated, GIS-enabled spatial planning targeting institutional deserts to achieve regional equity and spatial democratisation.
Post-Apartheid University Restructuring	South Africa	Redesigning and channelling intensive research funding into historically black universities to dismantle structural inequalities.	Strategies for overcoming deeply entrenched socio-spatial divisions and structural capability precarity.
Project 211 and Double First Class Initiative	China	State-supported deployment of specialised institutions (e.g., Renmin University) to integrate advanced agrarian science with regional economic planning.	Linking macro-state development goals directly with localised scientific planning and rural innovation grids.
Excellence Initiative	Germany	Institutionalising high-end research clusters through collaborative talent funding networks across regional spaces.	Structuring interdisciplinary research centres around shared regional ecological and technological problem spaces.
Community College System	United States	Open-access, locally integrated public learning nodes coupled with regional enterprise networks and flexible evening delivery frameworks.	Mitigating skills mismatches by fully integrating vocational credit lines and supporting student labour.

Sources: Altbach et al. (2009), de Sousa Santos (2012), Marginson(2014), de Novaes and de Oliveira (2021) and Tilak (2021)

International comparative research, published in leading journals such as *Compare*, *Higher Education*, and the *International Journal of Educational Development*, demonstrates that truly democratising advanced learning requires rejecting the neoliberal commodification of knowledge. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos argued, modern global universities stand at a historical crossroads, confronted with strong societal questions for which traditional, market-driven, or elite institutional structures provide only weak, exclusionary answers (**de Sousa Santos, 2012**). The public university must be reframed as an inclusive, community-embedded site of cognitive justice that directly serves the emancipatory needs of the surrounding populace.

1.11 Conclusions and Future Horizons: A Vision for 2047

The systematic rollout of a well-funded, well-governed, community-embedded network of Central People's Universities is not a peripheral policy option but a central, indispensable instrument of national development strategy (**Sen, 1999; Rangarajan, 2022**). To delay implementation any further is to remain complicit in systemic educational exclusion; the time for establishing Central People's Universities is now. To operationalise this ultimate transition, the framework delivers a comprehensive matrix of definitive policy recommendations based on the evidence reviewed in this paper:

Enact the Standalone Central People's Universities Act: Parliament must immediately pass a comprehensive legislative bill under Entry 63 of the Union List, creating a distinct institutional category with clear, unyielding statutory community engagement and social equity mandates (**GoI, 2009**).

Establish a Non-Lapsable Union Budget Fund: The central exchequer must systematically allocate dedicated capital for the phased national expansion of CPUs across all 112 Aspirational Districts via the OADOPU framework (**NITI Aayog, 2018**).

Overhaul Faculty Recruitment and Retention: Eliminate precarious ad-hoc hiring by establishing fast-track local boards that convert existing ad-hoc scholars into permanent tenure-track lines within a non-negotiable six-month timeline, pairing appointments with competitive compensation and a National Faculty Cadre Development programme (**Zweig, 2021**).

Enforce Decolonised, Multidisciplinary, and Bilingual Curricula: Mainstream undergraduate and postgraduate degree architectures must be structurally engineered to deliver dual-medium instruction in regional Scheduled Languages and English, fully integrating subaltern analysis, traditional Indian intellectual paradigms, and NSQF-aligned vocational credit lines (**Devy, 2020; GoI, 2020**).

Codify Statutory Community Liaison Committees: Establish local community governance interfaces at district and block levels with real voting powers on the Executive Syndicates to review curricula and monitor social impact (**Hall and Tandon, 2017**).

Ring-Fence ANRF Funding for Action Research: The Anusandhan National Research Foundation must legally reserve a fixed, high percentage of its annual capital specifically for community-relevant, field-based interdisciplinary research clusters at people's universities (**Mahal and Karan, 2019; Tandon, 2020**).

The establishment of Central People's Universities is not solely a governmental responsibility. Civil society organisations, teachers' associations, student movements, community aggregates, alternative media, and the international academic community all have distinct, active roles to play in advocating for, designing, and sustaining these institutions (**Apple, 2013**). The long history of higher education reform in India—stretching from the anti-colonial freedom movement's historical demand for an indigenous, national university system to the post-independence Mandal movement's insistence on democratising public campuses via statutory reservations—proves that transformative structural change comes from below as much as it does from above (**Deshpande, 2016**). Scholars reading this article are therefore formally invited to join an international, cross-disciplinary scholarly coalition for Central

People's Universities in India to defend academic freedom, secure cognitive justice, and build decentralised public assets (Singh, 2011). Looking toward India's centenary of independence in 2047, the nation faces a definitive moment of civilisational self-reckoning regarding the kind of knowledge society it intends to construct (Dewey, 1916). Will it be one in which world-class research infrastructure and advanced technological assets serve a small urban elite while the vast majority of citizens remain at the margins of knowledge production and higher education? Or will it be a society in which a network of Central People's Universities—rooted in every aspirational district, teaching in every major language, researching every pressing social challenge, governed democratically, and accountable to their communities—ensures that the university in India becomes, at last, truly of the people, by the people, and for the people? The choice is fundamentally political, deeply moral, and hyper-urgent, for which this entire monograph has provided the necessary scholarly scaffolding and architectural design.

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