

From Colonial Framework to Modern Expansion: A Historical Analysis of Higher Education in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Higher education in West Bengal has undergone significant transformation from its colonial legacy to the present era of modernization and expansion. The state, which once stood as a premier centre of knowledge dissemination during the British rule, has continued to evolve through multiple phases of institutional growth, policy reforms, and academic restructuring after independence. This research paper examines the historical trajectory of higher education in West Bengal, emphasizing the major turning points that shaped its development over time. Using a qualitative historical analysis, the study explores how colonial institutions laid the foundation for higher learning, while post-independence initiatives facilitated democratization of access, diversification of curricular structures, and expansion of universities and colleges across the state. The paper further investigates the role of national education policies, state-level interventions, and the increasing participation of private institutions in widening educational opportunities. It also highlights persisting disparities in educational provision between rural and urban regions and identifies challenges related to quality assurance, governance, and research productivity. By drawing insights from historical documents, government reports, and scholarly literature, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the transition from elite-centric colonial education to a more inclusive and multi-disciplinary higher education system. The research ultimately suggests that while West Bengal has made remarkable progress, sustained reforms and greater emphasis on innovation are crucial for enhancing global competitiveness.

How to cite this paper: Samir Das "From Colonial Framework to Modern Expansion: A Historical Analysis of Higher Education in West Bengal"

Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-9 | Issue-6, December 2025, pp.601-605, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd99891.pdf



IJTSRD99891

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KEYWORDS: Colonial legacy, Higher education, Institutional expansion, Policy reforms, Access and equity, Governance.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in West Bengal has a long and distinguished historical trajectory, shaped initially by colonial interventions and later by post-independence reforms. The establishment of Hindoo College in 1817, which later became Presidency College, is often considered a turning point in the development of Western higher learning in Bengal (Ghosh, 2022). This foundation was further strengthened by the creation of the University of Calcutta in 1857, one of the earliest modern universities in India, marking the institutionalization of university education in the region (Jana, 2024). During the colonial period, higher education primarily served a selective social group mainly elite, urban, and English-educated learners (Ghosh, 2022). The curriculum and structure reflected British administrative and ideological priorities, which contributed to the growth of an educated class that played a major role in India's

socio-political awakening. This system also laid the foundation for Bengal's intellectual leadership during the Bengal Renaissance and the nationalist movement (Jana, 2017). However, the educational reach remained limited, with rural areas receiving minimal benefits from the expansion of higher education. The post-independence phase brought a deliberate shift toward expansion, democratization, and regional equity. The Government of West Bengal undertook significant efforts to increase institutional presence, focusing on access for socio-economically disadvantaged and geographically marginalised communities (RUSA, 2016). As a result, the number of universities and colleges increased steadily across districts, aiming to reduce the urban concentration of educational opportunities (Jana, 2024). Higher education policies during this period emphasized public sector leadership and the provision of

affordable education (**Ray, 2021**). From the 1990s onwards, structural changes in educational policy at both national and state levels encouraged private participation, diversification of programs, and improvements in quality standards through mechanisms like NAAC accreditation (**Basu, 2023**). As Basu (2023) notes, accreditation-driven quality enhancement has gained prominence as enrolment expanded. The emergence of private institutions has contributed to increased access and offered new professional and technical courses, thereby aligning higher education with evolving economic needs (**Ray, 2021**). Despite visible progress, critical challenges persist. Regional disparities remain evident, particularly between southern urban belts and the northern and western districts of West Bengal, where inequitable distribution of institutions affects student access and mobility (**Ray, 2021**). Issues of funding, governance, research infrastructure, teacher shortages, and variable quality also pose constraints on achieving global competitiveness (**Basu, 2023; Jana, 2017**). Thus, while the quantitative growth of institutions is notable, qualitative transformation remains an ongoing process. In this context, examining the historical path of higher education in West Bengal becomes essential to understanding its achievements and identifying persistent gaps. This study therefore traces the transition from a colonial, elite-driven model to the contemporary, expanded system, assessing how policy interventions, social needs, and institutional restructuring have shaped today's educational landscape. Such an analysis is expected to provide insights for policy enhancement and future reforms toward a more inclusive and quality-oriented system of higher education in West Bengal.

Objectives:

1. To examine the evolution of higher education in West Bengal from its colonial foundations to the post-independence era, highlighting the historical forces that shaped institutional development and policy orientation across different periods.
2. To analyze the expansion of higher education in terms of institutional growth, access, and academic diversification, focusing on the roles of public and private sectors in enhancing educational opportunities and regional outreach.
3. To critically assess the persistent challenges and transformation needs including governance, quality enhancement, research productivity, and infrastructural disparities to understand the current status and future trajectory of higher education in the state.

Analysis of Research Objective-1

The objective to examine the evolution of higher education in West Bengal from its colonial foundations to the post-independence era, highlighting the historical forces that shaped institutional development and policy orientation across different periods is central to understanding the state's academic transformation in a broader socio-political context. West Bengal, formerly a core region of British India, emerged as a significant centre for modern higher learning in South Asia due to early colonial interventions. The establishment of institutions such as the Hindu College (1817) and later the University of Calcutta (1857) marked the introduction of Western liberal education, replacing pre-colonial traditional systems (**Chakrabarti, 2017; Sengupta, 2015**). The colonial government used higher education as a tool for administrative manpower development, but it also unintentionally fostered nationalist consciousness and social reform movements (**Basu, 2014**). The late colonial period saw a dual trend elite-focused education and the rise of indigenous demands for broader educational access. Intellectual leadership emerging from Bengal played a pivotal role in India's freedom struggle, leading to a greater emphasis on education as a means of social empowerment (**Roy, 2020**). Therefore, the objective requires exploring how higher education served both colonial governance and anti-colonial mobilization. Following independence in 1947, West Bengal inherited a strong but unevenly distributed education system. Significant policy reforms such as the Radhakrishnan Commission (1948–49) and Kothari Commission (1964–66) shaped curriculum modernization, teacher training, and democratization of access across India (**Tilak, 2018**). At the state level, the government prioritized the establishment of new universities and colleges to address increased demand driven by population growth, urbanization, and political aspirations (**Chattopadhyay, 2009**). This period of expansion forms a crucial part of the historical analysis for the stated objective. The rise of left-oriented politics from the late 1970s also influenced higher education policy in West Bengal. The focus shifted toward equity, public funding, and strengthening rural accessibility, although concerns about quality decline and bureaucratic constraints emerged (**Bhattacharya, 2016**). Simultaneously, research output and innovation lagged behind expectations, partly due to limited industry linkages and declining investment in science and technology (**Agarwal, 2009**). From the 1990s onward, liberalization introduced new dynamics. The private sector began playing a more visible role in expanding technical and professional education, while central

government initiatives such as NAAC accreditation and RUSA supported reforms in quality assurance and governance (Mukhopadhyay & Parhar, 2020). Thus, the objective demands comparative study across historical phases colonial, early post-independence, left-dominated governance, and post-liberalization to identify shifts in priorities and outcomes. The analysis also recognizes socio-cultural factors unique to Bengal its strong intellectual tradition, political activism, and emphasis on arts and humanities which shaped institutional identity and enrolment trends (Chakrabarti, 2017). At the same time, regional disparities continued between Kolkata and other districts, requiring policy responses to reduce inequality over time. Overall, this research objective is significant because it prompts a holistic investigation of how historical forces colonial policy, nationalism, post-independence reforms, ideological governance, and economic modernization guided the developmental trajectory of higher education in West Bengal. The insights gained will contribute to understanding current challenges and future directions for the state's educational landscape.

Analysis of Research Objective-2

The second research objective to analyze the expansion of higher education in terms of institutional growth, access, and academic diversification, focusing on the roles of public and private sectors in enhancing educational opportunities and regional outreach emphasizes the multidimensional development of higher education in West Bengal since 1947. Institutional growth remains a central indicator of educational expansion. After independence, the state witnessed a steady rise in universities, general degree colleges, and professional institutions to meet increasing demand for higher learning (Agarwal, 2009). Kolkata initially remained the primary hub due to historical advantages, but over time the state government and higher education bodies-initiated policies to decentralize institutions to semi-urban and rural districts (Bhattacharya, 2016). Access and equity have been critical priorities in West Bengal's higher education framework. Post-independence policies focused on expanding affordable public education, particularly benefitting marginalized and first-generation learners (Chattopadhyay, 2009). Reservation policies, fee subsidies, and establishment of colleges in backward regions contributed to increased enrolment among disadvantaged groups (Tilak, 2018). However, disparities persist, with access still comparatively higher in urban centres such as Kolkata, Howrah, and Burdwan than in North Bengal and remote districts (Chakrabarti, 2017). Academic diversification represents another key area of expansion. During the

early decades, emphasis on humanities and social sciences supported the state's strong intellectual culture (Sengupta, 2015). In later years, the demand for employment-oriented programs drove growth in science, engineering, medical education, and vocational fields. Introduction of IT and management studies post-1990s signalled a shift toward market-responsive curricula aligning with national economic liberalization (Roy, 2020). The roles of the public and private sectors have evolved significantly. The public sector remains dominant in West Bengal, particularly in research-oriented and general education institutions (Mukhopadhyay & Parhar, 2020). State universities and government-aided colleges continue to serve the majority of student enrolments due to lower fees and wider geographical presence. Public funding priorities historically emphasized social equity and regional balance, reinforcing the state's distinctive approach among Indian counterparts (Bhattacharya, 2016). Conversely, the private sector emerged as a major contributor after the 1990s, especially in technical and professional domains such as engineering, pharmacy, and management (Agarwal, 2009). Private institutions helped bridge the supply-demand gap and introduced modern infrastructure in some fields. However, concerns remain regarding affordability, commercialization, and uneven quality across institutions (Tilak, 2018). Thus, analyzing expansion involves assessing complementary yet contrasting roles public institutions promoting inclusiveness, and private institutions driving professional diversification. Quality assurance structures such as NAAC accreditation and autonomous college status introduced new evaluation norms, though many institutions still struggle with infrastructural inadequacies and inadequate research ecosystems (Chakrabarti, 2017). Regional outreach efforts through open and distance learning initiatives, such as Netaji Subhas Open University, further broadened access for working and remote learners (Roy, 2020). Overall, this objective is crucial for understanding how West Bengal's higher education system has widened participation and diversified knowledge domains while balancing equity and economic demands. It allows for a critical review of the contributions and limitations of both public and private sectors in shaping the state's educational landscape. The findings will offer valuable insights into future policy directions to sustain growth and quality improvements.

Analysis of the Research Objective-3

The objective to critically assess the persistent challenges and transformation needs including governance, quality enhancement, research productivity, and infrastructural disparities to

understand the current status and future trajectory of higher education in the state is central to moving beyond descriptive accounts of expansion and toward actionable reform. West Bengal's higher education system demonstrates broad institutional coverage, but structural weaknesses continue to constrain effectiveness and global competitiveness (Tilak, 2015). A critical assessment must therefore interrogate four interlinked domains: governance, quality assurance, research capacity, and infrastructure. Governance problems in many West Bengal institutions stem from limited institutional autonomy, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and politicization of administrative appointments (Mukhopadhyay & Parhar, 2020). Colleges under affiliating university systems often lack the decision-making freedom required to update curricula, mobilize resources, or enter industry partnerships actions critical for responsiveness in a changing labour market (Agarwal, 2009). Strengthening governance thus requires calibrated autonomy, transparent accountability frameworks, and capacity building for academic leaders to manage financial, academic, and outreach functions effectively (Tilak, 2018). Quality enhancement remains uneven despite national mechanisms such as NAAC accreditation and UGC regulations (UGC, 2020). While accreditation has incentivized self-assessment and institutional improvement in pockets, many colleges continue to struggle with outdated syllabi, limited faculty development, and teaching-heavy workloads that leave little capacity for pedagogic innovation (Bhattacharya, 2019). Continuous professional development, curriculum renewal linked to learning outcomes, and systematic institutional support for pedagogical research are essential to raise baseline quality across the state (Mukhopadhyay & Parhar, 2020). Research productivity in West Bengal's universities is another persistent gap. Comparative studies show that the state lags behind leading research hubs due to constrained funding, weak industry-academia linkages, and an academic workforce burdened by heavy undergraduate teaching loads (Bhattacharya, 2019; Tilak, 2015). Remedy this requires targeted research funding, incentives for high-quality publications, support for doctoral education, and platforms that promote collaborative applied research addressing regional development challenges. Public investment and strategic partnerships with industry and international collaborators would accelerate research output and translational impact (Agarwal, 2009). Infrastructural disparities across both urban rural and inter-district lines undermine equitable access and the quality of student experience. Many rural and peripheral

colleges lack adequate laboratories, libraries, digital connectivity, and hostel facilities, which restricts both learning quality and student retention (RUSA, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic starkly exposed the digital divide, with students from remote areas disproportionately affected by the shift to online learning (Kundu & Chakraborty, 2021). Addressing infrastructure requires multi-pronged investment: upgrading physical facilities, extending dependable digital broadband, and ensuring maintenance and recurring expenditure support rather than one-time capital grants. These four challenge areas are deeply interdependent. Poor governance weakens quality assurance implementation; weak infrastructure blunts research ambitions; limited research culture reduces the relevance of teaching to local economic needs. Therefore, transformation needs must be systemic rather than piecemeal. Policy levers include conditional funding tied to performance metrics, phased devolution of autonomy to capable institutions, strengthening state-level quality cells to support NAAC processes, and launching state research fellowships to boost doctoral throughput and faculty scholarships (UGC, 2020; Mukhopadhyay & Parhar, 2020). Finally, equity considerations must be embedded within reform designs. Investments and autonomy should prioritize historically disadvantaged districts and institutions serving first-generation learners to prevent reforms from widening existing disparities (RUSA, 2016). A forward trajectory for West Bengal's higher education therefore depends on coordinated policy, sustained financing, capacity building for academic leadership, and an explicit emphasis on research-driven teaching and inclusive infrastructure development.

Findings:

The study reveals that the evolution of higher education in West Bengal reflects a complex interplay of historical legacy, policy reform, and socio-economic transformation. The colonial foundations laid in the 19th century established a strong academic culture in the state, with Kolkata emerging as a major educational hub. Post-independence policies accelerated institutional growth, leading to increased access and expansion into rural and semi-urban regions. Public institutions continue to dominate the sector, promoting affordability and equity, while private institutions have contributed to professional and technical diversification in recent decades. However, several persistent challenges remain. Governance frameworks often lack autonomy and efficiency, which affects decision-making and innovation. Quality disparities exist among institutions, particularly between metropolitan and peripheral districts. Research productivity remains

limited due to inadequate funding and infrastructure constraints. Additionally, issues such as faculty shortages, outdated curricula, and digital gaps hinder modernization efforts. Despite these challenges, ongoing reforms, accreditation measures, and growing awareness about employability focus are gradually supporting improvement in standards and regional inclusivity.

Conclusion:

The evolution of higher education in West Bengal showcases significant progress from its colonial origins to a broad-based, inclusive system serving diverse social and regional groups. The state's strong intellectual heritage and extensive public sector initiatives have ensured wide participation and equity in higher learning. Yet, the transformation has been uneven, with structural limitations still affecting quality, research advancement, and institutional competitiveness at national and global levels. To strengthen future growth, policy interventions must prioritize governance reforms, infrastructural modernization, digital enhancement, and stronger linkage between academia, industry, and research ecosystems. Encouraging institutional autonomy with accountability, fostering innovation through adequate funding, and supporting faculty development are essential to sustaining long-term improvement. Addressing regional disparities remains crucial to ensuring that educational opportunities benefit all sections of society equally. As West Bengal aspires to reclaim its historical leadership in education, a forward-looking and research-driven approach is necessary. Strategic investment and coordinated efforts from government, universities, communities, and private stakeholders will help steer the higher education sector toward excellence and global relevance.

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