



Declining Enrolment in Social Sciences in Higher Education of Karnataka: A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the declining enrolment in social science disciplines within Karnataka's higher education system through a sociological lens. Drawing on state-level data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), Karnataka government reports, and university statistics, it identifies structural, economic, and institutional factors contributing to reduced student participation in sociology, political science, economics, and related fields. The analysis reveals that despite Karnataka's higher-than-national-average Gross Enrolment Ratio (36.2% vs. 28.4% nationally), social sciences face marginalisation due to STEM prioritisation, faculty vacancies (69% across state universities), and labour market signalling favouring technical credentials. The article concludes with recommendations for policy interventions to revitalise social science education in light of its critical role in democratic citizenship and social development.

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INTRODUCTION

Karnataka, one of India's most educationally advanced states, presents a paradoxical picture in higher education. While the state's Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education stands at 36.2% significantly above the national average of 28.4% and female GER (36.3%) slightly exceeds male GER (36.1%), social science disciplines are experiencing a concerning decline in student enrolment. This trend mirrors national patterns but is exacerbated by state-specific factors, including severe faculty vacancies (69% of teaching posts unfilled across 32 public universities), institutional fragmentation, and policy emphasis on employment-oriented technical courses.

Recent data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2023–24 shows that while Arts remains the largest undergraduate stream nationally (32.1% of enrolment), social sciences at the postgraduate level account for only 18.6% of students, with management and STEM fields commanding greater institutional resources and student interest. In Karnataka, this trend is compounded by the state government's recent announcement of 1,000 faculty recruitments and new "employment-oriented courses" in aviation, railway engineering, and urban planning initiatives that further marginalise social sciences.

This article approaches Karnataka's enrolment decline from a sociological perspective, arguing that it reflects not merely individual student choices but broader structural transformations in how the state values knowledge, credentialises labour, and defines educational success within a neoliberal policy framework.

Core Concepts

- 1. Instrumental Rationality and Educational Choice in Karnataka:** Max Weber's concept of instrumental rationality is particularly salient in Karnataka's context, where the state's IT-dominated economy (Bengaluru as India's "Silicon Valley") shapes student and family perceptions of educational value. With rising tuition costs and competitive labour markets, education is increasingly framed as a financial investment rather than a process of intellectual or civic development. Social science degrees, perceived as offering lower starting salaries and less direct career pathways than engineering, management, or AI-related programmes, are systematically deprioritised. The Karnataka government's recent "Women and AI" initiative providing AI coaching to 1,200 girls across 17 government degree colleges pursuing commerce and arts courses exemplifies this instrumental logic, implicitly positioning technical skills as necessary supplements to social science education for employability.
- 2. The Credential Society and Labour Market Signalling:** Randall Collins' theory of the credential society helps explain why STEM and management credentials carry higher exchange value in Karnataka's labour market, regardless of whether social science graduates possess equally valuable analytical or communicative competencies. NITI Aayog's 2026 report on Karnataka

emphasises skilling in IT, financial services, healthcare, and professional services, reinforcing employer preferences for technical credentials. This signalling effect is internalised by students, who anticipate better employment outcomes from STEM degrees despite evidence that humanities graduates find work in law, civil services, policy, communications, and human resources.

- 3. Cultural Capital and Disciplinary Prestige:** Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital elucidates how certain forms of knowledge acquire symbolic value while others are marginalised. Karnataka's policy narratives, which tie higher education's worth to economic productivity and IT sector growth, elevate STEM fields while casting social sciences as less "useful" or "rigorous." This symbolic devaluation is evident in the state's 2026 higher education reforms, which prioritise "job-oriented courses" in aviation and railway engineering over social science curriculum development.
- 4. The Neoliberal University and Faculty Precarity:** The transformation of Karnataka's public universities into market-oriented institutions has intensified pressure to align curricula with labour market demands while simultaneously eroding institutional capacity. With 69% of teaching posts vacant (3,052 out of 4,448 sanctioned positions) and guest lecturers paid as little as ₹466/day, social science departments face severe resource constraints. Four newly established universities (Mandya, Maharani Cluster, Nrupathunga, Hassan, and Chamarajanagar) have 100% faculty vacancies, creating a feedback loop that discourages student enrolment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative sociological analysis based on secondary data from government reports, higher education surveys, and media publications specific to Karnataka. Data sources include:

- a) All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE)** reports for 2022–23 and 2023–24, providing national and state-level enrolment trends by discipline.
- b) Karnataka Department of Collegiate and Technical Education** statistics on GER, gender parity, and institutional capacity.
- c) Times of India** and **Deccan Herald** reports on faculty vacancies, university reforms, and AI training initiatives.
- d) NITI Aayog** policy recommendations on skills gaps in Karnataka's services sector.
- e) Citizen News Puttur** and **Bangalore Mirror** coverage of state higher education summits and reform proposals.

The analysis synthesises these sources to identify state-specific patterns and contextualise them within sociological theory. Limitations include the lack of discipline-specific enrolment data for Karnataka (AISHE reports aggregate "Arts" without separating sociology, political science, etc.), necessitating inference from national trends and institutional anecdotes.

Table with Analysis

Indicator	Karnataka Data	National Comparison	Sociological Interpretation
Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)	36.2% (2021–22); female GER 36.3%, male GER 36.1%	30% (2023–24)	Higher access does not translate to social science enrolment; instrumental rationality channels students toward STEM/ management
Faculty Vacancies	69% of teaching posts vacant (3,052/4,448); 4 new universities at 100% vacancy	Not reported at national level	Institutional precarity undermines social science department capacity; guest lecturer reliance signals low disciplinary value
Undergraduate Enrolment by Stream	Arts largest stream (implied from national 32.1%), but social sciences not separately reported	Arts 32.1%, Science 13.5%, Engineering 12.9%, Commerce 12.0%	Arts aggregate masks decline in specific social science disciplines; students may choose BA with vocational/technical add-ons
Postgraduate Enrolment	Social Sciences 18.6%, Management 18.2% (national data applied to Karnataka context)	Social Sciences 18.6%, Management 18.2% lead PG enrolment	Management competes directly with social sciences; students perceive MBA as higher ROI than MA Sociology/Political Science
Policy Priorities	1,000 faculty recruitments; new courses in aviation, railway engineering, urban planning	NEP 2020 emphasises STEM, GER 50% target by 2035	State policy reinforces STEM/vocational prioritisation; social sciences excluded from "employment-oriented" initiatives
Employment Initiatives	"Women and AI" programme for 1,200 girls in arts/commerce colleges	NITI Aayog recommends IT, finance, healthcare skilling	Implicit message: social science degrees insufficient without technical skills; AI credential adds exchange value
Institutional Capacity	32 public universities; 100% faculty vacancy in 4 new universities [	1,289 universities nationally (+69.6% since 2014–15) [cavalier]	Rapid institutional expansion without faculty hiring creates hollow structures; social sciences disproportionately affected

RESULTS

The analysis reveals several Karnataka-specific patterns:

- 1. High GER Masks Disciplinary Decline:** Despite Karnataka's GER (36.2%) exceeding the national average (30%), social sciences face marginalisation within the state's expanded higher education system. The state's focus on access and gender parity (female GER 36.3%) has not translated into proportional support for social science disciplines, which are implicitly deprioritised in favour of STEM and management.
- 2. Severe Faculty Vacancies Undermine Capacity:** With 69% of teaching posts vacant across 32 public universities, social science departments operate with minimal permanent faculty. Guest lecturers paid ₹466/day cannot provide the mentorship, research supervision, or curriculum development necessary to attract and retain students. Four newly established universities have 100% faculty vacancies, creating "hollow institutions" that discourage enrolment.
- 3. Policy Emphasis on Technical Employability:** The Karnataka government's 2026 higher education reforms prioritise "employment-oriented courses" in aviation, railway engineering, and urban planning, while social sciences receive no comparable investment. The "Women and AI" initiative, though well-intentioned, signals that arts and commerce degrees are insufficient without technical add-ons.
- 4. Labour Market Signalling Favors STEM:** NITI Aayog's recommendations for Karnataka emphasise skilling in IT, financial services, healthcare, and professional services, reinforcing employer preferences for technical credentials.

Despite evidence that humanities graduates find work in law, civil services, policy, and human resources, the state's policy narrative frames social sciences as less economically valuable.

- 5. Institutional Fragmentation:** Karnataka's 32 public universities include newly established institutions (Mandya, Maharani Cluster, Nrupathunga, Hassan, Chamarajanagar) with zero permanent faculty, creating a fragmented landscape where social science programmes lack institutional anchoring. Established universities like Bangalore University and Mysore University face resource constraints that limit their ability to innovate or market social science programmes.

CONCLUSION

The declining enrolment in social sciences in Karnataka is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in the intersection of instrumental rationality, credentialism, faculty precarity, and policy-driven STEM prioritisation. Despite the state's higher-than-national GER and progressive gender parity, social sciences face structural marginalisation that threatens their institutional viability. From a sociological perspective, this trend reflects broader transformations in how Karnataka values knowledge and labour within a neoliberal policy framework that privileges technical credentials and economic productivity over critical social inquiry. The state's 69% faculty vacancy rate and emphasis on "employment-oriented" technical courses create a feedback loop that further discourages student enrolment in social sciences. Addressing this decline requires more than isolated recruitment drives; it demands a revaluation of social science education within Karnataka's higher education policy. Specific interventions could include:

Targeted Faculty Recruitment: Prioritising permanent hires in social science departments, particularly in newly established universities.

- a) **Curriculum Innovation:** Integrating social science perspectives into employment-oriented courses (e.g., sociology of urban planning, political economy of aviation)
- b) **Career Pathway Visibility:** Highlighting successful social science alumni in civil services, law, policy, and human resources to counter STEM-centric narratives.
- c) **Research Investment:** Supporting social science research centres at Bangalore University, Mysore University, and NLSIU to enhance disciplinary prestige.

Without such interventions, Karnataka risks producing a generation of graduates technically proficient but ill-equipped to navigate the complex social, political, and ethical challenges of the 21st century including inequality, urbanisation, environmental degradation, and democratic erosion.

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