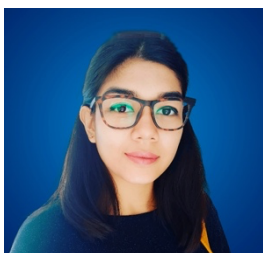


Thriving in Academia: A Closer Look at Mental Health in India



From securing funding to navigating bureaucratic red tape, researchers have to leap through obstacle after obstacle that diverts attention away from meaningful research, says **Khushboo Choudhury**.  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6207-5807>

Gaining or earning a Ph.D., particularly in STEM fields, presents unique challenges, especially for underrepresented groups. While the pursuit of a doctoral degree can often symbolize the zenith of academic achievement, it then serves as a focal point for the systemic issues prevalent in institutional cultures. The mental health crisis among researchers and scientists, particularly in India, has become deeply intertwined with toxic work environments that prioritise validation, deadlines, and consistent output over innovation and comfort.

A STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION

Indian academic institutions often exhibit a rigid hierarchical structure that expects research scholars and junior scientists to conform to their supervisors' directives as well as work flow, leaving little room for intellectual independence. This creates stagnation that, very simply put, throttles any innovation or discovery.

This constant rigidity also leads to limited exploration of novel methodologies and a toxic culture that discourages risk-taking. Researchers often find themselves trapped in environments where completing a

Ph.D. in seven to eight years is considered standard. This toxic work culture often leads to heightened stress, burnout, and even disillusionment among researchers (Levecque et al., 2017; Mackie & Bates, 2019).

A significant contributor to this burgeoning crisis is the lack of adequate support for researchers. From securing funding to navigating bureaucratic red tape, researchers have to navigate through obstacle after obstacle that diverts attention away from meaningful research. Institutional cultures that fail to prioritise the mental well-being of researchers exacerbate these challenges (Nicholls et al., 2022). Reports have highlighted instances where scholars lose rightful authorship in research papers or are subjected to unreasonably high expectations without adequate resources. Such practices not only harm individuals but also stifle innovation at a systemic level.

THE RACE TO PUBLISH OR PERISH

A significant yet often overlooked issue is the proliferation of predatory journals in India, which severely undermines the credibility and integrity of research outputs. On one hand, there is a relentless race

toward publishing in academia, driven by a pervasive 'publish or perish' culture which takes a significant toll on researchers and academics. On the other hand, predatory journals exploit scholars' pressure to publish, further exacerbating stress and anxiety among them (Demir, 2018; Panda, 2020).

Cultural attitudes towards mental health further exacerbate the issue. While many Western countries increasingly acknowledge the significance of robust mental health support, Indian society often attaches a stigma to individuals who seek help. This prevailing lack of awareness and limited open dialogue around mental health creates an environment where stress is normalised, and seeking assistance is unjustly perceived as a sign of weakness. Researchers often internalize these pressures, leading to a silent mental health crisis within academia (van der Heijde et al., 2019).

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A CALL FOR RECOGNITION AND ACTION

Despite challenges, there are signs of progress and opportunities for reform. Increased awareness of mental health issues in academia has spurred many initiatives to create more supportive environments. International collaborations and exposure to global practices hold promise for improving institutional cultures within academia, in India. Policies advocating mentorship, equitable authorship and transparent funding mechanisms could help alleviate these pressures faced by researchers.

In recent years, driven by the increasing recognition of issues faced by research scholars, mental health awareness has grown significantly. In a 2018 study published in *Nature Biotechnology*, it was revealed that Ph.D. students are at least six times more likely to experience anxiety and depression, highlighting the need for tangible action to support their mental health (Evans et al., 2018). Influenced by insights from the above-mentioned and similar studies, major universities around the world have implemented initiatives such as mental health first aid training, well-being services, and peer-support networks. Extensive international collaborations between Indian and foreign universities have also contributed to fostering a culture of acceptance toward mental health initiatives. Indian institutions are also acknowledging initiatives like “Manodarpan” under the Ministry of Education provides psychosocial support for students and also helps in integrating counseling services at institutions like AIIMS and IITs (Mukhopadhyay, 2020).

While challenges persist, the growing discourse reflects a positive shift in attitudes among both mentors and institutions. By adopting global practices, enhancing mentorship and also improving transparency in publication and funding, Indian academia can help in creating a more supportive and productive environment for its researchers. This will further help in creating a pathway for innovation and scientific progress.

While challenges persist, the growing discourse reflects a positive shift in attitudes within Indian academia. This shift encompasses not only institutional reforms but also recognizes the pivotal role played by mentors in shaping research flow. Mentors act as crucial anchors for doctoral students, bridging the widening gap between institutional objectives as well as individual aspirations. They help in guiding early-career scholars in navigating academic complexities, fostering intellectual curiosity and promoting a culture of constructive dialogue. Historically, mentorship in Indian academia has been an informal and unevenly emphasized process, that has eventually left gaps in creating a support structure for researchers. Addressing this gap would require deliberate integration of mentorship programs within institutional frameworks that draw from global best practices. This would involve in training mentors and formalizing

mentorship guidelines, while also fostering an environment where guidance is prioritized alongside innovation. This would lead to individual growth as well institutional success, where researchers would also thrive in an ecosystem of trust and encouragement.

Another factor that is essentially crucial to Indian academia is the need to foster transparency; addressing key areas such as publication expectations, funding criteria along side institutional objectives. For instance, clear guidelines on the number and quality of publications required during a scholars' tenure would alleviate undue pressure on them. Similarly, transparency in funding processes is also crucial which would enable equitable opportunities for doctoral, post doctoral as well as early career researchers. By openly addressing the broader goals, achievable deadlines and targets for faculty and students, we can all hope to reach a more trustworthy and open research environment. This would also further reduce the mental and emotional strain on researchers, build a more inclusive field that would help researchers and their mentors strive for innovation and scientific progress.

As Martin Luther King quoted about education and academics, “*The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.*” We need to bring forth independent thinkers who have the freedom to believe in their own dreams.

Acknowledging the presence of issues will help the whole community in dealing with them. Taking proactive steps will help change not only the quality of research but also ensure that Ph.D. becomes a journey of growth and discovery instead of being one of unnecessary hardships.

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