

INSTITUTIONAL CONFIGURATIONS OF COMMERCE EDUCATION IN INDIA: MAPPING LOCATIONS, ROLES, AND CONTRIBUTIONS WITHIN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Commerce education holds a focal and growing place in the Indian higher education system in terms of enrolment and its high level of association with the economic and professional spheres. Recent surveys show that commerce and management studies combined take up a high percentage of student admissions, with commerce alone accounting for a large number of undergraduate (UG) and post-graduate students across diverse institutional settings. This study examines the institutional configurations of commerce education in India through a systematic analysis of its structural locations, functional roles, and systemic contributions within the broader higher education ecosystem. Adopting a system-level perspective and drawing on institutional analysis models, the study develops a three-layered analytical model: institutional locations, functional roles, and systemic contributions. This model is applied to map commerce education across universities, affiliated and autonomous colleges, private institutions, open and distance learning (ODL) systems, and profession-related ecosystems. The study shows that commerce education is highly dispersed and functionally differentiated: affiliated colleges constitute the mass provision of UG programmes, universities provide academic rigour and research, and private and autonomous institutions focus on employability and professional integration. It also identifies key structural challenges—fragmentation between academic and professional streams, quality disparities, curriculum–practice misalignment, and weak research orientation—and proposes a coherent policy direction, especially in the context of the National Education Policy 2020, to strengthen institutional differentiation, curricular innovation, and quality assurance. The study concludes that commerce education should be recognised as a systemically important domain deserving continuous policy attention.

Keywords: *Commerce education; Employability and professional education; Functional differentiation; Indian higher education; Institutional configurations; NEP 2020; Quality assurance.*

1. Introduction

Commerce education in India operates in a complex and evolving institutional ecosystem, featuring functional relevance, diversity, and scale. It occupies a key and enduring position within the architecture of Indian higher education, displaying both its mass appeal and its strong association with professional and economic domains. India has experienced tremendous growth in higher education over the last few decades, with the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) rising to more than 28% in 2021–22 compared to 10.8% in 2005–06 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2022). Within this growth trajectory, commerce has consistently emerged as one of the preferred streams, especially at the undergraduate (UG) level, with commerce and management together accounting for a substantial portion of enrolment (Sharma, 2025).

The rise of commerce education is closely associated with structural transformation in the Indian economy—liberalisation, globalisation, and the growth of the services sector—which has increased demand for graduates with competencies in accounting, finance, taxation, management, and entrepreneurship (Agarwal, 2009; Tilak, 2015). As a result, commerce education has evolved beyond its traditional academic orientation to cover professional integration, skill development, and employability enhancement, serving as a vital interface between higher education and the labour market.

Alongside this growth, Indian higher education institutions have diversified tremendously, comprising central universities, state universities, deemed-to-be universities, private universities, affiliated colleges, and ODL institutions functioning under multi-layered systems of regulation and governance (D. L. Sharma, 2025). This diversity is enhanced by policy reforms such as the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), which focuses on flexible learning pathways, multidisciplinary education, and institutional autonomy (Ministry of Education, 2020). Commerce education is entrenched in this heterogeneous system, taught across institutional locations with different capacities, missions, and pedagogical orientations.

Despite its scale and importance, commerce education is under-researched as a cohesive institutional phenomenon. Existing literature has attended to particular aspects—curriculum design, employability, or quality (Maheshwaran, 2023)—but tends to fragment the field into narrow silos, with a notable absence of analyses considering institutional structure, functional roles, and system-level contribution together. This gap is especially significant amid ongoing NEP 2020 reforms whose implementation across the diverse landscape remains uneven (Sethy & Mahapatro, 2025). Against this background, the study aims to: (a) map the institutional locations of commerce education; (b) examine its functional roles across institution types; and (c) evaluate its contributions to the higher education system and the wider economy.

2. Conceptual and Analytical Framework

Understanding the institutional configurations of commerce education requires a multi-dimensional conceptual foundation integrating functional analysis, system-level perspectives, and institutional theory. The higher education system perspective conceptualises higher education as a dynamic, interconnected ecosystem of institutions, disciplines, regulatory agencies, and stakeholders (Clark, 2023; Marginson, 2007). Within this ecosystem, commerce education is not a standalone discipline but is spread across institutional locations, each with its own governance structures, funding mechanisms, and policy preferences.

Institutional theory offers a critical lens for analysing diversity, differentiation, and convergence. Institutions are socially constructed arrangements shaped by specific logics, resource configurations, and legitimacy claims, so the same programme (e.g., B.Com) can be delivered very differently across contexts. Institutional isomorphism—similarity in curricular forms, degree formats, and evaluation systems arising from regulatory standardisation and accreditation pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)—coexists with differentiation in mission and pedagogy: centrally funded universities prioritise research, affiliated colleges prioritise mass teaching, and autonomous and private institutions emphasise flexibility and market responsiveness. This coexistence of isomorphism and differentiation is key to understanding commerce education's configurations.

A further dimension is the hierarchical stratification of the higher education system into central universities, state universities, and affiliated colleges (Raj, 2024), reflected in unequal access to resources, faculty expertise, research facilities, and industry linkages. The functional approach, drawing on sociological traditions, emphasises the roles higher education institutions perform—knowledge creation, skill development, social mobility, and economic contribution (Parsons, 2017; Altbach, 2016). For commerce education these divide into five interdependent dimensions: (i) knowledge creation through research and academic inquiry; (ii) professional preparation for accounting, finance, and management; (iii) skill development for employability; (iv) social mobility, especially among first-generation students; and (v) economic development through workforce supply and entrepreneurship.

These functions are unevenly distributed across institution types with differing mandates, resources, and governance. The interface between policy frameworks and institutional practices is also significant: institutions interpret and adapt policies such as NEP 2020 according to their organisational logics and resource limits (Narkhede et al., 2025). Incorporating an equity and access lens—since different institution types serve different student populations (Pragasan & Tirkey, 2026)—the study adopts a three-layered analytical model: (a) institutional locations, mapping the structural distribution of commerce education; (b) functional roles, examining the functions fulfilled in each context; and (c) systemic contributions, assessing total contributions to the system and economy.

3. Institutional Landscape of Indian Higher Education

Commerce education is embedded within a rapidly expanding and structurally complex higher education system shaped by socio-economic transformation, historical evolution, and policy reform. Enrolment grew from about 11.4 million in 2010–11 to over 41 million more recently (Ministry of Higher Education, 2022), with some estimates exceeding 43 million learners (Sharma, 2025). Commerce and management disciplines account for roughly 13–14% of UG and PG enrolment (Sharma, 2025), underscoring their centrality to massification.

Indian higher education is organised as a multi-tiered system. **Central universities**, created by Acts of Parliament, focus on research, interdisciplinary education, and national norms, with commerce most evident at PG and research levels. **State universities**, funded by state governments, form the backbone of the system, acting as affiliating institutions that shape curricula, examinations, and regional access (Agarwal, 2009). **Affiliated colleges** are the most predominant type—tens of thousands of largely teaching-based, resource-constrained colleges delivering the majority of UG enrolment through standardised curricula (Betsurmath & Chidambaram, 2024). **Deemed-to-be and private universities** have grown dramatically, enjoying greater autonomy to implement market-relevant, industry-linked programmes (Tilak, 2015). **Autonomous colleges** operate within the affiliating system but with greater academic freedom, while **ODL institutions** expand access for working professionals and remote learners (Santhosh & Panda, 2016).

A multi-layered regulatory structure governs this ecosystem. The University Grants Commission (UGC) is the main coordinating agency; accreditation bodies such as NAAC and NBA support quality assurance, though coverage is uneven; and professional bodies and state governments add to a fragmented regulatory environment (Sethy & Mahapatro, 2025). NEP 2020 promotes multidisciplinary institutions, autonomy, flexible curricula, and industry–academia collaboration (Ministry of Education, 2020), but implementation varies by capacity and resources. Equity and access remain pressing concerns, with rural populations, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically disadvantaged and first-generation students underrepresented in many segments (Naik et al., 2024; Pragasan & Tirkey, 2026). Government spending on higher education—about 0.75% of GDP—remains well below policy targets, disproportionately constraining state universities and affiliated colleges (Borthakur et al., 2024).

4. Mapping Institutional Locations of Commerce Education

This section constructs a typological and tier-based mapping of commerce education, integrating institutional categories and functional characteristics to capture diversity and hierarchy in the system.

4.1 University-Based Commerce Education

Universities—central, state, and deemed-to-be—constitute a foundational location, especially for PG teaching and research. Most have dedicated commerce departments offering M.Com and doctoral programmes governed by university-level academic councils. Central universities enjoy relatively privileged status, conducting research, publishing, supervising Ph.D. students, and adding specialised areas such as FinTech, analytics, and sustainability accounting—though some departments remain teaching-oriented. State universities, numbering in the hundreds, are instrumental at the regional level but often face limited resources, faculty and infrastructure variability, staff-retention issues, and administrative constraints, while playing significant equity roles. Overall, university commerce education is marked by academic depth, disciplinary specialisation, and research potential, though its role in UG mass education remains limited given the dominance of affiliated colleges.

4.2 Affiliated and Autonomous Colleges

Affiliated colleges are the largest provider of commerce education, especially at the UG level, delivering overwhelming B.Com enrolment under standardised curricula, centralised examinations, and regulatory guidelines (Betsurmath & Chidambaram, 2024). The model provides large-scale delivery and geographical spread but is linked to limited autonomy, rigid pedagogy, and uneven quality, ranging from well-established colleges with strong academic profiles to under-resourced institutions relying on contract faculty. Autonomous colleges, a reform-based type, enjoy greater freedom in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, offering skill-based courses, interdisciplinary modules, and industry-linked programmes with continuous assessment and add-on certifications. Both remain central to massifying and democratising commerce education.

4.3 Private and Deemed Universities

Private and deemed-to-be universities have introduced new dynamics—greater autonomy, market responsiveness, superior infrastructure, and industry linkages (Tilak, 2015). Their commerce programmes often include contemporary and specialised subjects such as financial analytics, FinTech, international business, and entrepreneurship, with a strong emphasis on professional integration and employability through internships, case-based learning, and industry projects. This category is diverse in quality, cost, and regulatory compliance (Altbach, 2016).

4.4 ODL and Digital Platforms

ODL institutions constitute a significant location, offering commerce programmes to working professionals, non-traditional learners, and geographically dispersed students in modular, self-instructional formats with low infrastructural reliance (Santhosh & Panda, 2016). Digital platforms such as SWAYAM and NPTEL extend access at low cost through centralised, expert-based content and support lifelong learning (Patro & Mehta, 2025), though completion rates, student support, and perceived quality remain challenges relative to traditional modes.

4.5 Profession-Linked Ecosystem and Specialised Institutions

A distinctive feature of Indian commerce education is its integration with profession-related ecosystems—Chartered Accountancy (CA), Cost and Management Accountancy (CMA), and Company Secretaryship (CS)—which operate parallel to, yet interconnect with, the university system. Students often pursue dual careers, combining B.Com degrees with professional certifications, facilitated by coaching, flexible scheduling, and embedded programme structures that create an academic–professional hybrid ecosystem. Separate business schools and skill-development institutes represent further specialised configurations,

from high-end B-schools offering industry-oriented MBAs to vocational centres providing short-term training in areas such as accounting and retail management.

Table 1. Typology of Institutional Locations of Commerce Education in India

Institutional Type	Key Features	Dominant Roles	Degree of Autonomy
Universities (Central / State / Deemed)	Departments, PG and research focus	Academic depth, research, and curriculum design	Moderate to High
Affiliated Colleges	Large-scale UG delivery, standardised curricula	Mass education, access	Low
Autonomous Colleges	Curriculum flexibility, innovation	Skill development, curriculum innovation	High
Private Universities	Market-oriented, industry-linked	Employability, professional integration	High
ODL Institutions	Flexible, distance mode	Access, lifelong learning	Moderate
Profession-Linked Ecosystem	Parallel certification structures	Professional training, career pathways	External to university system

Source: Author-constructed.

4.6 Geographic and Regional Distribution

The institutional distribution of commerce education is marked by high geographic concentration and regional inequality. Urban and economically developed areas host more institutions and offer students many alternatives, while rural and economically weaker regions face limited access to quality commerce education, obliging students to migrate or accept fewer opportunities. This disparity reflects broader socio-economic inequalities and affects fair access and human-capital development.

4.7 Comparative Observations

A comparative view reveals clear functional differentiation aligned with structural characteristics: affiliated colleges excel in enrolment and access; universities and autonomous institutions in academic depth and innovation; ODL institutions in inclusivity and flexibility; and private institutions in employability and industry alignment. The profession-based ecosystem, external to the formal university structure, is vital in shaping orientation and outcomes. Commerce education thus emerges as highly fragmented yet functionally connected, running through numerous locations with different mandates and capacities.

5. Functional Roles of Commerce Education Across Institutions

Commerce education performs academic, professional, economic, and social functions simultaneously, though to differing degrees by institution type.

5.1 Mass UG Education Provider

A primary role is the mass provision of UG education, especially through affiliated colleges. B.Com is among the most widely offered degrees, accounting for a significant portion of enrolment (Ministry of Higher Education, 2022). The comparatively low infrastructural demands of commerce programmes enable delivery in resource-limited institutions, extending access to first-generation students and diverse socio-economic groups—though standardised curricula and examinations can restrict pedagogical innovation (Beteille, 2005), a constraint autonomous colleges seek to address.

5.2 Professional Competency Development and Pathway Enablement

Commerce education equips professional competencies and enables careers in accounting, finance, taxation, and business management, strongly linked to CA, CMA, and CS certification schemes. Universities and premier institutions increasingly stress analytical, research, and leadership skills, while many affiliated colleges emphasise technical and procedural skills for immediate employment (Kulkarni et al., 2023). Professional coaching, internships, and certification are frequently embedded in private universities and autonomous colleges, creating structural pathways to professional careers—though depth and quality of preparation vary by institutional capacity.

5.3 Skill Development and Employability Enhancement

Building employability-oriented technical and soft skills—accounting software, financial analysis, teamwork, communication, and problem-solving—is a critical role. Autonomous colleges and private universities more readily embed internships, industry projects, and partnerships, while standardised affiliated colleges often rely on add-on courses and workshops. Universities contribute through specialisation and analytical training at the PG level, though with a more academic than vocational orientation; employability outcomes depend heavily on institutional support networks and curriculum relevance (Adarsha & Girisha, 2025).

5.4 Academic and Research Functions

Universities and some autonomous institutions perform important academic and research functions, creating knowledge in accounting, finance, taxation, and business studies and offering doctoral training. However, research activity is highly uneven and concentrated in well-endowed institutions; many state universities and affiliated colleges have limited research activity, with faculty focused on teaching. This reflects broader structural disparities and leaves commerce education predominantly teaching-oriented, limiting its contribution to theory and policy-oriented research.

5.5 Employability and Labour Market Positioning

Commerce education directly influences labour-market outcomes, preparing graduates for banking, finance, accounting, insurance, and corporate roles. Institutional capacity to support employability—career services, industry linkages, faculty networks, and reputation—varies widely: elite institutions offer strong placement cells and employer networks, while many affiliated colleges lack organised placement support. This contributes to credential differentiation, whereby degrees from different institutions carry dissimilar labour-market value.

5.6 Social Mobility, Access, and Lifelong Learning

Commerce education is a valuable instrument of social mobility and inclusion, given its ubiquity in affiliated colleges and ODL centres. Lower-cost, accessible programmes enable participation by economically disadvantaged and first-generation learners (Pragasan & Tirkey, 2026), and ODL institutions allow learners to combine education with employment (Santhosh & Panda, 2016)—though outcomes again depend on institutional quality and support systems.

5.7 Functional Differentiation Across Institution Types

A comparative study shows functional roles closely aligned with institutional characteristics, yielding a complementary division of labour: universities contribute academic depth and research; affiliated colleges dominate mass education and access; ODL institutions promote flexibility and inclusion; professional ecosystems support career-oriented pathways; and autonomous colleges and private universities emphasise

employability and skill development. This differentiation reflects both institutional capacity and systemic design.

6. Contributions to the Higher Education System and Economy

6.1 Enrolment Growth and System Stabilisation

Commerce education absorbs high volumes of enrolment—about 13% of UG and 14% of PG enrolment (Sharma, 2025)—translating into millions of students and making it one of the largest disciplinary streams. Its relatively cheap, scalable programmes let institutions expand intake efficiently, acting as a stabilising mechanism and generating significant revenue, especially in private institutions, that supports cross-subsidisation of other programmes (Shettar, 2025).

6.2 Workforce Preparation and Economic Productivity

Commerce education prepares human capital for a services-based economy, supplying graduates to banking, finance, accounting, taxation, insurance, and corporate management. However, research points to a persistent skills mismatch—graduate competencies not fully aligned with employer needs in digital skills, critical thinking, and multidisciplinary problem-solving (Md. Tamzidul Islam et al., 2025)—a systemic inefficiency affecting employability and productivity.

6.3 Support to Professional Education Ecosystems

Commerce education feeds professional education systems in accounting, finance, and corporate governance, with programmes such as CA, CMA, and CS drawing heavily on commerce graduates. Higher education institutions provide foundational academic training while professional bodies provide certification, forming a self-reinforcing ecosystem—though improved curricular fit is needed to reduce duplication and increase coherence (Agarwal, 2009).

6.4 Entrepreneurship and Business Development

Commerce education fosters entrepreneurship and supports business growth, especially in the MSME sector, equipping students with accounting, finance, business law, and management knowledge. Private universities and B-schools encourage entrepreneurship through incubation centres, start-up assistance, and industry interaction; while the direct link between formal commerce education and start-up success is debated, its role in building foundational and managerial competencies is significant (Aithal, 2016).

6.5 Knowledge, Innovation, and Sustainable Development

At higher levels, commerce education contributes to knowledge creation and innovation, with faculty engaged in research, consultancy, and policy advisory roles. Research output remains concentrated in elite institutions but influences management practice and policy. Themes of corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability, and ethical business are being incorporated, though coverage across the curriculum is uneven (Beaumont et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2025).

6.6 Democratisation, Social Mobility, and Inclusion

Widely available in affiliated colleges and open learning systems, commerce education advances the democratisation of higher education and social mobility, creating entry to white-collar jobs for diverse socio-economic groups. ODL institutions further widen access for working and marginalised populations

(Santhosh & Panda, 2016), making commerce education an important instrument of inclusive growth—contingent on institutional quality and support.

6.7 Linking Institutional Roles to System-Level Contributions

System-level contributions are best understood as aggregate outcomes of institution-specific roles: universities drive knowledge creation and depth; affiliated colleges spur enrolment expansion and access; ODL institutions facilitate inclusion and lifelong education; professional ecosystems enhance workforce quality and career pathways; and autonomous and private institutions increase employability and professional alignment. Together these yield considerable outcomes in enrolment, workforce preparedness, professional capacity, and socio-economic mobility.

7. Key Issues and Structural Challenges

Over-concentration in affiliated colleges and structural rigidity. Centralised curricula, examinations, and administrative control restrict innovation and local adaptation, producing a high-volume, low-flexibility system slow to incorporate areas like FinTech, data analytics, and digital business (Beteille, 2005). **Quality heterogeneity and accreditation gaps.** Wide disparities in faculty qualification, infrastructure, and governance persist, and accreditation (notably NAAC) is not universal, concentrating on more resourceful institutions and leaving information asymmetry for students and employers (Altbach, 2016; Kumari, 2025).

Curriculum rigidity and misalignment with industry. Despite NEP 2020's flexibility agenda, many programmes retain old models inadequately addressing digital transformation, globalisation, and sustainability, with affiliated colleges especially slow to revise curricula (Upadhyay, 2023). **Faculty development and research capacity constraints.** Limited funds, heavy teaching loads, and weak research facilities constrain universities, while many colleges rely on contractual, non-doctoral faculty, weakening research culture (Agarwal, 2009). **Fragmentation between academic and professional streams.** Weak coordination between universities and professional bodies (CA, CMA, CS) produces content duplication, divergent learning outcomes, and increased student workload.

Industry-academia disconnect. Employers report graduate skill gaps in practical application, communication, and technology, while advisory boards, internships, and placement services remain underdeveloped in most colleges (Ghogare & Ramchandani, 2025). **Equity and access disparities.** Socio-economically disadvantaged, rural, and marginalised students are overrepresented in lower-resource institutions, while elite institutions are dominated by privileged groups (Bandaru & Abraham, 2025), translating into unequal educational experiences and labour-market outcomes. Collectively, these reflect systemic frictions—expansion versus equity, centralisation versus autonomy, standardisation versus innovation, academic versus vocational focus, and growth versus quality control—that require coordinated, multi-level policy responses.

8. Policy Implications and Way Forward

Strengthening institutional differentiation and system design. Policy should recognise and support distinct institutional roles—universities for research and PG education, colleges (especially autonomous ones) for UG teaching, skills, and local engagement—to reduce duplication and improve complementarity (Altbach, 2016). **Strengthening quality assurance.** Accreditation should become mandatory and integral to affiliation, with routine review, outcome-based assessment, and benchmarking, supported by data

systems such as AISHE (Patel, 2024). **Enhancing autonomy and curriculum innovation.** Greater college-level autonomy and outcome-based education can enable dynamic, industry-oriented curricula incorporating FinTech, business analytics, and digital commerce (Ramdev & Bhandari, 2025).

Integrating academic and professional education. Collaborative models between universities and professional bodies can harmonise curricula, support credit transfer, and design integrated or dual-degree programmes (Agarwal, 2009). **Faculty development and research capacity building.** Investment in doctoral training, research grants, faculty exchange, and continuous professional development, alongside publication incentives and reduced teaching burdens for active scholars, can strengthen research culture.

Promoting equity and inclusive access. Scholarships, financial aid, outreach, and platforms such as SWAYAM–NPTEL can reduce disparities, complemented by investment in resource-constrained institutions (Patro & Mehta, 2025).

Strengthening industry engagement and employability systems. Policy incentives for industry participation in curriculum design, advisory boards, internships, and placements—supported by government-backed employer–institution platforms—can improve outcomes (Sharma, H. et al., 2024).

Leveraging NEP 2020. Its focus on multidisciplinary, flexible learning, the Academic Bank of Credits, and institutional restructuring offers opportunities to integrate commerce with disciplines such as data science, economics, and public policy. A balanced approach combining autonomy with accountability, expansion with quality, and academic depth with professional relevance is necessary.

9. Conclusion

This study examined the institutional configurations of commerce education in India by mapping its locations, functional roles, and systemic contributions. Commerce education is deeply embedded in a heterogeneous, stratified landscape—universities, affiliated and autonomous colleges, ODL systems, and profession-related ecosystems—whose structural and functional diversity shapes delivery, experience, and alignment with socio-economic needs. A key insight is the functional differentiation across institution types: affiliated colleges dominate mass UG access; universities add academic depth and research; autonomous and private institutions expand curricular innovation, employability, and professional integration; and ODL institutions improve flexibility and inclusion. These roles are unevenly distributed, producing institutional stratification and unequal quality, resources, and outcomes.

At the system level, commerce education drives enrolment growth, workforce development, professional development, entrepreneurship, and social mobility, absorbing about 13% of UG and 14% of PG enrolment and sustaining India's service economy. Yet its contributions are limited by quality heterogeneity, curricular rigidity, faculty-development gaps, over-concentration in affiliated colleges, industry–academia disconnect, and academic–professional fragmentation. Addressing these requires integrated policy formulation rather than piecemeal reform. NEP 2020 offers a transformative framework, but its success depends on workable implementation across diverse settings with adequate resources, regulatory consistency, and institutional capacity-building. Commerce education should be recognised not merely as a high-enrolment field but as a systemically important domain deserving sustained analytical and policy attention.

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