

Perception of Incivility in Higher Education Institutions: A Review

SWEETY KUMARI* AND MEENAKSHI SINGH**

Abstract

This paper critically examines incivility in Indian higher education, demonstrating that it is more than mere rudeness; it reflects deeper cultural and structural tensions. Drawing on both student and faculty perspectives, the paper traces the evolution of incivility since the 1990s and explores its varied manifestations across disciplines and groups. Incivility includes disrespect, misuse of authority, exclusion, and subtle microaggressions, all of which weaken trust, erode academic relationships, and disrupt teaching and learning.

In India, everyday acts of incivility are tied to systemic issues, including postcolonial language hierarchies, the dominance of English, and caste-based discrimination. These factors create hostile and unequal campus climates, significantly affecting the academic success, mental health, and sense of belonging of marginalised students. Recent research also links incivility to educator burnout, student stress, and challenges posed by the digital era. The paper argues that interventions must go beyond enforcing politeness or codes of conduct. It advocates for transformative pedagogical practices and policy reforms that promote dignity, inclusion, and accountability, making higher education truly equitable and humane.

Keywords: Incivility, Higher Education, Structural Violence, Caste Discrimination, Language Politics, Social Justice

INTRODUCTION

Incivility refers to the behaviours causing social, organisational, psychological, or emotional harm. In educational settings, such behaviours—ranging from minor

disruptions to overt disrespect or aggression—can degrade classroom culture, diminish mutual respect, and negatively impact the well-being of students and faculty (Hendricks *et al.*, 2021).

*Research Scholar, Faculty of Education (K), Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

**Professor, Faculty of Education (K), Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

Uncivil conduct is often verbal rather than physical and can be passive or active, direct or indirect (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Cortina *et al.*, 2001; Pearson and Porath, 2009). It may range from subtle acts, like ignoring someone, to overt insults (Pearson *et al.*, 2000). Moderate conflict, when handled constructively, can strengthen relationships by fostering belonging and effective communication (Almost, 2006).

By contrast, civility is grounded in dignity and respect, guiding interactions in shared communities (Forni, 2002; Weeks, 2011). Increasingly complex social interactions and digital communication amplify the challenge of maintaining civility (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). Breaches often escalate to tipping points, shifting conflicts from reciprocal exchanges to one-sided hostility.

INCIVILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Incivility in higher education undermines teaching and learning environments globally (McKinne and Martin, 2010; Hudgins *et al.*, 2023). It encompasses a spectrum of behaviours that erode trust, disrupt academic norms, and damage professional relationships. Common manifestations include disrespect, condescension, and everyday dismissals, which faculty often perceive as threats to academic and professional standards (Clark, 2008).

In India, incivility carries distinct cultural dimensions. Kerala students, for example, perceive rigid hierarchies and outdated pedagogical practices as uncivil when their voices are silenced in classrooms (Chakkambath, *et al.*, 2024). Caste-based microaggressions further reinforce exclusion and alienation (Rathod, 2017), highlighting incivility as both structural and interpersonal.

Global studies indicate similar trends. Approximately 68 per cent of faculty report moderate to severe incivility among colleagues (Clark *et al.*, 2013). Research links academic incivility to public health concerns, including stress, burnout, and even self-destructive behaviours (Jones *et al.*, 2024). Metrics developed for student incivility demonstrate its detrimental impact on morale and teaching effectiveness (Gibson and Pohlmann, 2024). Post-conflict and culturally diverse contexts further reveal how socio-political and emotional factors shape perceptions of incivility (Orfan, 2022; Hamid and Azizee, 2024).

Together, these studies suggest that incivility is both universal and context-specific, reflecting cultural hierarchies, systemic inequities, and institutional norms.

KINDS OF INCIVILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Classroom Incivility

Between 40–90 per cent of faculty report experiencing classroom incivility (Bennett *et al.*, 2021; Al-Sager *et al.*, 2021). Behaviours

may be subtle or overt, affecting learning environments and student engagement. Social learning theory explains how exposure to peers' academic dishonesty increases the likelihood of such behaviours (Michaels and Miethe, 1989).

Workplace Incivility

Prevalent across organisational levels, workplace incivility involves low-intensity deviance that breaches norms of respect without overt aggression (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). It contributes to stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction, undermining teaching quality (Hutton and Gates, 2008; Lim and Cortina, 2005; Hodgins and McNamara, 2017).

PERCEPTION OF INCIVILITY

Perceptions of incivility vary across roles, identities, and institutional cultures. Faculty often interpret behaviours like late arrivals, inattentiveness, or breaches of etiquette as violations of professional standards (Hudgins *et al.*, 2023; McKinne and Martin, 2010). Students, on the other hand, perceive dismissive tones, biased evaluations, and unfair treatment as uncivil (Clark and Springer, 2007; Alberts, 2012).

Rigid hierarchies, caste, and language dynamics in India exacerbate these perceptions (Maurya, 2018; Lum, 2019). Gender and disciplinary cultures also influence perceptions, with female students and clinical programmes reporting heightened sensitivity

to exclusion and condescension (Miner-Rubino and Cortina, 2007; Pathak, 2025; Wagner, 2018).

Power asymmetries complicate interpretations. Faculty enforcement of discipline may be seen as hostile by students, while student resistance may be interpreted as disrespect by faculty (Lester *et al.*, 2011; McKinne and Martin, 2010). Research consistently shows that the faculty behaviours like condescension or reinforcing hierarchies erode trust (Clark and Springer, 2007; Altmiller, 2012). Even minor actions, such as keeping students after class or cancelling sessions, can contribute to frustration and perceptions of disrespect (Boice, 1996; Ausbrooks, Jones, and Tijerina, 2011).

The perceptions of incivility are socially constructed, contextually mediated, and shaped by role, gender, discipline, and power dynamics—a “mosaic of meanings” requiring dialogue and shared understanding to inform effective policies and interventions.

The uncivil practices in higher education can be categorised and observed as follows.

Faculty-to-Faculty Incivility

Drawing on Bandura's (1973) social learning theory, faculty incivility may arise from the personal factors (such as knowledge, attitudes, and communication skills), observed behaviours, and environmental influences, including organisational norms. Such incivility manifests

in various forms, including verbal abuse, passive-aggressive conduct, exclusion from professional interactions, harassment, and cyber incivility (Lester *et al.*, 2011; Cortina *et al.*, 2017; Hollis, 2017; Bullock *et al.*, 2019). Faculty members have reported experiences of being shouted at or insulted by colleagues, subjected to sarcasm or dismissive gestures, excluded from meetings, humiliated or belittled, and targeted through hostile e-mails or social media messages (Lester *et al.*, 2011; Cortina *et al.*, 2017; Hollis *et al.*, 2017; Bullock *et al.*, 2019).

Student-to-Faculty Incivility

Clark (2008) identifies three dominant patterns of student incivility towards faculty: demeaning behaviour, perceptions of unfair treatment, and unreasonable demands. In the Indian context, Chakkambath *et al.* (2024) argue that student incivility is often a response to rigid hierarchies and outdated pedagogical practices, particularly where student voices are marginalised. Lawrence *et al.* (2024), drawing on nursing education, further highlight that incivility within clinical learning environments undermines not only academic development but also the ethical foundations of future caregiving practices.

Student-to-Student Incivility

Student-to-student incivility is frequently driven by intense academic competition. In highly competitive environments, students

may view peers as obstacles to success, fostering rivalry and hostile behaviours (Hirschy and Braxton, 2004). Where academic rewards are perceived as scarce, such as limited scholarships or rankings, competition may escalate into exclusionary practices, academic sabotage, or the formation of closed peer groups (Feldman, 2001). Research indicates that both experiencing and witnessing incivility can adversely affect students' academic performance, as stress and distraction impair concentration, engagement, and participation in learning activities (Clark, 2008).

Faculty-to-Student Incivility

Power asymmetries between faculty and students can contribute significantly to incivility. Faculty members' positional authority may, at times, legitimise dismissive or harsh interactions with students (Rosenberg, 2015). When institutional mechanisms fail to address such behaviour, incivility risks becoming normalised (Clark and Springer, 2007). In some cases, faculty may perceive their critiques as constructive, without recognising that tone or delivery may be experienced as humiliating or disrespectful (Alberts, 2012). High workloads, research pressures, and administrative demands can further exacerbate stress among faculty, leading to frustration and reduced patience in interactions with students (Duffy, 2010).

At a macro level, Anuik *et al.* (2024) examine how digital spaces—particularly social media—have emerged as new arenas for academic incivility, challenging traditional boundaries of professionalism. Their work calls for a rethinking of digital engagement as both a pedagogical opportunity and a zone of heightened risk. Similarly, Macarthur (2024) traces incivility within music education, demonstrating how neoliberal cultures of competition, evaluation, and prestige can foster exclusion and emotional toxicity.

Collectively, these accounts suggest that the incivility thrives where respect is not modelled, institutional support is limited, and power remains unchecked. From the classrooms to cyberspace, incivility in higher education is not merely a matter of individual misconduct but a manifestation of deeper cultural, structural, and interpersonal fractures within academic life. Whether enacted through collegial undermining, student resistance, peer rivalry, or the misuse of authority, each instance reflects a broader erosion of empathy, communication, and institutional care.

FACTORS RELATED TO INCIVILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Studies identify several contributing factors, including increased workload, stress, and the absence of clear communication and expectations (Eka and Chambers, 2019). Incivility has far-reaching consequences—

reducing satisfaction and engagement, impairing academic achievement, and intensifying emotional strain and interpersonal conflict (Hudgins *et al.*, 2023). Organisational culture plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes towards incivility, while inadequate communication and conflict-resolution skills often exacerbate tensions (Cortina *et al.*, 2017; Lester *et al.*, 2011).

IMPACT OF INCIVILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Rawlin (2017) highlights the cumulative harm of incivility, emphasising its detrimental effects on health and well-being, teaching and learning quality, stress levels, and the perpetuation of uncivil conduct, noting that “incivility incites incivility” (p. 711). Researchers have examined its impact across multiple levels:

- **On students:** Incivility negatively affects academic performance, engagement, and mental health, leading to heightened stress, diminished confidence, and lower achievement (Vural and Donat, 2020).
- **On faculty:** Faculty members experiencing incivility report increased stress, job dissatisfaction, and burnout, which in turn undermines teaching quality and faculty–student relationships (Hudgins *et al.*, 2022).

- **On institutions:** Incivility contributes to governance challenges, increased grievances, and reputational decline, weakening organisational culture and hindering the development of respectful academic environments (Cognella, 2023).

Beyond these immediate effects, incivility in the Indian context must be understood as more than interpersonal discord. It constitutes a subtle expression of structural violence, embedded in caste hierarchies and language politics, where everyday slights mirror deeper systems of exclusion.

INCIVILITY AS STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the Indian context, what is often labelled as “incivility” in higher education, must be understood not merely as a breach of manners or interpersonal etiquette, but as a manifestation of structural violence embedded within the country’s historical and social hierarchies. Centuries of caste stratification, linguistic domination, and socio-economic inequality shape institutional norms, curricula, and everyday interactions, rendering marginalised groups—particularly Dalit and Adivasi students—vulnerable to exclusion, microaggressions, and systemic neglect (Rathod, 2017, 2020). Indian scholarship emphasises that incivility is rarely random; rather, it is mediated

by structural factors such as caste-based resource discrimination, which Deshpande (2006) describes as the unequal access to educational and social capital, perpetuated under the guise of “meritocracy” (Ashoka University, 2023).

Indigenous scholarship further illustrates how language intersects with power, identity, and equity in education. Policy and language frameworks often deepen these inequities. The Three-Language Formula (TLF) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, while ostensibly promoting multilingualism and inclusivity, frequently reproduce linguistic hierarchies and privilege dominant-language speakers (Sastry and Ghosh, 2023; Bashir and Jan, 2024). The Economic Times (non-dated) notes that the implementation of the TLF across Indian states is inconsistent, often constrained by political considerations and inadequate planning, resulting in structural disadvantages for students whose mother tongues are neither Hindi nor English. At the institutional level, linguistic marginalisation intersects with caste and socio-economic inequality, reinforcing exclusionary practices in classroom participation, assessment, and access to academic resources (Benila, 2023; Mohanty, 2010). These dynamics resonate strongly with manifestations of incivility in higher education, where privileging certain languages reproduces hierarchies, silences minority voices, and frames

linguistic plurality as a problem rather than a resource. In this sense, linguistic marginalisation itself becomes a subtle yet powerful form of institutional incivility.

The lived experiences of marginalised students reveal the human impact of these structural inequities. Dalit students report managing their identities to avoid stigma, negotiating hostile social environments, and encountering biased evaluation practices that undermine both confidence and academic performance (Maurya, 2018; Lum, 2019). Similarly, Adivasi students describe difficulties navigating higher education systems grounded in dominant-caste epistemologies, alongside limited institutional support for their cultural, linguistic, and psychological needs (Kumar and Kumari, 2025). These accounts underscore that incivility is not incidental, but embedded within institutional culture and pedagogy, producing cumulative emotional, academic, and social harm.

By situating incivility within India's historical and structural context, this framework shifts attention from individual behaviour to systemic patterns of exclusion. Drawing on Indigenous scholarship and the voices of marginalised students, the analysis argues that higher education institutions must recognise incivility as a form of structural violence, mediated through caste hierarchies, linguistic domination, and policy failures.

This reframing lays the groundwork for transformative interventions in both the policy and pedagogy, aimed at dismantling entrenched inequities and fostering genuinely inclusive learning environments (Rathod, 2017; Ashoka University, 2023; Pathak, 2024).

CONFLICT ANALYSIS AND TRANSFORMATIVE DESIGN IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Indian higher education remains a contested terrain where language, caste, and socio-cultural hierarchies intersect to reproduce systemic inequities. Foundational conflicts emerge from the politics of language, wherein the privileging of English and Hindi over regional and indigenous languages reinforces linguistic hierarchies and marginalises first-generation and non-dominant language learners (Benila, 2023; Canagarajah and Ashraf, 2013). Policy frameworks such as the NEP 2020, while nominally advocating multilingualism, continue to fall short in addressing implementation gaps, leaving students from marginalised linguistic backgrounds at a significant disadvantage (Sastry and Ghosh, 2023). These inequities are further intensified by intersectional vulnerabilities, particularly for learners experiencing overlapping linguistic, socio-economic, and caste-based marginalisation (Pathak, 2024).

Structural and Cultural Conflicts

Indian higher education constitutes a site of intersecting structural and cultural conflicts. Historical caste hierarchies, linguistic dominance, and socio-economic inequalities continue to shape institutional practices, producing systemic disadvantages for Dalit, Adivasi, and other marginalised students (Rathod, 2017, 2020; Maurya, 2018). These conflicts are not isolated instances of “rudeness” or interpersonal friction; rather, they are embedded within the architecture of the university, where norms, curricula, and assessment practices reproduce upper-caste and dominant-language privilege (Deshpande, as cited in Ashoka University, 2023).

Language hierarchies generate conflict at both the classroom and institutional levels. Policies such as the Three-Language Formula (TLF) and NEP 2020, while ostensibly inclusive, frequently privilege English and Hindi speakers, disadvantaging students from other linguistic backgrounds in comprehension, participation, and assessment (Sastry and Ghosh, 2023; Bashir and Jan, 2024). *The Economic Times* (non-dated) notes that inconsistent implementation across states exacerbates these tensions, transforming policy intentions into structural barriers.

Caste-based conflicts manifest in both social and academic domains. Dalit and Adivasi students report

exclusion from peer networks, biased evaluation practices, and the need to conceal their identities to avoid stigma (Lum, 2019; Maurya, 2018). These experiences expose a persistent tension between institutional ideals of equity and everyday practices that reinforce social hierarchies. Although affirmative action policies are designed to offer protection, their uneven implementation highlights a significant gap between policy intent and lived reality (Ashoka University, 2023).

Impact on Learning and Psychological Outcomes

The intersection of caste, language, and policy gaps produces tangible conflicts that directly affect learning outcomes. Marginalised students frequently experience heightened stress, reduced engagement, and mental health challenges, compounded by systemic neglect and linguistic disadvantage (Bhoi, 2025; Kumar and Kumari, 2025). The conflict is therefore not only social but pedagogical, as classrooms and curricula often fail to accommodate diverse knowledge systems or acknowledge structural inequities (Mohanty, 2010; Pathak, 2024).

Towards Transformative Design

Addressing these conflicts requires sustained structural and curricular interventions.

Policy and Institutional Reforms

- **Multilingual and culturally relevant resources:** Investment in textbooks, digital content, and academic materials in regional and indigenous languages is essential to ensure equitable access to knowledge (Sastry and Ghosh, 2023; Benila, 2023).
- **Faculty training and accountability:** Educators should be trained in bilingual pedagogy, anti-bias practices, and inclusive classroom management, with faculty evaluation and promotion linked to their capacity to foster equitable learning environments (Mohanty, 2010).
- **Independent anti-discrimination cells:** Empowered and autonomous bodies should be established to address the caste, gender, and linguistic discrimination in a confidential, transparent, and effective manner (Ashoka University, 2023).
- **Mandatory sensitisation and equity training:** Workshops addressing the caste, gender, language, and socio-economic biases should be implemented for students, faculty, and administrative staff to normalise inclusivity and respect (Nambissan, 2017).
- **Monitoring and accountability mechanisms:** Institutional practices, policies, and curricula should be regularly audited for inequities, with public reporting

on corrective measures and outcomes (Rathod, 2020).

Curricular and Pedagogical Reforms

- **Decentring dominant epistemologies:** Dalit, Adivasi, and other marginalised knowledge systems should be integrated into core curricula, not as elective or peripheral content, but as central components of disciplinary learning (Guru, 2002; Rege, 2010; Xaxa, 2014).
- **Critical and reflective pedagogy:** Students should be encouraged to interrogate social hierarchies, structural violence, and privilege through participatory learning, debate, and critical projects (Apple, 2013; Freire, 1970/2000).
- **Co-created classroom norms:** Students and faculty should collaboratively establish codes of conduct, discussion guidelines, and evaluation practices that prioritise respect, equity, and inclusivity.
- **Mentorship and peer-support programmes:** Structured mentorship initiatives linking marginalised students with supportive faculty or senior peers can provide both academic guidance and socio-emotional support (Lum, 2019).
- **Trauma-informed pedagogy:** Educators should be trained to recognise the emotional impact of discrimination, microaggressions, and exclusion, incorporating teaching strategies that create

psychologically safe learning spaces (Bhoi, 2025; Kumar and Kumari, 2025).

- **Experiential and community-based learning:** Field projects, local research, and community engagement initiatives should centre marginalised voices and enable students to engage critically with social inequalities in practice.
- **Inclusive assessment practices:** Evaluation methods should be redesigned to accommodate linguistic diversity, socio-cultural backgrounds, and varied learning styles, thereby reducing systemic bias in grading and progression.

Technology and Digital Equity

- **Digital accessibility:** Learning platforms, resources, and assessments should be made available in multiple languages and formats, with due attention to regional disparities in technological access.
- **Online civility standards:** Clear policies should regulate online classroom and institutional interactions, addressing harassment, exclusion, and microaggressions in digital spaces.

By integrating these policy, curricular, and pedagogical measures, Indian higher education institutions can transform classrooms from sites of structural exclusion into spaces of critical engagement, social justice, and empowerment. Transformative pedagogy does not merely mitigate

the effects of discrimination; it actively challenges and dismantles entrenched hierarchies, cultivating students and faculty capable of sustaining inclusive knowledge ecosystems (Rathod, 2017; Maurya, 2018; Lum, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Incivility in higher education is not merely a matter of rudeness; it represents the visible fracture of a much deeper fault line. As argued at the outset, behaviours that appear as discourtesy or misbehaviour are, in fact, manifestations of entrenched structural inequities—caste hierarchies, linguistic domination, and institutionalised power relations that quietly script academic life. This review demonstrates that incivility is less a behavioural lapse than a mirror of systemic exclusion—policies that privilege certain voices, pedagogies that silence others, and institutional cultures that normalise hostility in the name of discipline.

Revisiting the central problem statement makes it evident that addressing the incivility requires moving beyond procedural codes of conduct towards transformative practices that actively dismantles the structural violence. Civility cannot be legislated into existence; it must be cultivated through equity, dialogue, and inclusive pedagogy. If incivility exposes the fractures within universities, then its resolution demands a reimagining of the academic spaces as sites of dignity, fairness, and belonging.

Confronting the deeper structures beneath everyday acts is essential if higher education is to fulfil its democratic promise. Cultivating such an environment requires not only policy reform and professional training, but also a fundamental cultural shift—a collective rethinking of what it means to teach, to learn, and to belong within the university.

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