

Understanding Academic Stress in India with the Lens of Indian Psychology

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ABSTRACT

In India, the expansion of education, the examination-based system, socioeconomic disparities, and cultural expectations have led to a dangerously high level of academic stress among students. Research in this area has primarily relied on Western psychological models of stress and coping. These frameworks only partially capture the culturally embedded meanings of learning, duty, self-identity, and suffering from an Indian perspective, which shape the academic experiences of Indian students. Indian thought offers a nuanced understanding of academic stress by redefining it as a multi-faceted phenomenon rooted in motivation, self-concept, values, and the cultural meaning of education. Therefore, integrating concepts such as Karma Yoga, the Triguna theory, and non-egoistic spirituality with contemporary stress frameworks can help develop a holistic, culturally grounded approach to understanding and addressing the high-pressure academic system in India. This review traces the historical evolution of academic stress in India, from ancient Vedic traditions to contemporary classical education, and incorporates psychological frameworks to provide a culturally informed Indian perspective. By holistically integrating classical constructs such as Dharma, Karma Yoga, suffering, Triguna, and non-egoistic self-identity with modern theories of stress, motivation, and values, a revised conceptual model is proposed. The implications for research, pedagogy, and policy-making are discussed.

Keywords: *Academic Stress, Indian Psychology, Karma Yoga, Selfhood, Triguna, Suffering, Acceptance, Meaning-Making*

Education is an essential aspect of human life that not only manifests itself in various forms of knowledge and skills but also shapes an individual's character. Formal education is conducted under the rules and predetermined methods of an educational institution, such as a school, while informal education depends on a continuous process guided by the unwritten ethics and values of family and society. From a psychological perspective, appropriateness and harmony in human behavior are essential, and these depend to a large extent on an individual's educational processes. One of the most widely accepted approaches to explaining human behavior, the behavioral approach, considers learning, an inevitable part of the educational process, as the basis of behavior. Although discussions and research on education are not new, the declining importance of moral and value-based education and the ever-increasing cutthroat competition in institutional education in the

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current social scenario are concerning and warrant serious consideration. The stress generated among students in this context not only leads to various behavioral abnormalities but also compels them to commit life-threatening acts like suicide. The alarming statistics of suicides among young people who fail in various competitive examinations highlight a serious flaw in the education system and process. Therefore, it is essential to understand how this situation has arisen in a country like India, which is often referred to as a world leader in education. Evaluating academic stress from an Indian perspective will likely be helpful in understanding this problem.

Most existing research on academic stress in India is largely based on Western psychological models that understand stress in terms of cognitive appraisal, performance pressure, test anxiety, and individual coping abilities. While these models have provided valuable empirical insights, they often treat stress as an individual psychological response, failing to adequately consider the cultural meanings of education, moral obligations, and self-identity that shape students' experiences within the socio-cultural context of Indian society. Consequently, stress is often viewed as a psycho-physical deficit or pathology rather than a phenomenon embedded within broader value systems and educational ideologies.

Historically, Indian educational traditions viewed learning as a moral and developmental endeavor, focusing on self-discipline, ethical conduct, social responsibility, and the meaning of life. Concepts such as dharma, karma, and disciplined effort (tapas) provided meaningful frameworks that shaped how students approached the challenges and difficulties they faced. The gradual shift towards examination-centered, outcome-focused education, particularly during the colonial and post-independence periods, transformed academic pursuits into an experience increasingly fraught with performance anxiety and an obsession with results.

Against this backdrop, this narrative synthesis connects Indian psychology with contemporary academic stress research to develop a culturally sensitive and theoretically grounded understanding of student stress in India. By tracing the historical development of academic stress and integrating indigenous concepts with modern psychological theories, this review aims to:

- a) move beyond deficit-based models of academic stress and understand it in the light of Indian psychology
- b) highlight culturally grounded approaches to motivation and coping, and
- c) inform educational research, practice, and policy with the goal of promoting students' overall well-being.

The Historical Trajectory of Academic Stress in India

- **Gurukul and Classical Traditions:** In ancient Indian educational systems like the Gurukul, learning took place within moral, spiritual, and social contexts. Education emphasized self-discipline, moral development, and mastery of knowledge rather than competitive comparison or external evaluation. Academic endeavor was viewed as Sadhana (disciplined practice), and challenges were considered an essential part of personal and moral growth (Joshi, 2024; Rajguru, 2024; Bhandary & Ansary, 2025). When stress arose, it was understood not as a psychological threat or failure, but as a lack of disciplined effort (Tapas), and overcoming stress was emphasized through Tapas itself (YogaRenew, 2024). In this tradition, academic stress could also be seen as a form of class-based deprivation.
- **Medieval and Colonial Transformations:** During the medieval period, educational institutions continued to emphasize moral education alongside scholarly training,

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although access remained socially stratified. A decisive shift occurred under colonial rule, when education was reorganized around standardized curricula, written examinations, and bureaucratic evaluation. Learning became increasingly instrumental, focused on certification and employment within colonial administrative structures. This shift marked the initial institutionalization of performance-based academic stress, as success and failure were externally defined and had significant social consequences (Islam, 2025).

- **Post-Independence and Contemporary India:** After independence, the expansion and democratization of education created unprecedented opportunities for social mobility. However, the limited availability of well-established academic institutions, coupled with population growth and economic competition, led to increased reliance on high-stakes examinations and ranking systems. Academic success became a primary indicator of merit and future security, intensifying performance pressure across socio-economic groups. Thus, in contemporary India, academic stress is deeply embedded in structural inequalities, familial aspirations, and national narratives of achievement, making it a chronic and culturally normalized feature of students' educational experiences (Vasudevan, & Ramesh, 2025).
- **Western Psychological Models of Academic Stress:** Western frameworks primarily view academic stress as a transactional process involving the appraisal of demands and coping resources. Models such as the transactional theory of stress, the control-value theory of achievement emotions, and test anxiety frameworks have made significant contributions to understanding stress mechanisms (Kristensen et al., 2023). However, these approaches largely frame stress as an individual phenomenon while underestimating the cultural, ethical, and existential dimensions that are particularly relevant in the Indian context.

Integrating Indian Psychology into the Understanding of Academic Stress

Indian psychology is deeply rooted in diverse Indian thought systems, offering a unique and holistic perspective on human experiences (Dalal & Misra, 2010). Conceptualizing Stress from threat appraisal to inner disequilibrium is the Indian psychological pathway to understand academic stress. Current models of academic stress are largely based on Western psychological frameworks, which emphasize cognitive appraisal, performance pressure, and outcome-based achievement (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Putwain, 2007; Zeidner, 1998, 2014). While these models have significantly contributed to understanding stress processes, they often downplay the culturally embedded meanings of learning, duty, identity, and suffering. In collectivistic and duty-oriented educational contexts like India, Indian psychology rooted in classical sources such as the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Buddhist psychology, and Yoga philosophy offers a culturally grounded and philosophically integrated framework for re-understanding academic stress (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Rao et al., 2008).

In Western psychological traditions, academic stress is typically understood as a transactional process arising from a perceived imbalance between academic demands and available coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In contrast, Indian psychological traditions view stress (*duhkha* or *klesa*) as stemming from internal imbalance, attachment to outcomes, ego-identification, and a lack of harmony between work and purpose (*artha* and *dharma*) (Radhakrishnan, 1951; Rao et al., 2008).

Karma Yoga and Reframing Academic Pressure

A central contribution of Indian Psychology in understanding academic stress lies in the principle of Karma Yoga, articulated in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Karma Yoga emphasizes disciplined action performed in accordance with one's duty (*dharma*) while relinquishing excessive attachment to outcomes (*niskama karma*) (Bhagavad Gita, 2009; Yogi Madhvācārya, 2007). From this perspective, stress does not arise from effort itself but from ego-driven identification with success and failure. In contemporary academic contexts, pressure exaggerates when students' self-worth becomes contingent upon grades, rankings, and external validation. Such outcome attachment increases performance anxiety, fear of failure, and maladaptive perfectionism. Karma Yoga offers a psychologically protective reorientation by shifting motivation from outcome obsession to process-oriented engagement, ethical effort, and responsibility toward learning itself. This reframing reduces evaluative threat while protecting commitment and perseverance.

Conceptually, Karma Yoga aligns with modern motivational theories that emphasize intrinsic motivation and mastery orientation, particularly Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, it extends these frameworks by situating motivation within a moral–existential context. Effort is not guided solely by personal interest or autonomy but by a sense of duty, purpose, and contribution beyond the self. This moral anchoring can buffer academic stress in high-pressure environments where outcomes are uncertain and competition is intense. Importantly, detachment in Karma Yoga does not imply emotional disengagement or reduced aspiration. Rather, it fosters equanimity (*samatva*), enabling students to remain psychologically balanced amid success and failure. By decoupling performance from identity, Karma Yoga mitigates rumination and anticipatory anxiety while supporting sustained engagement and resilience.

In an educational setting, an approach based on Karma Yoga views academic pressure not as a test of personal ability, but as an opportunity for disciplined engagement in learning. This perspective has significant implications for teaching and assessment, fostering practices that emphasize effort, ethical conduct, and mindful learning rather than simply focusing on outcomes.

Selfhood, Ego, and Academic Identity

Indian psychology offers a unique understanding of self-identity, which is crucial for a novel perspective on academic stress. Classical traditions differentiate between the ego-self (*ahamkara*), which is constructed through social roles, comparison, and achievement, and the deeper, witnessing self (*atman* or *sakashī bhava*), which remains stable and non-evaluative (Radhakrishnan, 1951; Rao et al., 2008). Academic stress increases when students become too attached with their ego and start associating grades, rankings, and exam results with their personal value.

In today's educational environment, academic identity is often reduced to performance indicators. This kind of ego-based identity makes individuals vulnerable to the pressures of evaluation, fear of failure, and feelings of shame, especially in competitive environments where success is scarce and carries significant social weight. From an Indian psychological perspective, stress arises not merely from academic demands, but from the misguided association of self-worth with performance outcomes.

Cultivating awareness of the witnessing self provides a psychologically protective mechanism. Practices that foster decentring including mindfulness, meditation, and self-

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reflective inquiry (*svadhyaya*) enable students to observe thoughts, emotions, and evaluations without fusion or self-judgment. Empirical research in contemporary psychology supports this mechanism, demonstrating that decentring reduces rumination, anxiety, and stress while enhancing mindfulness, emotional regulation and resilience (Cohen et al., 2021; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Shapiro et al., 2006).

This concept challenges Western models of academic identity, which often emphasize maintaining self-esteem and identity-based motivation, and instead offers a non-egoistic model of selfhood. Rather than reinforcing the self through academic achievement, Indian psychology emphasizes loosening rigid self-identification altogether. This shift reduces the psychological stakes of evaluation while maintaining engagement, effort, and responsibility. In an educational setting, adopting this perspective fosters teaching practices that support reflective learning, formative feedback, and psychological safety. By separating academic performance from core identity, students may feel better equipped to navigate challenges, tolerate failure, and maintain their well-being in high-pressure academic environments.

Triguṇa Theory and the Dynamics of Academic Stress

Indian Psychology conceptualizes psychological functioning through the Triguṇa framework, which describes three fundamental qualities (*guṇa*) of the mind: *sattva* (clarity, balance, and harmony), *rajas* (activity, striving, and restlessness), and *tamas* (inertia, confusion, and withdrawal) (Rao et al., 2008). Rather than discrete traits, the *guṇas* are dynamic and coexisting tendencies that shape cognition, motivation, and emotional regulation. From this perspective, academic stress reflects not merely situational pressure but shifts in the qualitative balance of mental functioning.

In today's academic environment, demanding exams, continuous evaluation, and social comparison often foster a predominantly Rajasic mode of functioning. Excessive Rajas leads to problems such as intense competition, haste, perfectionism, and constant anxiety. While a healthy level of Rajas supports effort and ambition, its persistent dominance impairs self-regulation, heightens stress reactivity, and increases the risk of burnout (Cunningham, 2021).

Prolonged exposure to Rajas-driven stress can lead to a shift towards Tamas (Bharti & Verma, 2025), especially when desired results are not achieved despite continuous effort. Tamas-dominant states are characterized by isolation, helplessness, emotional numbness, and disengagement from learning patterns that resonate with contemporary descriptions of burnout, learned helplessness, and lack of motivation in academic settings. From the perspective of the three Gunas, burnout is not merely exhaustion, but a qualitative decline in motivational energy after a prolonged period of imbalance.

In contrast, Sattva represents a state of mental clarity, peace, and mindful awareness that helps align with the demands of academic pursuits. A Sattva-dominant approach enables students to persevere without excessive attachment, manage emotions effectively, and maintain a balanced perspective on both success and failure (Kumar, 2025). Educational environments that emphasize ethical education, mindful teaching methods, balanced routines, and positive teacher-student relationships can foster Sattva, thereby mitigating academic stress.

Therefore, the unique aspect of the Triguṇa framework is that it views academic stress not as a fixed state but as a dynamic process. Consequently, interventions focus not merely on

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reducing stress, but on restoring balance among the gunas. Practices such as yoga, mindfulness, contemplative inquiry, and values-based education are seen as mechanisms for cultivating sattva and regulating rajas and tamas, thus providing culturally grounded pathways to sustainable academic well-being.

Suffering, Acceptance, and Meaning-Making

Indian Psychology conceptualizes suffering (*duḥkha*) as an inherent aspect of human experience rather than an aberration to be eliminated (Cecil et al., 2025). In academic contexts, stress and struggle are not viewed solely as indicators of maladjustment but as integral to learning, discipline, and personal growth (Rao et al., 2008). This perspective contrasts with dominant Western stress models that prioritize control, mastery, and symptom reduction, often framing stress primarily as a problem to be managed or avoided.

In the Indian psychological understanding of suffering, the concepts of acceptance (*ksanti*) and tolerance (*titiksa*) are central, involving enduring hardship without giving up or retreating. Acceptance does not imply passivity; rather, it reflects a psychologically mature attitude that acknowledges difficulties while maintaining a sense of purpose. In academic settings, such acceptance can mitigate secondary stress reactions such as rumination, shame, and catastrophic thinking, which often exacerbate performance pressure.

Meaning-making plays a critical mediating role in this process. When academic challenges are situated within a broader framework of life purpose (*puruṣārtha*), duty (*dharma*), and self-development, stress is more likely to be experienced as meaningful effort rather than as personal failure. This orientation supports perseverance, emotional regulation, and long-term motivation, particularly in contexts where outcomes are uncertain or delayed (Akartuna et al., 2025). Contemporary psychological research on resilience and post-adversity growth converges with this perspective, demonstrating that the capacity to derive meaning from adversity predicts better psychological outcomes under stress (Arslan & Yıldırım, 2021; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Indian Psychology extends these findings by embedding meaning-making within ethical and existential frameworks, thereby offering culturally grounded pathways through which students can transform academic suffering into adaptive growth.

In educational contexts, integrating acceptance- and meaning-based perspectives encourages pedagogical practices that normalize struggle, emphasize learning as a developmental journey, and reduce stigma associated with failure. Such approaches foster psychological safety and resilience, enabling students to engage with academic challenges without excessive fear or self-blame.

Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

Incorporating Indian psychology into our understanding of academic stress has significant implications for educational practice and policy, especially in high-pressure systems like India. Firstly, it calls for a reorientation from outcome-centred to process-oriented educational cultures. Teaching methods that emphasize effort, ethical engagement, and mastery rather than solely focusing on grades and rankings can mitigate undue performance pressure while sustaining academic motivation. Therefore, assessment systems should include formative assessments, narrative feedback, and opportunities for reflective learning alongside summative measures.

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Secondly, Indian psychology emphasizes the importance of psychological decoupling between performance and self-worth. Educational institutions can facilitate this by creating psychologically safe learning environments where struggle and failure are normalized as part of the learning process. Teacher training programs should incorporate components such as non-egoic feedback, growth-oriented assessment, and culturally relevant stress awareness to empower educators to mitigate the threat of evaluation in the classroom.

Thirdly, incorporating mindfulness and self-regulatory practices offers culturally grounded, preventative approaches to academic stress. Practices such as yoga, mindfulness, breath control, and contemplative inquiry when implemented in secular, developmentally appropriate forms can cultivate emotional regulation, attentional control, and equanimity. Policy initiatives that recognize such practices within the school curriculum can shift stress interventions from remediation to prevention.

Fourthly, a triguna-based perspective suggests that educational environments themselves shape students' psychological functioning. Policies that mitigate excessive competition, regulate academic workload, and promote balanced daily routines can help prevent chronic rajas-dominant stress and subsequent burnout. Therefore, institutional structures should be evaluated not only for academic efficiency but also for their impact on students' psychological balance and well-being.

Finally, incorporating Indian psychology inspires policymakers to adopt broader definitions of educational success. Student well-being, moral development, resilience, and meaning-making should be recognized as core educational outcomes alongside academic achievement. National education policies that explicitly prioritize holistic development can help reconnect educational goals with concepts of learning and human development that are relevant to the cultural context.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review demonstrates that academic stress in India cannot be fully understood solely through Western psychological models. While cognitive appraisal and coping frameworks have advanced empirical understanding, they fail to fully capture the cultural meanings of learning, duty, self-identity, and suffering that shape the academic lives of Indian students. By integrating Indian psychology with contemporary stress research, this review redefines academic stress as a multifaceted phenomenon rooted not only in academic demands but also in outcome attachment, ego-based identity, motivational imbalances, and meaning-making processes.

Concepts such as Karma Yoga, non-egoistic self-identity, Triguna dynamics, and acceptance-based meaning-making offer culturally grounded mechanisms through which academic pressure can be transformed rather than merely managed. Together, these perspectives shift the focus from stress reduction to psychological balance, ethical engagement, and sustainable motivation, challenging deficit-based interpretations of student distress. Academic stress emerges not merely as an individual weakness but as a consequence of educational structures, assessment cultures, and dominant conceptions of success.

From a practical standpoint, the integration of Indian psychology supports pedagogical approaches that emphasize process over outcomes, normalize struggle, decouple performance from self-worth, and cultivate reflective awareness. At the policy level, it calls

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for broader definitions of educational success that prioritize well-being, resilience, and ethical development alongside achievement. Such a reframing is particularly crucial in examination-driven systems where chronic stress has become culturally normalized.

Future research should empirically investigate Indian psychology-informed constructs and interventions using culturally sensitive methodologies, moving beyond the direct transplantation of Western measures. By grounding academic stress research within indigenous epistemologies, educational psychology can develop more relevant, humane, and sustainable responses to student stress – responses that align academic excellence with psychological well-being and human flourishing.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite presenting an integrative and culturally grounded framework, this narrative review has several limitations. First, this synthesis relies primarily on conceptual and theoretical sources of Indian psychology, rather than on a large body of directly empirical studies examining academic stress within this framework. While classical concepts such as Karma Yoga, the Triguna (three gunas), and non-egoistic selfhood offer strong explanatory potential, systematic empirical validation in contemporary educational contexts remains limited. Consequently, the proposed integrations should be understood as theoretically productive rather than conclusively established.

Second, Indian psychology is internally diverse, encompassing several philosophical traditions (e.g., Vedanta, Yoga, Buddhist psychology) that differ in their beliefs about selfhood, suffering, and motivation. This review inevitably adopts a selective and integrative approach, which may obscure important theoretical distinctions. Future research should examine how specific traditions relate differently to academic stress processes rather than treating Indian psychology as a monolithic framework.

Third, as a narrative review, the current work does not use systematic review or meta-analytic procedures. While this allows for conceptual comprehensiveness and historical contextualization, it limits conclusions about the relative strength of evidence across studies. Future reviews could adopt systematic or mixed-method approaches to evaluate empirical support for Indian psychology-informed stress concepts and interventions.

Future research should prioritize the empirical operationalization and measurement of key Indian psychology concepts related to academic stress, including outcome attachment, equanimity (samatva), triguna dominance, and non-egoic identity. Developing culturally sensitive assessment tools, rather than relying solely on Western stress and coping scales, will be crucial to advance validity and cross-cultural relevance.

Intervention research represents another important direction. Experimental and longitudinal studies examining the effects of karma yoga-based motivation framing, contemplative practices, and triguna-informed educational environments on academic stress, engagement, and well-being are needed. Such studies should take into account developmental stage, socioeconomic context, and institutional constraints to avoid culturally irrelevant applications.

Finally, future work should explore policy-level implications through interdisciplinary collaboration, examining how assessment systems, curriculum structures, and teacher education programs can be redesigned to reduce chronic academic stress while maintaining

academic rigor. By empirically grounding Indigenous frameworks within contemporary educational research, future studies can contribute to more humane, culturally responsive, and sustainable models of education.

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