

# Chapter 11

## Attrition Among Indian Social Science Doctoral Scholars: An Exploration of the Contributing Reasons

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*Doctoral education, while a pinnacle of academic achievement, presents significant challenges. This study explores the factors contributing to attrition among social science doctoral scholars in India, focusing on the resilience and adaptability required to sail through the doctoral journey. Employing semi-structured interviews with former doctoral students, we identified key themes related to academic, personal, and institutional challenges. Our findings highlight the importance of fostering resilience and adaptability in doctoral students and creating culturally responsive support systems within educational institutions. By understanding the factors influencing attrition, we can develop strategies to enhance doctoral student persistence and well-being, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape.*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Earning a doctoral degree signifies the highest level of academic achievement. However, embarking on this rigorous journey can be daunting, with many doctoral candidates worldwide ultimately leaving their programs before completion. Attrition rates vary depending on the program format, with traditional programs ranging from 30-50% and online programs reaching as high as 70% (Rigler et al., 2017). India, currently one of the leading nations in awarding doctoral degrees, has witnessed a substantial rise in PhD enrolments (Government of India, 2020). Despite this growth, a closer look reveals concerning trends in doctoral student persistence within India.

This study delves into the specific challenges social science PhD scholars face in India and explores why they leave their programs. By understanding the factors contributing to attrition, we can work towards developing strategies to retain doctoral students and foster a more successful doctoral education system in India. Moreover, the data obtained aims to make the doctoral education system in India more sustainable by providing recommendations on how to improve the structure and support mechanisms of doctoral programs. It is hoped that this book chapter will shed light on a better understanding of the challenges faced by PhD students in the social sciences, as well as the development of resilience and adaptation strategies that reflect their potential to cope with challenges.

### **1.1. High Attrition Rates in Indian Social Science PhD Programs**

Doctoral degrees represent the pinnacle of academic achievement. However, studies worldwide reveal a concerning trend – a high attrition rate among doctoral candidates. India, currently ranked fourth in awarding doctoral degrees (over 24,000 graduates annually), has witnessed a significant rise in PhD enrolments, between 2015-2016 and 2019-2020 (Government of India, 2020; Roy, 2022).

Despite this growth, Indian doctoral programs face unique challenges that contribute to attrition. Sahay (2019) identified factors such as resource constraints, unclear policies, and low motivation among students and supervisors. Financial disparity is another critical issue, with a significant gap between doctoral stipends and industry salaries (Sahay, 2019).

### **1.2. Existing Research on Doctoral Student Persistence**

Research has shed light on various factors impacting doctoral student persistence. These include social support networks, supervisor relationships, financial preparedness, a supportive university research environment, and personal characteristics like growth mindset and competency satisfaction (Linden et al., 2018; Hudson et

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