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Academic Precarity and the Contractual University

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The real costs of a contractualised teaching in universities are reduced diversity and burnt out teachers who no longer can practice a pedagogy of care.

In 2023, I was fired from my job at a college in the University of Delhi, where I had worked as an ad hoc lecturer for three years. Ad hoc lectureships last for the semester, and incumbents like me had to go through another round of open-call interviews to do the same job the following semester (Patgiri 2026). We were allowed just four leaves in a semester, unlike regular faculty who had earned leave, maternity leave, childcare leave, and medical leave, amongst other benefits. In many cases, we were required to teach for more than the 16 hours mandated by the UGC for assistant professors in undergraduate colleges, in addition to administrative work, extra invigilation duties, and any residual work that came up.

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There was hardly an option of saying no. And after all this, as several of my colleagues and I discovered, we were entirely disposable, let go at will.

According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2022-23 data, nearly a fifth of faculty in public institutions are contractual. This domination of contractualised academic labour in higher education institutions (HEIs) in India mirrors educational spaces worldwide under populist governments and neoliberal economies. 'Financial autonomy' for institutions masks the demand that they raise funds on their own and cut costs-the first of which is budgets earmarked towards academic salaries.

Contractual employment allows colleges and universities to hire casual employees without paying them full salaries and benefits. The neoliberal university saves money and also exercises more power over the precarious workforce. No wonder then that tenured or permanent positions are few, and the options that are most likely available are contractual teaching positions with meagre pay. At the University of Delhi, for instance, the number of applicants per contractual position has ranged between 80 and 200. In most cases, these are sound academics with PhD degrees, teaching experience, and publications.

The human costs of pursuing these jobs are manifold. For the young people entering academia, such jobs entail frequent relocation of both workspaces and cities, often at the expense of social and familial relations. Such contractualisation is a form of institutional exploitation that leads to a state of uncertainty in everyday life. Academics are lonelier and mentally burnt out. Wages have stagnated or even declined in real terms. The explicit and implicit costs are not concerns for the government: in 2024, [the education minister told Parliament](#) it had no plan to standardise contracts and wages for contractual teachers. No surprise then that the academic job market in India is bleak.

Myths vs Reality

The most prevalent trope of academia is of lazy professors enjoying their lives in permanent jobs, wasting time away reading, without real-life contributions or responsibilities. This perception is driven by the belief that one gets a well-paid teaching job after post-graduation and clearing the University Grants Commission's National Eligibility Test (UGC NET). This is further fuelled by social media content that shows academics relaxing and doing leisure activities for most of the day (Patgiri 2025).

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The stark reality is that the bulk of teaching is undertaken by contractualised staff in successively worse states of precarity and insecurity: temporary, ad-hoc, and guest. Academics are under constant surveillance, with biometric attendance regulating their entry and exit. In private institutions, failure to adhere to the dedicated timeline, even by a few minutes, can mean a salary cut.

The lack of studies or even awareness of the everyday functioning of the academy has meant that public discourse on what academics do and their jobs is shaped by floating myths. This also perhaps explains why there is little public anger against the crisis in higher education, with budget slashes, departments shut down, faculty losing jobs, and both faculty and students put behind bars.

This academic precarity cannot be understood in isolation, as something that affects the individual teacher. Structural discrimination is manifested in the hierarchy and inequality in the workplace, which are only set to worsen. Without the promise of tenure or permanency, the long years of doing a PhD and research are no longer financially viable for those from marginalised sections and identities.

Care and freedom

My experience made visible a distinction that is often lost in discussions of academic labour: the difference between being employed in a university and being secure within it. Precarious employment hits in various ways. The visible impact is displacement and the loss of jobs. The invisible consequences on academic freedom in the classroom and the creation and reinforcement of hierarchy in the workplace are also equally crucial to note.

The contractualisation of teaching is antithetical to the very idea of what has been called a pedagogy of care. It is difficult to practice a pedagogy of care when one is not cared for. Contractual faculty lack the freedom to design courses or choose pedagogical methods, and constantly censor themselves in fear and in the hope of renewing their contracts. Since their jobs can be terminated at any point, contractual teachers hesitate to reach out to students through dialogue. There is a fear that anything which is against the status quo could be used to terminate their jobs. Within the education system, the burden of care is most often on the teachers, but in systems where teachers are equally vulnerable as students, this care is most often misplaced.

There is a traceable relationship between precarious labour and academic freedom. The erosion of tenure is much more than the loss of protection for academics; it is also the erosion of critical thinking. Since their jobs can be terminated at any point, contractual teachers fear that anything which is against the status quo could be used to terminate their jobs. In terms of pedagogical methods as well, there are limitations. For social sciences such as sociology, discussing and critiquing issues that are familiar, such as caste, class, ethnicity, gender and religion, are part of the curriculum. Many teachers have become uncomfortable speaking freely about issues of caste, class, ethnicity, gender and religion. Thus, the academic freedom to teach is practically non-existent in these situations. The visible impact of this kind of precarious employment is the loss of jobs.

Deepa Das Acevedo's *The War on Tenure* (Cambridge University Press, 2025) is set in the United States, but her characterisation of the assault on academia is equally applicable to India. Das Acevedo looks at tenure as a form of employment protection in academia, comparable to employment contracts in other industries and debunks the myth that tenure kills the incentives of professors to continue working hard. Uniquely, she sees academic work as labour, not just passion and the pursuit of knowledge and the greater good.

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This resists reducing the rigorous work academics do to 'leisure' activities like reading and writing. It acknowledges the administrative and managerial duties that faculty do: invigilation, grading, mentoring, and research guidance; but also monitoring security arrangements during college fests, performing election duties, census duties, committee work, hostel management, attending different kinds of state events, organising events, etc. As was made clear to me (and I am sure, to everyone like me): 'since you are a contractual faculty, you have to do it'. The justification for such additional work was explicitly linked to our precarious employment status and the threat of not renewing the contract.

Faculty are expected not just to teach but also to produce quality research outputs. But the work conditions for contractual faculty are not conducive to it; to the contrary, they place structural barriers (Patgiri 2024). A former ad-hoc faculty member at the University of Delhi whom I interviewed for my research described the gap between workplace reality and expectations particularly starkly: "In every Staff Council Meeting, we were asked about our contribution to the college. This 'contribution' that the principal referred to did not include our teaching work. It meant what kind of administrative tasks we perform, what we publish, etc. But how can we publish good quality research when we are teaching for 16 hours along with everything else?" (Patgiri 2026).

What Changes

Casualisation thus creates a binary between teaching and research, whereas the academy expects employees to merge them. They are expected to perform the full range of academic labour while being denied the conditions that make that labour sustainable. Academics, and more specifically contractual faculty, do not get institutional support such as funding and research breaks to pursue their research work. But one's recruitment and promotion are both dependent on publishing, among other activities.

Increasingly, as Das Acevedo argues for the US, even tenure does not guarantee job security, as academics can be fired for the flimsiest of reasons by institutions. This resonates in India: even the slightest critical thought could be interpreted by social media trolls as an attack on a community and reported to the institutional authorities.

The significance of contractualisation goes beyond employment conditions. It changes what can be said, taught and researched within the university. The contractual university is a university in which insecurity becomes an organising principle of academic life. Academic freedom becomes conditional, and research becomes riskier. The question, then, is not only whether universities can expect academics to care for students and produce quality research under conditions of precarity, but whether institutions themselves provide the structural conditions necessary for such work.

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