



Caste, Campuses, and Constitutional Promises: A Study of UGC Regulations and the Rohit Act

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ABSTRACT

Caste-based prejudice persists in shaping daily experiences within Indian higher education institutions, notwithstanding a strong constitutional commitment to equality and social justice. This paper analyses the enduring nature of caste hierarchies in universities and colleges, as well as the constitutional and statutory protections established to avert discrimination, encompassing equality jurisprudence, reservation policies, and sector-specific regulatory frameworks. The primary focus is on the University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, which aim to institutionalise equity via obligatory compliance frameworks, oversight bodies, and grievance redressal mechanisms within higher education institutions. This analysis is enhanced by situating the Regulations within a federal framework through an examination of the Karnataka government's proposed Karnataka Rohith Vemula Act. The study argues that the evolving federal structure of anti-discrimination measures exposes both the potential and conflicts of regulating campus equality within a simultaneous constitutional framework.

Introduction

Caste-based prejudice persists in influencing the framework and experiences within higher education institutions in India, notwithstanding constitutional assurances of equality and years of affirmative action



initiatives. Recent data and public discourse indicate that exclusion is not only incidental but systemic. A report presented in the Rajya Sabha revealed that from 2019 to 2021, a minimum of 98 students from Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi communities in central universities, IITs, NITs, IIMs, and IISERs died by suicide (R J, 2026). These fatalities are not singular tragedies; they indicate entrenched patterns of marginalization within elite educational environments. This exclusion is further evidenced by the composition of the faculty. A survey referenced by the journal *Nature* indicates that over 98% of professors and more than 90% of assistant and associate professors in India's leading universities, including the IITs and IISc, are from upper castes (R J, 2026). This unequal representation in decision-making and academic power perpetuates institutional cultures that may be inattentive or even antagonistic towards the realities of historically marginalised communities. In reaction to escalating apprehensions regarding caste-based harassment and institutional indifference, legislative measures like the proposed Rohit Vemula Bill aim to tackle systemic discrimination in higher educational institutions. The Bill seeks to establish accountability mechanisms while promoting brotherhood and inclusion among castes and communities (R.J.,2026). Simultaneously, discussions over the University Grants Commission (UGC) norms have highlighted the sufficiency of current institutional protections against caste discrimination.

This article analyses the changing regulatory and legislative framework, including the UGC regulations and the planned Rohit Act, in relation to ongoing caste-based discrimination in higher education. The paper examines contemporary policy discussions regarding structural disparities and institutional failures to determine whether current reforms adequately address entrenched hierarchies. The following paragraphs outline the legal underpinnings of anti-discrimination in India, presenting the constitutional and statutory framework essential to understanding these ongoing debates.

Legal Foundations of Anti-Discrimination in Indian Education

The Indian Constitution establishes a thorough normative framework for combating caste-based discrimination in society, especially in educational institutions. Articles 14, 15, and 16 of the equality code ensure legal equality and forbid discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Recognizing the structural nature of social hierarchies, Articles 15(4) and 16(4) authorize both the Union and State governments to enact affirmative action policies, including reservations in educational institutions and public employment for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and other socially and educationally disadvantaged groups. These provisions transcend legal equality and provide corrective efforts directed at achieving substantive fairness.



The Directive Principles of State Policy further solidify this commitment. Article 46 mandates the State to diligently advance the educational and economic interests of marginalized segments of society, specifically Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), while safeguarding them against social injustice and exploitation. This constitutional command, while not justiciable, has profoundly impacted legislative and policy measures in education.

Alongside constitutional protections, other statutory measures aim to avert and punish caste-based discrimination. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 (amended in 2015), criminalizes acts of violence, humiliation, and discrimination based on caste. The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, pertains to the eradication of untouchability and forbids discriminatory activities associated with it. Institutional supervision is enhanced by entities like the National Commissions for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which oversee protections and examine complaints.

Legislation relevant to certain sectors further enhances the anti-discrimination framework. The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, has significant provisions designed to foster equality and ban discrimination within the education system. The Act explicitly prohibits discrimination based on religion, caste, sex, or socio-economic class, ensuring that no child is denied entry for these reasons (Shah & V, 2024). The RTE Act, while largely centered on elementary education, embodies a wider dedication to equitable educational access that also influences the governance of higher education. In addition to these constitutional and statutory rights, there are specific welfare programs designed to improve access and retention for marginalized communities. In the fiscal year 2022–23, ₹207.93 crore was designated for the Pre-Matric Scholarship Scheme for Scheduled Caste students, while ₹4,392.50 crore was allotted for the Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme for Scheduled Caste students (Shah & V, 2024). These financial support programs exemplify the redistributive aspect of the State's endeavor to mitigate educational disparities.

Collectively, these constitutional provisions, legislative actions, and social schemes illustrate that combating caste-based discrimination in education is not simply a policy option but a constitutional obligation. The ongoing prevalence of caste-based exclusion in higher education institutions underscores the enduring disparity between legal assurances and actual experiences, an issue that current regulatory measures aim to address.



Caste Discrimination in Higher Education Institutions

Notwithstanding a comprehensive constitutional and legislative framework aimed at fostering equality, empirical research indicates that caste-based discrimination persists in influencing access, assessment, and institutional experiences inside Indian higher education. The enduring nature of structural exclusion is most evident in elite institutions and postgraduate admissions, where significant gaps in representation and outcomes continue.

Data from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay indicate substantial discrepancies in PhD admissions. From 2015 to 2019, although applications were submitted by candidates from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC), merely 1.6 percent of all PhD candidates were from the ST category, 7.5 percent from the SC category, and 19.2 percent from the OBC category (Sahoo, 2021). A significant number of seats allocated for SC/ST candidates remained unfilled despite the availability of competent applications. These findings indicate that formal reservation policies alone do not ensure equitable access to higher education, as persistent structural and procedural hurdles remain (Kumar, 2024). Concerns about discrimination in evaluation methods have been expressed. The Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) at the University of Hyderabad accused the PhD admission procedure of "gross discrimination," especially over the distribution of interview scores to students from reserved categories. According to department-specific data acquired via the Right to Information Act, the ASA discovered that SC, ST, and OBC candidates frequently received inferior interview scores relative to those from unreserved categories, despite comparable entrance examination marks. The findings suggest that the scoring system was employed purposefully to largely fill general category seats with unreserved category candidates (TNM, 2023). These charges underscore how ostensibly impartial evaluation systems can perpetuate caste hierarchies inside institutional processes.

In addition to admission statistics and assessment methods, academics have highlighted the overarching structural rationale of "merit" that frequently leads to exclusionary results. Admission processes sometimes neglect to recognize the socio-economic advantages historically had by upper-caste communities. Merit-based criteria, when divorced from an awareness of structural disadvantage, may perpetuate existing disparities instead of rectifying them (Shah & V, 2024). Economic obstacles exacerbate caste disadvantages, as access to quality education, tutoring, and other resources is inconsistent. In practice, admission processes may unintentionally favor candidates with greater financial and social capital, thereby marginalizing students from historically marginalized communities. Institutional exclusion is perpetuated by deficiencies in implementation and representation. In certain



cases, reservation quotas are insufficiently enforced, leading to the underutilization of reserved seats. The inadequate representation of SC/ST/OBC individuals in decision-making bodies, academic roles, and institutional leadership perpetuates systemic bias and hinders the potential for revolutionary reform. The lack of participation in governance structures frequently diminishes trust in grievance resolution methods and strengthens feelings of institutional antagonism.

The ramifications of caste-based discrimination in higher education are not only procedural but deeply human. The death of Rohith Vemula in 2016 garnered national and international attention to the pervasive experiences of humiliation, marginalization, and institutional indifference encountered by Dalit students. The demise of Dr. Payal Tadvi, a 26-year-old resident physician at BYL Nair Hospital and Topiwala National Medical College in Maharashtra in May 2019, ignited extensive discourse around caste-based harassment in professional and academic environments. Payal Tadvi, a member of the Scheduled Muslim Tadvi Bhil tribe, allegedly endured persistent harassment from senior colleagues, who were later charged with ragging, torture, and caste-based discrimination. These examples demonstrate the profound psychological and societal repercussions of ingrained caste bias within educational institutions. Personal accounts also highlight the ongoing nature of discrimination beyond educational environments. Dr. Ritu Singh, a Dalit scholar, has claimed that her termination from an assistant professorship at Daulat Ram College, Delhi University, was associated with her caste identification and activism (Shah & V, 2024). These instances indicate that caste-based exclusion functions not just throughout the entrance process but also within employment, advancement, and professional acknowledgment in academic institutions.

The aggregate impact of these occurrences has resulted in legal mobilization. The mothers of Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi submitted a public interest litigation to the Supreme Court, requesting enhanced institutional protections against caste-based discrimination in educational establishments (Dhyani, 2026). Their petition indicates a wider call for accountability and structural reform, suggesting that current constitutional and statutory provisions have inadequately resulted in secure and equitable campus settings.

Collectively, statistical disparities, claims of biased assessment, structural limitations of meritocracy, insufficient enforcement of reservations, underrepresentation in governance, and egregious cases of institutional harassment illustrate that caste discrimination in higher

education is neither incidental nor isolated. Instead, it is ingrained in institutional cultures, evaluative methodologies, and governance frameworks. These circumstances establish the immediate framework for



comprehending the rise of more robust regulatory and legislative measures, like the UGC's 2026 Regulations and state-level actions like the planned Rohith Vemula Act.

UGC and Anti-Discrimination Regulations

The University Grants Commission's 2012 regulations represented the inaugural systematic effort to establish a legal institutional structure aimed at preventing caste-based discrimination in higher education institutions throughout India. These principles sought to rectify injustices encountered by persons based on caste (SC/ST), religion, gender, and language. Institutions were mandated to designate an Anti-Discrimination Officer and establish an Equal Opportunity Cell (EOC) to foster inclusive access and provide equal opportunities for students. A 60-day timeframe was established for addressing concerns. The grievance procedure necessitated that affected individuals file written complaints to the Anti-Discrimination Officer, who would do an investigation and present a report to the institutional management. Should any instructor, staff member, or student be deemed accountable, measures would be implemented in accordance with university regulations.

Notwithstanding these restrictions, the 2012 framework faced criticism due to its restricted enforceability. The lack of rigorous consequences for non-compliance diminished its deterrent impact, and the onus for investigation primarily fell on internal members of the institution, prompting questions over impartiality and institutional bias (R. Kumar, 2026). The advising nature of the guidelines was regarded as a considerable structural constraint over time.

On 13 January 2026, the UGC announced the University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, superseding the 2012 guidelines and indicating a significant transition from an advising framework to a compulsory and potentially punitive system (Dhyani, 2026). The 2026 Regulations mandate that each higher educational institution create an Equal Opportunity Centre (EOC) to supervise the execution of policies for marginalized groups, offer counselling and support services, and enhance campus diversity. The Equity Committee must oversee the EOC and investigate discriminatory concerns. To guarantee representational inclusivity, the Committee must incorporate members from the OBC, SC, ST, Persons with Disabilities, and women's categories (Chaudhary, 2026). Furthermore, the Regulations require the establishment of Equity Squads responsible for maintaining mobility, identifying vulnerable areas on campus, and combating discriminatory activities. Institutions must appoint Equity Ambassadors in various departments, faculties, dorms, libraries, and other entities to execute programs established by the EOC and report infractions. Additionally, a 24-hour Equity Helpline should be instituted to allow stakeholders to report instances of



discrimination. Complaints can be reported via online portals, email, or directly to the EOC Coordinator. When allegations pertain to penal legislation, the information must be submitted to law enforcement authorities (Chaudhary, 2026).

The announcement of the 2026 Regulations incited much public criticism. Numerous upper-caste factions orchestrated demonstrations promptly following the January 13 declaration (Lugun, 2026). A significant issue of dispute revolved around the definition of “discrimination,” which specifically delineated Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) as groups susceptible to caste-based prejudice. Critics contended that this framing implicitly depicted "general category" or upper-caste folks as presumed oppressors and allowed for possible misuse (Lugun, 2026). The UGC justified the need for the Regulations before a legislative committee and the Supreme Court, referencing a documented 118 percent rise in instances of caste-based discrimination in educational institutions (Lugun, 2026). The Supreme Court later suspended the enforcement of the Regulations, citing that certain clauses were "ambiguous" and could exacerbate social divide. The incorporation of OBCs among vulnerable groups sparked political discourse, especially about overarching centre–state and party interactions.

The shift from the 2012 guidelines to the 2026 Regulations signifies a substantial change in regulatory thought. The previous framework depended mostly on institutional persuasion and moral duty, whereas the 2026 Regulations implement enforced compliance measures, including potential penalties such as the withholding or rejection of central grants for non-compliance (Desai, 2026). This transition from advising recommendations to regulatory enforcement signifies a broader trend towards centralized equity governance in higher education. Nonetheless, it also prompts significant inquiries concerning institutional autonomy, federal conflicts, and the equilibrium between administrative control and substantive justice.

Federal Question and the Rohith Vemula Act

The Karnataka Rohith Vemula (Protection of SC/ST from Caste Discrimination in Higher Educational Institutions) Bill, 2025, named in honor of Rohith Vemula, an Ambedkarite doctoral scholar who tragically took his own life on 17 January 2016 at the University of Hyderabad due to allegations of caste-based harassment, signifies a substantial legislative measure at the state level aimed at addressing anti-discrimination within academic institutions. In contrast to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, a criminal statute imposing severe penalties, the proposed Rohith Vemula Bill is primarily structured as a civil law framework aimed at combating caste discrimination in educational institutions (Mondal & Rajendran, 2026).



The draft Bill, prepared by the Law, Justice and Human Rights Department of the Government of Karnataka, aims to protect the right to education and dignity of Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and minorities. The claimed objective is to offer accessible, institution-based remedies for caste discrimination, addressing issues inside campus frameworks instead of through extended criminal litigation or police involvement (Mondal & Rajendran, 2026). The Bill seeks to institutionalize accountability at colleges while minimizing procedural obstacles for complainants.

The draft requires the formation of internal Equity Committees in all higher educational institutions, analogous in structure to Gender Sensitisation Committees Against Sexual Harassment (GSCASH). Significantly, it mandates that 80 percent of the appointed members of the Equity Committee be from Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes, so instituting representative protections inside the complaint procedure (R J, 2026). The Bill presents comprehensive definitions of discrimination, encompassing “indirect discrimination”—actions that seem neutral yet disproportionately harm SC/ST individuals—and “institutional discrimination,” which pertains to systemic biases ingrained in university policies, councils, or administrative procedures. The array of remedies suggested in the Bill embodies a hybrid methodology that integrates restorative and punitive approaches. Individuals convicted of discrimination may face consequences such as written apologies, good behavior bonds, community service, demotion, exclusion from examinations, and monetary fines. In severe instances, punishments consist of imprisonment for a maximum of one year and a fine of ₹10,000 for the initial offence, with judges granting compensation up to ₹1 lakh; subsequent offences may incur imprisonment of up to three years and a fine of ₹1 lakh. Institutions that do not maintain openness to all classes, castes, creeds, genders, or nations may incur fines between ₹1 lakh and ₹10 lakh, and the state government may revoke financial assistance or grants (R J, 2026). The Bill includes measures to safeguard complainants against victimization.

The writing process itself embodies wider societal mobilization. The Campaign for Rohith Act, a civil society collective, drafted legislation in conjunction with legal professionals and university teachers, and the Karnataka government allegedly integrated numerous proposals from this draft into its final version (R, 2026). The Rohith Vemula Bill was included in the Congress Party's agenda for the 2023 Karnataka Assembly elections. Rahul Gandhi subsequently encouraged the chief ministers of Congress-led states, including Karnataka, Telangana, and Himachal Pradesh, to implement such legislation to combat caste discrimination in higher education institutions (R, 2026).



The proposed Rohith Vemula Act presents substantial constitutional and regulatory issues from a federal standpoint. Education is included in the Concurrent List of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, allowing both the Union and the States to enact legislation on the matter. The University Grants Commission aims to centralize anti-discrimination administration via the 2026 Regulations, but Karnataka's legislative proposal signifies a declaration of state power to establish a more interventionist and accountability-focused structure. The interplay between central regulatory principles and state-level legislation innovation exemplifies a multifaceted framework of anti-discrimination governance under Indian federalism.

This tiered architecture also creates potential tensions. Inquiries may emerge concerning the intersection between federal regulatory requirements and state laws, especially in the domains of enforcement, penalties, and institutional independence. The Rohith Vemula Bill exemplifies how subnational governments can address region-specific social movements and political demands by establishing more robust protections than those required at the national level. The Bill embodies both the competitive and cooperative aspects of Indian federalism, with states functioning as experimental grounds for social justice within a comprehensive central regulatory structure.

The UGC's regulatory framework and Karnataka's proposed civil-penal legislative model illustrate unique yet intersecting perspectives on anti-discrimination governance—one prioritizing centralized compliance and institutional oversight, while the other emphasizes representational protections and enforceable accountability via state legislation. The interplay between these frameworks highlights the developing federal nature of equality regulation in Indian higher education.

Conclusion

The enduring presence of caste-based discrimination in India's higher education system highlights a concerning disparity between constitutional assurances and institutional practices. Notwithstanding a strong constitutional foundation of equality and protective legislation, data from student suicides, faculty representation, and admission practices demonstrate that caste hierarchies persist in influencing access, assessment, and daily academic experiences. The previously referenced data specifically, the fatalities of 98 Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi students from 2019 to 2021 (R J, 2026), along with the preponderance of privileged castes in elite faculty frameworks, emphasises that discrimination is not solely interpersonal but also structural and institutional.



In this setting, the discussions on the UGC regulations and the proposed Rohit Vemula Act have heightened importance. Although UGC frameworks seek to standardize grievance redressal and anti-discrimination measures, their implementation has frequently been inconsistent, lacking robust enforcement and institutional accountability. The Rohit Vemula Bill, by publicly acknowledging widespread caste discrimination and offering organized internal processes with enforceable remedies, indicates a significant transition from symbolic commitment to institutional accountability. Its focus on promoting fraternity and inclusion redefines higher education not solely as a venue for meritocratic competition, but as a constitutional domain mandated to maintain dignity and substantive equality.

Nevertheless, legislation alone cannot eradicate established caste privilege. Successful transformation necessitates stringent enforcement, transparent admission and assessment procedures, equitable faculty recruitment, and substantial participation of marginalized communities in decision-making entities. It necessitates a reevaluation of "merit" and institutional culture to recognize past disadvantages and systemic power dynamics. The fight against caste discrimination in higher education transcends regulatory change; it aims to preserve the constitutional ideals of justice, equality, and fraternity. The survival of Indian universities as democratic entities hinges on the ability of legislation, policy, and institutional practices to transcend mere legal equality and provide substantial inclusion and dignity for all students.

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