



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 8.428 (SJIF 2026)

Equity on Paper, Discrimination on Campus: An Analysis of UGC's Latest Data

Dr. A. U. More

Shri Sai Shikshan Mahavidyalay,
Chandrapur (Maharashtra, India)
E-mail: anilmore172@gmail.com

DOI No. **03.2021-11278686** DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doilink/03.2026-33475294/IRJHIS2603001>

Abstract:

Caste-based discrimination continues to shape the experiences of many students in Indian higher education, despite the presence of constitutional guarantees and regulatory frameworks aimed at promoting equality. This article examines the growing gap between formal commitments to equity and the realities faced on university campuses, using recent data released by the University Grants Commission as a point of analysis. The sharp rise in reported complaints is explored not only as an indicator of persistent discrimination but also as a reflection of increased awareness and reporting among marginalised students. The article analyses the forms and consequences of campus discrimination, the limitations of existing institutional mechanisms, and the challenges involved in implementing equity-focused regulations. It also highlights the social and academic costs of exclusion, including its impact on mental well-being, academic participation, and long-term mobility. By critically examining policy–practice gaps and proposing practical reforms, the article argues that meaningful change requires ethical commitment, institutional accountability, and collective action.

Keywords: *Caste-based discrimination, Higher education in India, Equity and inclusion, University Grants Commission (UGC), SC/ST students, Campus discrimination, Equal Opportunity Cells, Grievance redressal mechanisms, Social justice, Policy–practice gap*

Introduction:

Higher education in India is often presented as a powerful tool for social change and equality. The Constitution of India promises justice, equality, and dignity to all citizens, especially to historically marginalised communities such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). Universities and colleges are expected to reflect these constitutional values by providing a fair, inclusive, and respectful learning environment for every student, regardless of caste or social background.

On paper, India has a strong framework to ensure equity (fair treatment according to need) in higher education. There are reservation policies, anti-discrimination laws, grievance redressal mechanisms, and detailed guidelines issued by regulatory bodies. Institutions proudly mention inclusion, diversity, and equal opportunity in their official documents, prospectuses, and policy

statements. However, the everyday experiences of many SC/ST students show a different and troubling reality.

Recent data released by the University Grants Commission (UGC) reveals a 118% increase in complaints related to caste-based discrimination in higher education institutions over the last few years. This sharp rise raises serious questions. Does this increase mean that discrimination has become more common on campuses, or does it reflect greater awareness and willingness among students to report injustice? More importantly, why does discrimination continue to exist despite clear laws, policies, and repeated assurances of equity?

For many SC/ST students, discrimination is not always open or violent. It often appears in subtle forms, biased evaluation, discouraging remarks, exclusion from academic guidance, social isolation, or being treated as less deserving. Such everyday experiences may not always make headlines, but they deeply affect students confidence, mental health, and academic progress. Over time, this gap between policy and practice creates an environment where equity exists only in official records, not in lived reality.

This article examines the contradiction between equity on paper and discrimination on campus by analysing the latest UGC data on caste-based discrimination. It aims to understand the nature of these complaints, the reasons behind their increase, and the limitations of existing institutional mechanisms. More importantly, it asks a fundamental question: Can higher education truly be transformative if dignity and equality are denied within its own spaces?

Understanding the Role of the University Grants Commission:

The University Grants Commission (UGC) is the national body that guides and supervises the higher education system in India. It was established to create uniformity in academic standards and to ensure that universities function responsibly within the framework of national laws and values. Through its regulatory and advisory role, the UGC influences how higher education institutions operate on a daily basis.

One of the core duties of the UGC is to oversee the functioning of universities. This includes approving institutions, setting minimum academic standards, allocating financial assistance, and reviewing whether universities follow prescribed rules and norms. Alongside academic supervision, the UGC is also expected to safeguard fairness and inclusivity in higher education. This responsibility arises from the constitutional goal of reducing social inequality and ensuring access to education for marginalised communities, particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).

In response to long-standing concerns about caste-based bias, the UGC has introduced specific directions for universities. Institutions have been instructed to create dedicated mechanisms for addressing complaints from SC/ST students, so that issues of discrimination can be formally reported and examined. The UGC has also encouraged the formation of Equal Opportunity Cells (EOCs), which

are meant to support disadvantaged students, promote inclusive practices, and observe whether campuses provide a respectful learning environment.

Overview of the Latest UGC Data:

The recent data released by the University Grants Commission covers a five-year period, roughly from 2019–20 to 2023–24. This time span is important because it allows us to see trends over time rather than isolated incidents. By comparing data across these years, it becomes possible to understand whether problems related to caste-based discrimination are decreasing, remaining unchanged, or becoming more visible within higher education institutions.

One of the most striking findings in this data is the 118% increase in discrimination-related complaints. In simple terms, this means that the number of complaints reported in recent years is more than double compared to the number reported at the beginning of this period. For example, if around 170 complaints were recorded earlier, the figure has now grown to nearly 380. This sharp rise does not automatically mean that discrimination suddenly began; it may also indicate that more students are coming forward to report their experiences due to increased awareness and available complaint mechanisms.

The data includes complaints from different types of higher education institutions. These consist of central universities funded by the Union government, state universities managed by state governments, and deemed as well as private universities that operate under UGC recognition. This wide coverage shows that the issue is not limited to one category of institution but exists across the higher education system.

Nature of Caste-Based Discrimination on Campus:

Caste-based discrimination in higher education does not always appear in direct or aggressive forms. For many SC/ST students, unequal treatment is experienced through everyday academic and social interactions that slowly create a sense of exclusion. These experiences may seem minor in isolation, but together they shape an environment where students feel unwelcome and undervalued.

One common form of discrimination is biased evaluation. Some students report receiving lower marks, harsher feedback, or being judged as less capable without clear academic reasons. Their performance is often viewed through stereotypes rather than merit. Another issue is the hostile classroom environment, where discriminatory remarks, insensitive jokes, or dismissive attitudes from teachers or classmates make SC/ST students hesitant to participate in discussions or express their views openly.

Exclusion from research guidance is another serious concern, particularly at the postgraduate and doctoral levels. Students may be discouraged from pursuing certain research topics, denied mentorship opportunities, or face delays in approval and evaluation. Such practices directly affect their academic growth and future career prospects. Outside the classroom, social segregation in hostels and

campus spaces is also reported, where students experience isolation, grouping based on caste identities, or lack of access to informal peer networks that are important for emotional and academic support.

A significant aspect of caste discrimination is its invisible or subtle nature. This includes being ignored, constantly questioned about merit, or treated as an exception rather than an equal. Unlike direct abuse, such behaviour is difficult to prove but deeply damaging. This highlights the difference between overt discrimination, which is open and explicit, and covert discrimination, which operates quietly through attitudes, decisions, and institutional practices.

The impact of these experiences on students is profound. Continuous exposure to discrimination affects mental health, leading to stress, anxiety, and loss of self-confidence. It also harms academic performance, as students struggle to focus and participate fully. Over time, these pressures contribute to higher dropout rates, undermining the very purpose of higher education as a space for empowerment and social mobility.

Why Are Complaints Increasing?

The sharp rise in complaints related to caste-based discrimination in higher education does not have a single explanation. Instead, it is the result of several interconnected social, institutional, and technological changes. One important factor is the growing awareness among SC/ST students about their rights. Compared to earlier decades, students today are more informed about constitutional protections, UGC guidelines, and grievance redressal processes. Awareness programmes, public debates, and academic discussions have helped many students recognise that unfair treatment is not something they must silently accept.

Another reason for the increase is the availability of easier complaint mechanisms. Many universities now provide online portals, email-based systems, and dedicated helplines for reporting discrimination. These platforms reduce the need for face-to-face confrontation and offer a sense of safety, making it more likely for students to submit formal complaints. The digitalisation of grievance processes has therefore lowered practical barriers that previously discouraged reporting.

The role of social media has also been significant. Platforms such as online forums and networking sites allow students to share experiences, find support, and draw public attention to discrimination cases. When incidents gain visibility, they encourage others to come forward. Alongside this, student activism has strengthened on many campuses. Student groups and unions often raise issues of caste discrimination, demand accountability from administrations, and provide guidance to affected students. Civil society organisations, including advocacy groups and legal aid networks, further support students by offering counselling, legal advice, and public platforms for discussion.

However, an important question remains: Is discrimination itself increasing, or is reporting increasing? While the data shows more complaints, it does not necessarily mean that discriminatory practices are new. It may reflect a greater willingness to speak out rather than a sudden rise in incidents.

Gap Between Policy and Practice:

India's higher education system operates within a broad legal framework that formally supports equality and social justice. The Constitution of India clearly upholds the principle of equal treatment and authorises special protections for communities that have faced historical exclusion. Alongside this, regulatory instructions issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) require universities and colleges to adopt measures that prevent discrimination and promote inclusion. Judicial directions from the Supreme Court have further underlined that educational spaces must remain free from caste-based bias and must actively protect the dignity of students from marginalised groups.

However, the presence of laws and regulations has not automatically translated into fair practices on campuses. A major weakness lies in the ineffective functioning of institutional mechanisms. Equal Opportunity Cells, though officially established in many universities, often operate without clarity, independence, or regular activity. In some cases, students are not even aware of their existence, making these bodies inaccessible and ineffective.

Another concern is the limited preparedness of academic and administrative staff. Faculty members and officials are rarely trained to recognise or address caste-based disadvantage, which allows biased behaviour to continue unchallenged. Representation of SC/ST members in committees is often symbolic rather than meaningful, with little influence on decision-making processes. This weak participation undermines the purpose of inclusive governance.

UGC's New Regulations and Their Limitations:

In recent years, concerns over unequal treatment in universities have pushed the University Grants Commission to introduce revised rules focused on equity. These regulations make it compulsory for higher education institutions to create internal bodies dedicated to equity-related matters. Such bodies are expected to look into complaints of discrimination and suggest corrective steps within the institution. Along with this, universities are required to submit regular institutional statements explaining how complaints were handled and what measures were taken to improve fairness. Failure to follow these requirements may invite administrative action, including restrictions linked to grants or institutional approval.

These regulations have certain strengths. By formally assigning responsibility to institutions, they attempt to ensure institution-level responsibility rather than leaving issues unaddressed. The requirement of structured complaint procedures also provides students with a recognised institutional route to raise concerns. Compared to informal or unclear processes, this framework at least creates visibility for discrimination-related issues within university administration.

At the same time, several weaknesses limit the real impact of these rules. One major concern is the absence of strong follow-up mechanisms. Information submitted by institutions is largely self-reported, making it difficult to judge whether actions mentioned on paper reflect genuine change on

campus.

As a result, while the regulations introduce structure and intent, their effectiveness depends heavily on ethical commitment and transparent implementation rather than formal rules alone.

Social and Academic Consequences of Campus Discrimination:

Discrimination within higher education spaces has consequences that extend far beyond isolated incidents. For students from marginalised backgrounds, repeated exposure to unfair treatment often results in psychological strain. Experiences such as being ignored, questioned about merit, or treated differently because of caste can create persistent stress. Over time, this pressure may turn into emotional exhaustion or trauma, affecting students' ability to engage fully with academic life.

Another serious outcome is the erosion of self-confidence and personal dignity. When students constantly face doubt about their abilities or belonging, they may begin to internalise negative perceptions. This sense of being undervalued discourages participation in classroom discussions, academic collaboration, and leadership roles, further isolating them within the campus environment.

Discrimination also affects academic and institutional outcomes. Limited access to mentorship, research opportunities, and academic networks reduces research productivity among affected students. As a result, fewer individuals from marginalised communities progress to advanced academic positions, leading to underrepresentation in higher academia, including faculty and research leadership roles. This imbalance reinforces existing inequalities within the knowledge system.

In the long term, such exclusion weakens social mobility. Higher education is meant to provide upward movement and equal opportunities, but discrimination interrupts this pathway, trapping individuals in cycles of disadvantage. In its most severe form, prolonged academic and social isolation has been linked to extreme distress among students. Discussions around student suicides, when approached with care and responsibility, highlight how hostile educational environments can contribute to feelings of hopelessness. While no single factor explains such tragedies, discrimination remains an important risk factor that demands urgent attention and preventive action.

The Way Forward: From Equity on Paper to Justice on Campus:

Bridging the gap between written policies and everyday campus realities requires deliberate and sustained action. A key starting point is the revitalisation of Equal Opportunity Cells. These bodies must function as active support systems rather than symbolic structures. This can be achieved by appointing trained personnel, ensuring regular meetings, maintaining transparency in procedures, and making students aware of their existence and role.

Another essential step is the introduction of mandatory caste-sensitisation programmes for faculty members and administrators. Such training should focus on helping educators understand social inequality, unconscious bias, and the lived experiences of students from marginalised communities. Without awareness and reflection, even well-meaning institutions may continue practices that reinforce

exclusion.

Effective reform also demands the creation of independent grievance redressal mechanisms. When complaints are handled by bodies external to the institution, the risk of bias and conflict of interest is reduced. Independent oversight can improve trust in the system and encourage more students to report discrimination without fear.

Equally important is ensuring strong protection for complainants and whistleblowers. Clear safeguards must be put in place to prevent academic, social, or administrative retaliation. Confidentiality, time-bound inquiry processes, and strict penalties for victimisation are crucial for creating a safe reporting environment.

Beyond institutional reforms, the responsibility for change lies with the wider academic community. Students, teachers, and civil society organisations all play a role in challenging discriminatory practices, supporting affected individuals, and holding institutions accountable. Ultimately, meaningful change requires ethical commitment, not just formal rule-following. Equity cannot remain a written promise; it must be reflected in everyday attitudes, decisions, and actions on campus.

Conclusion:

This article has highlighted the clear contrast between formal commitments to equality and the everyday experiences of many students within higher education institutions. While policies, regulations, and committees exist to promote inclusion, persistent complaints of discrimination reveal that equity often remains confined to official documents rather than lived practice. This gap shows that rules alone cannot transform institutional culture.

Equity must be understood not merely as a legal requirement but as an ongoing practice that shapes teaching, evaluation, mentorship, and campus interactions. The recent data on discrimination should be viewed as a warning sign, drawing attention to deep-rooted problems that demand urgent and thoughtful responses. These numbers represent real lives and experiences, not abstract statistics.

Reference:

1. University Grants Commission. (2012). *Guidelines for Establishment of Equal Opportunity Cells in Universities*. New Delhi: UGC.
2. University Grants Commission. (2023–2024). *Annual Reports and Data on Grievances Related to Caste-Based Discrimination in Higher Education Institutions*. New Delhi: UGC.
3. Government of India. (1950). *The Constitution of India*. New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice.
4. horat, S., & Newman, K. (2010). *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
5. Teltumbde, A. (2018). *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal*

Hindutva. New Delhi: Navayana.

6. National Commission for Scheduled Castes. (Various Reports). *Annual Reports on Issues Affecting SC Students in Higher Education*. New Delhi: NCSC.

7. National Commission for Scheduled Tribes. (Various Reports). *Status Reports on Tribal Students in Education*. New Delhi: NCST.

