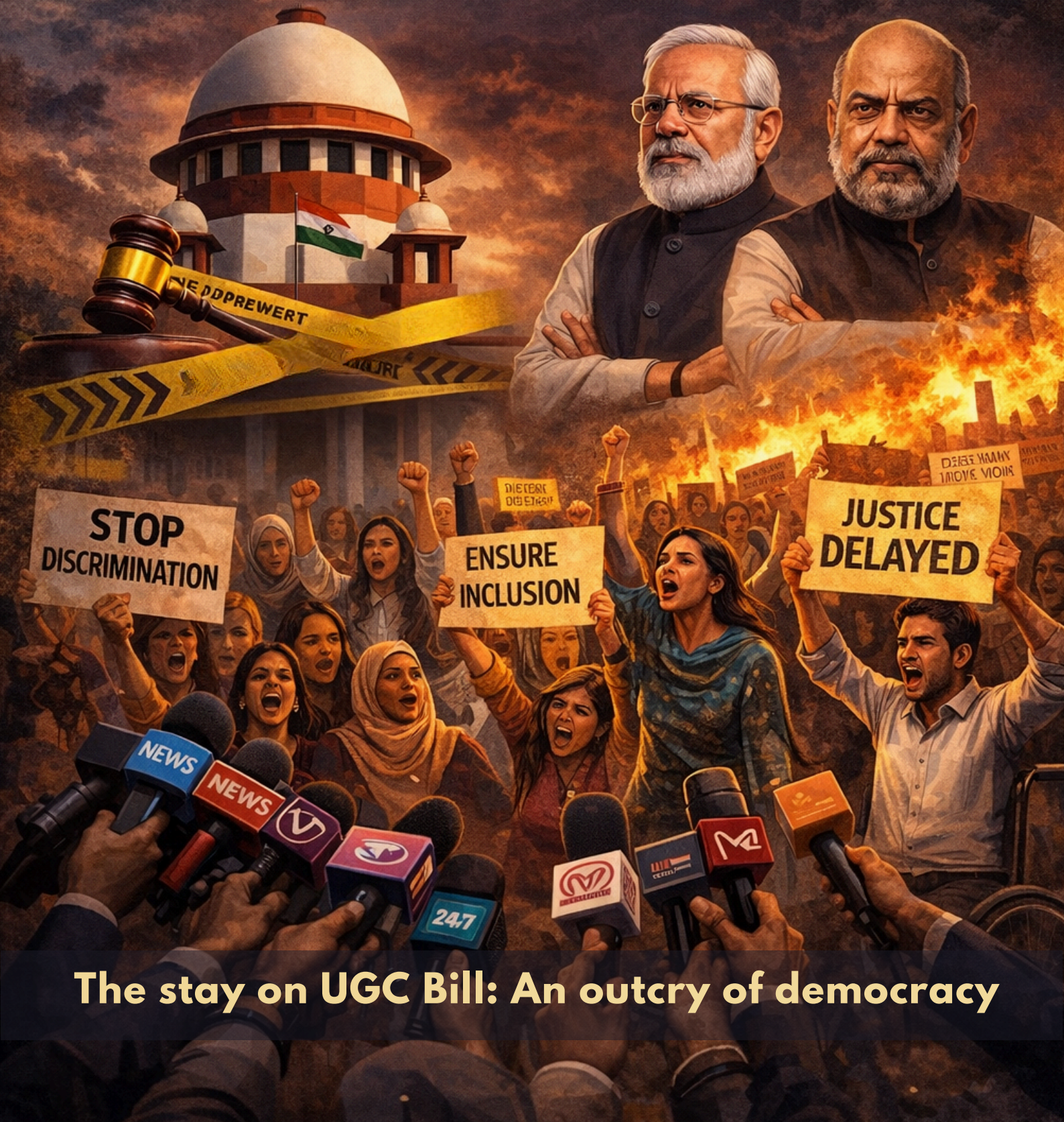


February 2026

New Democracy

Voice of the people



The stay on UGC Bill: An outcry of democracy

New Democracy

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Editorial

Feb, 2026

We, the people of India, represent the world's largest Democratic country. If we want to ensure the commitments of our constitutional preamble and rights, we have to follow up our directive principles, which are contained in Part IV (Articles 36-51) of the Indian Constitution, are guidelines for creating a social and economic democracy and a welfare state. Where clearly instructing the state to ensure justice, equality, and welfare. Equality, liberty and fraternity are the soul of the Indian constitution. Directive principles are non-Justiciable but Fundamental rights. While courts cannot enforce their implementation, Article 37 mandates that these principles are essential in making laws.

The 2026 regulations introduced by the University Grants Commission represent one of the most debated reforms in India's higher education landscape in recent years. Framed as a comprehensive framework to promote equity and curb discrimination on campuses, the regulation mandates structured grievance redressal mechanisms, Equal Opportunity Cells and institutional accountability systems across universities and colleges. While its intent aligns with constitutional values of equality and dignity. Its execution has generated serious legal, academic, and political concerns.

At its core, the regulation seeks to address caste-based, gender-based and other forms of discrimination that have historically affected marginalised communities in higher education. No democratic society can ignore inequities within its academic institutions. Universities must be spaces of mobility, intellectual freedom and safety. Institutionalising anti-discrimination mechanisms is therefore not only desirable but necessary. By formalising complaint procedures and oversight structures, the regulation attempts to move beyond symbolic commitments toward enforceable protections.

However, public policy must be judged not only by its objectives but also by its clarity and balance. Critics argue that several provisions in the 2026 regulation are broadly worded, leaving room for subjective interpretation. In regulatory law, ambiguity can lead to arbitrary enforcement. Universities are complex ecosystems where academic judgment, disciplinary authority and intellectual disagreement coexist. If definitions of discrimination are not precisely drawn, legitimate academic evaluation or administrative decisions could risk being misinterpreted.

Another major concern is procedural fairness. Any grievance mechanism must protect both complainants and respondents. Without strong safeguards—such as clear rights to defence, confidentiality, protection against reputational damage, and consequences for demonstrably false complaints—the system risks losing credibility. Equality before the law requires that justice be even-handed. A framework perceived as structurally imbalanced may deepen mistrust rather than foster inclusion.

Dr. Arti

Editor,
New Democracy

Kush

Chief Editor,
New Democracy

UGC Equity Regulations 2026: A Landmark Push for Inclusive Campuses or a Polarizing Policy?

Feb, 2026

In the first week of January 2026, India's higher education landscape witnessed a significant regulatory overhaul when the University Grants Commission (UGC) notified the 'University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026'. Popularly dubbed the 'UGC Bill 2026' or 'UGC Equity Regulations 2026' in media and public discourse. These rules replaced the advisory of 2012 framework with mandatory, enforceable mechanisms to combat discrimination in universities, colleges, and other higher education institutions (HEIs).

The regulations arrived against the backdrop of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's emphasis on equity and inclusion, a documented surge in caste-based harassment complaints and high-profile student suicides allegedly linked to systemic bias. Proponents hailed them as a long-overdue tool to make campuses safer for marginalized communities. However, Critics decried them as vague, one-sided and potentially divisive. Within weeks nationwide protests erupted, culminating in a Supreme Court stay on January 29, 2026. As of February 2026, the 2012 regulations remain operative, while the new rules are under judicial scrutiny.

Background: From Advisory Guidelines to Binding Law

The UGC, established under the UGC Act, 1956, has long held the mandate to promote and maintain standards in higher education while ensuring equality of opportunity. The 2012 UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Educational Institutions) Regulations were a first step, outlining basic anti-discrimination measures. However, they were largely

advisory, lacking teeth for enforcement. Compliance was patchy and many institutions treated them as mere paperwork.

Data from UGC and parliamentary records revealed a troubling trend: discrimination complaints in HEIs rose 118.4% from 173 in 2019-20 to 378 in 2023-24, with over 1,160 cases in five years, many involving caste based issues. Tragic incidents amplified the urgency. The 2016 suicide of Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula at the University of Hyderabad and the 2019 death of Payal Tadvi, a tribal medical student in Mumbai, both allegedly due to caste-based harassment, prompted Supreme Court interventions. Petitions by the mothers of Vemula and Tadvi highlighted institutional failures and called for stronger safeguards.

The NEP 2020 further prioritized "full equity and inclusion," targeting a 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) by 2035, with special focus on Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), Persons with Disabilities (PwD), and women. The 2026 regulations were framed under Sections 12(j) and 26(1)(g) of the UGC Act to translate these aspirations into actionable mandates, superseding the 2012 version and applying to all HEIs—central, state, deemed universities, colleges, and even open/distance learning (ODL) and online programs.

Key Provisions: Mandatory Structures and Strict Timelines

The regulations are structured around prevention, redressal, monitoring, and

defined broadly as "any unfair, differential, or biased treatment... on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, gender, place of birth, disability, or any of them," including acts that impair equality or human dignity. "Caste-based discrimination" specifically targets bias against SCs, STs, and OBCs.

Every HEI must:

Establish an Equal Opportunity Centre (EOC): This body implements policies for disadvantaged groups, offers academic, financial, and social guidance, and promotes campus diversity. Smaller college's route functions through their affiliating university's EOC.

Constitute an Equity Committee: Chaired by the Head of Institution (Vice-Chancellor/Principal), it includes three senior faculty, one non-teaching staff, two civil society representatives, student invitees, and an EOC Coordinator as Member-Secretary. Representation from SCs, STs, OBCs, PwD, and women is mandatory. The committee meets at least twice yearly, maintains quorum, and oversees the EOC.

Supporting mechanisms include:

Equity Squads: Mobile vigilance teams to monitor vulnerable campus areas.

Equity Ambassadors: One per department/hostel to promote awareness and report issues.

Equity Helpline: A 24/7 confidential channel for reporting distress.

Grievance Redressal Process (Regulations 6, 8, 9) is time-bound:

Complaints (online portal, email, written, or helpline) trigger an Equity Committee meeting within 24 hours.

Inquiry completes in 15 working days; report goes to the Head of Institution.

Action must follow within 7 working days.

Penal offences are referred to the police.

Appeals lie with the Ombudsperson (under 2023 Student Grievance Regulations) within 30 days.

Duties of HEIs (Regulation 4) are proactive: eradicate discrimination, promote equity, protect stakeholders irrespective of background, and ensure no condonation of bias. Heads of institutions bear personal accountability.

Monitoring and Reporting (Regulation 10):

HEIs submit annual reports to UGC by January-end, detailing demographics, dropout rates, and grievance status. Bi-annual EOC reports go public on websites. UGC maintains a national monitoring committee with civil society input.

Penalties for Non-Compliance (Regulation 11): UGC can debar institutions from schemes, degree programs, ODL/online offerings, or recognition under Sections 2(f)/12B of the UGC Act.

These provisions elevate equity from recommendation to enforceable obligation, with illustrative lists of discriminatory acts (e.g., biased evaluation, hostel allocation, derogatory remarks) to guide implementation.

Intended Benefits: Building Truly Inclusive Campuses

Supporters argue the regulations address deep-rooted inequities. By mandating representation and swift redressal, they empower marginalized students who often

face subtle exclusion—ranging from social ostracism to academic sabotage. The focus on SEDGs aligns with constitutional Articles 14 (equality), 15 (non-discrimination), and 16 (equal opportunity in public employment/education).

In a diverse nation where caste continues to influence social interactions, the rules could reduce dropout rates among reserved-category students, foster cross-group dialogue through sensitization programs, and align with global DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) standards. Civil society involvement and resource mobilization for welfare schemes promise holistic support. Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan assured: "Oppression will not be allowed against anybody... there won't be discrimination... Nobody will have the right to misuse [the regulations]."

For institutions, structured mechanisms like helplines and squads could preempt crises, while annual reporting enhances transparency and accountability. Ultimately, the regulations aim to create campuses reflecting India's unity in diversity, supporting NEP's vision of a vibrant, equitable knowledge society.

Controversies and Protests: Fears of Reverse Discrimination

The regulations sparked immediate backlash, primarily from general-category (often upper-caste) students and groups. Critics contended that the narrow definition of "caste-based discrimination" (explicitly against SC/ST/OBC) created a "hierarchy of victimhood," offering no equivalent safeguards for upper-caste students facing bias, ragging framed as caste retaliation, or false complaints

Key concerns:

Vagueness and Misuse: Broad definitions of discrimination (including "implicit" bias) and absence of penalties for frivolous complaints could weaponize the system, leading to "mob lynching" of faculty/students via complaints.

One-Sided Focus: While discrimination against any group is prohibited, protective mechanisms tilt toward marginalized sections, potentially ignoring regional, linguistic, or intra-caste issues (e.g., Northeast or South Indian students).

Administrative Burden: Mandatory committees, squads, ambassadors, and reporting in resource-strapped institutions risk bureaucracy over education.

Societal Division: Detractors feared heightened polarization, with slogans like "Savarna khatre mein hai" ("Upper castes are in danger") gaining traction.

Protests erupted across Delhi University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, University of Hyderabad, and Uttar Pradesh campuses (Lucknow, Jaunpur, etc.). Groups like Savarna Sena, Karni Sena, and Brahmin Mahasabha led marches, burning effigies and submitting blood-written memoranda to the Prime Minister calling the rules a "black law." A BJP Kisan Morcha leader in Rae Bareilly resigned in protest. Hashtags #UGCRollback and #SavarnaSena trended. Protesters argued the rules ignored "reverse discrimination" and could deter merit-based interactions.

Even some Dalit activists and legal experts noted implementation challenges, though they largely supported the intent.

Supreme Court Intervention: "Too Sweeping"

On January 29, 2026, a Division Bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi stayed the regulations in petitions by Rahul Dewan, Mritunjay Tiwari, and advocate Vineet Jindal. The court termed them "prima facie vague," "too sweeping," and capable of misuse, potentially dividing society rather than uniting it. It highlighted the lack of reciprocal protection for general-category students and questioned the regressive caste lens in an era aspiring toward castelessness.

Implications and the Road Ahead

The stay has paused implementation, giving institutions breathing room but leaving students in limbo—marginalized groups without stronger safeguards, general-category students without clarity. If upheld with modifications, the regulations could set a global precedent for context-specific equity in diverse societies. If struck down or significantly diluted, it may signal limits to affirmative regulatory interventions.

Broader questions remain: How to balance group-specific protections with universal equality? Can campuses self-regulate without excessive oversight? The episode underscores tensions between social justice and merit/individual rights in post-Mandal India.

As hearings approach (possibly March 2026), stakeholders, government, academia, civil society, must engage constructively. True equity demands not just rules but cultural shifts: sensitisation, dialogue, and zero tolerance for any bias.

In conclusion, the UGC Equity Regulations 2026 represented an ambitious attempt to eradicate discrimination through institutional reform. Its noble objectives clashed with implementation fears, exposing fault lines in India's quest for inclusive education. Whether revised or replaced, the debate has spotlighted the urgent need for campuses where every student, regardless of background, feels safe, valued, and empowered. The final judicial word will shape not just policy but the soul of Indian higher education for decades.

Dr. Deepak Kumar

Head of Department, Hindi, Goenka College of Commerce and Business Administration, Kolkata, West Bengal.

Between Constitutional Ideals and Caste Realities

Feb 2026

The Madhya Pradesh government has fully implemented the UGC's Equality Promotion Act in all universities and educational institutions in the state. Upper caste communities, especially Brahmins, are protesting it from all sides. Brahmin leaders and intellectuals are failing to understand that it protects SC, ST, disabled and female students. This opposition is similar to the Brahmin community's opposition to reservations and yet also secures jobs through EWS reservations. Who teaches them this double standard?

Some time ago, at a convention of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Employees' Organization (AJJKS), Dr. Santosh Verma, an IAS officer of Madhya Pradesh cadre, stated that reservations should remain in place until the daughters of upper castes have marital relations with his sons. This statement was widely opposed. MPs and MLAs from both the ruling and opposition parties met with the Chief Minister and submitted a petition to take action against Santosh Verma. The government released him without charge and sent a letter to the central government requesting action against him.

In support of Dr. Santosh Verma, organizations from various SC, ST, and OBC communities met in various districts, and a program called the SC, ST, and OBC United Front was held at the BHEL Dussehra Ground in Bhopal. People came together, using their own resources and the crowd numbered over fifty thousand. This instilled enthusiasm and hope among activists working within the Bahujan Samaj in Madhya Pradesh. Such programs were now being planned in every district to protest social inequality and oppression. At the same time, the central government enacted the UGC Equality Act.

The Bahujan Samaj was already experiencing social unrest due to Anil Mishra's repeated insults to Baba Saheb and the injustices being meted out to SC, ST, OBC communities and employees in the state. To manage this widespread discontent, the government hastily implemented the UGC's Equality Act.

Many upper-caste Congress leaders are actively protesting against this. Meanwhile, the Bahujan Samaj is vociferously supporting Mohan Yadav's decision, staging protests in every district. Along with this, protests are also underway to implement 27 percent OBC reservation. The government's upper-caste lawyers not only argue for this reservation in the Supreme Court but also keep adjourning the case. This has also fueled dissatisfaction among the OBC community with the government.

The Equality Act is facing increasing opposition in Madhya Pradesh because it has been implemented there. There are strong political reasons for its implementation in Madhya Pradesh. The social

The political structure remains firmly based on upper caste dominance. Even today, in Bundelkhand, we hear of Dalits being denied permission to ride a horse in a wedding procession. Whether it's urinating on a tribal youth in Sidhi district or cutting off the headscarves of Yadav boys in Rewa, news of various forms of exploitation emerges daily. Civilized society should seriously consider who legitimizes such inhumane practices of inequality-driven humiliation and exploitation?

Such heartbreaking incidents occur every day. No widespread campaign has ever been launched by the leaders/intellectuals of the upper caste society or indeed the Brahmin

community, in the upper caste communities to protest these incidents. This is a criminal mentality that nurtures and fosters oppression. Often, even politicians merely pay lip service to such exploitation, without formulating concrete, long-term plans. In reality, they deeply disregard such atrocities. It's absurd that the most intellectual and influential sections of society consider such a tradition a sign of their social superiority.

Sometimes, a political pretense of eating at a Dalit's home is also enacted. It should be noted that cooked meals are already commonly eaten in Dalit homes. Furthermore, the food and utensils are brought in prepared from outside. The question here should be: when will a Dalit from an ordinary family sit in the kitchen of an elite Brahmin's home and dine with respect with their family?

In Madhya Pradesh, those in power and educational institutions foster an antisocial structure based on inequality. The UGC's Equality Promotion Act holds a mirror to this. Even so many years after the Constitution was enacted, various government reports continue to reveal that those who foster inequality occupy the most responsible positions in educational institutions. These powerful individuals discriminate against children from the Bahujan Samaj at every level. This isn't just for students; we can also see it in NFS data for positions like professorship. What happens here is that if a person from a particular community becomes a professor, they become senior and head the policy-making committee. So, try to stop them as long as you can.

There is no difference between those in favor of the government and those against it in this matter. With the implementation of this bill, both opposition and support are emerging at various levels. The protests are most prominent in Bundelkhand and Baghelkhand. This is happening. The slogans raised in protest at the Shivpuri district headquarters were caste-based. The slogan used against Hon'ble Chief Minister Mohan Yadav was, "Yadav will go and graze buffaloes."

The demand for a statue of Constitution-maker Baba Saheb Bhimrao Ambedkar on the premises of the Gwalior bench of the Madhya Pradesh High Court has been ongoing for a long time. It's not difficult to identify those who are preventing it. These people don't even acknowledge Baba Saheb as the architect of the Constitution. They don't hesitate to call him a supporter of the British and upper caste organizations are not taking any social action against him.

Mohan Yadav's decision, albeit unintentionally, benefits the BJP. The Congress party is not making its stance clear on whether it supports Rahul Gandhi's Bahujan ideology or the upper-caste Congress mentality of Madhya Pradesh. This was a prime opportunity for the Congress to rally SC, ST and OBC communities from Madhya Pradesh to Delhi, on the issue of the Samata Act and 27 percent OBC reservation. However, the Congress party's top leadership seems content to dismiss the formality by making speeches and making statements on social media. The BJP has largely contained the discontent surrounding Dr. Santosh Verma's issue.

Hindu saints and babas proclaim that all Hindus are brothers, but these religious leaders remain silent on the issue of injustice against Dalits and tribals and on the issue of OBC representation. Yet, these same people spread social animosity by speaking out and holding rallies against the UGC's Equality Act. This clearly demonstrates that these individuals too are nurturing unconstitutional inequality, whereas they should be dedicated to establishing a humanistic ideology of equality, freedom, justice and fraternity.

This UGC bill in Madhya Pradesh signals bad news for the Congress party more than for the BJP. The time is ripe for the upper-caste Congress leaders to accept Rahul Gandhi as their leader and internalize the ideas he periodically expresses through his speeches. Otherwise, power will remain a mirage for them.

Dr. Ramayan Patel

Assistant Professor

Sarojini Naidu Kanya Mahavidyalaya

Bhopal.

Equality in Higher Education Needs Clarity, Balance, and Social Commitment—Not Just Legislation

Feb, 2026

The introduction of a University Grants Commission (UGC) framework aimed at promoting “equity” in higher education institutions reflects an important and necessary aspiration. Equality—samata—is not a narrow administrative goal but a foundational moral principle of a democratic society. In the Indian context, it carries historical, constitutional, and ethical weight. The commitment to equity and inclusion is also aligned with the vision articulated in the National Education Policy 2020, which identifies “full equity and inclusion” as the bedrock of all educational decisions. At the level of intent, therefore, the initiative appears both legitimate and timely.

However, the strength of any law lies not merely in its intention but in its clarity, balance and enforceability. When examined from this perspective, the current framework raises significant concerns. The most pressing of these relates to definitional ambiguity, procedural imbalance, and the broader political and social context in which such measures operate. If the objective is to build trust and create inclusive campuses, then the law must inspire confidence across all sections of society—not suspicion or polarization.

The Problem of Definitional Obscurity

One of the core issues in the framework is the treatment of caste-based discrimination. There is no dispute that caste discrimination has historically shaped access to education, opportunity and dignity in India. Nor is there disagreement that institutions of higher learning must actively prevent such discrimination.

Yet, defining caste-based discrimination in operational terms is inherently complex. Unlike racial discrimination in certain historical contexts, which often involved demarcated binary. Caste in India is multi-layered, regionally varied and socially dynamic. In many parts of the country, hierarchies are not linear but contextual. This makes it difficult to codify discrimination in a way that is both comprehensive and precise. If the law leaves too many grey areas, it risks subjective interpretation.

For example, what constitutes social exclusion in a campus setting? Is choosing one’s own friend circle a personal liberty or a potential discriminatory act? When does interpersonal discomfort become actionable discrimination? These questions require objective standards. Without clearly articulated criteria, the line between social prejudice and personal preference may become blurred, potentially leading to overreach.

Laws dealing with sensitive social realities must be carefully drafted to avoid unintended consequences. If students and faculty feel that routine social interactions may be misinterpreted, a climate of caution and distrust may replace the intended atmosphere of openness.

Confidentiality and Accountability

The introduction of an equity helpline that guarantees anonymity to complainants can be seen as a progressive move. Many victims of discrimination hesitate to report incidents due to fear of backlash or social ostracism. Confidentiality encourages reporting and signals institutional seriousness.

However, confidentiality must be matched with safeguards against misuse. The framework appears to clearly outline consequences for institutions that fail to comply with its provisions. Yet, it is less explicit about the consequences for malicious or false complaints. A system that protects complainants but does not adequately address intentional misuse risks losing legitimacy.

This is not to suggest that false complaints are widespread or that they outweigh genuine grievances. Rather, it is a question of procedural balance. Justice must protect the vulnerable without presuming guilt. In the absence of clearly defined checks and balances, the perception—fair or not—that the system can be weaponized may undermine trust in the mechanism itself.

Data, Scale and Interpretation

According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22 data, India has over 45,000 colleges and more than 1,100 universities with projections suggesting that the number could cross 52,000 by 2025. This massive expansion reflects the democratization of higher education in quantitative terms.

However, scale complicates enforcement. If the number of officially recorded caste discrimination complaints appears small relative to the number of institutions. There are two possible interpretations: either such incidents are rare or they are underreported. Both scenarios are concerning, albeit for different reasons.

If incidents are rare, then targeted legal interventions must be proportionate and evidence-based. If underreporting is the issue, then the problem may lie not in the absence of law but in institutional culture, awareness and trust mechanisms.

In either case, better transparency in data presentation would strengthen public understanding. Disaggregated statistics—while sensitive—could help identify patterns without stigmatizing communities.

Policy must be driven by credible data, not perception or political expediency. When numbers are cited, they should illuminate rather than inflame.

The Political Context

It is impossible to ignore the broader political environment in which debates about caste, equity and higher education unfold. India's electoral politics has long been influenced by identity-based mobilization. Affirmative action, reservation policies and protective legislation have been both instruments of social justice and subjects of intense political negotiation.

When a new legal framework is introduced without extensive public consultation or clear communication, skepticism is natural. Some may interpret it as an attempt to consolidate support among specific communities. Others may view it as compliance under judicial pressure. Whether these interpretations are accurate or not, perception matters.

For a policy to succeed in deeply divided contexts, it must appear above partisan calculations. That requires transparent drafting processes, broad stakeholder engagement and clarity about objectives.

Beyond Legislation: The Social Dimension

Perhaps the most compelling part of the debate is the recognition that legal reform alone cannot eliminate social discrimination. Seventy-five years after independence, the persistence of inequality—whether social or economic—signals the limits of legislative solutions.

The Indian Constitution unequivocally rejects discrimination in any form. Yet, constitutional morality does not automatically translate into social behavior. Education is not merely about compliance with rules; it is about internalizing values.

Campuses must become spaces of dialogue, empathy and shared experience. Diversity workshops, peer mentoring, interdisciplinary interaction and inclusive pedagogy may prove more transformative than punitive frameworks alone. If the educational system continues to prioritize employability over ethical formation, it risks producing skilled professionals without social responsibility. The purpose of education should not be reduced to job acquisition. It must cultivate critical thinking, civic awareness and mutual respect. Without this philosophical reorientation, even the most well-intentioned laws will operate in a reactive rather than transformative mode.

Economic Inequality: The Emerging Frontier
Another dimension worth considering is the growing salience of economic inequality. While caste-based exclusion has deep historical roots, contemporary disparities increasingly intersect with economic status. Access to private coaching, digital infrastructure and urban networks often shapes educational outcomes as much as, if not more than, traditional social hierarchies.

This does not negate caste discrimination; rather, it complicates the picture. A holistic equity framework must address both social and economic vulnerabilities. Scholarships, need-based financial aid, mental health support and academic bridging programs are essential components of inclusion.

If equity is framed solely through one axis of identity, it may fail to capture the layered realities of disadvantage. Intersectionality—recognizing how caste, class, gender and region overlap—should inform policy design. **Avoiding Polarization** Perhaps the most delicate challenge is avoiding the creation of new divisions while attempting to address old ones. Any perception that a law targets a particular community, even indirectly, can harden social boundaries. Higher education institutions thrive when intellectual exchange transcends identity markers.

The objective must be restorative rather than accusatory. Policies should focus on eliminating discriminatory behavior, not labeling groups. Clear language, objective criteria and transparent processes can prevent collective blame narratives.

At the same time, acknowledging historical injustices remains essential. Denial of structural inequities is as harmful as overgeneralization. The balance lies in affirming equal dignity without fostering collective guilt.

Institutional Responsibility Universities must not treat compliance as a box-ticking exercise. Internal committees, grievance redressal cells and awareness campaigns should be functional, independent and credible. Faculty training is critical, as subtle biases often operate unconsciously.

Moreover, students must be empowered participants in shaping campus culture. Dialogue forums, diversity councils and collaborative initiatives can create ownership of the equity agenda. Government oversight should ensure standards without micromanaging academic spaces. Autonomy and accountability must coexist.

Conclusion: Clarity, Trust and Shared Responsibility

The aspiration for equality in higher education is non-negotiable. It is rooted in constitutional values and reaffirmed in policy visions such as the National Education Policy 2020. Yet aspiration must be matched with precision. A law that seeks to eliminate discrimination must itself embody fairness, clarity and proportionality.

Ambiguity breeds mistrust. Imbalance fuels polarization. Political framing weakens moral authority. If the objective is genuine inclusion, then policymakers must refine definitions, strengthen safeguards, enhance transparency and invest in social transformation alongside legal reform.

India's higher education system is vast and expanding, as reflected in data from the All India Survey on Higher Education. Managing equity at this scale is a formidable task. But it is also an opportunity—to demonstrate that a diverse democracy can confront its historical inequalities without fracturing its social fabric.

Equality cannot be legislated into existence in isolation. It must be cultivated through education, reinforced by institutions, and sustained by collective commitment. The path forward lies not in choosing between law and society, but in aligning them. Only then can equity move from statute books to lived reality.

Dr. Sudhanshu Sharma

Assistant Professor

Ramlakhan Yadav College

Ranchi, Jharkhand.

The UGC Bill 2026 from the Northeast's Perspective

Feb, 2026

People from Northeast India leave their homes hoping for education, health and a better future. The systematic neglect of Northeast India reveals our insignificance to the rest of India. Yet, we proudly call ourselves Indians. Our children serve in various roles, from the military to other places across the country. Despite this, we continue to face racial discrimination in one form or another. We lack employment opportunities, major educational centers or major health centers. Therefore, we are compelled to move outside our regions. Forcing them to reluctantly leave their communities and families behind and migrate to the rest of India.

The world knows that we, the people of the Northeast, have a distinct physical appearance compared to other Indians, making us easily recognizable in a crowd. With features like small eyes and flat noses, we have faced taunts for years for our distinctive appearance. Being mocked and subjected to derogatory remarks has become a common experience.

How strange and painful it is to mock a person simply by looking at their face without even knowing them. They are called derogatory names like "Chingchi," "Chinese," and "Momo." This behavior is extremely hurtful. Only the people of the Northeast can truly understand this pain. Often, in streets and crowded places, a stranger abuses them without any reason, as if their very existence is worthless to them, even though they have no connection whatsoever. Often, such things become deeply ingrained in the mind, and gradually this pain becomes severe,

sometimes resulting in violence and, in some cases, even loss of life and property.

Today, the situation in the country has changed somewhat. To prevent racial discrimination, people from the Northeast enjoy the same rights as other Indian citizens under Articles 15, 16, and 19 of the Indian Constitution. Similarly, provisions such as Sections 153A, 295A, and 505 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) have been enacted to prevent crimes such as insulting, vilifying, and inciting hatred against people from the Northeast. Furthermore, the complaint process in such cases has been simplified.

In business and professional fields, racial discrimination is relatively rare due to increased interaction between people and maturity. Similarly, in the medical field, this type of behavior is less prevalent due to increased human sensitivity. Unfortunately, this problem still persists in educational institutions. Most students entering schools and universities enter a new environment with limited social background and experience. Seeing new people and students from different cultures, especially those from the Northeast, often leads them to feel superior and discriminate against them. Whatever the reason, it seems extremely strange that while people from the Northeast face discrimination due to their distinctive appearance, in the same society, people with similar facial features and physical features are also discriminated against solely on the basis of belonging to an Other Backward Class, Scheduled Caste, or Scheduled Tribe, as if their caste is written on their forehead.

Today's Indian society calls itself modern, but the mindset of many individuals and communities still harbours the same narrow-mindedness and hierarchical approach of the colonial era, when society was divided into several classes to simplify governance. The tribal societies of the Northeast have largely avoided these notions of casteism and hierarchy. Traditionally, tribal societies have had no rigid hierarchy; everyone is seen as equal human being. Many people are unaware that they are administratively categorized as Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, or Other Backward Classes. In their mountain and community lives, every individual deserves respect, and within their limited resources, they consider themselves independent and self-respecting—as if each individual were the king of their own small world.

Educational institutions are considered, after the family, the most important and disciplined place for personality development. Along with higher education, students are also prepared for society as mature citizens with many expectations. We generally believe that educational institutions are places with a calm, disciplined, well-organized, and controlled environment, where students go to shape their future. A large part of students' lives are spent within these campuses. According to various reports from 2019 to 2024, incidents of discrimination and harassment in many educational institutions across the country have shocked the entire nation. This is why the University Grants Commission (UGC), a premier institution, faces the challenge of not only improving the quality of education but also ensuring an

equitable, safe, and discrimination-free educational environment in all higher educational institutions across the country.

Under the provisions of the UGC Bill 2026, special emphasis is placed on preventing any form of discrimination against students from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Socially and Educationally Backward Classes, Economically Weaker Sections, and students with disabilities, and on maintaining an equal and inclusive environment on campuses. This law is even more important for students from the Northeast, as they cannot expect anyone to discriminate against them solely on the basis of their different facial features. Most of the country's prestigious educational institutions are located in major cities, and many students from the Northeast are forced to study in these cities, even if they do not want to, in search of knowledge and a better future. Ironically, not only classmates but sometimes even teachers in these institutions have a very limited view of the social and cultural knowledge related to the Northeast. As a result, informal and indirect racial discrimination has become commonplace on campuses. If a student protests, they often find it best to remain silent due to fears of expulsion, accusations of disrupting the environment, or social pressure. In many cases, students have to hide this from their parents and family, as they are the sole source of their hopes. Numerous such examples have already emerged. In these circumstances, the effective implementation of the UGC Bill 2026 is expected to provide relief from racial and social discrimination to students from all disadvantaged communities, including those from the Northeast. Ensuring

better oversight and accountability in colleges and universities will provide students with a more safe, respectful, and inclusive educational environment.

Although this bill provides for its nationwide implementation from January 15, 2026, another aspect of this law's implementation is that the very classes and communities for whose protection this law was enacted often themselves remain victims of discrimination and neglect, because the mindset of those who exploit does not immediately change simply by the enactment of the law. Even though circumstances have changed, many people still harbor the same prejudices. It is also clear that the problem of discrimination is not limited to racial identity. General category students can also face discrimination due to various reasons, such as physical impairment, disability, economic weakness, and social circumstances. Therefore, this law should be equally effective for all students. Some believe that the introduction of this bill at this time appears to be a political move, especially in the backdrop of the upcoming Panchayat elections in Uttar Pradesh. There are also fears that this bill may be used to attract voters from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that this bill could certainly bring about some positive changes in the campus environment for students from the Northeast. Any sincere effort to improve the current deteriorating conditions is significant, as it is impossible to maintain a balanced education while living in an environment of fear and insecurity.

If this law reduces the discrimination faced by Northeastern students by even a mere one percent, it would be a ray of hope. This law will ensure that students do not feel alienated or out of place on campus due to their identity, appearance, eating habits, or accent—and that they can pursue knowledge without mental pressure—this will be a significant achievement in itself. This will propel India onto the path of progress, not discrimination. Even if this law is currently implemented slowly or even suppressed for some reason, it will be necessary to re-enact it in the future with even stronger and stricter regulations. But if this is unnecessarily delayed, it is difficult to imagine how many more Northeastern students will have to compromise their self-respect and self-esteem during this time. And how many will have a profound impact on the course of their lives? It is impossible to estimate this.

Dr. Teli Mecha

NIT Jote, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh

Why UGC Equality Regulations Are Essential: Question of Social Justice in Universities

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Higher education in India is often described as a pathway to social mobility, intellectual freedom, and democratic empowerment. Universities are expected to embody the constitutional values of equality, dignity, and justice. Yet, for many research scholars from marginalized communities, the lived reality can be deeply distressing. The need for strong and effectively implemented University Grants Commission (UGC) equality regulations becomes evident when we examine experiences of caste-based discrimination, academic harassment, and institutional apathy within university systems.

In September 2013, after qualifying for the Junior Research Fellowship (JRF), I secured admission to the Ph.D. program in the Hindi Department at Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi. Having completed my postgraduate degree in the same department in 2012, I was familiar with many of the faculty members. However, what soon became apparent was the overwhelming dominance of upper-caste professors in the department. Nearly 90 per cent of the faculty belonged to socially privileged communities, with negligible representation from Other Backward Classes (OBCs) or other marginalized groups. This structural imbalance shaped the academic environment in subtle and overt ways.

For students from marginalized backgrounds, representation matters. When there are hardly any faculty members from similar social locations, research scholars often feel hesitant to share academic or personal concerns. The absence of diversity creates not only a

psychological distance but also an institutional power imbalance. In such an environment, the freedom to express research interests or grievances without fear becomes severely constrained.

One of the most troubling aspects of the research process was the issue of supervision. Some professors reportedly viewed guiding students from backward or Dalit communities as beneath their status. Even when they agreed to supervise, there were instances where students were pressured to undertake research topics aligned with the supervisor's personal networks or preferences, rather than their own academic interests. In my case, although I was interested in working on novels or short stories independently, I was assigned a research topic that combined two genres—novels and short stories—under a demanding and expansive title: “Rural and Urban Realities in the Fiction of Shivprasad Singh: Content and Form.” This topic involved studying nine novels, five of which were out of print and difficult to access.

Despite repeated requests, I received no meaningful support from my supervisor in locating these texts. The burden of arranging materials, structuring the research, and managing expectations rested entirely on me. The workload appeared disproportionate, especially when compared with topics assigned to some upper-caste scholars, whose research themes were narrower and more manageable.

Equally concerning was the alleged misuse of institutional power in matters of fellowship and academic progression.

Despite completing the required academic work—including writing two chapters as per norms—my three months of JRF fellowship were withheld. The transition from JRF to Senior Research Fellowship (SRF), which should have followed established UGC regulations, was also delayed without transparent justification. Research Progress Committee (RPC) evaluations, typically conducted every six months and were reportedly stalled for over two years. Since fellowships are often the only financial support for full-time research scholars, withholding them can cause severe economic and psychological stress.

The situation was compounded by expectations unrelated to academic work. There were pressures to perform personal and domestic tasks for the supervisor—ranging from household errands and festival preparations to proofreading personal publications and assisting in evaluation work. Such demands blur professional boundaries and violate ethical norms. Research scholars are not domestic aides; they are emerging academics engaged in intellectual labor. When academic authority is used to extract personal service, it undermines dignity and institutional integrity.

Moreover, differential treatment among students was visible. Upper-caste scholars reportedly enjoyed greater flexibility, including relaxed attendance expectations and academic support without the burden of non-academic obligations. In contrast, marginalized scholars faced stricter monitoring and greater scrutiny. Such

disparities, whether systemic or individual, create an environment of alienation and reinforce social hierarchies within academic spaces.

It is important to acknowledge that not all faculty members engaged in discriminatory behaviour. A few professors demonstrated empathy and professionalism. However, isolated goodwill cannot substitute for institutional safeguards. When complaints were raised informally and later formally—including a written request for a change of supervisor—there was no transparent acknowledgement or receipt of the complaint. The absence of procedural accountability discouraged trust in the system.

These experiences highlight why UGC's equality and anti-discrimination regulations are indispensable. The UGC has issued guidelines promoting equity in higher educational institutions, mandating the establishment of Equal Opportunity Cells, SC/ST Cells, grievance redressal mechanisms, and transparent fellowship disbursement systems. On paper, these provisions aim to ensure that no student faces discrimination on grounds of caste, community or social background.

However, the mere existence of regulations is insufficient without strict enforcement. Equality regulations are necessary for several reasons: Safeguarding Constitutional Values Indian universities function within a constitutional framework that guarantees equality before law and prohibits discrimination.

UGC regulations operationalize these principles in academic settings. Without enforcement, constitutional promises remain symbolic. Protecting Academic Freedom Research scholars must have the autonomy to pursue topics aligned with their intellectual interests. When supervisors impose topics for personal reasons or as a form of coercion, academic freedom is compromised. Clear guidelines and grievance mechanisms protect this freedom. Ensuring Financial Security Fellowships such as JRF and SRF are lifelines for scholars. Delays or arbitrary stoppages can derail academic careers. Transparent digital tracking systems and time-bound reviews can prevent misuse of power. Preventing Exploitation Explicit codes of conduct governing supervisor–scholar relationships are essential. They should prohibit personal service demands, establish professional boundaries, and define consequences for violations. Promoting Diversity and Representation. Balanced representation among faculty helps foster inclusivity.

While appointments must follow merit and reservation policies, universities should actively ensure that marginalized communities are represented in teaching and decision-making roles. Supporting Mental Health. Hostile academic environments can lead to anxiety, depression, and even extreme distress among scholars. Accessible counselling services and supportive institutional cultures are crucial for well-being.

The broader implication of such systemic issues extends beyond individual suffering.

When talented scholars feel marginalized or compelled to abandon research, the academic community loses valuable perspectives. A homogeneous faculty structure risks intellectual stagnation. Diversity enriches scholarship by bringing varied lived experiences into academic discourse.

Indian universities aspire to global recognition and improved rankings. However, global standards of excellence are inseparable from inclusivity, fairness, and ethical governance. Academic quality cannot flourish where discrimination persists. Transparency, accountability, and equity are not peripheral concerns, they are central to institutional credibility.

Conclusion:

UGC equality regulations are not bureaucratic formalities but essential safeguards for justice in higher education. They protect vulnerable scholars, uphold constitutional ideals, and strengthen academic integrity. My experience during doctoral research at BHU reflects the urgent need for effective implementation of these norms. Universities must move beyond token compliance and create genuinely inclusive environments where every research scholar—regardless of caste or background—can pursue knowledge with dignity and freedom. Only when equality becomes a lived reality within campuses can Indian higher education truly fulfil its transformative promise.

Dr. Gajadhar Yadav

Hindi Lecturer, Government Intermediate College Udhwa, Sahibganj, Jharkhand

The reasons for the confusion and distrust regarding equity, equality, social justice and fairness:

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The rules which were made for the rights, interests and social security of SC, ST, OBC classes for the sake of 'promotion of equality' in higher education institutions, due to which the violence, abuse and caste discrimination that is happening in higher education institutions are being forced to endure in academic institutions - both private and government. Whereas the SCHEDULED CASTE AND SCHEDULED TRIBES (PREVENTION OF ATROCITIES) ACT 1989 law was made to provide them social security legally. So that all the caste violence, discrimination, atrocities, oppression and sexual harassment happening against SC ST can be stopped. Basically, these crimes include caste-based abuse, insulting the deprived community in public places, forcibly evicting them from their land and sexual exploitation. Against this, arrangements were made for arrest, compensation, rehabilitation.

A proposal was passed to set up special courts for crime prevention as soon as possible and on 31 March 1995, this law was implemented across the country under equal civil security and rights. Despite this, what happened in the last 30 years since then? Did the incidents of crime increase or decrease? What percentage of cases were registered and how many were resolved? Did the crimes against SC, ST decrease? Even the National Scheduled Caste, Tribal Commission was formed. And Article 17 was legally enacted to abolish untouchability, Articles 15(4) and 16(4) to allow reservations and prohibit caste discrimination, Article 46 to promote economic interests in education, and Articles 341 and 342 to list SC/ST identities.

Furthermore, the powers vested in Article 35 against social injustice were also implemented. But what is the actual meaning of these laws in the country? What do crime statistics prove? Has there been any decline in the most heinous of all crimes, sexual violence? The answer to all these questions is no, absolutely not. Nothing of the kind was legally implemented. Papers were simply blackened, and every moment, innocent and innocent Bahujan people were left vulnerable to casteist, violent religious extremists, and academic Brahminist fundamentalist forces. Now, on the pretext that the law has been passed, defend yourselves.

Now let's discuss the UGC Act 2026. Since neither the UGC is located outside the country, nor is the UGC system separate from powerful benches, abbots, and the notorious criminals of the academic system, the reservation system is not valid. No institution is capable of filling the vacant seats reserved for SCs, STs, and OBCs under the UGC and the Constitution. On the one hand, there is the question of the backlog of SCs and STs that has remained vacant for 75 years since independence. These posts have been declared NFS (over 80% of OBC and over 83% of SCs and STs are still vacant), and these same posts have been converted to the general category in every third notification. There has been no protest against this by SCs, STs, and OBC groups across the country. While reserved positions were unconstitutionally distributed to unreserved categories like sweets. The UGC and the SC/ST/OBC Commission never documented this matter, nor did they take any serious action. Neither SC/ST regional parties

nor Members of Parliament raised this issue in Parliament. Nor were any review meetings ever held that resulted in any serious reconsideration of these matters.

Especially after globalization, when academic awareness began to grow from the 1990s onwards, around 1995, the academic system cleverly accelerated the NFS, ultimately implementing the roster system. This completely disregarded the Constitution and reservations, and established a fearless anti-reservation system. However, the UGC never questioned it. Similarly, the UGC did not object to the changes made to the curriculum, especially within these 15 years. Although the UGC 2026 Regulations are considered revolutionary for the interests of marginalized communities, especially in relation to caste discrimination and oppression, the UGC and the government did not stop the protests by upper castes across the country during its implementation. Instead, the media and academic institutions worked together to strengthen and consolidate these protests. However, OBCs were granted reservations in 1990 so that marginalized communities could unite and represent themselves. But on the one hand, 49.5% reservation was provided to 85% of the underprivileged population. On the other hand, 50.5% was quietly implemented for 15% of the population, and not only that, but they also achieved a 95% share of all resources across the country. Consequently, all resources, from the media to the economy, are firmly in the hands of the unreserved. SCs, STs, OBCs, minorities, and women cannot usurp their rights even if they so desire. All the unconstitutionally filled

positions cannot be vacated, nor can the upper castes. When all the high-level positions and other employment resources, from Parliament to all the pillars of democracy, have been completely handed over to them, should we assume that the UGC and constitutional institutions will do justice for the underprivileged, or are they merely plotting a deliberate conspiracy through paperwork? In the ongoing political, social, and cultural game within democracy, academics, parliamentary leaders, constitutional criminals, ascetics, monasteries, temples, Hindu religious fundamentalists, and liberal groups are united and fighting tooth and nail against the marginalized. They are exercising the freedom of speech and expression guaranteed under Article 19, and the right to assemble. While the marginalized seem to be barred from exercising these very rights, political and administrative conspiracies and plots are being hatched to break this strong bond. The legal system is supporting the armed Hindutva groups and the violent processions of upper-caste groups. The law enforcement and upper-caste media, ostensibly for their part, provide public security to their processions and demonstrations, yet take no action despite the vandalism, anarchy, and violence. Since the matter concerns the upper castes, the law sits silent like Gandhi's three monkeys, but when it comes to the rights of the deprived, these same monkeys, wearing the legal garb, enter the deprived communities like madmen and are involved in riots with the mob to grab their rights, scratching, biting, inflicting injuries in various ways, and have come out on the streets against the deprived.

Following protests against the UGC Regulations 2026 by a mere 3% of upper castes, SC, ST, OBC, and minority groups have joined forces to promote equality in higher education, organizing rallies, processions, demonstrations, and protests in support of UGC 2026. The administration has resorted to lathicharges and violent action against them. The police and law enforcement are standing firmly in the face of the upper caste groups in the academic system, opposing the movement of the reserved categories.

While there has been no discussion yet on the shortcomings and flaws within the 2026 Regulations, how to make amendments and implement them more stringently. The introduction provided by the UGC reveals a significant lack of transparency and analysis. In this context, three key points are worth noting:

1. First, the National Education Policy 2020 addresses complete equity and inclusion. What are the shortcomings that were not included in the rules and conditions, intentionally or accidentally, due to lack of time or intent? These are important to highlight. Finally, how is complete equity and inclusion defined? No detailed analysis is available here. Equity involves both social justice and racial justice. What kind of justice is the UGC referring to? It is unclear, given that there are separate legislations for justice and equality. How fair is this inclusion? To what extent is it just and neutral? There is no clear delineation of this. Equality involves rights to resources and opportunities based on individual needs – While equity involves natural justice, free

from prejudice and bias, promoting fairness. Equity essentially provides needy groups with access to resources and opportunities, according to their needs and demands. Whereas equality provides benefits, resources, and opportunities to those in need so that they can stand on equal footing with others. Equity advocates for economic rights for disadvantaged groups. What kind of strict rules does the University Grants Commission recommend for groups that are against discrimination? This is not a punitive law.

2. The purpose of the UGC's 1956 and 2012 subsections appears to be that all are equal, meaning that all classes, castes, races, religions, whether forward, backward, deprived, physically disabled, economically weak, etc., will receive equal value, recognition, economic, social, and educational equality, and resources. So, how can this institution, which advocates for and represents only the deprived classes, groups, castes, and the Bahun population living below the poverty line, make decisions? How can the Supreme Court then stay the protests and unreasonable demands of upper castes? What is the meaning of the abbreviation (c) of the UGC, which is an autonomous institution and abides by the Indian Constitution? The requirement that the Equality Committee be headed by a person holding the position of head of an educational institution is itself a discriminatory system. Since 98% of central and state universities are dominated by upper castes, how can one expect justice for the deprived in accordance with the principles of equality? There is no precise explanation for how the Samata Helpline will operate

transparently and impartially.

The role of the Equal Opportunity Center and how this system will function in a systematic and legal manner have not been elaborated upon.

Representation of the underprivileged is completely absent among faculty members. Therefore, how can an equal division of SC, ST, OBC, minorities, and marginalized women be achieved in the committees formed for justice? To achieve this, vacant reserved positions should be filled first thing in the year, and until then, all universities should work together to provide faculty members to the committees for the rights of the underprivileged. This provision should be added to the list.

3. While the term "complaint" refers to the aggrieved person in this regulation, the aggrieved person can belong to any community, class, caste, gender, religion, or race. This increases the likelihood of complaints of serious harassment being mixed with other complaints. It would be appropriate to use the sections applicable to marginalized communities rather than the aggrieved person. Harassment of students occurs in various ways. To specify this, the regulation and sections of the SC, ST, OBC Act and the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 should be added.

The institution should be headed by a bench of three High Court judges, with a female member representing an SC, ST, OBC, minority, or marginalized community. The head of the institution should also be the head

of this committee. The Vice-Chancellor should not be appointed as the head of this committee.

The Lokpal should be appointed for a one-year term, and the Lokpal should consist of three members, including a Deputy Lokpal and an Assistant Lokpal, all selected from reserved categories. So that there is no doubt about justice. The amicus curiae option is baseless.

Measures for promoting equality, procedures for discriminatory actions, appeals, and monitoring, along with consequences for non-compliance, are specified as if they were a scheme of an NGO registered organization, working to bring together all sections of society for collective and holistic development. This should be made more concrete and legal, and the punitive triangle should be implemented more strictly.

What should be included in this regulation

The draft provisions of the Indian Penal Code concerning women from SC, ST, OBC, minorities, and marginalized communities (why no punitive action was ordered against complainants who have submitted their grievances in any form) should be approved for reconsideration. Review meetings should be held, especially for long-pending files under the RTI Act 2005 and complaints filed against decisions against marginalized individuals. It should be ensured that 50% of cases are resolved within six months. Review should be allowed for all pending, dismissed, and marginalized cases under the Lokpal since 2005. Discriminatory decisions in all serious cases filed by marginalized

individuals should be included in this regulation, so that review petitions can be filed against decisions against marginalized individuals. Third, what standards were coordinated and determined? Despite the fact that this draft is still too full of shortcomings and flaws to be fully implemented, which is why doubts and distrust persist.

The preamble lays out the foundation for all decisions of the National Education Policy 2020: "Complete Equity and Inclusion," ensuring that all students progress in the education system.

According to data from the University Council of 'The Wire,' caste-based discrimination in universities has increased by 118%. To curb this increase, shouldn't stricter regulations and guidelines be implemented? Permanently banning the perpetrators is not enough; they must be punished severely under the law, whether they are administrative officers, faculty, students, or employees.

Advice and Amendments

Just as in January, higher education institutions were asked to establish equality committees and equal opportunity centers, 24/7 helplines, and other online complaint mechanisms. Similarly, the number of counselors should be increased to solicit ideas for other redressal measures. In cases of harassment and sexual assault involving students from disadvantaged communities, at least one academic scholar, both male and female, selected from the disadvantaged community, representing the disadvantaged community from the Department of Psychology, Department of Sociology, and

the complainant's department, should be included in the "COMMEETEE FOR DISCRIMINATION AGAINST (CASTE, CLASS, GENDER, AND PHYSICALY HANDICAPED), DEPRIVED CASTSE (SC, ST, OBC, MINORITY AND DEPRIVED SECTIONS), and the Committee for Protection and Prevention of Exploitation, Harassment, and Sexual Violence for SC, ST, OBC, Minority, and Deprived Castes" to expedite the resolution of the matter. These committees should be formed, rotating every two years. Each university should report to the UGC every six months regarding the committee's grievance resolution and the appointment of the jury. Similar committees should be formed within the Higher Education Department in each state, where experienced and high-quality officers and subordinate staff from disadvantaged communities should be appointed in equal proportions.

Additionally, a similar committee should be formed within the Education Ministry, comprised of officials and employees from marginalized communities. This ensures that any case is filtered at every level, and that decisions are not made due to collusion or personal bias at lower levels. Similarly, a similar committee should be formed within the Central Education Ministry to enable higher authorities to take cognizance of these cases and conduct review meetings to resolve them. Appropriate action and penalties should be provided for any shortcomings in the resolution process. Furthermore, annual reports should be submitted on all these cases to maintain transparency in matters of protection for the marginalized.

Most importantly, complaints filed after 2006 by students and teachers, university employees, and officials belonging to marginalized communities and castes should be assigned to these committees for re-examination, reconsideration, and review. Especially those cases where the plaintiff/complainant failed to receive justice and their families suffered the consequences. Additionally, all governments, both state and central, should provide compensation, a job with dignity, a fair and acceptable amount, including interest, for those who have suffered physical, mental, and sexual harassment, as well as socio-economic humiliation. They should also guarantee security.

Defects in the bill: Privileges and protections should be guaranteed for disadvantaged communities, especially during probation. No powerful person from the reserved or unreserved category can threaten, force, or harass probationers from disadvantaged communities, or create unethical grounds for torture based on prejudice against them. If such a person is found guilty, the university administration and the committee formed for the rights of the disadvantaged should expel them from their jobs, even if the departmental scholar/senior/employee themselves belong to the disadvantaged community.

The objective of justice and punishment has not been fully defined in a transparent and specific manner.

The NCRB 2020-2022 report reveals that when the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment discussed caste-based harassment data in the Rajya Sabha, a total of 50,291 cases were reported in 36 states in

2020, 50,900 in 2021, and 57,582 in 2022. The National Crime Records Bureau confirmed the registration of 67,000 cases. Prior to this, the SC/ST Act was amended in 2015, making it more stringent. Subsequently, it was further amended in 2018. Between 2019 and 2021, 35,950 students committed suicide, primarily due to social discrimination and academic harassment. In 2022, 31,516 cases of sexual violence, harassment, and rape were reported.

Such situations are evident. The reasons behind the rise in oppression, exploitation, harassment, and sexual crimes are increasing every year. In contrast, the effectiveness of the UGC 2026 Bill needs to be discussed in a civil, serious, and formal manner by legal experts, social activists, and human rights members, along with officials representing the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Minority Commissions, and especially those representing marginalized communities in the Women's Commission. So that any shortcomings, flaws, and suggestions can be addressed within a year, along with the bill's implementation. Because there are many drafts that are still missing that desperately need to be discussed.

Dr. Anil Pushkar

Post Doctoral Fellow,
Critic and Literary Writer

Shattered Dreams, Unbroken Resolve: A Tribal Woman's Struggle for Dignity in Higher Education

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On 3 February 2026, I received an email from the University of Hyderabad informing me that my Ph.D. admission had been cancelled. With a single administrative communication, ten years of perseverance, intellectual labor, and emotional endurance were brought to an abrupt halt. The message did not merely terminate my enrollment; it fractured my sense of belonging, shook my family's faith in higher education, and wounded the aspirations of a community that had seen in my journey a symbol of possibility.

For me, this was never just about earning a doctoral degree. I am a woman from the Tharu community of Uttar Pradesh—an Indigenous Scheduled Tribe group with limited representation in higher education. I am the first highly educated Tharu woman from my region to pursue a doctorate. My academic journey carried not only personal ambition but collective hope. Families in my community began to imagine sending their daughters to universities because they believed that if I could do it, so could their children. The cancellation of my Ph.D. admission has therefore reverberated far beyond my individual life; it has struck at the fragile confidence of a historically marginalized society.

A Decade of Struggle:

My doctoral journey began in 2016 with optimism and commitment. I entered the program determined to work diligently and contribute meaningfully to scholarship. However, from the very first day of admission, my relationship with my research supervisor became a source of distress rather than guidance. Instead of academic mentorship, I encountered hostility, obstruction, and repeated attempts to undermine my confidence. A continuous battle for survival within the system.

Research supervision is built upon trust, dialogue, and mutual respect. A guide is expected to nurture intellectual growth, provide methodological direction, and ensure that a scholar navigates institutional processes smoothly. In my case, the opposite occurred. Academic communication became strained; minor technical issues were amplified into major deficiencies; and procedural requirements were interpreted in ways that placed me at constant risk of non-compliance. Over time, what should have been an intellectually stimulating journey turned into a continuous battle for survival within the system. Many well-meaning individuals attempted to mediate. Colleagues, acquaintances, and concerned persons tried to resolve misunderstandings and encourage constructive engagement. Yet every appeal was dismissed. The atmosphere grew increasingly adversarial. Eventually, my supervisor allegedly exerted pressure on the administration, culminating in the cancellation of my Ph.D. registration. A process that should have been governed by academic evaluation and procedural fairness instead felt shaped by power dynamics and unilateral authority.

The Burden of Identity:

While academic disagreements can arise in any doctoral program, the context in which they occur matters deeply. I belong to a Scheduled Tribe community that has historically been marginalized in educational institutions. Representation of tribal women in doctoral programs remains extremely limited. As the first Tharu woman from my region to reach this level, my presence itself challenged entrenched assumptions about who "belongs" in elite academic spaces.

Over the years, I began to sense that my identity was not merely incidental but central to the hostility I experienced. Comments, attitudes, and subtle insinuations suggested that I was perceived as less capable. I was made to feel that I had to prove, repeatedly and disproportionately, that I deserved to be there. The narrative that gradually emerged portrayed me as incompetent, careless, or unworthy—stereotypes often imposed upon students from marginalized backgrounds.

Internalizing such narratives can be psychologically devastating. After years of being questioned and obstructed, I began to doubt myself. I asked whether I truly was inadequate, whether I lacked the intellectual ability to complete a doctorate. Yet, objectively, this was not the case. I had qualified for admission through established criteria. I had worked diligently on my research. I had invested countless hours in reading, writing, and refining my work. The image of failure was constructed not by academic incapacity but by sustained institutional pressure.

Technicalities as Tools of Exclusion:

One of the most distressing aspects of my experience was the repeated invocation of technicalities. Academic regulations are necessary for maintaining standards; however, when rules are selectively or excessively applied, they can become tools of exclusion. Minor procedural lapses were treated as grave violations. Clarifications were delayed. Feedback was ambiguous. Administrative processes that should have facilitated progress instead became obstacles. Over a ten-year period, these technical complexities accumulated, creating an environment of

uncertainty. Instead of focusing on research questions, theoretical frameworks, and scholarly contributions, I found myself entangled in bureaucratic defenses. The constant threat of cancellation loomed over my academic life, culminating in the final decision conveyed through an email.

The cancellation not only nullified my academic registration but symbolically erased a decade of intellectual labor. Ten years—years in which peers completed degrees, secured jobs, and advanced in their careers—now appear lost in procedural ambiguity.

Psychological Consequences:

The psychological toll of such prolonged struggle cannot be overstated. Doctoral research is inherently demanding; it requires resilience, discipline, and sustained motivation. When institutional hostility is added to this equation, the burden becomes overwhelming. Feelings of helplessness, humiliation, and despair gradually intensify. Receiving the cancellation email felt like a public declaration of my inadequacy. I imagined people whispering that the “tribal girl” could not survive the rigors of doctoral research. I worried about the message it would send to young girls in my community. If the first among them failed, would others even dare to try?

Mental health in academic spaces is rarely discussed openly, especially among students from marginalized backgrounds who often feel compelled to appear strong. Admitting vulnerability can be mistaken for weakness. Yet the emotional impact of exclusion is real. Being repeatedly told, implicitly or explicitly that one does not belong corrodes self-worth.

Collective Disappointment:

My family had supported me unwaveringly. They celebrated each milestone: admission, coursework completion, research presentations. For them, my progress symbolized social mobility and dignity. When I informed them of the cancellation, their silence spoke volumes. It was not only my dream that had shattered but theirs as well.

Within the Tharu community, news of my academic journey had inspired many. Parents who once hesitated to send daughters beyond secondary school began to reconsider. They saw education not as an abstract ideal but as a lived possibility. The recent development risks reversing that fragile progress. When institutions appear hostile to marginalized scholars, communities internalize the belief that higher education is not meant for them.

Institutional Responsibility:

Universities are not merely centers of knowledge production; they are public institutions entrusted with upholding constitutional values of equality and justice. When a scholar's registration is cancelled after a decade of engagement, questions arise regarding procedural transparency, due process and accountability. Was the scholar given a fair hearing? Were grievances addressed impartially? Was there an independent review mechanism? Were anti-discrimination safeguards activated? These questions extend beyond one individual case. They speak to systemic structures that can either protect or marginalize vulnerable scholars. Institutions must ensure that supervisory authority does not become unchecked power. Clear grievance redressal systems, independent review committees, and transparent communication channels are essential.

The Gendered Dimension:

Being a tribal woman adds another layer to the experience. Women in academia often confront gender biases—expectations about demeanor, competence, and ambition. For tribal women, these biases intersect with caste and ethnic marginalization. The combined effect can be isolating. Balancing societal expectations, familial responsibilities, and academic demands is already challenging. When institutional hostility compounds these pressures, the risk of attrition increases. The loss is not merely individual; it represents the erosion of diversity within scholarship.

Resilience amid Rupture:

Despite the devastation, I refuse to allow this episode to define my intellectual identity. Ten years of research, reading, and writing cannot be erased by a single email. The skills I acquired, the knowledge I built, and the perseverance I demonstrated remain part of me. Resilience does not mean denying pain; it means refusing to surrender to it. The path ahead is uncertain. Legal remedies, administrative appeals, and public advocacy may become necessary. Yet beyond procedural recourse lies a deeper commitment: to ensure that no other tribal girl endures such prolonged marginalization.

A Call for Reform:

This experience underscores the urgent need for structural reforms in Indian higher education. Clear guidelines delineating the responsibilities of supervisors and scholars, with mechanisms to change supervisors without retaliation. Functional Equal Opportunity Cells and SC/ST Cells with real authority to investigate complaints impartially. Doctoral evaluations and

disciplinary actions must follow strict timelines and provide opportunities for defense. Universities should proactively offer counseling services tailored to marginalized students. Administrative decisions affecting a scholar's future must be documented with detailed reasoning and subject to appeal.

Reclaiming the Narrative While my doctoral dream has been interrupted, it is not extinguished. Being the first Tharu woman to pursue a Ph.D. is still a historic step, regardless of the outcome. The journey itself challenges entrenched hierarchies.

Even in apparent defeat, there is resistance, resistance against silence, against invisibility, against imposed inadequacy. Higher education must not become a site where marginalized scholars are made to feel disposable. It should be a space of empowerment and intellectual liberation. When institutions fail to protect that promise, they must be reminded, through dialogue, reform, and accountability, of their constitutional and moral obligations. The email of 3 February 2026 may have closed one chapter, but it has also illuminated systemic fractures that demand attention.

My story is not solely about loss; it is about the urgent need to safeguard dignity within academia. If the dream of a doctoral degree has been deferred, the dream of justice remains alive. And for every young Tharu girl watching, I say this: education is still your right. Your presence in universities is not an act of charity granted by institutions, it is a rightful claim grounded in equality. No cancellation letter can erase that truth.

Tara Choudhary

Phd Research Scholar, Department of History,
Hyderabad Central University
(Member of UP Cultural
(Nominated by the Governor)

UGC Regulations 2026 and the Indic Pasmanda: Towards an Inclusive Framework for Higher Education

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Introduction: A Paradigm Shift in Indian Academics

The notification of the “UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026” on January 13, 2026, is being hailed as a transformative milestone in the history of Indian higher education. For decades, the Indian campus has been a site of both aspiration and deep-seated systemic exclusion. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 laid the conceptual groundwork for ‘Equity and Inclusion,’ these new regulations represent the institutionalization of those ideals. However, the efficacy of any policy is measured by its impact on the most vulnerable.

In the Indian social fabric, the Indic Pasmanda community, indigenous Muslims who are socially, educationally, and economically backward, represents a unique intersection of marginalization. As we dissect these regulations, it is imperative to ask: Does this new legal architecture possess the strength to dismantle the invisible walls that have historically barred Pasmanda students from academic excellence?

Redefining Discrimination: Moving Beyond the Visible

The 2026 Regulations move away from a narrow, punitive understanding of discrimination toward a more holistic and systemic definition. Historically, discrimination was often interpreted only as "overt harassment" or "physical exclusion." The new framework acknowledges Micro-aggressions and Institutional Bias.

Section 3 of the regulations now includes any condition, process, or behavior, whether intentional or unintentional that compromises a student’s dignity or hampers their access to equal opportunity. This is particularly relevant for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), who are now explicitly protected under the ambit of caste-based discrimination. For the Pasmanda student, who predominantly falls within the OBC category, this provides a shield against the subtle biases prevalent in:

Research Supervision: Where subjective preferences often sideline students from backward backgrounds.

Academic Evaluation: Addressing the "halo effect" where students from elite backgrounds receive unearned advantages.

Hostel and Resource Allocation: Ensuring that social identity does not dictate the quality of a student's living and learning environment.

The Pasmanda Identity: Deconstructing the Monolith

To understand the significance of these regulations for the Pasmanda community, one must first deconstruct the myth of a "homogenous Muslim identity." The term ‘Pasmanda’ a urdu word meaning "those who have been left behind" refers to the Dalit, tribe and backward Muslims who constitute the overwhelming majority of the Muslim population in India.

Inspired by the social justice philosophies of Baba Kabir, Dr. Ambedkar, and Maulana sim Bihari, this society has led a silent revolution for the right to education and against institutional discrimination.

The Kaka Kalelkar Commission, the Mandal Commission, and more recently, the Sachar Committee (2006) and the Ranganath Misra Commission, have all provided empirical evidence that the socio-economic and educational status of pasmanda Muslims is often comparable to, or even worse than, that of Scheduled Castes and Tribes in certain indices. Despite this, the discourse on social justice in higher education has often ignored the internal caste hierarchies within religious minorities.

By explicitly including OBCs in the anti-discrimination framework, the UGC has created a legal bridge. A Pasmanda student no longer has to choose between their religious identity and their social backwardness when seeking justice; the law now recognizes the multi-layered nature of their exclusion.

Institutional Teeth: The Architecture of Accountability

A policy is only as good as its enforcement mechanism. The UGC 2026 Regulations introduce a multi-tier structure designed to ensure that grievances do not languish in bureaucratic corridors:

Equal Opportunity Centres (EOC): Every Higher Education Institution (HEI) is now mandated to establish a functional EOC. Unlike previous versions, these centers are now tasked with "proactive inclusion" identifying students from Pasmanda and other backward backgrounds early in their academic journey to provide mentorship.

The Equity Committee: This committee is the "judicial heart" of the regulation. It requires diverse representation, ensuring that members from OBC, SC, and ST backgrounds are part of the decision-making process.

For a Pasmanda student, seeing a representative from a similar social background on the committee significantly increases the Trust-Factor in the institution.

Strict Time-Bound Redressal: The regulations introduce a revolutionary timeline:

24x7 Equity Helpline: A digital and telephonic lifeline for students in distress.

24-Hour Response: The committee must convene within a day of a formal complaint.

15-Day Resolution: A final investigation report must be submitted within two weeks, preventing the "exhaustion strategy" often used by administrations to silence dissenting students.

Leadership Responsibility: Perhaps the most significant clause is the direct accountability of the Vice-Chancellor or Director. Failure to implement these regulations or address discrimination can now lead to financial penalties for the institution and personal accountability for the head of the institute.

Pasmanda Students and the Challenge of "Double Marginalization"

The Pasmanda student faces what sociologists call "Double Marginalization." On one hand, they face religious prejudice from the larger society; on the other, they often face "Ashraafization" or elite-capture within their own community's institutions.

The 2026 Regulations provide three specific advantages to this group:

Documentation of Invisible Bias: By creating a formal reporting structure, we can finally begin to collect data on how many Pasmanda students drop out due to "unfriendly" campus environments.

Representation as Rights: The mandatory presence of OBC members in Equity Committees ensures that the specific cultural and linguistic nuances of indigenous communities are understood.

Support for First-Generation Learners:

Most Pasmada students are first-generation learners. The regulations mandate EOCs to provide special guidance on scholarship applications, language proficiency, and navigating the complex bureaucracy of higher education.

Critical Gaps and Practical Challenges

Despite the robust framework, several challenges remain that require urgent attention from policymakers and activists:

The "Autonomy" Myth: Many elite institutions often hide behind the veil of "institutional autonomy" to resist external social audits. The UGC must ensure that the Equity Committees are not merely populated by "yes-men" of the administration.

Public Data Transparency: For the regulations to be effective, there must be a National Equity Ranking. The number of complaints received, resolved, and the demographic breakup of beneficiaries should be in the public domain to ensure institutional "naming and shaming."

Grassroots Awareness: A Pasmada student in a remote state university may not even know these regulations exist. A massive awareness campaign in regional languages is essential.

The Funding Gap: Small state-funded colleges often lack the budget to run a 24x7 helpline or a fully-staffed EOC. Central funding must be tied to the successful implementation of these equity measures.

The Path Forward: Beyond Compliance

To truly realize the potential of the 2026 Regulations, we must move from Symbolic Inclusion to Substantive Equity. This requires: **Intersectionality in Research:** Encouraging academic studies on the specific dropout rates and mental health challenges of Pasmada and OBC students.

Sensitization as a Culture: Anti-bias training should not be a one-time seminar but a mandatory part of faculty recruitment and promotion.

Strengthening Student Unions: Ensuring that student bodies are also diverse and that Pasmada voices are not drowned out in the polarized binary of modern campus politics.

Conclusion: A New Social Contract for Higher Education

The UGC Regulations 2026 represent a new social contract between the state and the marginalized student. For the Indic Pasmada community, these regulations are more than just legal clauses; they are an acknowledgement of their long-standing struggle for dignity and representation.

However, the history of social justice in India teaches us that the distance between the "statute" and the "status quo" can be vast. The success of this move will depend on the vigilance of the student community, the honesty of university administrators, and the continued pressure from social movements. If implemented in letter and spirit, 2026 will be remembered as the year Indian higher education finally decided to leave no one behind.

Dr. Faiyaz Ahmad Fyzie

Author, translator, columnist, media panelist, Socio-Pasmada activist and medical doctor by profession.