The Real Equity Gap in Higher Education

Mains: *GS II – Social justice*

Why in News?

The debate surrounding the University Grants Commission (UGC) (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, has triggered intense discussion within academic and policy circles.

What is the status of equity in higher education?

- **Measurement** – Equity in HEIs is best assessed through the representation of different social groups across various levels of education and employment.
- Data from the UGC Annual Report 2023 highlights four key trends in Central universities.
- **Employment** – Representation of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in teaching and non-teaching positions remains below constitutionally mandated reservation levels of *15%, 7.5%, and 27%, respectively.*
- This underrepresentation becomes more pronounced at higher levels of employment, such as senior faculty and administrative positions.

An uneven ladder

Employment lags behind admissions, while limited data shapes understanding of discrimination and crime.

Table 1: Category wise non teaching, teaching staff and admissions in 2023-24

Non-teaching staff	**SC**	**ST**	**OBC**
Group A	5.9	3.9	7.9
Group B	10.7	5.2	12.1
Group C	10.5	6.2	14.4
Teaching staff	**SC**	**ST**	**OBC**
Professor	8.8	2.2	7.2
Associate Professor	9.2	2.9	9.1
Assistant Professor	12.5	6.1	19.3
Admissions in First year	**SC**	**ST**	**OBC**
UG	13.6	5.6	25.6
PG	10.5	16.5*	24.5
M.Phil.	16.7*	11.7*	29.7
Ph.D.	11.4	20.0*	25.9

Source: UGC Annual Report 2023-24

- **Admissions in academics** – In contrast to employment, representation in student admissions at undergraduate, postgraduate, M.Phil, and Ph.D. levels is broadly aligned with reservation norms.
- ST representation in admissions is notably higher than mandated levels, ranging from 1.5 to 2.7 times—except at the undergraduate level.
- These trends clearly indicate that inequity is more severe in employment than in admissions.
- While gaps in admissions can be corrected annually through policy enforcement, employment disparities persist over longer periods, as recruitment cycles are slower and often influenced by legacy appointments made before effective implementation of reservation policies.
- **Structural Nature of Employment Inequity –** The persistence of employment gaps is largely structural.
- Faculty and administrative positions are long-term, and turnover depends on retirements and limited new recruitment opportunities.
- Even with strict enforcement of reservation policies, it may take years or decades to achieve proportional representation.
- Moreover, the underrepresentation at leadership levels has a cascading effect on institutional culture, decision-making, and mentoring opportunities.
- The absence of diversity in higher positions can perpetuate subtle biases and limit the effectiveness of equity measures at lower levels.

What is the analysis of NCRB Data on Caste-Based Crimes?

- **Data on Discrimination in HEIs –** An objective analysis of discrimination in HEIs is constrained by the lack of comprehensive and disaggregated data.
- However, available figures provide some insight.
- In 2023–24, 378 complaints were reported by Equal Opportunity Cells (EOCs) and SC/ST Cells across 704 universities and 1,553 colleges.
- Even under the extreme assumption that all EOC complaints are caste-based, this translates to approximately 3.7 complaints per one lakh students and about 0.16 complaints per institution (assuming an average enrolment of 4,000 students per HEI). Additionally, the disposal rate of complaints related to SC/ST issues stands at an impressive 90%.
- While these figures do not negate the existence of discrimination, they suggest that reported instances are relatively low at the macro level.
- The absence of detailed breakdowns, however, limits deeper analysis across different social groups.

Table 2: Crime/ atrocity against SC/ST in India in 2023

Social group of victim	Social group of accused	Crime incidence	% of total crime	Crime rate	Charge-sheeting rate	% Population
Crime against SC	Others	57,789	0.9	28.7	81.2	SC- 16.6
	SC/ST	Na	Na	Na	Na	
Crime against ST	Others	12,960	0.2	12.4	79.5	ST- 8.6
	SC/ST	Na	Na	Na	Na	
Crime against Others	Others	Na	Na	Na	Na	Others- 74.8 Na
	SC/ST	Na	Na	Na	Na	
Crime against all	All	62,41,569	100	270.3	72.7	100

Source: Crime in India 2021-23, NCRB



- **Limitations** – Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) is often used to assess caste-based crimes.
- However, its methodology has significant limitations.
- It classifies all crimes against SCs and STs committed by "Others" as caste-based crimes, which may not always be accurate.
- Furthermore, it excludes crimes occurring within SC and ST communities and does not provide comparable data for other social groups.
- According to NCRB data for 2023, crimes against SCs and STs committed by "Others" constitute approximately 0.9% and 0.2% of total recorded crimes, respectively.
- If one assumes that crime distribution broadly reflects population shares, SCs (16.6%) and STs (8.6%) would account for 16.6 and 8.6 crimes per 100, respectively, with the remaining 74.8 attributed to other groups.
- Based on this proportional reasoning, the likelihood of crimes against SCs and STs occurring within their own communities appears significantly higher than those committed by "Others."
- This is consistent with the sociological observation that crimes are more likely to occur among individuals in close social and geographic proximity.
- **The Issue of Underreporting –** A critical caveat in interpreting crime data is underreporting, especially in cases involving marginalized communities.

- Even if one assumes, hypothetically, that actual crimes against SCs and STs by "Others" are underreported by a factor of 100, the likelihood of intra-community crimes would still remain higher.
- Additionally, chargesheeting rates for crimes involving SCs and STs are 81.2% and 79.5%, respectively, compared to the overall average of 72.7%.
- This suggests relatively stronger procedural follow-through in such cases, indicating institutional responsiveness rather than systemic neglect.

What are the key shortcomings of the UGC Regulations, 2026?

- **Failure to address inequity in employment** – They fail to address the primary challenge of inequity in employment, particularly at higher levels within HEIs.
- By focusing largely on grievance redressal, they overlook the structural nature of representation gaps.
- **Conflating equity with anti-discrimination** – Equity involves proactive measures to ensure fair representation and outcomes, while anti-discrimination focuses on addressing specific instances of bias or misconduct.
- The regulations, despite their title and preamble emphasizing equity, are largely limited to complaint-resolution mechanisms such as helplines and procedural safeguards.
- **Eliminating identity based crimes** – The regulations implicitly assume that identity-based crimes can be eliminated entirely through institutional mechanisms.
- While reducing discrimination is a legitimate goal, complete eradication of such crimes is unrealistic without a broader reduction in overall crime rates.
- Excessively stringent measures may inadvertently lead to social fragmentation and reinforce segregation.

What are the measures to be taken?

- **Enhancing Representation in Employment** – Priority should be given to increasing the representation of SCs, STs, and OBCs in faculty and leadership positions.
- This includes strict enforcement of reservation policies, transparent recruitment processes, and targeted capacity-building initiatives.
- **Long-Term Institutional Reforms** – Policies must account for the slow nature of employment transitions.
- Creating additional positions, promoting internal career progression, and ensuring diversity in selection committees can accelerate change.
- **Improving Data Collection –** Comprehensive and disaggregated data on discrimination and representation is essential for evidence-based policymaking.
- Standardized reporting mechanisms across HEIs should be established.
- **Fostering Social Integration –** Encouraging interaction among diverse social groups can reduce prejudice and build mutual understanding.
- HEIs should promote inclusive campus environments through academic and extracurricular initiatives.
- **Reducing Overall Crime Rates** – Since identity-based crimes are often a subset of broader criminal activity, efforts to improve law and order and strengthen justice systems are equally important.

- **Balanced Regulatory Approach** – Regulations should strike a balance between preventing discrimination and promoting equity without creating an atmosphere of excessive surveillance or fear.

What lies ahead?

- The discourse on equity in higher education must move beyond admissions and grievance redressal to address deeper structural inequalities in employment and representation.
- While anti-discrimination measures are necessary, they are not sufficient to achieve substantive equity.
- A comprehensive approach that combines representation, institutional reform, data-driven policymaking, and social integration is essential for building inclusive and equitable higher education institutions in India.

Reference

The Hindu| Equity Gap in Higher Education

