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Caste Discrimination on Campus: The Real Test of the Institutional Safety Shield



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Why in the News

After the death of student Sahil Wakode at IIT Bombay, allegations of caste discrimination have once again raised questions about the safety arrangements of higher educational institutions (HEIs). The students' 57-day sit-in has ended and the institution has announced some reforms, but the police report and the findings of the independent inquiry are still awaited; the deceased's parents have approached the Bombay High Court seeking a CBI probe. The episode is also significant because the Supreme Court has already constituted a National Task Force (NTF) on student suicides and complaints of discrimination in higher education. The question is: despite inquiry committees and commissions, why does the institutional safety shield appear to fail again and again?

What the Levels of Institutional Safeguards Are

An HEI should have several rings of protection: the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes cell (SC/ST cell), the internal complaints committee, the anti-ragging mechanism (UGC's anti-ragging regulations of 2009), mental-health counselling, a student-welfare officer and an independent grievance-redress system. Their existence on paper is one thing; the real test is that filing a complaint should be easy, the process time-bound and fair, the complainant protected from retaliation, and action visible.

The National Task Force (NTF): The Court's Initiative

- **Formation:** treating student suicides as more than a matter of individual circumstances, the Supreme Court constituted the NTF in March 2025 (order of 24 March 2025). In the order, the Court expressed serious concern that the number of student suicides had become alarming compared with other groups.
- **Chairmanship:** Justice S. Ravindra Bhat, former Judge, Supreme Court of India. Members include a psychiatrist, educationists, a disability activist, an anti-ragging activist, a clinical psychologist from NIMHANS, a tribal-studies expert and a mental-health researcher; the Secretary, Department of Higher Education is an ex-officio member, and the Secretaries of the Home, Social Justice, Women and Child Development, Health and Law ministries are also ex-officio members.

- **Mandate:** identification of the predominant causes of student suicides - ragging, caste-based and gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, academic pressure, financial burden, mental-health stigma, tribal identity, disability and others; assessment of the effectiveness of existing laws and institutional frameworks; and recommendations for stronger protections.
- **Time limit:** it was directed to present an interim report within four months and the final report preferably within eight months of the order.

UGC Equity Regulations 2026: Current Status

For an anti-discrimination framework, the UGC's 'Promotion of Equity in Higher Educational Institutions Regulations, 2026' were notified in January, the court stayed them, and the Centre has spoken of a plan to form a committee for reconsideration. The full background of this dispute and the tests of process reform are in our earlier article. Keep the context clear: the notification's purpose was inclusion, the dispute is about definitions and process, and the matter is under judicial review - neither side should be presented as the final verdict.

Analysis: Committees Exist, Why Not Trust

- **The problem of repetition:** after every incident an inquiry committee is formed, yet the allegations remain the same - this means the problem is not of a particular individual but of trust in the process: doubts persist over the independence of internal committees, conflicts of interest and the publication of findings.
- **The meeting point of mental health and discrimination:** hesitation in seeking help because of stigma, academic pressure and social isolation together raise the risk; these factors are listed together in the NTF's mandate.
- **Constitutional basis: Article 14**, **Article 15** and **Article 21** guarantee equality and dignity; the safety arrangement in HEIs should be their practical expression.

Way Forward

- Time-bound implementation of the NTF's recommendations and compliance reporting at the HEI level.
- External independent members, time limits and publication of findings in internal inquiry committees.
- An integrated, accessible and confidential grievance system for ragging, discrimination and mental-health complaints.
- Reconsideration of the UGC regulations with a hearing of all stakeholders, so that both protection and fairness are built.

Mains Practice Question

Question. Despite the existing institutional arrangements for student safety in higher educational institutions, cases of caste discrimination and mental-health crises persist. Analyse the reasons and suggest reforms. (250 words, 15 marks)

Answer Outline

In the introduction: introduce the issue through cases such as IIT Bombay and the formation of the NTF.

In the main body: reasons for failure - doubts over the independence of internal committees, fear of retaliation, mental-health stigma, slow processes; reforms - implementation of NTF recommendations, an independent inquiry framework, an integrated grievance system, balanced reconsideration of the UGC regulations; write connecting with **Articles 14, 15 and 21**.

In the conclusion: conclude that a safety shield means not the existence of a process but trust in the process.

Prelims Practice Questions

Question 1. With reference to the National Task Force (NTF), consider the following statements:

Statement 1: It was constituted by the Supreme Court for the mental-health concerns of students in higher educational institutions
Statement 2: It is chaired by Justice S. Ravindra Bhat, former Judge of the Supreme Court
Statement 3: It is an ordinary administrative cell of the University Grants Commission

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 and 2 only
(b) 2 and 3 only
(c) 1 and 3 only
(d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer and Explanation

Correct answer: (a)

Statement 1: Correct - the NTF was constituted by the Court's March 2025 order
Statement 2: Correct - the chairperson is Justice S. Ravindra Bhat (former Judge, Supreme Court)
Statement 3: Incorrect - it is an independent task force constituted by the Court, not a cell of the UGC

Question 2. With reference to student safety in higher educational institutions, consider the following statements:

Statement 1: The framework of anti-ragging regulations is linked to the UGC's regulations of 2009
Statement 2: The NTF was asked to present an interim report within four months and the final report within eight months of the order
Statement 3: The NTF's mandate includes both caste-based discrimination and ragging

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 and 2 only
(b) 2 and 3 only
(c) 1 and 3 only
(d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer and Explanation

Correct answer: (d)

Statement 1: Correct - the anti-ragging framework is based on the UGC's 2009 regulations
Statement 2: Correct - the official mandate gives this very time limit
Statement 3: Correct - the mandate includes ragging, caste-based and gender-based discrimination, mental health and more

Related Articles (internal links)

- Review of the UGC Equity Regulations: equal protection and a trustworthy process

Sources

- National Task Force (NTF) - official mandate and members

- Supreme Court order: constitution of the NTF, 24 March 2025
- UGC: Promotion of Equity in HEIs Regulations, 2026 (notification text)
- The Hindu's op-ed: When institutional safeguards fail (16 November 2026)
- NDTV: Sahil Wakode's parents approach Bombay High Court seeking CBI probe
- Times of India: end of the 57-day sit-in and the reforms announced

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Summary answer: After the death of IIT Bombay student Sahil Wakode, the safety arrangements of higher educational institutions are under question again; the Supreme Court's National Task Force (NTF) has been working on this very subject since March 2025.

Question: What is the National Task Force (NTF) and when was it formed?

A task force constituted by the Supreme Court in March 2025 (order of 24 March 2025) to address mental-health concerns and suicides of students in higher educational institutions. It is chaired by Justice S. Ravindra Bhat, former Judge of the Supreme Court; members include a psychiatrist, educationists, a disability activist and mental-health experts, and Secretaries of several ministries are ex-officio members.

Question: What is the NTF's mandate and time limit?

Mandate: identifying the predominant causes of student suicides - ragging, caste-based and gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, academic pressure, financial burden, mental-health stigma and others - assessing existing laws and institutional frameworks, and recommending stronger protections. It was directed to present an interim report within four months and the final report preferably within eight months of the order.

Question: What is the current status of the UGC Equity Regulations 2026?

The UGC equity regulations were notified in January 2026 and subsequently stayed by the court. The Centre has said it plans a committee to reconsider them. The consideration of a committee should not be read as an announcement of final amendments or of the stay being lifted.

Question: What is the latest position in the IIT Bombay case?

The students' 57-day sit-in has ended and the institution has announced some reforms, but the police report and the independent inquiry's findings are still awaited. The deceased's parents have approached the Bombay High Court seeking a CBI probe.