

Ten years after Rohith Vemula's death, why campus reforms still fall short

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"I always wanted to be a writer. A writer of science, like Carl Sagan." Rohith Vemula wrote these words days before his death on Jan 17, 2016.

Ten years later, they remain a reminder of what Indian universities failed to recognise: not only a student marked by caste, but a young mind with intellectual aspirations that the system could neither nurture nor protect.

In the decade since Rohith's death, higher education has undergone visible reform. Universities now have anti-discrimination rules, grievance committees, and equity offices, which have been shaped by moral pressure and judicial scrutiny. On paper, the system appears far more responsive than it did in 2016. Yet a harder question remains largely unexamined: have these reforms changed how universities think and teach, or only how they manage complaints?

Focus on procedure, not knowledge

Rohith's death is often remembered as a failure of procedure: delayed action, mishandled complaints, and institutional apathy. But at a more fundamental level, it was a failure of knowledge. The university he inhabited could enforce rules and issue notices, yet failed to recognise the intellectual world of learning he wished to enter. This tension continues today. While grievance mechanisms have multiplied, they operate within academic cultures shaped by inherited hierarchies, including what is taught, whose knowledge counts, which histories remain peripheral, and who holds final decision-making authority.

That authority rarely lies with those most affected by exclusion. Curricular decisions are typically insulated within socially homogeneous faculty bodies, where dominant frameworks are reproduced as disciplinary common sense. Resistance to curricular change need not be malicious to be effective; it often appears as inertia, overload, or claims of academic neutrality. Yet the result is the same: existing knowledge remains intact, while transformative demands for curricular and institutional reform are treated as external, optional or someone else's responsibility.

Over the past decade, universities have become far better at demonstrating compliance. In the best-case scenarios, committees are constituted, timelines are prescribed, hearings are scheduled, and reports are written as a matter of formal compliance. This procedural expansion creates the appearance of accountability. Following Rohith Vemula's death, and later the death of Payal Tadvi, UGC regulations and institutional grievance frameworks were sought to be strengthened in the name of prevention and redress. The University Grants Commission notified its revised anti-discrimination regulations on Jan 13. Yet for many complainants, the experience is one of containment rather than remedy. Harm is acknowledged narrowly; responsibility is diffused; outcomes are framed as misunderstandings rather than manifestations of power.

Access to these mechanisms is also uneven. Students and junior faculty often encounter self-doubt, delay, opacity, or informal discouragement long before any formal process begins. Even when procedures move forward, time itself becomes an outcome. Semesters pass, courses end, and the original injury is rendered administratively closed rather than substantively addressed.

Intention becomes a refuge

A central reason is that anti-discrimination mechanisms are asked to do work they were never designed to do. They treat discrimination as an interpersonal deviation, apparently something that can be corrected through inquiry and explanation. But much caste-based harm is structural. It lies in what syllabi privilege or omit, which perspectives are treated as essential or optional, and how attempts at curricular reform are facilitated or resisted. When harm arises from these conditions, grievance processes struggle to recognise it because the knowledge system itself is not under scrutiny.

This is also why intention becomes a convenient refuge. Institutions insist there was no intent to discriminate, as if discrimination exists only when openly declared. But caste often operates through routine decisions, inherited curricula, and unexamined norms, forms of bias that do not announce themselves, yet shape outcomes decisively. In such contexts, grievance mechanisms end up managing complainants rather than confronting the conditions that produced the complaint.

Beyond committees

Ten years after Rohith Vemula's death, the challenge before Indian universities is not merely to refine procedure, but to confront what their systems protect and reproduce. Anti-discrimination cannot remain an administrative function detached from teaching, curriculum, and institutional self-understanding. If grievance mechanisms are to matter, they must be accompanied by serious engagement with anti-caste knowledge, curricular accountability, and a willingness to recognise harm even when it is structural rather than personal. Otherwise, reform risks becoming ritual: rules without justice, and process without transformation.