

Information about my book

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IN THE UNITED STATES AND INDIA: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Summary

In this book I undertake a comparative analysis of “affirmative action” in the United States and “reservation policies” in India. These are arguably the two most important national experiences with positive discrimination in favor of historically disadvantaged racial/ethnic minority groups. After reviewing the history of positive discrimination policies in each country, and the debates they have spawned, I develop a comprehensive list of the claims made for and against such policies. Identifying the implied potential benefits and costs of positive discrimination, I elaborate a cost-benefit framework for analysis of the effectiveness of positive discrimination policies.

I utilize this cost-benefit framework to develop a general model for the comparative analysis of positive discrimination policies, which I apply first to assess the likely consequences of affirmative action in the US and reservation policies in India. My comparative analysis of the US and Indian cases suggests that the particular procedures used in applying positive discrimination policies, as well as the general societal context in which they are applied, tend to be more conducive in the United States than in India to the generation of overall benefits greater than overall costs.

A definitive analysis of the success or failure of positive discrimination policies requires that the claims of benefits and costs be put to the test of empirical evidence. Toward this end I review systematically the available empirical evidence on the consequences of positive discrimination policies in admissions to higher educational institution in the US and India. The evidence suggests that in both countries these policies have generated some, but not all, of the benefits expected by their proponents, as well as some, but not all, of the costs anticipated by their opponents. I conclude that in each country the issue should not be whether to continue such policies – but how best to structure them so as to maximize their net benefits.

Preface

My interest in writing this book has two primary sources – one going back to the early years of my academic career, and the other much more recent. During the 1960s I spent a total of four years in India, teaching economics at the Indian Statistical Institute and working on problems of economic development planning. During that time I developed great affection for and appreciation of the people and the cultures of India; and for many years thereafter my teaching and research was oriented to the political economy of that fascinating subcontinental

nation. By the early 1980s, however, my focus had shifted to other parts of the world; and I did not visit India for two decades after a brief trip to New Delhi in 1980.

In 1996 I accepted an appointment as Director of the Residential College at the University of Michigan. One year later two lawsuits were filed against the affirmative action admissions policies of the University, and the growing national debate over affirmative action came to be focused on the Michigan campus. As a social scientist as well as an administrator, I became increasingly interested and involved in issues relating to racial/ethnic diversity in higher education. I was certainly predisposed to favor affirmative action policies; but I was also conscious of some of the negative consequences to which such policies could give rise. I began to acquaint myself with the literature on the subject and found myself participating increasingly in discussions and debates about affirmative action.

In looking forward to a year of leave in 2001-02, I had been hoping to start a new research project that would renew my acquaintance with India while drawing on my background as an economist and my interest in controversial policy issues. I was aware of the fact that India had been practicing a form of affirmative action for a considerably longer time than the United States; but in my earlier years I had never paid much attention to issues of race, caste or ethnicity – much less the details of India’s “reservation policies” on behalf of “backward classes.” Here, then, was a marvelous opportunity for me to return my attention to India. I would undertake a research project designed to shed new light on a controversial contemporary issue through a comparative analysis of affirmative action policies in the United States and reservation policies in India. After two trips to India (in December 2000 and September 2001), and after exploring several possible research directions, I resolved to write the present book.

By coincidence, just as I was finishing the manuscript, the US Supreme Court handed down its rulings on the two lawsuits filed against the University of Michigan’s admissions policies. In the context of the general rightward drift of US politics since the 1970s, and mounting attacks on affirmative action in particular, many observers expected – and not a few fervently hoped – that the Court would decide in the Michigan cases to end affirmative action preferences in educational admissions once and for all.

In fact, in the decisions issued on 23 June 2003, the Court came down firmly in support of affirmative action. Although it ruled against the particular procedures used by the University of Michigan to implement preferences in undergraduate admissions, it strongly endorsed the basic rationale for such preferences in upholding the admissions policies of the Law School. Speaking for the Court majority, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor stated unambiguously that the nation has a compelling interest in promoting racial/ethnic diversity in higher education and that racial/ethnic identity may be taken into account in determining who should be admitted to selective colleges and universities.

How can this surprising outcome be explained? The answer is that affirmative action won the day not as a policy promoting social justice for America’s disadvantaged racial/ethnic minorities. Instead, it prevailed because it serves the interests of a wide-ranging coalition of US elites in the effective management of America’s major institutions in an age of globalization. This coalition includes a substantial majority of the top executives of American multinational corporations, most of the top US military brass, many US political leaders, and almost all of America’s higher educational administrators.

Some members of the pro-AA coalition (especially the educators) are genuinely committed to the group-egalitarian goals that affirmative action policies can help to promote. But what unites most coalition members into a politically powerful partnership is the understanding that the US cannot expect to prevail in the heightened competition of an increasingly globalized multicultural world if its leadership remains predominantly and visibly white. As so many CEOs, generals and politicians in the US have come to realize, they cannot win from America's growing non-white population the legitimacy and trust they need to achieve their goals so long as they monopolize society's most esteemed positions. Nor can they and their white colleagues and subordinates effectively engage the cooperation, confidence and commitment of their fellow citizens of color – unless they are seen as genuinely appreciative of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity. How much more important are these considerations when one is dealing not with a minority of the US population, but with a majority of the world's population?

The contrast between the US and India is illuminating. Most Indian business, military and educational leaders – especially those representing the most elite institutions – line up firmly against reservation policies in higher education and employment. They argue that these policies weaken India's ability to compete in a globalized world, because they provide opportunities to typically under-prepared and culturally deprived members of marginal groups, who are likely to perform poorly, at the expense of well-prepared and culturally sophisticated members of mainstream groups, who are primed for success on the world stage. From this perspective, preferential policies are seen as a costly luxury rather than a good investment.

Globalization puts a high premium on the capacity to speak articulate English, which is hard to attain in India without attending English-language schools. So it is from the uppermost Indian social strata that effective players on the world stage are most likely to be recruited. Moreover, India does not need to look for members of under-represented racial/ethnic groups in order to show the world an assemblage of leaders who reflect the diversity of the world's population, rather than looking like members of a privileged club, and who can therefore be expected to inspire more confidence and less suspicion around the globe.

The effect of globalization on high-level support for preferential policies is just one of many issues on which insights may be gained by a comparison of the experiences of the United States and India with policies favoring under-represented racial/ethnic groups. In this book I undertake a systematic comparison of US affirmative action policies and Indian reservation policies, focusing attention primarily on the consequences of those policies. In so doing, I hope to contribute both to a general understanding of preferential policies and to a specific understanding of how affirmative action and reservation policies have been working in the US and in India over the past half-century.

In ruling on the Michigan affirmative action cases, a majority of US Supreme Court Justices shied away from taking a moral position on the fundamental rightness or wrongness of preferences for under-represented racial/ethnic groups. Instead, their decisions reflected a concerted effort to balance considerations weighing for and against the use of such preferences. In this book I adopt precisely such a pragmatic approach to affirmative action and reservation policies, treating them as policy options entailing possible benefits and possible costs. Indeed, I seek also to draw from the comparative experience of the US and India lessons that will be helpful in designing preferential policies so as to maximize their potential benefits and minimize their potential costs.