

## Reservation in Faculty Recruitment: A Necessity for Merit, not a 'Premium for Mediocrity'

It is widely believed that the implementation of affirmative action in faculty hiring within government educational institutions will generate a decline in the quality of teaching and research. One would imagine that a belief so widespread among the 'intelligentsia' would have some basis in the empirical realities of life.

But such empirical evidence is nowhere to be found.

In fact, some [studies](#) have found that the implementation of affirmative action within government organisations generates a mild increase in productivity. The belief that affirmative action hurts excellence is based on the presumption that, in the absence of affirmative action, hiring and promotion of faculty is based solely on merit. Economic theory suggests that this presumption is false.

Invoking 'merit' to deny affirmative action has a long history in India; a history which spans the ideological spectrum of Indian politics. There are two variants of the merit argument: the strong and the weak.

The strong variant says that affirmative action hurts efficiency and therefore ought to be avoided altogether. One of the early advocates of this position was Jawaharlal Nehru's home minister, Govind B. Pant, who put it bluntly: "If we go in for reservations... we swamp the bright and able people and remain second-rate or third-rate."

The strong-variant of the merit argument proved particularly potent in stalling affirmative action in faculty recruitment. The reasons for this are succinctly explained by sociologist Arvind Shah in an article published in the *Economic & Political Weekly*. In the article, Shah says, "...to compromise with merit in appointment of a teacher at any level is to subject his students, including those of backward classes, to mediocrity for the entire length of the teacher's service". This was circa 1991.

The weak-variant of the merit argument differs from the strong in that it allows for 'unmeritorious' recruitment at the 'lower levels'. The idea behind this is that the higher-level positions are far too important to be left to factors other than 'pure merit'.

One proponent of this position was Kakasaheb Kalelkar, chairman of India's first Backward Classes Commission. Kalelkar accepted reservations in government jobs of grades III and IV but objected to any affirmative action in Grades I and II.

The weak-variant of the merit argument can be found within the judiciary too. In *Thomas vs The State of Kerala*, for instance, Justice Iyer supported affirmative action among clerks on the grounds that here is a "pen-pushing clerk" not a "space scientist or top administrator... on whose initiative the wheels of a department speed up or slow down".

The weak-variant of the merit argument has not just survived the times, but appears to have grown stronger with them. In 2020, the Ramgopal Rao Committee recommended that the [Indian Institutes of Technology be excluded from affirmative action](#) in faculty hiring so that they can compete at the international stage “in terms of excellence, output, research and teaching”. It is as if the mere spectra of caste-based reservations is enough to erode excellence, for the IITs never did implement reservations in earnest.

### What studies say

Though there are no empirical studies on the relation between productivity and caste-based affirmative action in faculty hiring within universities in India, there are two studies pertaining to other government institutions. Neither study offers any support to either the weak or the strong variant of the merit argument.

The first of these is a 2014 study by [Deshpande and Weisskopf on the Indian Railways](#) published in *World Development*. They examine the implementation of reservation in Grade A and B level positions for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) from 1980 to 2002.

Grade A and B employees make managerial decisions that can have sizeable effects on the productivity of the organisation. Deshpande and Weisskopf found that the implementation of affirmative action did not decrease the productivity of the Indian Railways; if anything it generated a mild increase in productivity.

The second of the two studies is by Bhavnani and Lee, who analyse the [effect of reservations in the Indian Administrative Service](#). Their study, published in *the American Journal of Political Science* in 2020, uses a detailed data set on the recruitment, caste and careers of India’s elite bureaucrats to examine the implementation of schemes used to build roads, schools and wells. They find that the bureaucrats recruited through affirmative action perform no differently from everyone else in the delivery of public services. Moreover, the result holds irrespective of whether the public services are targeted at the poor or meant for the larger community as a whole.

Why then is the empirical evidence on affirmative action so much at odds with the conventional belief that affirmative action hurts efficiency? The answer lies in the incentives faced by government bureaucrats in making hiring and promotion decisions.

The conventional belief is based on the notion that, in the absence of affirmative action, government organisations hire solely on the basis of merit. In reality, however, the bureaucrats who run government organisations have little to no incentive to hire or promote workers on the basis of merit.

Government organisations are writ with what economists call ‘incentive-compatibility problems’ and higher educational institutions are no exception. Incentive-compatibility

problems arise when the incentives faced by the bureaucrats who run an organisation do not align with the goals of the organisation.

In government organisations, the tenures and salaries of bureaucrats tend to be fixed. Bureaucrats are neither punished nor rewarded for the effects their decisions have on the productivity of the organisation. In fact, it is more sensible to think of bureaucrats as serving superior bureaucrats rather than final consumers, irrespective of whether the final consumer is a traveller on Indian Railways or a student at an IIT. This is because the resources controlled by a bureaucrat depend on the decisions made by his superiors within the bureaucracy. The final consumers' sole influence is through her attendance at the poll booth once every five years.

This influence is terribly weak for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that citizens cast their votes considering bundles of goods offered by competing politicians. The behaviour of a particular bureaucrat – or even the functioning of a whole government organisation for that matter – is but a grain of sand within the large and diverse bundles of goods voted upon every five years.

All this means that the final consumer, as a voter, is in no position to align the incentives of a bureaucrat with the goals of the organisation. Bureaucrats, in serving their superiors, can engage in behaviours that, though beneficial to themselves, are detrimental to the organisation.

The expression of caste preferences in hiring, promotion and access to resources is one such detrimental behaviour. Such caste-oriented behaviour is most likely to be found in government organisations where the higher-level bureaucrats are predominantly of one caste. The IITs, IIMs, and the Indian Statistical Institutes are all examples of such organisations.

Consider IIT Madras for instance. All but one director of IIT Madras, since its inception in 1959, have been Brahmins. The vast majority of the deans and heads of departments, too, have been Brahmins. In such a setting, there is an incentive for junior bureaucrats to woo higher bureaucrats for promotions by expressing – or at the very least tolerating the expression of – caste preferences in the allocation of resources.

There is little incentive to make the quality of teaching or research matters of primary importance, particularly if these come in the way of caste sentiments. In such a setting, caste discrimination in the form of differential treatment, exclusion from research centres and even humiliation, are not bugs; they are features of a system in which the incentives faced by the bureaucrats do not align with the goals of the organisation.

Caste not only influences the flow of resources among those within an organisation, but it also poisons the very recruitment process by which individuals become faculty members at national 'Institutes of Eminence'.

Incentive-compatibility problems intrude into the hiring process in three ways. The first of these is in advertisements for faculty positions. Bureaucrats have an incentive to tailor advertisements to call for specific qualifications, which are met by their kin waiting in the wings. Note that the hiring of faculty members is not based on the demand for courses since government institutes are not funded by students.

The second way in which these intrusions take place is in the shortlisting of candidates for interviews. Faculty applicants come with doctoral degrees from various universities and publication in a variety of journals. Neither universities nor journals can be unequivocally compared across disciplines, or even within the same discipline for that matter. Here again, there is a need for judgement and there is little incentive within the system for the judgement not to be directed by one's caste sentiments.

The third place in which incentive-compatibility problems intrude into the hiring process is at the interview stage. The composition of the interview panel is as much a determinant of an examination's outcome as the quality of the interviewee. Bureaucrats, therefore, can influence the outcome of an interview by selecting panels that are likely to favour certain candidates over others. The favoured candidates are more likely than not to belong to the castes of the bureaucrats who commission the selection panel.

Overall, there are numerous avenues in faculty hiring and promotions where caste preferences eclipse merit.

In some senses, India has come a long way since the days when Jyoti Basu told the Mandal Commission that caste is of little relevance in his state and Rajiv Gandhi criticised V.P. Singh for implementing the Mandal recommendations. However, the belief among the ruling elite that affirmative action hampers excellence remains unchanged; a belief most potently expressed by the *Organiser*, RSS's mouthpiece magazine, circa 1990.

The magazine called affirmative action "a premium for mediocrity"; economic theory suggests that such belief is mere blind faith. In the absence of affirmative action, there is little incentive within government educational institutions to hire or promote faculty members solely on the basis of merit. Affirmative action, therefore, opens the doors to individuals who may have been rejected because of their caste and despite their merit. Naturally, the recruitment of more meritorious faculty members will increase, not decrease, the quality of research and teaching.

Affirmative action and merit are therefore friends, not foes, at least within reasonable bounds.

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