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Q6(c)

What is affirmative action ? Substantiate theoretical positions on affirmative actions with example

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- What is affirmative action? Substantiate theoretical positions on affirmative action with example
- Keep the answer within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Affirmative action uses group criteria to repair unequal starting lines.

Rawls, Sen, and Ambedkar supply justice arguments.

Critics allege reverse discrimination; radicals call it too thin.

Indian reservation and US admissions are the cases.

- **Bourdieu:** merit already hides cultural capital.

Introduction

Affirmative action is a public correction of historical exclusion by using group criteria in education, jobs, or contracts. It treats equal treatment as inadequate when starting lines differ. India names much of this as reservation.

Body

The idea

- Formal equality ignores accumulated caste, race, and gender disadvantage. John Rawls's difference principle is a cousin: inequalities must help the least advantaged.
- Amartya Sen's capability approach asks whether people can actually convert a right into a functioning.

Theoretical positions

- **Liberal compensatory:** repair past discrimination, then return to colour- or caste-blind rules. Time-bound reservations argue this.
- **Social justice and representation:** B. R. Ambedkar treated political and educational safeguards as ongoing against a graded inequality.
- **Critique from the right:** reverse discrimination and efficiency loss, a Davis-Moore style talent worry.
- **Radical critique:** without land and capital reform, seats in a college are a thin patch.

Examples

- Indian reservations in legislatures, public jobs, and higher education.
- United States affirmative action in university admissions, later constrained by courts.
- Gender quotas on some panchayats show descriptive representation without an automatic end to unpaid care.

Substantiation

- Bourdieu explains why "merit" already encodes cultural capital. Affirmative action names that bias.
- Exclusion in higher education, as **Census** graduate gaps show, is the empirical warrant.

Flow diagram

Historical exclusion -> Affirmative action

Affirmative action -> Seats jobs contracts

Formal merit -> Blind rules

Affirmative action -> Corrected chances

Conclusion

Affirmative action is structured preference to equalise chances after group exclusion. **Rawls**, **Sen**, and **Ambedkar** support it as justice; merit-only critics deny the group cut. **Indian reservation** is the large example. It is necessary and incomplete without wider redistribution.

Facts & figures

Ambedkar

Safeguards in representation and education against caste as a durable structure.

Rawls

Difference principle: inequalities justified if they benefit the least advantaged.

Sen

Capabilities: real freedoms, not only formal rights, measure advantage.

Indian reservation

Constitutional quotas in public education, jobs, and some elected bodies.