Affirmative Action Policies and Higher Education in India
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Presenters and Abstracts

Quantifying the Effect of Reservations for Low Castes on Educational Attainment
Guilhem Cassan, The University of Namur, Belgium

The reservation debate is very strong in India, in particular, when it comes to education. However, there is very little evidence on the impact of the various affirmative action policies on the level of education of its beneficiaries. In other words, we lack systematic knowledge on the efficacy of those policies. Recently, economists have used statistical tools, which permit their evaluation at the national scale. This presentation will detail the results of two studies assessing the role of affirmative action policies on the educational attainment of the Scheduled Castes and of the Other Backward Classes.

Guilhem Cassan holds a PhD from the Paris School of Economics. His research, which was awarded the price of the French Economic Association, focuses on the impact of identity based policies in India. After having completed a post doctoral visit at the London School of Economics, he is now Associate Professor in Economics at the University of Namur.

Caste Disparities, Discrimination and Affirmative Action:
Two Stories from Tamil Nadu and Gujarat
Ashwini Deshpande, Delhi School of Economics

Tamil Nadu, a relatively rich state, has witnessed a long history of anti-caste movements and the predominance of non-Brahmin political parties for several decades. Gujarat boasts of a high rate of growth over the last two decades, under the stewardship of an OBC chief minister, with a claim that the growth has been socially inclusive. This paper is an attempt to compare whether, to what extent, these two histories have resulted in different outcomes for the marginalized communities, specifically the Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs. Relying on macro-data from the National Sample Survey, the paper adopts a “difference-in-differences” methodology to track changes in indicators such as wages, consumption, education, occupation and labour market discrimination and so forth across successive birth cohorts to examine if the gaps across social groups are diminishing or widening in each of the indicators. The implementation of affirmative action in the two states has also been very different, with TN having a range of state-level quotas. The resultant picture is a mixed one, reminding us that there are no straightforward solutions (such as high growth alone) to the vexed problem of caste discrimination; and a multi-pronged approach backed by strong political is possibly the only way forward in order to weaken the stranglehold of caste inequalities.

Ashwini Deshpande is Professor of Economics at the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, India. Her Ph.D. and early publications have been on the international debt crisis of the 1980s. Subsequently, she has been working on the
economics of discrimination and affirmative action issues, with a focus on caste and gender in India, as well as on aspects of the Chinese economy: poverty, inequality, regional disparities and gender discrimination. She has published extensively in leading scholarly journals. She is the author of Grammar of Caste: economic discrimination in contemporary India, OUP, 2011 and Affirmative Action in India, OUP, Oxford India Short Introductions series, 2013; and has edited several volumes. She received the EXIM Bank award for outstanding dissertation (now called the IEDRA Award) in 1994, and the 2007 VKRV Rao Award for Indian economists under 45.

Affirmative Action in Higher Education in India: Targeting, Catch Up, and Mismatch
Veronica Frisancho, Inter-American Development Bank, Washington, D.C.

Using detailed data on the 2008 graduating class from an elite engineering institution in India we evaluate the impact of affirmative action policies in higher education focusing on four issues: targeting, catch up, mismatch, and labor market discrimination. We find that admission preferences effectively target minority students who are poorer than average displaced non-minority students. Moreover, we find that minority students, especially those in more selective majors, fall behind their same-major peers in terms of grades as they progress through college. We also identify evidence in favor of the mismatch hypothesis: once we control for selection into majors, minority students in more selective majors end up earning less than they would have had if they had chosen a less selective major. Finally, we find no evidence of wage discrimination against minority students but they are more likely to get worse jobs even after controlling for selection.

Veronica Frisancho is a research economist in the Research Department. She received her Ph.D. in Economics from Pennsylvania State University in 2012, and she holds a bachelor’s degree in Economics from the Universidad del Pacifico in Lima, Peru.

Before pursuing her doctoral studies, Veronica worked at GRADE, a prestigious think tank in Peru, for almost six years. She also has several years of teaching experience in Peru and in the United States. She has taught Intermediate Macroeconomic Analysis and Introductory and Intermediate Microeconomics, as well as Growth and Development and Advanced International Trade Theory and Policy.

Veronica’s work can best be described as applied microeconomics, and her main fields of specialization are Development and Labor Economics. Her research in these areas includes an emphasis on education, labor markets in developing countries, and microfinance. She is currently working on a series of articles on microfinance, savings, gender biased violence, vocational training, and on academic performance and learning. She has published in the Population Research and Policy Review, India Policy Forum, and in The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy, and currently has several articles under review.
Veronica is an active member of the Royal Economics Society. She has been a referee for the Journal of International Economics, Journal of Labor Economics, and The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy.

The Meritocrats: the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Social Life of Caste
Ajantha Subramanian, Harvard University

In India today, the technical sciences are prized as the true measure of intellectual worth and a proven means of professional advancement. The technical graduate has become India’s greatest export, widely understood to exemplify the country’s comparative advantage in the global marketplace. The value and mobility of Indian technical knowledge are most graphically represented by the success story of the Indian Institutes of Technology, or IITs. Within Indian and American public discourse, the IITian has become an exemplar of intellectual merit, someone seen as naturally gifted in the technical sciences. What gets obscured in such assessments are the forms of accumulated social and cultural capital that have enabled admission to the IITs. What does the naturalization of the IITian’s merit and the elevation of the IITs to emblems of meritocracy mean for the possibilities and limits of democratic transformation in India? My paper shows that the politics of merit at the IITs illuminates the social life of caste in contemporary India. Building on Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the forms of capital and Satish Deshpande’s on the social life of caste, I argue that the IITian’s status depends on the transformation of caste privilege into modern merit. However, I call for a more relational approach to merit by situating it in the context of subaltern political assertion. Analyzing meritocracy in relation to subaltern politics allows us to see the contextual specificity of claims to merit: at one moment, they may be articulated through the disavowal of caste, at another, through caste affiliation. Far from the progressive erasure of ascribed identities in favor of putatively universal ones, what we are witnessing today is the rearticulation of caste as an explicit basis for merit. Moreover, this rearticulation is not simply the assertion of an already constituted caste identity. Rather, claims to merit generate newly consolidated forms of upper casteness.

Ajantha Subramanian is Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies at Harvard University. Her research interests include political economy, political ecology, colonialism and postcoloniality, space, citizenship, South Asia, and the South Asian diaspora. Her first book Shorelines: Space and Rights in South India, chronicles the struggles for resource rights by Catholic fishers on India’s southwestern coast, with a focus on how they have used spatial imaginaries and practices to constitute themselves as political subjects. Her current research is on the relationship between meritocracy and democracy in India that considers the production of merit as a form of caste property and its implications for democratic transformation.

Respondent
Pathiba Natesan, University of North Texas

Prathiba Natesan is Associate Professor of Statistics, Research Methods, and
Measurement in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of North Texas. She serves as the director of the Office of Research Consulting (UNT). Her research focuses on improving statistical techniques to enhance the validity of inferences made from data reflecting real-world challenges. She has published over 15 peer-reviewed theoretical and applied research papers, engaging statisticians and practitioners. While she works primarily in measurement (psychometrics) and educational statistics, her empirical articles cover several disciplines. These include education, information sciences, merchandising, health, and transportation. For instance, her work on the use of sophisticated quantitative techniques to measure teachers' beliefs about teaching African American students revealed insights into how teachers' ethnicity plays a role in their perceptions of African American students, and how African American teachers are divided in their beliefs about African American students. Prathiba is an elected board member of the Southwest Educational Research Association and is Associate Editor of Frontiers Journal of Quantitative Psychology.