

Ramesh Sunam. 2018. *Samāveśītāko Bahas*. Lalitpur: Samata Foundation.

Post the success of the democratic movement of 2006, the government of Nepal made provisions to enforce a quota system in order to increase the representation of historically marginalized groups in civil service. Between the fiscal years of 2007 and 2017, 14,900 women, Dalits, *Janajātis*, and Madhesis became beneficiaries of the new provisions, markedly changing the demographic makeup of civil servants in the country. Out of every seventeen civil servants, three have now entered the system through positive discrimination. The backlash to this has been immense, particularly from those belonging to Khas-Arya communities, many of whom are strongly against positive discrimination on both an ideological and programmatic level. Ramesh Sunam's book, *Samāveśītāko Bahas* is a response to the narrative that positive discrimination is unnecessary and unfair, and in this 221-page volume, the author offers compelling evidence as to why quotas for people from marginalized groups are necessary in Nepal today.

The book is divided into eleven concise chapters. The first Chapter offers an overview of the idea of affirmative action in the country, explaining that it has been in the peripheries of the discourse of inclusion since the Maoist war. Sunam then proceeds to talk about increase in inclusivity in civil services as a result of quotas, providing plenty of statistical evidence that suggest that some of the policies have been successful. The next couple of chapters are rebuttals to complaints that are frequently lodged against the idea of positive discrimination, including “we shouldn't talk about ethnicity

and caste in the twenty-first century,” “quotas are ineffective as a policy,” “quotas are an assault on meritocracy,” “quotas have led to incompetent people dominating government offices,” and “the ‘creamy layer’ from ethnic minorities will benefit the most.” Sunam concludes with recommendations about how affirmative action policies can be improved, and a rumination on why quotas for Khas-Aryas that have been ensured in the new constitution are fundamentally problematic.

One of Sunam’s central claims in the book is that the idea of Nepal having progressed to becoming a “meritocracy” is deeply flawed. Many in ethnically dominant communities claim that everyone has access to the same educational opportunities now and because of the “equalizing” role that education plays in society, affirmative action is misguided and redundant. Sunam presents statistics to refute this point—if there is equality of opportunity, it doesn’t make sense that there are only 2 percent Dalits in civil service, that too mostly in rank and file positions, when they make up 13 percent of the Nepali population. Similarly, men make up almost 80 percent of civil servants to this day. Sunam argues that in a country where jobs are scarce, civil service is the most important source of employment, and the fact that upper-caste men make up an overwhelming majority of the workforce is suggestive of the fact that opportunities may not be the same for everyone after all.

Sunam also talks about the historic dimensions of discrimination in order to explain where the demands for inclusion have come from. He talks about Jang Bahadur Rana’s 1854 civil code and the codification of ethnic stratification that placed “Matwali” and “Untouchable” castes at the bottom of the ladder, and the lasting economic and social consequences this had on people belonging to these groups. Even though legally there is no caste-stratified citizenship anymore, the fact that for decades, wealth, economic opportunities and access were determined by ethnicity is something that still affects people’s lives. For Dalits in particular, a history of landlessness has meant that levels of poverty are disproportionately high, and Sunam points out that amongst Brahmins, ten out of hundred Brahmins are poor, while amongst Dalits, forty-one out of a hundred people are poor. Muslims and Madhesi Dalits have the lowest rate of enrollment in colleges. The refrain that “caste is of no significance anymore” therefore doesn’t match up with the socio-economic realities of Nepal.

In addition to economic factors, Sunam points to the myriad other disadvantages that people belonging to certain groups in the country face in their employment pursuits. Those from ethnically dominant communities with a certain level of wealth are much more likely to have the social and cultural capital that lead to a career in public service. For many, Nepali, the language that examinations are taken in, is a language that they have little command over and therefore the chances of passing exams is lower. Also, those who create the questions that are asked in examinations are often predominantly Khas-Arya, and this means that Khas-Arya exam-takers are likely to share their cultural knowledge and references and therefore more likely to pass exams and end up in civil service. For Sunam, the problem lies in the discourse of meritocracy, which presupposes that “intelligence and effort” are what determine life chances. This discourse fails to account for the various historic factors, manifesting in economic, social and cultural privileges that lead to certain people starting leaps and bounds ahead of others when it comes to access to opportunities.

Sections of the book that address two concerns are particularly insightful: one, that those who are most in need of positive discrimination do not benefit because of “elite capture,” and two, quotas should be based on economic need rather than ethnic background. To the “elite capture” claim, Sunam says that it is a myth, and evidence suggests that many of who have found their way into civil service through affirmative action come from impoverished backgrounds. Further, basing quotas on economic need rather than ethnic background is first, practically a difficult task as it involves arbitrary declarations about how poor one needs to be to “deserve” preferential treatment and second, likely to exclude those who have been the most marginalized.

An important distinction that Sunam repeatedly makes is between the individual and the structural—there are individual Brahmins who are very poor, and the government has an obligation to all its citizens to ensure a bare minimum quality of life. However, positive discrimination as a policy is one that is designed to address historical injustices that have a markedly ethnic and caste dimension, and quotas for Dalits are fundamentally different to quotas for Khas-Arya in terms of their theoretical underpinnings. Sunam is therefore critical of the fact that there are Khas-Arya quotas now, seeing this as a negative development. His recommendation is that quotas be reserved as

a tool for righting historical wrongs rather than a tool to divide opportunities amongst ethnic groups in a decontextualized manner.

Samāveśītāko Bahas is notable for both its brevity and its depth. Sunam makes a compelling case for positive discrimination by supplying evidence that is both statistically and theoretically sound. Because the book is based on the study of the public sector, discussion on affirmative action in the private sector is missing from the volume and something that interested readers may have to look for elsewhere. The heavy reliance on numerical data is, in places, tedious. Many of the things that Sunam says have already been said about positive discrimination in countries such as India and the United States. *In Defense of Affirmative Action* by Barbara R. Bergmann and Ashwini Deshpande's many works on the subject in India (that Sunam repeatedly references) are some well-known examples. But Sunam's rigorous exploration on how the positive discrimination debate has played out in Nepal's social context is one that is an essential addition to the existing literature on both affirmative action and inclusion in Nepal. The volume is written in very accessible Nepali and likely to be particularly valuable for students and policy-makers.

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