

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 10 marks

Comment on the affirmative action in around 150 words.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 affirmative action as the instrument converting formal → substantive equality

R2 deliberate state measures for groups hit by historical discrimination + structural exclusion → India frame (reservation, Arts 15/16)

Body flow

meaning + Indian form → moral justification (Rawls's difference principle → Ambedkar's social democracy) → aim is fair conditions, not favour

Counter-view

Sowell: weakens merit, deepens division → reverse discrimination / creamy layer / stigma persist

Conclusion routes

R1 necessary for distributive justice

R2 valid only as targeted, reviewable measure — not a permanent entitlement

Affirmative action is the chief instrument for turning formal equality into substantive equality. It refers to deliberate measures by the state to support groups held back by historical discrimination and continuing structural exclusion. In India it works mainly through reservation in education, employment & legislatures, resting on Articles 15 and 16.

Its deeper justification is moral. John Rawls's difference principle defends priority for the least advantaged, while B.R. Ambedkar held that political democracy remains incomplete without social democracy, which removes inequalities of status and opportunity. The aim is not favour but fair conditions — moving from equal rules to a genuine level playing field.

Critics disagree. Thomas Sowell argues that group preference weakens merit and deepens social division and the problems of reverse discrimination, the creamy layer and stigma remain real.

On balance, affirmative action is necessary for distributive justice, but valid only as a targeted, reviewable measure, never a permanent entitlement.