

DIVERSITY AND DISCRIMINATION

DIFFERENCE AND PREJUDICE

There are many things that make us what we are – how we live, the languages we speak, what we eat, wear, the games we play and the things we celebrate. All of these are influenced both by the geography and history of the place where we live.

You will get an idea of how diverse India is if you look even briefly at the following statement:

There are eight major religions in the world. Every single one of them is practised in India. We have more than 1600 languages that are people's mother tongues, and there are more than a hundred dance forms.

Yet this diversity is not always celebrated. We feel safe and secure with people who look, talk, dress and think like us.

Sometimes when we meet people who are very different from us we may find them strange and unfamiliar. At times we may not understand or know the reasons why they are different from us. People also form certain attitudes and opinions about others who are not like them.

Some of the statements above see villagers as dirty, ignorant and superstitious, and see people in cities as money-minded, lazy and cunning.

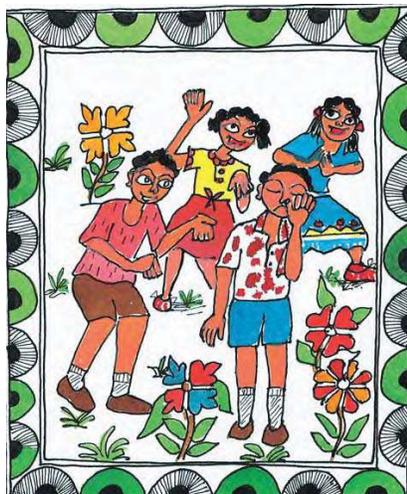
When our opinions about certain people are always negative – seeing them as lazy, cunning, stingy – as some of the statements above, then these become prejudices that we carry about them.

Prejudice means to judge other people negatively or see them as inferior. When we think that only one particular way is the best and right way to do things we often end up not respecting others, who may prefer to do things differently. For example if we think English is the best language and other languages are not important, we are judging these other languages negatively. As a result, we might not respect people who speak languages other than English.

We can be prejudiced about many things: people's religious beliefs, the colour of their skin, the region they come from, the accent they speak in, the clothes they wear etc. Often, our prejudices about others are so strong that we don't want to form friendships with them. At times, we may even act in ways that hurt them.

CREATING STEREOTYPES

All of us are familiar with gender differences. What does it mean to be a boy or a girl? Many of you would say, "We are born as boys and girls. It is a given. What is there to think about?" Let's see if this is the case.



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If we take the statement "They don't cry", you'll see that this is a quality that is generally associated with boys and men. As babies or children when boys fall and hurt themselves, their parents and other family members often console them by saying "Don't cry. You are a boy. Boys are brave, they don't cry." As children grow up they start believing that boys do not cry so that even if a boy feels like crying he stops himself from doing so. He also believes that crying is a sign of weakness. So, even though both boys and girls sometimes want to cry, especially if they are angry or in pain, as they grow older boys learn or teach themselves not to cry. If a grown boy cries, then he feels that others will either tease him or laugh at him, and so he stops himself from doing so in front of others. This is the way boys are and this is how girls are: these are statements we hear constantly and accept without even thinking, and we start believing that each one of us must behave accordingly. We fit all boys and all girls into an image that society creates around us.

When we fix people into one image we create a stereotype. When people say that those who belong to a particular country, religion, sex, race or economic background are "stingy" "lazy," "criminal" or "dumb," they are using stereotypes. There are stingy and generous people everywhere, in every country, in every religion, in every group whether rich or poor, male or female. And just because some people are like that it is not fair to think that everyone will be the same.

Stereotypes stop us from looking at each person as a unique individual with his or her own special qualities and skills that are different from others. They fit large numbers of people into only one pattern or type. Stereotypes affect all of us as they prevent us from doing certain things, that we might otherwise be good at.

INEQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination happens when people act on their prejudices or stereotypes. If you do something to put other people down, if you stop them from taking part in certain activities and taking up jobs, or stop them from living in certain neighbourhoods, prevent them from taking water from the same well or hand pump, or not allow them to drink tea in the same cups or glasses as others, you are discriminating against them.

Discrimination can take place because of several reasons. You probably recall from the previous chapter that Samir Ek and Samir Do were different from each other in many ways. For example, they belonged to different religions. This is an aspect of diversity. However, this diversity can also be a source of discrimination. Groups of people who may speak a certain language, follow a particular religion, live in specific regions etc., may be discriminated against as their customs or practices may be seen as inferior.

Another difference between the two Samirs was in their economic backgrounds. Samir Do was poor. This difference, as you have read earlier, is not a form of diversity but of inequality. People who are poor do not have the resources or the money to meet their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. They experience discrimination in offices, in hospitals, schools etc., where they are treated badly because they are poor.



Some people may experience both kinds of discrimination. They are poor and they belong to groups whose culture is not valued. Tribals, some religious groups and even particular regions, are discriminated against for one or more of these reasons. In the following section we will look at how a famous Indian was discriminated against. This will help us understand the ways in which caste was used to discriminate against large numbers of people.

ON BEING DISCRIMINATED AGAINST

People are engaged in different kinds of work like teaching, carpentry, pottery, weaving, fishing, farming etc. to earn a livelihood. However, certain kinds of work are valued more than others. Activities like cleaning, washing, cutting hair, picking garbage, are seen as tasks that are of less value and people who do this work are seen as dirty or impure. This belief is an important aspect of the caste system. In the caste system, communities/ groups of people were placed in a sort of ladder where each caste was either above or below the other. Those who placed themselves at the top of this ladder called themselves upper caste and saw themselves as superior. The groups who were placed at the bottom of the ladder were seen as unworthy and called "untouchables". Caste rules were set which did not allow the so-called "untouchable" to take on work, other than what they were meant to do. For example, some groups were only allowed to pick garbage and remove dead animals from the village. But they were not allowed to enter the homes of the upper castes or take water from the village well, or even enter temples. Their children could not sit next to children of other castes in school.

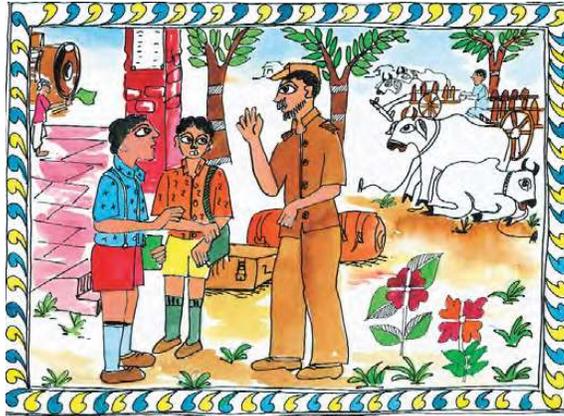


Being made to sit separately in the classroom because of one's background is a form of discrimination.

Thus upper castes acted in ways, which did not give the so-called "untouchables" the same rights as they enjoyed.

Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, one of the great leaders of India, shares his first experience of caste-based discrimination, which took place in 1901 when he was just nine years old. He had gone with his brothers and cousins to meet his father in Koregaon which is now in Maharashtra.

Long did we wait, but no one turned up. An hour elapsed and the stationmaster came to enquire. He asked us for our tickets. We showed them to him. He asked us why we tarried. We told him that we were bound for Koregaon and that we were waiting for father or his servant to come, but that neither had turned up and that we did not know how to reach Koregaon.



We were well-dressed children. From our dress or talk no one could make out that we were children of the untouchables. Indeed the stationmaster was quite sure we were Brahmin children and was extremely touched at the plight in which he found us. As is usual among the Hindus, the stationmaster asked us who we were. Without a moment's thought I blurted out that we were Mahars. (Mahar is one of the communities which are treated as untouchables in the Bombay Presidency.) He was stunned. His face underwent a sudden change. We could see that he was overpowered by a strange feeling of repulsion. As soon as he heard my reply, he went away to his room and we stood where we were. Fifteen to twenty minutes elapsed; the sun was almost setting. Our father had not turned up nor had he sent his servant, and now the stationmaster had also left us. We were quite bewildered, and the joy and happiness, which we felt at the beginning of the journey, gave way to a feeling of extreme sadness.

After half an hour the stationmaster returned and asked us what we proposed to do. We said that if we could get a bullock-cart on hire we would go to Koregaon, and if it was not very far we would like to start straightway. There were many bullock-carts plying for hire. But my reply to the station master that we were Mahars had gone round among the cart men and not one of them was prepared to suffer being polluted and to demean himself carrying passengers of the untouchable classes. We were prepared to pay double the fare but we found that money did not work. The stationmaster, who was negotiating on our behalf, stood silent, not knowing what to do.

Imagine how difficult it would be if people could not move easily from one place to the other, how insulting and hurtful it is to have people move away, refuse to touch you or allow you to drink water from the same source as they do.

This small incident shows how a simple task of going from one place to another in a cart was not available to the children – even though they could pay the money. All the cart men at the station refused to take the children. They acted in a discriminatory manner.

So, clearly, as this story shows us, caste based discrimination is not only limited to preventing Dalits from undertaking certain economic activities but it also denies them the respect and dignity given to others.

STRIVING FOR EQUALITY

The struggle for freedom from British rule also included within it the struggle of large groups of people who not only fought against the British but also fought to be treated more equally. Dalits, women, tribals and peasants fought against the inequalities they experienced in their lives.

As pointed out earlier, many Dalits organised themselves to gain entry into temples. Women demanded that they should have as much a right to education as men did. Peasants and tribals fought to release themselves from the grasp of the moneylender and the high interest they were charged.

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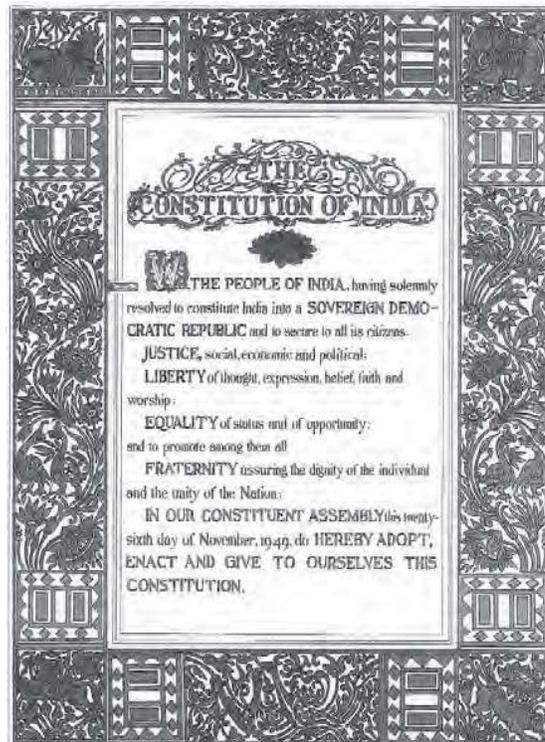
When India became a nation in 1947 our leaders too were concerned about the different kinds of inequalities that existed. Those who wrote the Constitution of India, a document that laid out the rules by which the nation would function, were aware of the ways in which discrimination had been practised in our society and how people had struggled against this. Many leaders of these struggles such as Dr Ambedkar had also fought for the rights of the Dalits.

So these leaders set out a vision and goals in the Constitution to ensure that all the people of India were considered equal. This equality of all persons is seen as a key value that unites us all as Indians. Everyone has equal rights and opportunities. Untouchability is seen as a crime and has been legally abolished by law. People are free to choose the kind of work they wish to do. Government jobs are open to all people. In addition, the Constitution also placed responsibility on the government to take specific steps to realise this right to equality for poor and other such marginal communities.

The writers of the Constitution also said that respect for diversity was a significant element in ensuring equality. They felt that people must have the freedom to follow their religion, speak their language, celebrate their festivals and express themselves freely. They said that no one language, religion or festival should become compulsory for all to follow. They said that the government must treat all religions equally.

Therefore, India became a secular country where people of different religions and faiths have the freedom to practise and follow their religion without any fear of discrimination. This is seen as an important element of our unity – that we all live together and respect one other.

Though these ideals are enshrined in our Constitution, this chapter points out that inequalities exist even today. Equality is a value that we have to keep striving for and not something which will happen automatically. People's struggles and positive actions by the government are necessary to make this a reality for all Indians.



The first page of the Constitution that clearly states that all Indians are entitled to equality of status and opportunity.