

# ON EQUALITY

## 1 CHAPTER

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### ➤ INTRODUCTION

**(a) On Equality**

- (i) Equality and democracy are dynamic and not static concept.
- (ii) This dynamism is reflected in the government's passing of new laws and programmes, and in people's movements around various social and economic issues.
- (iii) India is a democracy.
- (iv) The key elements of a democratic government, include people's participation, the resolution of conflict, and equality and justice.
- (v) Equality is a key feature of democracy and influences all aspects of its functioning.

### ➤ ELEMENTS OF EQUALITY

**(a) Right to Vote**

- (i) In a democratic country, like India, all adults irrespective of what religion they belong to, how much education they have had, what caste they are, or whether they are rich or poor are allowed to vote.
- (ii) This is called universal adult franchise and is an essential aspect of all democracies.
- (iii) The idea of universal adult franchise is based on the idea of equality because it states that every adult in a country, irrespective of their wealth and the communities she/he belongs to, has one vote.

**(b) Other Kinds of Equality**

- (i) Many people who live in democratic India and who have the right to vote but whose daily living and working conditions are far from equal.
- (ii) Apart from being poor, people in India experience inequality in different ways.
- (iii) One of the more common forms of inequality in India is the caste system. If you live in rural India your caste identity is something that you probably learned or experienced very young. If you live in urban India some of you might think that people no longer believe in caste.
- (vi) The issue of caste continues to be in the minds of highly educated urban Indians.

- (v) Dalit is a term that the so – called lower castes use to address themselves. Dalit means 'broken' and by using this word, lower castes are pointing to how they were, and continue to be, seriously discriminated against.

## ➤ **EQUALITY IN INDIAN CONSTITUTION**

### **(a) Recognition of Equality**

- (i) The Indian Constitution recognizes every person as equal. This means that every individual in the country, including male and female persons from all castes, religions, tribes, educational and economic backgrounds are recognized as equal.
- (ii) This is not to say that inequality ceases to exist. It doesn't. But at least, in democratic India, the principle of the equality of all persons is recognized.
- (iii) While earlier no law existed to protect people from discrimination and ill-treatment, now there are several laws to see that people are treated with dignity and as equals.
- (iv) This recognition of equality includes some of the following provisions in the Constitution. First that every person is equal before the law. What this means is that every person, from the President of the country to a domestic worker has to obey the same laws. Second, no person can be discriminated against on the basis of their religion, race, caste, place of birth or whether they are female or male. Third, every person has access to all public places including playgrounds, hotels, shops and markets. All persons can use publicly available wells, road and bathing ghats. Fourth, untouchability has been abolished.

### **(b) Implementation of Equality**

- (i) The two ways in which the government has tried to implement the equality that is guaranteed in the Constitution is first through laws and second through government programmes.
- (ii) There are several laws in India that protect every person's right to be treated equally. In addition to laws, The government has also set up several schemes to improve the lives of communities and individuals who

### **(c) Mid-day Meal Scheme**

- (i) One of the steps taken by the government includes the midday meal scheme.
- (ii) This refers to the programme introduced in all government elementary schools to provide children with cooked lunch. Tamil Nadu was the first state in India to introduce this scheme , and in 2001, the Supreme Court asked all state governments to begin this programme has had many positive effects
- (iii) These include the fact that more poor children have begun enrolling and regularly attending school teachers reported that earlier children would often go home for lunch and then not return to school but now with the midday meal being provided in school, their attendance has improved. Their mothers, who earlier had to interrupt their work to feed their children at home during the day, now no longer need to do so.
- (iv) This programme has also helped reduce caste prejudices because both lower and upper caste children in the school eat this meal together, and in quite a few places, Dalit women have been employed to cook the meal.
- (v) The midday meal programme also helps reduce the hunger of poor students who often come to school and cannot concentrate because their stomachs are empty.

### **(d) Problems of Implementation**

- (i) While government programmes play an important role in increasing equality of opportunity, there is much that still needs to be done.
- (ii) While the midday meal programme has helped increase the enrolment and attendance of poor children in school, there continues to be big difference in our country between schools that the rich attend and those that the poor attend.
- (iii) Even today there are several schools in the country in which Dalit children, are discriminated against and treated unequally.

- (iv) These children are forced into unequal situations in which their dignity is not respected. This is because people refuse to think of them as equal even though the law requires it.
- (v) One of the main reasons for this is that attitudes change very slowly. Even though persons are aware that discrimination is against the law, they continue to treat people unequally on the basis of their caste, religion, disability, economic status and because they are women.
- (vi) It is only when people begin to believe that no one is inferior, and that every person deserves to be treated with dignity, that present attitudes can change.
- (vii) Establishing equality in a democratic society is a continuous struggle and one in which individuals as well as various communities in India contribute to.

## ➤ ISSUES OF EQUALITY IN OTHER COUNTRIES

- (a) **U.S.A**
  - (i) You are probably wondering whether India is the only democratic country in which there is inequality and where the struggle for equality continues to exist.
  - (ii) The truth is that in many democratic countries around the world, the issue of equality continues to be the key issue around which communities struggle.
  - (iii) So, for example, in the United States of America, the African – Americans whose ancestors were the slaves who were brought over from Africa, continue to describe their lives today as largely unequal. This, despite the fact that there was a movement in the late 1950s to push for equal rights for African Americans.
  - (iv) Prior to this, African – Americans were treated extremely unequally in the United States and denied equality through law. For example, when travelling by bus, they either had to sit at the back of the bus or get up from their seat whenever a white person wished to sit.
  - (v) Rosa Parks was an African – American woman. Tired from a long day at work she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man on 1 December 1955. Her refusal that day started a huge agitation against the unequal ways in which African – Americans were treated and which came to be known as the **Civil Rights Movements**.
  - (vi) The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, religion or national origin.
  - (vii) It also stated that all schools would be open to African – American children and that they would no longer have to attend separate schools specially set up for them. However, despite this, a majority of African – Americans continue to be among the poorest in the country.
  - (viii) Most African – American children can only afford to attend government schools that have fewer facilities and poorly qualified teachers as compared to white students who either go to private schools or live in areas where the government schools are as highly rated as private schools.

## ➤ PROHIBITION OF DISCRIMINATION

- (a) **Article 15 of the Indian Constitution**

Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

  - (i) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.
  - (ii) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to.
    - (a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment.
    - (b) The use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public interest maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public.

## ➤ STRUGGLES FOR EQUALITY

### (a) Struggles in India

- (i) The Indian Constitution recognizes all Indians as equal before the law and states that no person can be discriminated against because of their religion, sex, caste or whether they are rich or poor. All adults in India have the equal right to vote during elections and this power over the ballot box has been used by people to elect or replace their representatives.
- (ii) But this feeling of equality that the ballot box provides, because the vote of one person is as good as that of another, does not extend to most people's lives. As you have read, the increasing privatization of health services and the neglect of government hospitals have made it difficult for most poor people to get good quality health care.
- (iii) These people do not have the resources to afford expensive private health services.
- (iv) Poverty and the lack of resources continue to be a key reason why so many people's lives in India are highly unequal.
- (v) The work women do is often considered of less value than that done by the men. All of these persons are discriminated against primarily because of their social and cultural background as well as because they are women. Discrimination on the basis of a person's religion, caste and sex is another significant factor for why people are treated unequally in India.
- (vi) Often poverty and lack of dignity and respect for certain communities and groups come together in such powerful ways that it is difficult to identify where one aspect of inequality ends and the other begins. Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim girls drop out of school in large numbers. This is a combined outcome of poverty, social discrimination and the lack of good quality school facilities for these communities.
- (vii) Throughout the world – in every community, village, city and town – you will find that there are some people who are known and respected because of their fight for equality. These people may have stood up against an act of discrimination that they faced or which they witnessed. Or they may be well – respected because they treat all persons with dignity and are, therefore, trusted and called upon to resolve issues in the community.
- (viii) Often, some of these persons become more widely recognized because they have the support or represent large numbers of people who have united to address a particular issue of inequality. In India, there are several struggles in which people have come together to fight for issues that they believe are important.
- (ix) The Tawa Matsya Sangh in Madhya Pradesh is another example of people coming together to fight for an issue. There are many such struggles such as those among beedi workers, fisherfolk agricultural labourers, slum dwellers and each group is struggling for justice in its own way. There are also many attempts to form cooperatives or other collective ways by which people can have more control over resources.