



Caste Discrimination and the Struggle for Equality

Caste system has created one of the major forms of inequality in our country. For centuries, people have fought against this discrimination and our constitution too strives to end it. Elimination of caste discrimination has been one of the major aims of our governments. Let us read how caste system works and what steps have been taken to end caste discrimination.

A large number of people in our country think of themselves as belonging to some caste or the other. They even put the names of their castes as a part of their own names. Usually, people of a caste follow some common customs and worship a particular deity. Many people who follow the caste rules marry only within their own caste. In olden days, people of one caste followed the same profession or work, though these days, this tradition has been changing fast. Thus, you can see that caste system creates some bonds among a particular group of people and separates them from the other groups.

- ◆ To what extent are the above true statements in your area and to what extent have they changed? Discuss.

However, the caste system has also given rise to great inequalities and discrimination in our society. Let us see how this happens.

People are engaged in different kinds of work like teaching, carpentry, pottery, weaving, fishing, farming etc. to earn their livelihood. However, certain kinds of jobs

are valued more than the 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 social order where each caste was either above or below the other. Those who placed themselves at the top of the 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 were called “untouchables”. Caste rules were set and 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, take water from the village well or enter the temples. Their children could not sit next to the children of other castes in school. Thus,

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

- ◆ In what ways do you think did the caste system promote inequality among people?

When some people are not allowed to do what they want to do – like get education, or take up jobs of their choice, we can say that they are facing discrimination. Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, one of the greatest 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. Let us read more about this incident :



Dr B.R. Ambedkar
(1891-1956)

Chairperson of the committee for drafting of the Constitution of India and the first Union Law Minister of India.

“Long did we wait, but no one turned up. An hour elapsed and the station master 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 station master was quite sure we were brahmin children and was extremely touched at the plight in which he found us in. As is usual among the Hindus, the station master 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 station master 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 station master 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 station master, who was negotiating on our behalf, stood silent, not knowing what to do.

Source: Dr B. R. Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Volume 12, Edited Vasant Moon, Bombay Education Department, Govt. of Maharashtra.

- ◆ Despite the children offering money, the cartmen refused them. Why?
- ◆ How did people at the station discriminate against Dr Ambedkar and his brothers?
- ◆ How do you think Dr Ambedkar felt as a child when he saw the station master's reaction to his statement that they were Mahars?
- ◆ Have you ever experienced prejudice or witnessed an incident of discrimination?
- ◆ How did this make you feel?

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 accessible 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, 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.

An example of discrimination in schools

Omprakash Valmiki is a famous dalit writer. In his autobiography, *Joothan*, he writes, *“I had to sit away from the others in the class, and that too on the floor. The mat ran out before reaching the spot I sat on. Sometimes I would have to sit way behind everybody, right near the door...sometimes they would beat me without any reason.”* When he was in Class IV, the headmaster asked Omprakash to sweep the school and the playground. He writes, *“The playground was way larger than my small physique could handle and in cleaning it, my back began to ache. My face was covered with dust. Dust had gone inside my mouth. The other children in my class were studying and I was sweeping. The headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me. I was not even allowed to get a drink of water. I swept the whole day,...From the doors and windows of the school rooms, the eyes of the teachers and the boys saw this spectacle.”* Omprakash was made to sweep the school and the playground for the next couple of days and this only came to an end when his father, who happened to be passing by, saw his son sweeping. He confronted the teachers and then walking away from the school holding Omprakash's hand, he said loudly for all of them to hear, *“You are a teacher...So I am leaving now. But*

remember this much Master...(He) will study right here...in this school. And not just him, but there will be more coming after him.”

- ◆ Why do you think Omprakash Valmiki was treated unequally by his classmates and the teachers?
- ◆ If you were in his place, how would you feel? Write four lines about it.

When people are treated unequally, their dignity is violated. The dignity of Omprakash Valmiki was violated because of the way in which he was treated. By picking on him and making him sweep the school because of his caste, Valmiki's schoolmates and teachers hurt his dignity badly and made him feel as if he was less than equal to all other students in the school. Being a child, Valmiki could do very little about the situation that he was in. It was his father who, on seeing his son sweep, felt angry by this unequal treatment and confronted the teachers.

Today many teachers have been making special efforts to ensure equality of students in the school. They not only encourage dalit students to learn but also ensure their participation in all school activities like welcoming guests, leading prayers, and making speeches in important functions. Such teachers also ensure that all children sit and eat the midday meals together and serve food and water to each other.

- ◆ Have you seen such efforts in your school or nearby schools? Share those experiences with the entire class.

Had caste system always been there?

No, there was a time when there was no caste system. We saw the lives of hunter gatherers and tribes. They did not have any caste system. Some aspects of the *Varna* system emerged in the later Vedic period in which the four major *Varnas* – Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra are mentioned. Later on, many new aspects like untouchability and restrictions on marriage, eating together etc. emerged. It was said that the lower castes should serve and obey the higher castes. These ideas spread all over India including Telangana in the times of the kingdoms you studied in chapters 11 and 12. As these ideas spread, many people criticised them. Thinkers like Buddha, Mahavira, Ramanuja, Basava, Kabir, Vemana, etc. criticised the idea of some people being superior to others by birth. They felt that all people, irrespective of their birth or profession, can perform good deeds and attain salvation. You will read about them in greater detail in later chapters.

Striving for Equality

You read about the establishment of British rule and the beginning of struggle against it. 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.

In the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, several social reformers fought

to create a new social system based on freedom, equality, brotherhood, human dignity and economic justice. They include Jyotirao Govindarao Phule, Savitri Bai Phule, Periyar E.V. Ramasami Naickar, Sri. Narayana Guru and Ayyankali. We shall read about some of them in class 8.

During the colonial period in the Telanagana region too, social mobilization emerged. Some of the important people involved in it were P.Venketaswamy, Eshwari Bai, T.N. Sadalakshmi, C.S. Ethirajan, Arigay Ramswamy, M. Venkataswamy, B.S. Venkatarao etc. Let us look at the struggles of one of them.

B.S. Venkatrao (1896-1953)

Bathula Venkatrao was born in Ghasmandi, Hyderabad. He was popularly known as Rao Saheb. His father, Bathula Sayanna, was a domestic servant of the Europeans. B.S. Venkatrao studied upto ninth class and was well versed in English, Urdu, Persian and Marathi apart from Telugu. He worked as a sculptor in Pune before joining the Public Works Department of the Nizam's Government. He rose to a very high position in the government of the Nizam prior to independence.

Having experienced untouchability and its impact on the suppressed classes, he was determined to eradicate it. The Adi-Dravida Sangham was formed with this objective in 1922 with the assistance of people like M. Govindrajulu and M. Venkataswamy. Its main objective, included abolition of the Devadasi system and bringing unity amongst the dalits. Later, they formed the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha in April 1927. A

decade later, after an influential discussion, at Pune, they formed Youth League of Ambedkarites, with the objective of getting educated dalit youth to propagate awareness about the exploitation based on caste. This was later renamed as Hyderabad State Depressed Classes Association.

The leaders of this organization went from place to place and organized meetings among the people to make them aware of caste oppression, the movements taking place in the country for the emancipation of the dalit castes and the need to organize and defend themselves. Some of them also promoted religious reform so that the dalits were freed of the casteist superstitions.

They constructed houses and library in the Ghasmandi area and named it Audi Nagar. Across the Hyderabad city, they also constructed 18 temples for the dalits. B.S. Venkatrao's contribution to the dalit upliftment in Hyderabad was recognised by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar who invited him to preside over the Bombay Presidency Mahar Conference in 1936 at Bombay. The conference was attended by 10,000 people and unanimously resolved to support the movement initiated by Dr.B.R. Ambedkar.

On 1 April 1947, the Hyderabad Assembly debated on the resolution moved by Palayam Pillai, recommending to the President-in-Council for a grant of twenty lakh rupees for the uplift of the suppressed classes of the State. Shri Venkatrao moved an amendment to the resolution raising the grant to one crore rupees. The House agreed to make a recommendation to the Prime Minister for the grant of one crore to the fund. Accordingly, the Nizam

constituted the depressed classes welfare fund and sanctioned one crore rupees for the same. The Nizam honored him by awarding the title of Khusru-E-Deccan.

He was elected to the Rajya Sabha by the State Legislative Assembly after 1952.

Equality after Independence

When India became a free nation in 1947, our leaders too were concerned about the different kinds of inequalities that existed. The people 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 the law. People are free to choose the kind of work they wish to do. Government jobs are open to all. 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 two ways in which the government has tried to implement the equality that is guaranteed in the Constitution is through laws and through government programmes or schemes to help the disadvantaged communities. 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 have been treated unequally for several centuries. These schemes help to ensure greater opportunities for them.

One of the steps taken by the government includes the mid-day meal scheme. This refers to the programme introduced in all government elementary schools to provide wholesome cooked lunch to all the children. Tamil Nadu was the first state in India to introduce this scheme, and in 2001, the Supreme Court asked all the state governments to begin this programme in their schools within six months. This programme has many positive effects. These include the fact that more poor children have begun 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, whose work was interrupted to feed their children at home during the day, now no longer need to do so. This programme has also helped reduce caste prejudices because both lower and upper caste children in the school eat this meal together. In Telangana, in almost all the rural schools, mid-day meal is prepared by the members of women self help groups, who are invariably from deprived classes, and in quite a few places, dalit women have been employed to cook the meal. The mid-day meal programme also helps to reduce the hunger of poor students who often come to school and cannot concentrate on studies because their stomachs are empty.

- ◆ Can you list three benefits of the mid-day meal programme?
- ◆ How do you think this programme might help promote greater equality?

While government programmes play an important role in increasing equality of opportunity, there is much that needs to be done. While the mid-day meal programme has helped increase the enrolment and attendance of poor children in school, there continues to be a big difference in our country between schools attended by the rich and schools attended by the poor. Even today, there are several schools in the country in which dalit children like Omprakash Valmiki, are discriminated against and treated unequally. 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.

One of the main reasons for this is that attitudes change very slowly. Even though people 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 sex. It is only when people begin to believe that no one is inferior, and that every person deserves to be treated with dignity, the present attitudes can change. Establishing equality in a democratic society is a continuous struggle. Individuals as well as various communities in India should contribute to achieve this.

Keywords :

1. Untouchability
2. Scheme
3. Constitution
4. Autobiography

Improve your learning

1. What is the difference between being punished for a mistake and being discriminated against? Was the child Ambedkar being punished or discriminated against?
2. Though there are many castes in the society, on what occasions do you find equality among them?
3. Our Constitution abolished the practice of untouchability and declared it a crime. Do you think it has been fully abolished in practice?
4. How can your school help in ending caste based inequalities?
5. Read the paragraphs “The two ways for them” (p.no.170) comment on it.



Project :

1. Find out about a government scheme in your area. What does this scheme do? To whom this scheme intended to benefit.
2. Discuss with your parents or grandparents about how caste system functioned earlier to find out what has changed and what has not. Prepare a report and present it in the class.