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## UNIT 5 EQUALITY

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### Structure

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Equality vs. Inequality
  - 5.2.1 Struggle for Equality
- 5.3 What is Equality?
- 5.4 Dimensions of Equality
  - 5.4.1 Legal Equality
  - 5.4.2 Political Equality
  - 5.4.3 Economic Equality
  - 5.4.4 Social Equality
- 5.5 Relation of Equality with Liberty and Justice
  - 5.5.1 Equality and Liberty As Opposed To Each Other
  - 5.5.2 Equality and Liberty Are Complementary To Each Other
  - 5.5.3 Equality and Justice
- 5.6 Towards Equality
- 5.7 Plea for Inequality in the Contemporary World
- 5.8 Marxist Concept of Equality
- 5.9 Summary
- 5.10 Exercises

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Of all the basic concepts of social, economic, moral and political philosophy, none is more confusing and baffling than the concept of equality because it figures in all other concepts like justice, liberty, rights, property, etc. During the last two thousand years, many dimensions of equality have been elaborated by Greeks, Stoics, Christian fathers who separately and collectively stressed on its one or the other aspect. Under the impact of liberalism and Marxism, equality acquired an altogether different connotation. Contemporary social movements like feminism, environmentalism are trying to give a new meaning to this concept.

Basically, equality is a value and a principle essentially modern and progressive. Though the debate about equality has been going on for centuries, the special feature of modern societies is that we no longer take inequality for granted or something natural. Equality is also used as a measure of what is modern and the whole process of modernisation in the form of political egalitarianism. Modern politics and modern political institutions are constantly subjected to social pressures to expand opportunities equally irrespective of ethnicity, sexual identity or age. Equality is a modern value in the sense that universalistic citizenship has become a central feature of all political ideologies in modern industrial democracies. Again, equality can also be taken as a criteria for radical social change. It is related to the development of democratic politics. Modern

societies are committed to the principle of equality and they no longer require inequality as automatically justifiable. The principle of equality enunciated by the American and French revolutions has become the central plank of all modern forms of social change and the social movements for the reorganisation of societies.

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## 5.2 EQUALITY vs. INEQUALITY

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Before we discuss the meaning of equality, we must understand that equality is a relative concept. The demand for equality has always been against the prevailing inequalities of the times. The existence of social inequalities is probably as old as human society and the debate about the nature and cause of inequalities is an ancient topic of political philosophy. In classical Greece, Aristotle in his book *Politics* distinguished three social classes and noted the significant difference between *citizens* and *slaves*, *men* and *women* in terms of rational and civic capacities. Participation in the *Polis* was restricted to the citizens only. Similarly, in our Hindu Society, according to the classical text, the society was divided into four (varnas) categories: *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudras*. All rights and duties were based upon this classification. During medieval feudalism, legal privileges were based upon status and birth. In short, different types of inequalities have been long enduring, giving rise to the notion that inequality is inevitable in social relations. In fact, the pre-eighteenth century teachings argued that men were naturally unequal and that there was a natural human hierarchy. Different ideologies justified inequality on grounds of superior race, ancestry, age, sex, religion, military strength, culture, wealth, knowledge, etc. According to Turner, inequality is multi-dimensional and the elimination of one aspect of inequality often leads to the exaggeration of other aspects of social, political and cultural inequalities. In fact, all human societies are characterised by some form of social inequalities in terms of class, status, power and gender. While studying the concept of equality, the contradiction between equality as a general value of modern society and inequality at a practical level, as a fact of all human societies must be kept in mind.

### 5.2.1 Struggle for Equality

If inequality has been a universal phenomenon, protest against the inequalities based upon privileges and birth had also been voiced right from their emergence. Thus in the history of western political ideas, the doctrine of equality is practically as old as its opposite. For example, the most prominent star in the Greek philosophy was Zeno who founded the Stoic School and supported equality among men. The Stoics concluded that all human beings possess reason and thereby all mankind is differentiated from other animals and is united. Humanity does not admit of degree. As such all men are equal as men. The Stoic philosophers gave the idea of universal brotherhood and they were opposed to slavery. The promulgation of the law of the people by the Roman Empire was another way in which the Romans attempted to give effect to the principle that all men are equal and as an extension to that, they conferred citizenship both on the individuals and entire communities. The climax was reached in 212 AD when a notable edict of Emperor Caracalla conferred citizenship of Rome upon all free inhabitants of the empire. Similarly, St. Paul said to Galatians 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male or female, for you are one in Jesus Christ'. From the fifth to the fourteenth century, the demand for equality was a cry against serfdom, medieval gradations or rank and hereditary nobility and the equality for career opportunities in the church. From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the cry for equality was against the landowners' status and religious intolerance and was raised by Puritans, Levellers, doctrine of natural rights and John Locke. Simultaneously, the movements of Renaissance and Reformation raised a powerful voice against the legal privileges of the clergy and nobility based upon birth and demanded equality by birth.



### 5.3 WHAT IS EQUALITY?

While equality is one of the many concepts (others being rights, liberty, justice etc.) it is a crucial one in a world in which so many differences exist among men. Every modern political constitution has some notion of human equality inscribed as a fundamental law and every political theory of any importance has contributed to the nature and feasibility of socio-economic equality. However, it is as difficult to define it clearly as it is to achieve it politically. As mentioned earlier, the concept of equality is relative and it can be understood only in a concrete context. Equality is not identity of treatment or reward. There can be no ultimate identity of treatment so long as men are different in wants, capacities and needs. As Laski wrote, 'the purpose of society would be frustrated at the outset if the nature of a mathematician met with identical response with that of a bricklayer'. Also inequalities gifted by nature are an inescapable fact and it has to be accepted in society. Injustice arises as much from *treating unequals equally* as from *treating equals unequally*. And most importantly, apart from the natural inequalities, there are inequalities created by the society – inequalities based upon birth, wealth, knowledge, religion, etc. Claims for equality have always been negative denying the propriety of certain existing socio-economic inequalities. When liberalism urged that all men are equal by birth, it meant to challenge the property owning franchise. The Declaration of the Rights of Man explicitly

15

recognised that superior talent and qualities of character are a proper ground for distinction of wealth, honour and power. During the twentieth century, we have been dismantling an educational and social system in which opportunities for advancement depended on the family means and replacing it with one that makes skill in examination one of the principal criteria. Thus, what we have to keep in mind is that out of context, equality is an empty framework for a social ideal. It is concrete only when particularised. The movement of history is not towards greater equality because as fast we eliminate one inequality, we create another one: the difference being that the one we discard is unjustifiable while the one we create seems reasonable. Social, political educational and other equalities are always in need of re-enforcement and reinterpretation by each new generation. Thus, the idea of equality constantly erodes the foundations of every *status quo*.

Like liberty, equality can also be understood in its negative and positive aspects. Ever since the rise of the idea of equality, it has been engaged in dismantling certain privileges whether they were feudal, social, economic, etc. Thus negatively, equality was associated with 'the end of such privileges'. Positively, it meant 'the availability of opportunity' so that everybody could have equal chance to develop his personality. Explaining the meaning of equality in this context, Laski writes that equality means:

- i) Absence of special privileges. It means that the will of one is equal to the will of any other. It means equality of rights.
- ii) That adequate opportunities are laid open to all. It depends upon the training that is offered to the citizens. For the power that ultimately counts in society is the power to utilise knowledge; that disparities of education result above all in disparities in the ability to use that power. Opportunity should be given to everyone to realise the implications of his personality.
- iii) All must have access to social benefits and no one should be restricted on any ground. The inequalities by birth or because of parentage and hereditary causes are unreasonable.
- iv) Absence of economic and social exploitation.

Similarly, Barker writes that the idea of equality is a derivative value – derivative from the supreme value of the development of personality- in each alike and equally, but in each along its own different line and of its own separate motion. According to him, 'The principle of equality, accordingly means that whatever conditions are guaranteed to me in the form of rights shall also and in the same measure be guaranteed to others and that whatever rights are given to others shall also be given to me'. According to Raphael, 'The right to equality proper.. is a right to the equal satisfaction of basic human needs, including the need to develop and use capacities which are specifically human'. According to E.F. Carr, 'Equality is just to treat men as equal until some reason other than preference such as *need, capacity* or *desert* has been shown to the contrary'. Recently, Bryan Turner in his book *Equality* has given a comprehensive meaning of equality relevant to the contemporary world. According to him, the concept of equality should include the following:

- i) Fundamental equality of persons
- ii) Equality of opportunity
- iii) Equality of conditions where there is an attempt to make the conditions of life equal