
UNIT 5 EQUALITY

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

5.1 INTRODUCTION

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.

5.2 EQUALITY vs. INEQUALITY

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 ye 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 15th to the 17th 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.