

The affirmation that all men are born equal was to figure in the manifestoes all over the world. The revolutions in Britain in 1649 and 1688, in the USA in 1778 and in France in 1789 made right to equality by birth as their central plank. 'Men are born free and equal and they are free and equal in their rights'. During this phase, the demand for equality coincided with the abolition of special privileges of the nobility and the achievement of political and legal equality with the nobility. It meant only juristic equality i.e. all men are born equal and they are equal before law.' Whether it was Britain, France or America, the issue at stake was equality in the form of uniformity of legal rights. As stated earlier, since the demand for equality was primarily raised by the rising bourgeois class which had acquired wealth, but lacked legal status and which was anxious to achieve political and legal equality with the nobility, the demand for legal equality served the purpose well.

The economic and social dimensions of equality emerged during the nineteenth century and was the result of conflicts and struggles between the capitalist/ industrial classes on one hand and workers and peasants on the other. The *laissez faire* policy of the state in the economic affairs created wide economic disparities in the society. As a result, along with legal equality, demand for economic and social equality was raised by liberal socialists and Marxist writers alike such as JS Mill, TH Green, Babeuf, Karl Marx etc. Simultaneously, the demand for political equality also grew stronger. The movement to broaden the franchise was an offshoot of the industrial revolution which increased the social power of the urban middle class and converted a large section of the population into factory workers. The reforms act of 1832, 1876 and 1884 in Britain were steps towards political equality.

In the twentieth century, the demand for equality became more persistent. Today, it has become the *sine qua non* for the socio-economic mobility typical of a highly industrialist society. The national liberation movements against imperialism and colonialism, movements against apartheid, socialist revolutions in Russia, China and East European countries brought the issue of equality to the forefront. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 extended the recognition of equality which had hitherto been accepted as the aim of all strata of industrialised countries to the people of the third world countries who had been discriminated, thus contributing to the eventual emergence of an international society based upon socio-economic equality.

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

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 first kind of equality i.e., *equality of persons*, is common to cultural, religious and moral traditions typically expressed in statements such as 'all are equal in the eyes of God'. This is concerned with the equality of men as men; something called 'human nature', 'human dignity', 'personality' or 'soul' by virtue of which they must be treated as fundamentally equal. A modern notion of this form of equality is found in Marxism when it talks about the 'human essence'. In the Marxist tradition, it is claimed that all human beings are defined by *praxis*, that is all human beings are knowledgeable, conscious and practical agents. It asserts that 'man is by his essence a universal free being who forms himself through his own self activity in the direction of an ever widening mastery of nature and an ever more universal intercourse, autonomy and consciousness'. Also, writers like R.H. Tawney often combined socialism and Christianity to provide a religious foundation for a commitment to social equality. However, this form of equality is not given importance in the contemporary welfare state based upon the notion of socio-economic equality.

The second meaning of equality is associated with the most common argument for equality as '*equality of opportunity*'. This means that the access to important social institutions should be open to all on universalistic grounds, especially by achievement and talent. The debate about equality of opportunity has been especially important in the development of modern educational institutions where promotion and attainment are in theory based upon intelligence, skill and talent regardless of parental and class background. This type of equality believes in meritocracy where the occupational structure of a society is filled on the basis of merit in terms of universal criteria of achievement and not on the basis of age, sex, wealth, caste, religion, etc.

Thirdly, the concept of equality of opportunity is closely related to and somewhat inseparable from the notion of *equality of conditions*. Equality of opportunity regards those who have ability and who are prepared to exercise their skills in the interest of personal achievement in a competitive situation. However, where parents can pass on advantage to their children, then the starting point for achievement is unequal, since, for example, working class children will start with disadvantages which they have inherited from their parents. In order for equality of opportunity to have any significant content, it is essential to guarantee equality of condition, that is, all competitors in the race should start at the same point with appropriate handicaps.

Fourthly, the most radical notion of equality is equality of results or *outcome*. In short, it means that through legislation and other political means, equalities of results are achieved regardless of the starting point or natural ability. A programme of equality of results would seek to transform inequalities at the beginning into social equalities as a conclusion. Social programmes of positive discrimination in favour of the disadvantaged (i.e. scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, women, children, handicapped etc.) are meant to compensate for a significant inequality of conditions in order to bring about a meaningful equality of opportunity to secure equality of results.

Thus, in order to understand the meaning of equality, we have to keep the different notions of equality in mind. Historically, while the liberal democratic tradition has favoured the idea of equality of opportunity and conditions, the equality of outcome has been a part of the platform of socialist policies aimed at redressing the inequalities generated by competition and the market place.

5.4 DIMENSIONS OF EQUALITY

Equality is a multi-dimensional concept. The need for equality is felt in different fields of social life. Historically also, the demand for different dimensions of equality was neither raised