

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 inequality.

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, worship some particular deity etc. Many people who follow the caste rules, also marry only within their own caste. In olden days people of one caste also followed the same profession or work, though in our times this is changing fast. Thus you can see that the caste system creates some bonds among a particular group of people and separates them from other groups of people.

- ◆ Can you discuss in the class to what extent these points are true in your area and to what extent they have changed?

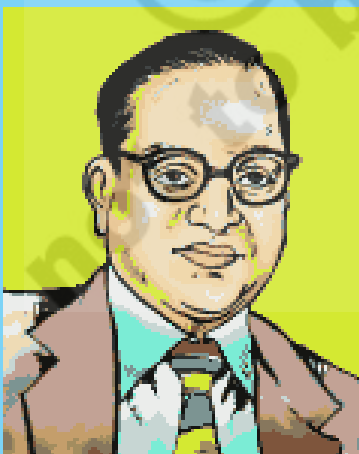
However, the caste system has also given rise to great inequalities and discrimination in our society. Let us see how this happens.

People are engaged in different kinds of work like teaching, carpentry, pottery, weaving, fishing, farming etc. to earn a livelihood. However, certain kinds of work are valued more than 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 sort of ladder where each caste was either above or below the other. Those who placed themselves at the top of this 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 called “untouchables”. Caste rules were set which 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 or take water from the village well, or even enter temples. Their children could not sit next to 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 the caste system promotes inequality among people?

When some people are not allowed to do what they want to do – like acquire education, or take up jobs of their choice, we can say that they are facing discrimination. Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, one of the great 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.



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. 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 available 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, as this story shows us, 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. 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 being treated unequally by his teacher and his classmates?
- ◆ Imagine yourself as Omprakash Valmiki and write four lines about how you would feel if you were in the same situation as him.

When persons 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, Omprakash 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, Omprakash 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.

Has it always been like this?

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 caste

system emerged in the times of the Vedas in which the four major caste groups – 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 lower castes should serve and obey the higher castes. These ideas spread all over India including Andhra Pradesh in the times of the kingdoms you studied about in chapters 13 and 14. As these ideas spread, many people also criticised them. Thinkers like Buddha, Mahavira, Ramanuja, Basava, Kabir, Vemana, etc. criticised the idea of some people being superior by birth and 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 beginnings 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 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.

Jyotirao Govindarao Phule also known as Mahatma Jotiba Phule was a social reformer from Maharashtra. Jotiba Phule and his wife Savitri Bai Phule were pioneers of women's education in India. In 1873 he founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth Seekers Society), which was devoted to securing human rights and social justice for low-caste people.



Jyotirao Govindarao Phule (1827-1890)

He is most known for his efforts to educate women and the lower castes as well as the masses. He, after educating his wife, opened a school for girls in India in August 1848.

Savitri Bai Phule was the first headmistress of the country's first school for girls in Pune. She devoted her life to educating dalits. She started a night school for agriculturists and labourers. She died while serving plague patients.



Savitri Bai Phule (1831-1897)

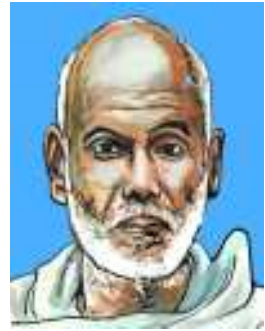
Periyar is known as a rationalist and the leader of the lower caste movement in South India. He aroused people to realise that all men are equal, and that it is the



Periyar E.V. Ramasami (1879-1973)

birthright of every individual to enjoy liberty and equality.

Sri Narayana Guru, born in Kerala, preached brotherhood for all and fought against the ill effects of the caste system. He led a quiet but significant social revolution and gave the watchwords 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for all men'.



Sri Narayana Guru (1856-1928)

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 law. People are free to choose the kind of work they wish to do. Government jobs are open to all people. 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 first through laws and second through government programmes or schemes to help 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 are to ensure greater opportunity for people who have not had this in the past.

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 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 in their schools within six months. This programme has had many positive effects. 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. This programme has also helped reduce caste prejudices because both lower and upper caste children in the school eat this meal together. In Andhra Pradesh 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 reduce the hunger of poor students who often come to school and cannot concentrate because their stomachs are empty.

- ◆ What is the mid-day meal programme?
- ◆ Can you list three benefits of the 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 big differences in our country between schools that the rich attend and those that the poor attend. 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 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. 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 and one in which individuals as well as various communities in India contribute to.

Key words :

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

Project work:

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

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. Do you think it is possible to make friends across castes – what kind of problems will you have to overcome for this?
3. Our constitution abolished the practice of untouchability and declared it to be a crime. Do you think it has been fully abolished in practice?
4. Why do you think people want to marry within their caste? Will this help to preserve caste inequality?
5. How can your school help in ending caste based inequalities?