Equality of Opportunity and the Equal Distribution of Benefits

ANDRE BETEILLE

GOKHALE MEMORIAL LECTURE, 1985

GOKHALE INSTITUTE OF POLITICS AND ECONOMICS,
Pune 411 004

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His publications are : *Caste, Class and Power (1965); Castes : Old and New (1969); Studies in Agrarian Social Structure (1974); Six Essays in Comparative Sociology (1974); Inequality among Men (1977) and Ideologies and Intellectuals (1981).*

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Equality of Opportunity and the Equal Distribution of Benefits

Andre Beteille

Some scholars have made a sharp distinction between societies based on the principle of hierarchy and those based on the principle of equality.[1] Traditional Indian society, with its multitude of castes and subcastes, is the text-book example of a hierarchical society while western societies, in both Europe and America, were the first to espouse the principle of equality in modern times. This distinction, which stands out quite sharply in historical perspective, does not appear as clear when we look at the world today.[2] The hierarchical conception of society nowhere enjoys the legitimacy it did in the past while, at the same time, the ideal of equality too has become a little tarnished.

The idealization of equality has in fact never passed unchallenged in the west. A hundred years ago, while Matthew Arnold (1903) was castigating his countrymen for what he called their 'religion of inequality', T.H. Huxley (1890) was invoking the aid of science to explain and justify the 'inequality of men'. The last few years have witnessed the revival of a severely critical attitude to equality among a section of western intellectuals. This attitude is well expressed in a recent collection of essays by a number of philosophers and social theorists entitled *Against Equality* (W. Letwin, 1983). Professor Nisbet has there pointed out that, no matter how stridently American intellectuals might clamour for equality, the plain fact is that the ordinary American citizen does not set a very high value on it.[3] Others in the same volume have attacked the very concept of equality as being vague or inconsistent or both (J.R.Lucas; 1983, 1965).

Despite the many objections that have been raised against it, the ideal of equality has come to stay in the modern world. At least in India it is difficult to see how it can be abandoned as a fundamental objective in the creation of a new social order in place of the one based on caste, sect, tribe and clan. If, however, we are to take this objective seriously, we have to recognise that equality means different things to different people and that these meanings are not always mutually consistent. The critics are in a strong position when they draw attention to the conflicting goals often set for themselves by the advocates of equality. It is unlikely that we will ever

arrive at a single unambiguous conception of equality that will be acceptable to all. At the same time, we must know what the conflicting demands made by equality are if we are to achieve some kind of balance between these demands.

I would like to take up two conceptions of equality, firstly, what is commonly called equality of opportunity and, secondly, what I shall call the equal distribution of benefits; and to relate these to such things as justice, fairness and the legitimate claims of individuals and groups in contemporary society. Because these two conceptions are not always clearly distinguished, arguments about equality and, especially, demands for greater equality often appear inconsistent. At the same time, each of the two conceptions - equality of opportunity and the equal distribution of benefits - when considered by itself and pushed to its logical limit may easily be made to appear empty or vacuous.

We must dwell a little on these two conceptions of equality as principles before we seek to determine how far they are realisable in practice. Few will argue that the ideal of equality of opportunity has been or can be fully realised in human societies as they are or as we know them to be. Nor would many recommend the equal distribution of every kind of benefit as a practical policy of social engineering. It is true nevertheless that our modern concern for equality tends to gravitate between these two poles of opportunity and distribution, and we must examine what they signify in themselves and in relation to each other.

It is useful to keep in mind the historical circumstances of the origin and growth of the two conceptions with which we are concerned. As an acknowledged principle of social life, equality of opportunity came into its own in the wake of the French revolution nearly two hundred years ago. It was a reflection of not only political but also economic change, and its institutional locus was in the new occupational system and the new educational system that grew in step with it. We see this most clearly in the growth in France of the *grands corps* and the *grandes ecoles*, designed to give expression to Napoleon's idea of 'careers open to talent' (Suleiman E.N. 1978). But the same trends became evident wherever the new occupational and educational systems became established. Equality of opportunity would not signify very much in the absence of the occupational and educational systems with which we are all now familiar: offices, factories, schools, colleges and universities.

It is remarkable how greatly the political complexion of the concept of equality of opportunity has altered from the first half of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth. At the beginning of the nineteenth century it was a radical concept, offering the prospect of a new kind of society in which inherited privilege would be replaced by individual achievement. By the time it came to be written into the Constitution of India equality of opportunity as an idea had become a little too commonplace to be

considered very radical. In contemporary capitalist societies it has acquired a conservative bias, at least in economic doctrine where it is linked with the defence of property and the meritocracy.[4] We must be careful, however, to avoid viewing the concept solely through the prism of contemporary ideological divisions.

If the first conception of equality had its greatest appeal in the formative period of laissez-faire capitalism, the second came into its own with the welfare state. Here the problem of equality tends to be posed in terms of distribution, not the *equal* distribution of *all* benefits, but the distribution to all of certain basic amenities of civilised living. The germ of the welfare state lay in the concept of citizenship which, as T.H. Marshall (1977) argued, developed in contraposition to the class divisions generated by capitalism. The idea of citizenship is an important one in the modern world: it seeks to reach beyond the distinction between ascription and achievement by emphasizing common entitlements for all, irrespective of social position or personal attainment.

* * *

Now, the established practice among sociologists, which I propose to follow, is to discuss these problems in relation to the social structure rather than in abstract and general terms. The starting point in sociological studies is not the idea of equality but the structure of inequality, meaning thereby the unequal positions occupied by individuals and groups in a society. What is important in this perspective is the ordering of social positions rather than the personal attributes of the individuals occupying them. This whole structure of positions has a certain autonomy, existing in some sense independently of the individuals who are assigned or have to find their places in it.

Sociologists use a geological metaphor, the metaphor of stratification to describe the inequalities they investigate. But the arrangement of persons in superior and inferior positions in a human society is enormously more complex than the arrangement of the layers of the earth. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to make a complete representation of all the positions in a society and their arrangement in relation to each other.

The social ranking of positions, whether of individuals or of groups, is based on a variety of criteria, hence one may speak of the different dimensions of stratification. It is common among sociologists to speak of the economic dimension, generally referred to as class, the status or prestige dimension, and the dimension of power.[5] I will not discuss these distinctions any further here, but merely point out that a major problem in the study of social stratification is to establish the relations between its different dimensions. Some authorities seek to relate all inequalities to a single framework, whether of power or of status, while others maintain that they are mutually irreducible.

When we look at inequalities in contemporary India from the sociological point of view, there are two institutional systems that strike our attention: the traditional caste system and the modern occupational system. The hierarchy of castes and the grading of occupations represent social stratification in its most palpable forms. The discussion of equality in Indian society, whether in terms of opportunity or distribution, will lack substance if we fail to relate it to these two important institutional systems.

I need not dwell at length on the importance of caste as both a source and an expression of inequality in Indian society. There was a time, not very long ago, when the argument that caste was of continuing importance in Indian society found favour with few in the academic world apart from the sociologists. The Reports of the many Commissions for the Backward Classes have created a new awareness among the intelligentsia of the vitality of caste in most parts of the country.[6] Not only are there castes and subcastes among the Hindus, but tribals, Muslims, Christians and others have divisions and subdivisions which fit into the same general pattern.

Although caste continues to be a prominent feature of the social morphology, it has lost much of the unity and coherence it enjoyed in the past.[7] In the traditional order a great deal of what one did in life was governed by the caste into which one was born, and it was considered right and proper that this should be so. Today caste continues to govern many choices in life, but people now have very mixed feelings as to whether this is as it should be. This can be seen best in regard to occupation. In the past whether one became a priest, a potter or a tanner was determined in large measure by the caste into which one was born. This may still be the case to some extent with some of the traditional occupations in the village. But there is now a whole range of new occupations, whose locus is in the office or the factory, where caste is no longer considered relevant, at least not in principle.

It has been observed by many that the caste system no longer provides the basis for the division of labour in Indian society, and yet the collective identities based on caste and subcaste have shown remarkable durability.[8] Caste identities have survived not only in rural areas but also, and nearly to the extent, in urban areas. The ranking of castes, on the other hand, is no longer as clear as in the past, although it must be remembered that caste ranking was characterised by many ambiguities even in the traditional order.[9] But however ambiguous or unclear, the inequalities of caste continue to be an important feature of the Indian reality.

As I have already indicated, caste had an important bearing on the traditional occupational system which, at least in theory, was only a particular aspect of it. The occupational system today is far more complex than it ever was in the past. The old occupations have become progressively differentiated

from caste, and a large number of new ones have come into existence. These new occupations have their locus in the office and the factory, unlike the old crafts and trades which were an extension of the household. The new occupational system has its own organizing principle which has little to do with the organizing principle of caste.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of the occupational structure in modern industrial societies, whether of the capitalist or the socialist type. Occupations have become highly specialised, and the occupational system has become more comprehensive and more autonomous than in any other historically-known society. Industrialization is accompanied not only by a new attitude to work but also by a new organization of work. The new attitude and the new organization are no longer confined to industrial societies but have acquired a universal significance. Offices and factories are now found in every society, even in predominantly agrarian societies like the Indian. It is true that the large majority of Indians work in agricultural and related occupations, but those are not the occupations in which the large majority of them, especially of the younger generation, would like to work. The good jobs, the jobs to which even the village boy aspires, are no longer on the farm or in the cottage: they are in the offices and factories.

A very important part of the study of stratification in all modern societies relates to the social gradation of occupations: 'The prestige hierarchy of occupations is perhaps the best studied aspect of the stratification systems of modern societies.[10] Sociologists have developed complex and ingenious techniques for comparing the ranks assigned to occupations in different societies.[11] Studies made in the United States have shown that, while individual occupations have changed a great deal, the prestige structure of occupations has remained remarkably stable (Goldthorpe and Hope, 1974). Comparisons between countries also show a certain broad uniformity in occupational ranking even where the comparisons include both developed and developing economies.[12]

For students of social stratification the traditional ranking of castes and the ranking of modern occupations represent two opposite poles.[13] I need not dwell on the differences between the two, but no less important than these differences is the co-existence of both systems of ranking in Indian society today. In other words, in talking about equality and inequality in contemporary India we have to consider not only the hierarchy of castes from the Brahmin to the Harijan, but also the grading of occupations from the manager to the peon. Now, there is no obvious way in which the two scales can be related to each other.

I would like to stress the disjunction between the two systems of ranking which exist side by side in contemporary Indian society. The various castes in a region, if not in the country as a whole, constitute a set, and one can see a certain coherence if not a logical necessity in their

mutual relations, and the same may be said of the set of modern occupations. Students of Indian society and culture have taken great pains to reveal the logic of caste ranking,[14] and sociologists in the west have been no less diligent in explaining the coherence of occupational ranking (Goldthorpe J.H. and Hope K, 1974). But there is no obvious way in which we can relate items in the one set with those in the other: Patidar, let us say, with office superintendent, or, Brahmin with aeronautical engineer. Such relations are empirical rather than logical, contingent rather than necessary.[15]

As I have already indicated, the very principle of equality of opportunity is intimately linked with a particular type of occupational system. It is difficult to think of equality of opportunity in a tribal economy or even a peasant economy. The occupational system must acquire a degree of autonomy before one can speak in a meaningful way of the principle of equality of opportunity. How effectively does the modern occupational system allow the realisation of this principle? This question may be approached in several ways. One approach focuses on the internal processes of the occupational system itself. A great deal of research has been done on occupational mobility both within and between generations. Most studies of social mobility, at least in industrial societies, are in fact studies of occupational mobility.[16] These studies seek to examine how far opportunities are in fact available to individuals for moving from one occupational level to another in the same generation and between successive generations.

Studies of social mobility show that there are many impediments to moving upwards from one occupational level to another. Parents pass on some of their advantages and disadvantages to their children so that the conditions of competition never become fully equal. While every society has its own distinctive pattern of mobility, it is extremely difficult to prove, on the basis of available empirical material, that there are any significant differences in rates of occupational mobility, at least among industrial societies (Bendix and Lipset 1959). All the evidence indicates that the family is everywhere a powerful impediment to the equalization of opportunities among individuals. As Professor Nisbet in his critique of Rawls has said, 'After all, "theory of justice as a whole", notwithstanding, there is abundant evidence that the family is among the most powerful generators and reinforcers of inequality in a social order'. (Nisbet 1983, P 146).

For India there is very little reliable empirical material on rates and patterns of occupational mobility.[17] The modern occupational system does not have the same significance as a unique source of prestige as in industrial societies, and it is out of the effective reach of large sections of the population still confined to traditional modes of livelihood. What little evidence there is would seem to suggest that opportunities for moving from the traditional to the modern

occupational sector, and from low-to-high status occupations are severely restricted in India.

Entry into modern occupations is filtered not only through the family but also through other divisions in society which have no intrinsic relationship with these occupations. In the Indian case the importance of caste in this regard can hardly be exaggerated. While entry into the highest occupations is in principle equally open to individuals from every caste, it is well known that some castes are much better represented in them than others. How does this come about? And what does it signify for equality of opportunity?

It must not be thought that the problem is unique to India, for, while this kind of unequal representation is most marked in this country, it has its parallels elsewhere. An obvious parallel is in the system of racial and ethnic stratification in the United States. That too has no intrinsic relationship with the modern occupational system, but nevertheless constrains entry into it. Despite a long tradition of equality of opportunity in America, very few Blacks have succeeded in reaching the upper rungs of the occupational ladder, and the same holds true to a large extent of other disadvantaged minorities such as native Americans and Puerto Ricans.

* * *

The considerations above show us some of the social limits within which equality of opportunity has to operate, and lead us to the distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of result. The great attraction of equality of opportunity is that it allows everybody to compete on equal terms for whatever society has to offer to its individual members by way of rewards or benefits. Equality of opportunity would have little significance in the absence of competition between individuals. Now, it is one thing to try to ensure equality in the conditions of competition but quite another to expect equality in its outcome. Equality of opportunity is in this sense linked very closely with inequality of result.

In a book published not long ago, two British intellectuals, one of whom was a member of the Conservative cabinet, wrote: 'Equality of results is itself the enemy of equality of opportunity (Joseph and Sumption, 1979). Now, it is the burden of my argument that, while we have to clearly distinguish between equality of opportunity and equality of result, it will be a misdirection of effort to define them in antithetical terms. The one principle should be used to limit the other and not to exclude it. The crucial question is one of balance between the two principles, although there obviously is no simple prescription for reaching such a balance.

There are two extreme positions which we must view with equal mistrust. The first is that equality of opportunity

is all, and that any attempt to interfere with - or even to question or scrutinise - its outcome is unreasonable if not perverse. This is the position of those in the west who stand for the free market as against the welfare state: President Reagan in the United States, Mrs. Thatcher in Britain and economists like F.A. Hayek, (1960, 1980), Letwin, (1983), Milton Friedman (1980) and others. The second extreme position is that equality of opportunity is a purely formal principle, a legal fiction, a deception, and the 'acid test' is equality of result, the actual distribution of government jobs or university degrees among the castes, sects and communities into which society is divided. This is the position in India of the champions of positive discrimination, job reservation and caste quotas: Mr. B.P. Mandal, Mr. L.G. Havanur, and the lawyers, political scientists and sociologists who provide them with intellectual ammunition (Mandal, 1980; Havanur, 1975).

Those who profess a commitment to the equal opportunities principle cannot expect that people will accept that principle solely on trust without requiring any test whatsoever of its social efficacy. How would one conceive of such a test? A strong test of the principle would be to see whether and to what extent it leads to a change from one type of social arrangement to another. A weaker test would be to see how far it leads to the circulation of personnel within the same type of social arrangement.

'Equality of opportunity', it has been said, 'is an attack on privilege in the name of liberty'(Joseph and Sumption, 1979, p.29). It is or ought to be more than that. It ought to be an attack on all forms of invidious discrimination such as those based on race, caste, gender, etc. Tawney had more than fifty years ago pointed out that equality of opportunity had played an important catalytic role in the transition from a society of estates to one based on classes, and that once that transition had been made, its role became more limited (Tawney, 1964). Equality of opportunity has a social significance only within a context of discrimination, whether that discrimination is based on law as in the past or on prejudice as at present. It is easy enough in our contemporary world to change the laws, but discrimination as a social process is not automatically brought to an end with that.

It hardly needs repetition that in India the lower castes are very thinly represented in the higher occupations - in administration, in management and in independent professions such as law and medicine. Avenues for upward mobility are similarly restricted for Blacks in the United States where there appears to be a job ceiling operating against them.[18] In all parts of the world women are handicapped in the competition with men in regard to both education and employment. There obviously is some failure of the principle of equal opportunities, but it is not clear that all of it can be attributed to discrimination within the occupational system.

If discrimination on the basis of race, caste and gender were to be completely eliminated from public life, equality of opportunity would still be distorted by the family system. Within the family parents pass on their advantages (and also disadvantages) to their children. These include not only material advantages, whose transmission can be restricted with some effort, but also mental ones, including attitudes and motivations, whose transmission cannot be restricted without altering the very process of socialization. Thus children enter the arena of competition, first in education and then in employment, with very unequal resources and skills.

If we eliminate all invidious discrimination and also eliminate the family system, there would still be disparities of ability and of luck between individuals, and it may be argued that the elimination of these disparities is neither possible nor desirable. Those who view equality of opportunity and equality of result in antithetical terms tend to emphasize disparities of ability and luck to the virtual exclusion of all other factors. On the other hand, those who are struck by the pervasiveness of invidious discrimination maintain that unequal results follow largely from unequal opportunities. The former regard the existing inequalities to be inevitable if not desirable whereas the latter believe that they can and should be altered by altering the existing social arrangements.

I have indicated more than once that equality of opportunity can be an operative principle only in a competitive system and that some degree of inequality is a necessary outcome of the competition. Further, while we know that where one comes out in the competition is determined partly by native ability, partly by luck and partly by social background, it is impossible to say how much each part contributes to the whole. Since no moral value can be assigned to at least some of the factors which contribute to individual success or failure, it would seem reasonable to set limits to the rewards of success as well as the penalties of failure. Now, it is easy to see that those who stress the antithesis between equality of opportunity and equality of result are precisely the ones who find such limits intolerable.

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Given the fact that full equality of opportunity is impossible to establish, it would appear unreasonable to demand only formal equality of opportunity without regard for its social consequences. It is in this context that Tawney had pleaded for what he called 'practical equality' in contrast with equality of opportunity. Practical equality requires not only the removal of disabilities but also the creation of abilities. Practical equality is distinct from equality of opportunity but not opposed to it, for, as Tawney (1964) put it, 'it is only the presence of a high degree of practical equality which can diffuse and generalize opportunities to rise'.

This point may be illustrated with a simple example from contemporary India. Positions in the civil service are open to all irrespective of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth: this is equality of opportunity. However, actual entry into the civil service requires a high level of education, and this automatically excludes large sections of the population in a country where millions of people are still illiterate: there is here an absence of practical equality. Some degree of practical equality in the form of a wider diffusion of literacy and education is a necessary precondition for equalizing the opportunities to enter the civil service.

We know that there are pockets of poverty and ignorance in even the most developed societies in the west (Townsend, 1979; Myrdal, 1962). When we turn to a country like India, we see the problem in its full magnitude: here poverty and illiteracy are the common lot of millions of people. This means that those institutions in which equality of opportunity means anything - schools, colleges, offices and even factories - are outside the reach of whole sections of society. Hence in this society the question is not simply of having a formal rule of equality of opportunity but of creating conditions that will make the rule operative. Equality of opportunity will have little vitality here without some measure of practical equality to sustain it.

Now, what we mean by practical equality will of course vary from one case to another. Tawney certainly did not mean by it a state of absolute uniformity in every respect. What he had in mind was a state of affairs in which the individual would be able to develop his own innate capacities and to choose a station in life, not necessarily at the top but one to which his capacities were suited. Large social disparities, justified by the argument from equality of opportunity, prevented too many people from giving of their best and were therefore a source of social waste. Besides, extreme of wealth and poverty are in themselves offensive to a civilised and humane way of life.

A civilised and humane way of life requires the diffusion of certain basic amenities across all the various sections of society. This involves a measure of redistribution through the agency of the state or some other public agency. What is redistributed may be income or some other benefit; the units between which redistribution takes place may be individuals, households or communities; and the redistribution may involve simple or complex mechanisms of transfer.

Those who would like to confine the meaning of equality to equality of opportunity in the strict sense take their stand on the ground that the state should not intervene arbitrarily in the natural rise and fall of individual fortunes. Now it is true that the state may use the pretext of redistribution to strengthen its own powers. But every intervention by the state cannot be regarded as arbitrary.

It must not be forgotten that in post-revolutionary France equality of opportunity itself was instituted by the active intervention of a very powerful state under Napoleon.

While all modern states play some part in redistribution, the measures actually adopted for the equalization of distribution vary greatly from one case to another. The idea of equality as distribution is a basic principle of the welfare state which came into being in the wake of the second world war. Britain was a pioneer in this regard, although the welfare state acquired a highly developed from in other European countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden.[19] In all these countries the state has played a notable part in the redistribution process, and the idea of the welfare state is now widely accepted in the countries of the Third World.

It hardly needs to be said that the welfare state does not anywhere seek to bring about complete equality in the distribution of everything. The idea rather is to secure certain basic minimum provisions for all citizens which might extend in some cases, as in the Netherlands, to a guaranteed minimum income for all. The benefits typically provided by the welfare state to its citizens are broadly of two kinds: social security on the one hand and social services on the other. Social security covers a wide range of benefits in the form of insurance against unemployment, accident, old age, etc. The most important of the social services are those that relate to health and education.

The welfare state has sought to bring about equality by extending the entitlements of citizenship. If these entitlements are to be made available to all citizens they must relate to specific and limited benefits.

Students of the welfare state in the west have remarked upon the extreme individualism on which it is based. 'The claim of the individual to welfare is sacred and irrefutable and partakes of the character of a natural right' (Marshall, 1977). It is true that attempts have been made to fit the special claims of disadvantaged minorities into the framework of the welfare state. Sometimes, especially in the field of education, these have been justified by an appeal to the value of pluralism. But to the extent that the welfare state in Europe has sought to create or promote equality, it has been on the whole equality between individuals, or, at the most, between households.

The strategy of moving towards equality through the distribution among all citizens of certain essential benefits has to be contrasted with the strategy of equalization through quotas. In the latter case the targets are not individuals or households, but castes or ethnic, or, even racial groups. The objective is not so much equality between individuals as parity between groups in regard to certain crucial advantages rather than minimum or essential

benefits. The example that comes immediately to mind is positive discrimination. While the Indian programme of positive discrimination for the Backward Classes is the most exhaustive of its kind, other countries, including the United States, have similar programmes for disadvantaged minorities and for women.

I have elsewhere described positive discrimination as an attempt to reduce social disparities by creating special opportunities for some in addition to the equal opportunities created for all (Beteille, 1984). There obviously is a tension between the two principles, but special opportunities are called for precisely because the principle of equal opportunities are does not by itself alter the disparities in the initial conditions of competition.

There are two aspects of the Indian programme of positive discrimination that are relevant in the present context. Firstly, the units among which benefits are sought to be distributed are castes or communities rather than individuals or households. Secondly, higher education, particularly professional education, and government employment figure prominently among the benefits whose distribution is sought to be equalised.

The castes and communities which positive discrimination seeks to benefit are collectively known as the Backward Classes. This is a large and heterogeneous category, varying in size and composition from one state to another. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which together account for more than 20 per cent of the population, occupy a special position within the category since they enjoy specific constitutional guarantees which the others do not. The other Backward Classes are a fluid and amorphous category entitled to substantial benefits in education and employment in some states but not in all.

Seats in the Lok Sabha and in the state legislatures were reserved for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes initially for a period of only ten years. It was felt then that reservation was a necessary but a transitional measure. The pressure for reservation has, if anything, increased in the last three decades. Two high-powered Commissions have been set up at the national level in the last few years, one for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and the other for the Backward Classes;[20] in addition, a number of Commissions and Committees have been set up by various state governments.[21] All these Commissions, or almost all of them, have recommended more extensive reservations in the name of equality: the idea underlying these recommendations is not so much that of equality of opportunity as of the equal distribution of the benefits of education and employment.

The advocates of reservation point out that there are massive disparities in both education and employment between castes and communities, and that the benefits of development have not been evenly distributed. They argue that equality

of opportunity will have very little meaning where the gap between the advanced and the backward sections of society remains so large. Here the idea seems to be that there must first be parity between castes and communities in certain crucial respects before equality of opportunity can be established between individuals.

In India government employment is for many the highest source of prestige and power. The proponents of reservation argue that in a welfare state at least the government should ensure that the posts at its disposal are equitably, if not equally, distributed among the different castes and communities. The same argument is made in regard to seats in educational institutions, especially medical and engineering colleges where the number of seats is very small in relation to the number of applicants. It is felt that the end of equality will be substantially advanced if scarce resources which cannot possibly be diffused among all individuals and households are nevertheless distributed in such a way that no caste or community is denied a fair share.

We saw that the welfare state in Europe was basically individualistic in its orientation: this fits well with the strong emphasis placed in European societies on equality of opportunity for all individuals. Positive discrimination in India, with its strong emphasis on reservations and quotas, has a different orientation: emphasis here is on the group rather than the individual. Again, this emphasis fits well into the grooves of the Indian social tradition where, as Nehru (1961) said, 'it is the group that counts; the individual has a secondary place'.

Equality is difficult, and for most people impossible, to conceptualise in an abstract way. We think of equality in the social sphere in relation to the map of society we carry in our heads, and people do not carry in their heads the same kind of social map everywhere. If they view society as being made up mainly of individuals, as is to a large extent the case in the contemporary west, they will think of equality as being mainly equality between individuals. If, on the other hand, they view society as being made up mainly of castes and communities, as Indian often do, they will think of equality mainly as equality or parity between castes. I would go even further and suggest that for many Indians what is logically, or conceptually, prior is the group and not equality, and that equality is merely a new way of seeing how what is fundamental in their society, namely, castes and communities, should align themselves in the modern world.

The critics of positive discrimination in India point out that it has led to a new kind of elitism without bringing any substantial benefits to the masses of disadvantaged individuals who are to be found in every caste and community (Sachchidananda, 1977). Whereas in the past the elite was recruited from among a few castes, today many more castes, including the lowest, are represented in it. But this has

not brought about any significant reduction in the gap between the elite and the masses. The attempt to create equality through the distribution of benefits cannot carry the system very far where the benefits are so few and the claimants so many. We have then to either increase the benefits or reduce the number of claimants. We cannot do the first for those benefits which, like higher administrative posts, are by their nature scarce; and we can justify the second only by adopting the fiction that what benefits the caste or tribe benefits also its individual members.

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While a case may be made for bringing about equality in the distribution of benefits independently of equality of opportunity, this can be done only up to apoint and only in some respects. Equality of opportunity carried to its limits leads to a callous meritocratic society, and the objections to such a society have been underlined by social theorists from Tawney (1964) to Rawls (1972). But a society in which equality is artificially ensured through a comprehensive system of quotas is not likely to be more agreeable than a meritocracy. What must inevitably be compromised in the one case as in the other is the human point of view.[22]

There are two kinds of criticism of equality of opportunity which we must separately note. The first is that what passes for equality of opportunity is not real but only formal equality of opportunity, and that there are so many impediments to it that it is an unattainable ideal or even a false ideal (Coleman, 1983). A more constructive variant of this criticism is that equality of opportunity is not so much a false ideal as a deceptive one in the absence of some equality of condition. It was to create such equality of condition - or 'practical equality' in Tawney's phrase - rather than to abandon equality of opportunity that the welfare state was brought into being in the west.

There is a second, in some sense more radical, criticism of equality of opportunity which dwells less on its practicability than on its implication for human values. Equality of opportunity has been closely associated with individualism, competitiveness and the idea of natural inequality. As I have shown elsewhere, the idea of natural inequality is a profoundly ambiguous one, and for some equality of opportunity simply means the celebration of natural inequality as they understand it: the race is to the swiftest and the devil take the hindmost.[23]

Equality of opportunity has been criticised on the ground that it makes competitiveness into a virtue, debasing not only those who fail but to some extent also those who succeed. The negative effects of competitiveness are most markedly in evidence in the educational system where the pursuit of knowledge gets displaced by the demand for certification. This competitiveness, which is legitimised by the educational as well as the occupational system, permeates every sphere

of life, including the family, and tends to subvert other values such as those of tolerance, amity and generosity. Competitiveness has for these and other reasons been viewed negatively not only by moral reformers of the traditional kind but also by socialists of various persuasions.

At the same time, our disenchantment with capitalism or liberalism or bourgeois democracy should not lead us to lose sight of two important points. Firstly, we cannot discard the principle of equality of opportunity, no matter how greatly we deplore the excesses of competitiveness or competitiveness turned into an end in itself. Secondly, while we may all find the prospect of practical equality very appealing, there is no short cut through which we can reach it, certainly not through a comprehensive system of reservations and caste quotas.

If full equality of opportunity is impossible to attain, or if its full attainment leads to some sacrifice of other cherished values, this does not mean that we can or should abandon it as a principle. It would in any event be futile to seek to replace it by the principle of equal distribution. It is true that the market cannot assure full equality of opportunity, but, then, no public agency, however benevolent, can bring about full equality in the distribution of benefits. The complete subordination of the individual to the state or community compromises the human point of view no less than the obsessive preoccupation with individual achievement.

Equalizing distribution without paying any attention to individual contributions would be to devalue effort and thereby to defeat the ends of both efficiency and justice. The equal distribution principle, unlike the principle of equal opportunity, has a compensatory element in it. Now, we may wish to compensate people for the deficiencies in their social circumstance or even in their natural endowment, but it would hardly be reasonable to compensate them for lack of effort. A society in which things are so arranged that everybody is guaranteed an equal share in all the good things of life will leave little room for the play of human aptitude, ability and initiative.

The attempt to bring about equality of result through a system of quotas has additional limitations. It is plain that the system of reservations that we have adopted has created at least as many problems as it has solved. No doubt the benefits of education and employment are both very unevenly distributed among castes, and to talk about equality of opportunity alone will carry little conviction. Some special benefits must be made available to the specially disadvantaged - the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes - if only to bring them on a level from which they may compete with the more able or the more fortunate with some realistic prospect of success. At the same time, the quota system by itself can produce little more than an appearance of equality at the top. Its indiscriminate extension to all and sundry categorized as the Other Backward Classes will defeat

the very purpose of positive discrimination which is to benefit the most disadvantaged sections of society and not all disadvantaged sections of it. It will then become in fact an enemy of equality of opportunity without altering in any significant way the distribution of benefits in the population as a whole.

Foot Notes

1. This point of view is most forcefully expressed in the writings of Louis Dumont (1972, 1977).

2. See A. Beteille's (1983, pp.33-53) Kingsley Martin Memorial Lecture, 'Homo Hierarchicus, Homo Equalis'.

3. *R. Nisbet*, (1983), 'The Pursuit of Equality' in Letwin (ed. 1983), *Against Equality* writes 'All evidence suggests that a very large number of Americans are indifferent, if not actually hostile, to any idea for a rational social policy that has substantial equalities behind it'. (p.126). David Lane (1983), in his inaugural lecture, *Inequality, socialism and Sociology*, writes, on the other hand 'Emprical studies reflect this division: in Contemporary England 50 per cent of the population judge inequality to be just, the figure falls only to 41 per cent in the U.S.A.' (p.6). See also R.V. Robinson and W. Bell (1978).

4. The most consistent exposition of this point of view is to be found in the writings of Hayek (1960, 1980). See also the essays by Harry Johnson and Peter Bauer in Letwin (ed. 1983). For the importance of the meritocratic criterion in socialist societies, See Wesolowski and Krauze in Berreman (ed. 1981).

5. See, for example, Bendix and Lipset (eds. 1966); Beteille (ed.1969); Heller (ed. 1969).

6. There was fairly wide discussion in the press, particularly, *The Times of India*, of these issues before and after the Report of the Mandal Commission (Mandal, 1980) was presented to parliament in mid-1982.

7. The unity and coherence of the traditional order of caste are probably exaggerated by contemporary authors looking back on the past. See Bose (1975); Dumont (1972).

8. For an account of the remarkable persistence of these identities in one of India's largest cities, see Bose (1965), and Beteille (1985).

9. The best account of these ambiguities is to be found in Srinivas (1966).

10. See Hodge, Siegel, and Rossi, in Bendix and Lipset (eds. 1966), pp. 322-34.

11. For a recent discussion, see Goldthorpe and Hope (1974).

12. See Hodge, Trieman, and Rossi, in Bendix and Lipset (eds. 1966).

13. For a general theoretical statement, see the two essays by Parson (1954).

14. There is a vast, though not always illuminating, literature on caste ranking in India. See Marriott (1968).

15. This important analytical distinction is developed by Nadel (1957).

16. A pioneering work is by Lipset and Bendix, (1959). A more recent study with an excellent bibliography is Goldthorpe (1980). See also Bendix and Lipset (eds. 1966).

17. Two recent works bearing on the problem are by D'Souza (1981) and Sarkar, (1984).

18. For the concept of 'Job Ceiling', see, Drake (1965).

19. See the two essays by Marshall (1977), 'The Welfare State and the Affluent Society' and 'The Welfare State - a Comparative Study'. See also the special issue of the European Journal of Sociology, 1961, Vol.2, No.2, devoted to the subject.

20. The Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes set up on 21 July 1978 with Mr. Bhola Paswan Shastri as Chairman and the Backward Classes Commission set up on 1 Jan. 1979 with Mr. B.P. Mandal as Chairman.

21. More than a dozen such Commissions have been set up. For a brief account of these see Mandal (1980), Vol.1, Ch. 2.

22. For the concept of the 'human point of view' as used here, see Williams (1962).

23. See Beteille (1983), Auguste Comte Memorial Lecture: 'The Idea of Natural Inequality', pp. 1-32.

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