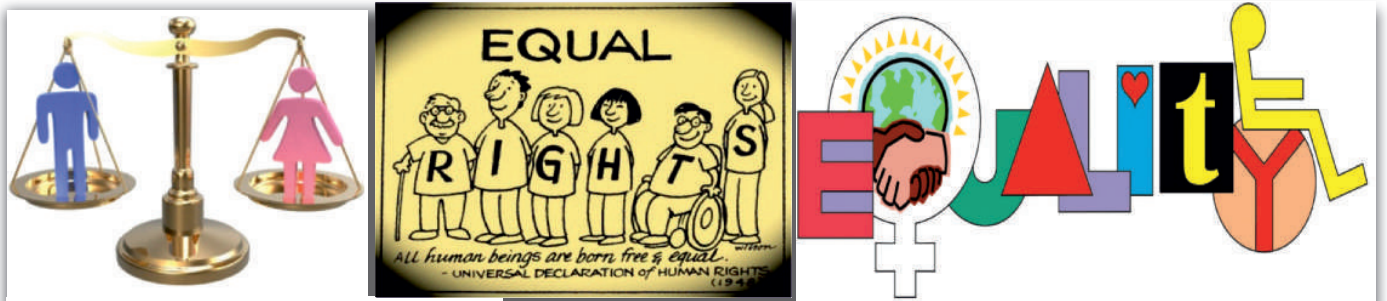


# Equality in a Democracy



Let us first study what is meant by democracy. It is derived from two Greek words **Demos** meaning 'People' and **kratos** meaning a 'Government'. In other words, Democracy is the Government of the People, by the People and for the People.

The Indian Constitution guarantees equality to all citizens. It states that all Indians are equal before the law and there should not be any discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, sex or financial status. All adults of the country have the right to vote. This is a powerful tool as we can choose/replace our representatives. But, in reality several types of inequalities exist in India, which include, economic inequality, caste and

religion based inequality and gender inequality. Our history is replete with the different types of inequality and our struggle against them.

The government has launched several programmes to bridge the inequalities but very little has been achieved. In order to bring about a positive change, public awareness is very much necessary. Inequality exists in varying degrees in several democratic countries. But equality is a very important aspect in a democracy and its functioning depends much upon people's participation.

## EQUAL RIGHT TO VOTE

Every adult citizen of India has a right to vote irrespective of his/her economic status, religion, caste or education.

Every adult (of 18 years and above) has the right to vote in an election.

Let us follow the story of Rama Devi, who is a domestic help in the house of Ramesh Ahuja. On the election day, she goes to the polling booth in the morning and stands in a long queue. She finds Ramesh Ahuja also standing in a line, waiting for his turn to cast his vote. So the conclusion :

- Both master and servant can cast his/her vote.
- Both are equal, no matter if one is rich and the other poor.



People belonging to all castes and classes stand in a queue to vote in an election

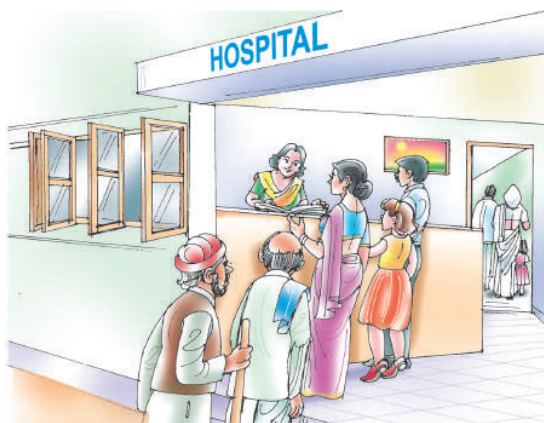
Universal Adult Franchise is in practice in India since the first general elections held in 1952.

- Both have one vote each, no matter if one is male and the other a female.
- Both are equal as both of them have to stand in a queue and wait for their respective turns.

But the evening finds Rama Devi standing in another queue with her sick daughter. This time round she is waiting to show her sick daughter to a doctor in a government hospital. Had she been rich, she could have gone to a private nursing home where there is less crowd or she could have called a doctor home. She couldn't go to work that day and was badly scolded. Rama Devi may have the equal right when it comes to electing a candidate, but is miserably below standard in various other aspects. Study the given table.

Both of them are human beings but there is vast inequality between the two.

Condition	Ramesh Ahuja	Rama Devi
Occupation	Businessman	Domestic servant
House	Big and clean	Small and dingy
Surrounding	Open, clean space and a park	Dirty, filthy, drain near her house
Status	Rich	Poor



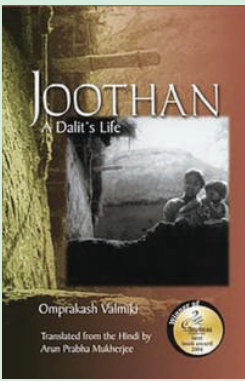
Rama Devi standing in a queue with her sick daughter

### OTHER KINDS OF INEQUALITY

People in India experience many other

inequalities. The most glaring of them all is the inequality imposed by the caste system. We shall read the story of Omprakash Valmiki, a "Dalit", who as a child was made to sweep the classrooms and school compound by the headmaster because he was of a lower caste. He was made to sit at the back of the classroom, right near the door. He had to sit on the bare floor without the mat. He was made to sweep the classroom, the school, and the playground for a couple of days. He was not even allowed to drink water from the common tap. His misery came to an end only when his father happened to see him sweeping and confronted the headmaster. This inequality was due to his caste. Being of a low caste, he was not allowed to sit with the children of the upper castes. For the same reason, instead of studying, he was made to sweep the classroom, even though he was a small child studying in Class IV. This inequality is shocking.

Let's find another case of inequality through the story of Mr. and Mrs. Qureshi who were



Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography **Joothan** tells us about his shocking experiences as a Dalit boy.



Omprakash Valmiki was made to do odd work outside the classroom

refused house after house for over a month. All they wanted was a house on rent in a big city. They were refused because they were non-vegetarian. Though they had money, they were refused a house because of their religion, which was apparent from their name. So the property dealer who was assisting them asked them to change their name to Mr. and Mrs. Kumar. But they did not agree to this suggestion and were put to much inconvenience.



Various forms of child labour

## RECOGNISING DIGNITY

People are treated unequally because of their caste, religion, social status and gender. Omprakash and the Qureshis do not deserve to be treated unequally because, being bonafide citizens of democratic India, they have a right to be treated equally. They deserve self-respect and dignity as everyone else. To be treated unequally is a direct violation of one's rights. The Qureshis' dignity and self-respect made them refuse changing their name.

## EQUALITY IN INDIAN DEMOCRACY

As laid down in the Constitution of India, everyone is considered equal, irrespective of his/her religion, caste, creed, tribe, education or economic background. It is everyone's birth right to be treated as equal. It does not mean that inequality in all forms ceases to exist. It means that the principle of equality of all citizens is recognised. Earlier there was no law to protect this right. But now there are several provisions in the Constitution to protect people against

discrimination and ill-treatment and to give them dignity and self-respect. The Fundamental Rights guarantee equality, dignity and self-respect to all citizens of India.

### The following provisions have been laid down in the Constitution :

- That all people are equal before the law. It means that every person, be it the President of India or Rama Devi, who is only a domestic help, has to obey the same laws.
- No one can be discriminated against on the basis of his/her caste, religion, place of birth, property, gender, etc.
- Every person is allowed free access to public places such as hotels, playgrounds, markets, public wells, roads, etc.
- Untouchability has been abolished. Now a person of an upper caste cannot claim to be polluted by the touch of a Dalit or Harijan or a member of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe.

The government has launched several programmes and schemes to improve the lives of the disadvantaged communities. Besides, there are laws in force which guarantee this constitutional Right to Equality.



Parliament

The Parliament in India consists of the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. People elect the members of Lok Sabha which is the cornerstone of our democracy.

A major step taken by the government in order to promote equality is the mid-day meal scheme. It was started for the first time in the state of Tamil Nadu. Later on it was adopted by other states. In 2001 the Supreme Court directed all schools to implement this scheme within six months.



Poor children are now enrolling and attending schools regularly. Literacy rate has increased. It has helped reduce caste prejudice, with children of all castes eating their meals together. It has created a potential for employment growth as well, because women have been employed to do the kitchen work. It has given an opportunity to the poor children to eat at least one square meal a day. Cases of malnutrition have decreased drastically due to the mid-day meal programme. Mothers are free from the worry of cooking lunch and can work at a stretch.



Mid-day meal scheme

In spite of the efforts by the government, there is much to be done. The mid-day meal programme may have increased the number of children studying in schools but there is a great difference between the schools that the rich attend and those that enrol the poor. Even now the Dalits are discriminated against and treated unequally. This is because social changes occur gradually. **Following steps may prove to be beneficial towards eradication of discrimination and inequality :**

- A general awareness programme should be implemented.
- Fear of punishment should be instilled among the public that inequality and discrimination is a crime and is punishable.
- Those practising inequality should be publicly disgraced.
- A feeling of brotherhood should be encouraged in the hearts of all. This has to be emphasised that all humans are born equal, irrespective

of their caste, creed, economic status, etc.

- There should be respect for every person's dignity.
- We should understand that a new-born has no caste or creed. The discrimination is man-made.

## ISSUES OF EQUALITY IN OTHER DEMOCRACIES

Since time immemorial, people of lower classes have been treated with inequality and humiliated by those who belong to higher classes. This stigma is not an issue in India alone. Such social discrimination has been prevalent in many powerful democracies as well. In the United States of America, people of the African-American origin were often looked down upon by the 'white' Americans. The ancestors of the African-Americans were slaves who were brought to America from Africa.



B.R. Ambedkar

"...Nothing is more disgraceful for a brave man than to live life devoid of self-respect."

"...Self-respect is the most vital factor in life. Without it, man is a Cipher."

— B.R. Ambedkar

In the 1950s, African-Americans were allowed only to sit at the back of buses and were forced to stand up and offer their seats to the White Americans. Rosa Parks, an African-American, refused to stand up on 1st December 1955 because she was tired and felt insulted at the humiliation. Her small action gave rise to a huge movement which came to be known as the Civil Rights Movement. Later, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination on the basis of race, religion or national origin in USA. It also promulgated that all schools would be open for African-American children.



Rosa Parks

## CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY

It cannot be said with firm conviction that all democratic countries are completely democratic. Efforts are on by communities as well as individuals to expand the idea of equality and democracy. We should not forget that we have the capacity to spread equality and brotherhood. It is within us.

### Excerpts from Article 15 of the Indian Constitution

Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

- The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth.
- No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or conviction with regard to :
  - access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment.
  - the use of wells, tanks or bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of state funds or dedicated to the use of the general public.

### DID YOU KNOW?

The Government of India passed the Disabilities Act in 1995. It states that persons with disabilities have equal rights. It is the government's duty to provide free education and integrate children with disabilities into mainstream schools. The law also states that all public places like schools etc. should be provided with ramps.

## STRUGGLES FOR EQUALITY

In spite of the fact that the Indian Constitution advocates Right to Equality for every citizen of India, Indian society is grossly unequal. Earlier we have learnt about the conditions of many people who are treated unequally because of their caste, religion, poverty, lack of resources and gender. To refresh our memory, the Indian Constitution recognises all Indians as equal before the law. No person can be discriminated against because of his/her religion, caste, creed, place of birth, gender, etc. All Indian adults have the equal right to vote during elections.

Increasing privatisation in all walks of life and work has resulted in creating wide gap

between the rich and the poor. It is very difficult for the poor to survive with all the inequalities and discriminations they have to put up with. Poverty and non-availability of resources are the two key reasons for people facing inequality in India.

Discrimination on the basis of a person's religion, caste and gender is another significant factor why people are treated unequally in India.

Another major reason why people are treated unequally is discrimination on the basis of religion. Actually, all the ideals or principles that the Indian Constitution stands for, are being severely violated. **The reasons for inequality are**

- Poverty
- Religion
- Caste
- Gender.

Are these not, then, the rights accorded to all Indians by the Constitution of India? Then, why are people like Omprakash Valmiki and the Qureshis being denied their rights? Why is Lata paid little for her strenuous work in her fields? Why is she not paid according to the labour the poor woman puts in? Why is a housewife's work considered of less value than that of a man's work? Why this discrimination against women? Why are girls considered inferior to boys? Why should they be removed from school after their primary education and married off?

Much has to be done by the government and people in order to bring equality for all in all sectors of society, economy and polity.

Some people stand out in a crowd for their efforts in restoring and working for equality and justice in society. They are respected and followed by millions of people. These people may have stood up against an act of discrimination that they faced or witnessed. For example, Gandhiji fought against inequality in South Africa. Nelson Mandela waged a lifelong struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, as we have read, himself faced discrimination in childhood as a Dalit boy. Throughout his life he fought for equality and justice for Dalits.

The struggle for equality goes on and people

form groups to raise issues of equality. To name some :

- Agricultural labourers, slum dwellers, beedi workers, fisherfolk, women's movements, etc.
- Cooperatives, through which the members gain more control over resources and market as well.

When development programmes are executed in hilly and forest areas, they bring with them misfortunes for the poor residents of those areas. Thousands of people are uprooted from their homes where they have lived for centuries. Hundreds of villages are submerged in reservoirs. The flora and fauna of the locality are destroyed. Such is the case when big dams are built. People's livelihoods are also lost when forest areas are declared sanctuaries and national parks.

People living in those areas are forced to leave their homes and move to new areas and again build their homes. Most of these poor people have to relocate themselves to areas unknown to them. This happens in urban areas as well when people living in *bastis* and slums have to give way for new colonies or railway tracks or roads and bridges.

The poor have to find new schools for their children. They have to look for new jobs. They have to build new houses and adapt themselves to the unfriendly environment they are forced into.

### INFOBITS

- ▶ In several cases of injustice meted out to beedi workers, agricultural labourers, etc. cooperatives have been formed to prevent their exploitation.
- ▶ Ethnic minorities face discrimination everywhere. In Britain, ethnic minorities are twice as unlikely to be unemployed as the white people.
- ▶ Barely 60 percent of girls complete primary education in the least developed countries.

### TAWA MATSYA SANGH

In order to fight the problem of displacement,

people come together and form organisations for their rights. One such organisation is the Tawa Matsya Sangh which has fought for the rights of the displaced forest dwellers in the region of the Satpura forests in Madhya Pradesh.

The Tawa river flows through Betul, after originating in the Mahadeo Hills. This river joins the Narmada in Hoshangabad. The Tawa Dam was completed in 1978. It took 20 years to build. The Dam displaced many people who later settled around the reservoir. They had no means of livelihood apart from fishing. Some had small patches of farmland to cultivate.

In 1994, the government auctioned the fishing rights in the Tawa reservoir to private contractors. So the local fishermen were driven away by the contractors who brought cheap labour from outside.

The contractors turned to unfair tricks and threatened those who did not wish to leave. The fishermen were left high and dry, without any means of livelihood. They were beaten and humiliated by the contractors and their people.

So the displaced people decided to form an organisation to fight for their rights. They formed the Tawa Matsya Sangh (TMS). They organised huge rallies. They organised a Chakka Jam, a road blockade in retaliation and demanded their right to continue fishing in the waters of the reservoir.

This made the government consider their rights and it formed a committee to look into the whole affair. The committee found that gross injustice had been done to the local fishermen. The Government decided to give the fishing rights to the people who had been fishing in those waters since a long time and had no other source of income. A five year lease agreement was signed.

Along with the fishing rights, the people went a step further and formed a cooperative to look into their interests. The cooperative increased its income three times.

### Passive Expression Against Inequality

Creative people express themselves differently against inequality and injustice. They pen stories, poems, songs and portray novels to express social discrimination, inequality, injustice and exploitation of the downtrodden. Artists too have been very active in fighting inequality. These people inspire us and give us confidence and hope to struggle against atrocities. Street theatres (Nukkad Natak) also arouse people against issues that are unjust.



A Nukkad Natak in progress

### A Dam - A Boon or a Bane



Tehri dam

A dam is built across a river at sites where one can collect a lot of water. This generally happens in hilly and forested areas. A dam on a river serves multiple purposes. It helps generate hydro-electricity, controls floods, helps in irrigation, fishing, etc.

The reservoir that is formed and the water that collects submerges vast areas of land. Often hundreds of villages and thousands of acres of land are submerged. Thousands of people have to be rehabilitated in new areas.

Homes and hearts are broken as people develop emotional bondage with the area where their forefathers have lived for centuries.

When the Tehri dam in Uttarakhand was built, the old Tehri town and around 100 villages were submerged fully or partially. Nearly one lakh people were displaced.

### THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION AS A LIVING DOCUMENT

The basic concept of all struggles and movements is the fact that all people are equal. It is this very truth that is repeated in the Indian Constitution. The Constitution itself guarantees the right to equality to all people. Many leaders and reformers came forward to propagate the idea of true democracy by fighting for the rights of the destitute and the downtrodden. They fought for the rights of the poor who are weak. They fought for justice to be awarded to all who had been victimised by the rich and the powerful.



Women protesting against violence

In 2001, over 1500 persons attended a public hearing in Lucknow. The aim was to protest violence against women. A group of eminent women played the role of judges and heard around 15 cases of violence against women. The jury highlighted the point that legal framework was not stringent enough to check violence against women. Recently a law has been passed by the government protecting women against domestic violence.

### POINTS TO REMEMBER

- All are equal before the law.
- India is a democratic country where government is formed by elected representatives of people. It is a republic and does not have a hereditary head of state.
- Each adult having attained the age of 18 years has a right to cast his/her vote, irrespective of his/her social or economic background.



- No one can be discriminated against on the basis of his/her caste, creed, religion, place of birth or property.
- Every person is free to go to all public places such as hotels, markets, playgrounds, public wells, parks, etc.
- The Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. demanded equal rights for African-Americans and removal of social discrimination.

## GLOSSARY

- AUTOBIOGRAPHY** : The story of one's own life written by a writer.
- CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT** : A movement that began in USA in the 1950s against the social, racial and economic discrimination against the 'Blacks' (African-Americans) by the 'Whites' (Americans).
- DIGNITY** : To treat oneself and others respectfully.
- UNIVERSAL ADULT FRANCHISE** : This means that the right to vote is given to every adult citizen (18 years and above) without discrimination on grounds of gender, caste, religion, property, etc. This is an essential aspect of democracy.

## TIME TO LEARN

### A. Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs)

- Which of the following books is Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography?
  - Joothan
  - Godan
  - Gulamgiri
  - None of these
- Why was Omprakash Valmiki discriminated against in his school?
  - Because he was poor in studies
  - Because his father was poor
  - Because he was a Dalit
  - Because he was unclean and untidy
- Which of the following statements is incorrect regarding the mid-day meal scheme? [HOTS]
  - This scheme was started in Tamil Nadu
  - This has helped reduce caste inequality
  - Cases of malnutrition have increased
  - Attendance of poor children in schools has gone up
- Which article of Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth?
  - Article 14
  - Article 15
  - Article 16
  - Article 17
- Who called dams 'the temples of modern India'?
  - Mahatma Gandhi
  - Jawaharlal Nehru
  - Sardar Patel
  - B.R. Ambedkar

### B. Match the following

Column A	Column B
1. Age of voting	(a) On 1st December 1955
2. The Civil Rights Act	(b) 18 years and above
3. Rosa Parks refused to stand up from her seat	(c) 1964
4. Indian Constitution	(d) Tamil Nadu
5. Mid-day meals	(e) Equal right to vote
6. Universal Adult Franchise	(f) Article 15



### C. Very short answer type questions

1. What is the occupation of Rama Devi?
2. Which religion was followed by the Qureshis?
3. Name the book written by Omprakash Valmiki.
4. Explain the term Constitution.
5. Which state started the mid-day meal scheme?
6. What is the biggest challenge a modern democracy has to face today?

### D. Short answer type questions

1. What is meant by Universal Adult Franchise?
2. Why and how was Omprakash Valmiki discriminated against?
3. Name two reasons why Rama Devi thinks she is not equal in all respects.
4. Why was the mid-day meal introduced in Tamil Nadu?
5. What is meant by the statement “All persons are equal before the law”?
- 6 Write a short note on the Civil Rights Movement of 1950s in the USA.

### E. Long answer type questions

1. Describe the struggle of Tawa Matsya Sangh.
2. Why is the Indian Constitution called a living document?
3. Write a short note on the provision of equality in Indian democracy.

[HOTS]

### F. Activity

1. Newspapers often carry stories of inequality. Identify and collect stories showing social, economic and religious inequality.  
Paste these stories in your notebook. Write a few lines to show how these stories relative human rights.
2. Visit a school in a nearby village. See how mid-day meal scheme works. Talk to children and the staff. Prepare a note on the advantages of the scheme, and problems, if any.

## LIFE SKILLS

- As a citizen of India you have been provided certain Fundamental Rights. Side-by-side you are expected to follow eleven Fundamental Duties given in the Constitution.

Here is a list of the Fundamental Duties. Tick (✓) mark those which you follow.

1. To abide by the Constitution and respect the National Flag and the National Anthem.
2. To cherish and follow the noble ideals which inspired our national struggle for freedom.
3. To defend the country.
4. To protect the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India.
5. To promote the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India.
6. To preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture.
7. To develop the scientific temper and spirit of inquiry.
8. To protect and improve the natural environment.