

## Equality for what?

In 1820 the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in his magnificently crafted *Philosophy of Right*, had written with some despair of the moral squalor and of the ravages that poverty brings in its wake. The state of poverty, he argued, is not an aberration, it is a product of industrial society, of the overproduction and underconsumption which marks this social order. But it is precisely society that banishes its victims to the twilight zone of collective life. Here, removed from the advantages of solidarity that civil society offers, the poor are reduced to a heap of fragmented atoms, rabble, *poebel*. When the standard of living of a large mass of people falls below a certain subsistence level, he wrote, we see a loss of the sense of right and wrong, of honesty and of self-respect. "Against nature man can claim no right, but once society is established, poverty immediately takes the form of a wrong done to one class by another."

Hegel suggests that poverty is a social phenomenon. One, society is complicit in the creation and recreation of poverty. Destitution, that is, is the outcome of a skewed economy. Two, poverty breeds unfortunate consequences, such as suffering, which seriously demoralises human beings. Three, the existence of large numbers of the poor pose a direct threat to the social order, simply because the poor are (justly) resentful of their exclusion from the benefits of society.

We should be seriously reflecting on Hegel's criticism of a society that refuses to correct the wrongs it has heaped on its own people, in the light of the research findings of the economist Thomas Piketty and his colleague Lucas Chancel.

In a paper aptly titled 'Indian income inequality, 1922-2014: From British Raj to Billionaire Raj?', they conclude that income inequality in India is at the highest level since 1922, when the country's income tax law was conceived, and that the top 1% earners corner 22% of income. These research findings should send a powerful warning signal to power elites, leaders who prefer to concentrate on the politics of beef, brutal repression of dissent, and curtailment of basic human freedoms, even as the lives of thousands of Indians are mired in mind-numbing poverty.

Income inequality in India at its highest level since 1922, says Lucas Chancel

There is more to the proposition that some persons are poor beyond belief, and others are rich beyond belief in India. P is poor, we can say, when she does not possess access to the basic resources which enable q, or s, or m to consume nutritious food, avoid ill health, attend school, take up a job, and own a home, let alone go on holiday or possess a car. This implies that p is not just poor, she is unequal to q, s, or m, since the latter three, unlike p, have access to certain advantages that p does not. Poverty is the effect of inequality as well as the prime signifier of inequality. And inequality is demeaning.

Arguably, inequality is not only a matter of statistics. It is a shattering reflection on the kind of society we live in. Logically, if the economic ordering of society is responsible for ill-being, it is obliged to remedy the wrongs that it has visited upon the heads of the poor. This constitutes a basic code of justice. People who have been wronged are entitled to ask for justice. If justice is not delivered, inequalities are reinforced and compounded over time.

The selfish way to combat inequality

Resultantly, people fated to occupy the lowliest rungs of the social ladder are not only denied access to basic material requirements that enable them to live a decent life, they are likely to be socially overlooked, politically irrelevant except in times of elections when their votes bring parties into power, disdained, and subjected to disrespect in and through the practices of everyday life. To

be unequal is to be denied the opportunity to participate in social, economic, and cultural transactions from a plane of equality.

Starkly put, the presence of massive inequality reflects sharply and pejoratively on the kind of social relations that we find in India. Because these social relationships are indisputably unequal, they cannot but be entrenched in massive discrimination and exploitation. Can we reflect on inequality without taking on exploitation and discrimination? And unless we confront these background inequalities directly, will not inequality continue to be produced and reproduced along with the production and reproduction of a lopsided social order, indeed as an integral part of this order?

Let us not understate the implications of inequality, it violates a basic democratic norm: the equal standing of citizens. Persons have equal standing because each human being has certain capacities in common with other human beings, for instance, the capacity to make her own history in concert with other human beings. Of course the histories that persons make might not be the histories they chose to make, but this is not the issue at hand. What is important is that each person realises this ability.

The everyday embrace of inequality

The principle of equal standing generates at least two robust principles of democratic morality. For one, equality is a relation that obtains between persons in respect of some fundamental characteristic that they share in common. Equality is, morally speaking, a default principle. Therefore, and this is the second postulate, persons should not be discriminated against on grounds such as race, caste, gender, ethnicity, sexual preferences, disability, or class. These features of the human condition are morally irrelevant.

These two postulates of political morality yield the following implications. To treat persons equally because they possess equal standing is to treat them with respect. The idea that one should treat persons with respect not only because some of these persons possess some special skill or talent, for example skilled cricketers, gifted musicians, or literary giants, but because persons are human beings, is by now part of common sense morality. If someone were to ask, 'equality for what', we can answer that equality assures equal standing and respect, and respect is an essential prerequisite for the making of human beings who can participate in the multiple transactions of society from a position of confidence and self-respect. If they cannot do so, the government is simply not taking the well-being of its citizens seriously.

There is urgent need, in the face of government inaction and insensitivity towards people trapped in inequality as a social relation to invoke the collective conscience of Indian citizens. If the right to equality is violated, citizens should be exercised or agitated about this violation. But for this to occur, for society to feel deeply about the right on offer, we have to incorporate the right to equality into political thinking, into our values, and into political vocabularies. The project requires the harnessing of creative imagination and courage on the one hand, and careful reasoning, persuasion, and dialogue on the other. The task also demands the investment of rather high degrees of energy and time. But this is essential because a political consensus on what constitutes, or should constitute the basic rules of society, is central to our collective lives. The political is not a given, it has to be constructed, as Karl Marx had told us long ago, through determined and sustained political intervention.

*Neera Chandhoke is a former Professor of Political Science at Delhi University*

END

crackIAS.com