

## Chapter 5

# Patterns of Social Inequality and Exclusion



*T*he family, caste, tribe and the market – these are the social institutions that have been considered in the last two chapters. In Chapters 3 and 4, these institutions were seen from the point of view of their role in forming communities and sustaining society. In this chapter we consider an equally important aspect of such institutions, namely their role in creating and sustaining patterns of inequality and exclusion.

For most of us who are born and live in India, social inequality and exclusion are facts of life. We see beggars in the streets and on railway platforms. We see young children labouring as domestic workers, construction helpers, cleaners and helpers in streetside restaurants (*dhabas*) and tea-shops. We are not surprised at the sight of small children, who work as domestic workers in middle class urban homes, carrying the school bags of older children to school. It does not immediately strike us as unjust that some children are denied schooling. Some of us read about caste discrimination against children in schools; some of us face it. Likewise, news reports about violence against women and prejudice against minority groups and the differently abled are part of our everyday lives.

This everydayness of social inequality and exclusion often make them appear inevitable, almost natural. If we do sometimes recognise that inequality and exclusion are not inevitable, we often think of them as being ‘deserved’ or ‘justified’ in some sense. Perhaps the poor and marginalised are where they are because they are lacking in ability, or haven’t tried hard enough to improve their situation? We thus tend to blame them for their own plight – if only they worked harder or were more intelligent, they wouldn’t be where they are.

A closer examination will show that few work harder than those who are located at the lower ranks of society. As a South American proverb says – “If hard labour were really such a good thing, the rich would keep it all for themselves!” All over the world, back-breaking work like stone breaking, digging, carrying heavy weights, pulling rickshaws or carts is invariably done by the poor. And yet they rarely improve their life chances. How often do we come across a poor construction worker who rises to become even a petty construction contractor? It is only in films that a street child may become an industrialist, but even in films it is often shown that such a dramatic rise requires illegal or unscrupulous methods.

### ACTIVITY 5.1

Identify some of the richest and some of the poorest people in your neighbourhood, people that you or your family are acquainted with. (For instance a rickshawpuller or a porter or a domestic worker and a cinema hall owner or a construction contractor or hotel owner, or doctor... It could be something else in your context). Try to talk to one person from each group

to find out about their daily routines. For each person, organise the information in the form of an imaginary diary detailing the activities of the person from the time they get up to the time they go to sleep on a typical (or average) working day. Based on these diaries, try to answer the following questions and discuss them with your classmates.

- How many hours a day do each of these persons spend at work? What kind of work do they do – in what ways is their work tiring, stressful, pleasant or unpleasant? What kinds of relationship does it involve with other people – do they have to take orders, give orders, seek cooperation, enforce discipline....? Are they treated with respect by the people they have to deal with in their work, or do they themselves have to show respect for others?

It may be that the poorest, and in some cases even the richest, person you know actually has no real 'job' or is currently 'not working'. If this is so, do go ahead and find out about their daily routine anyway. But in addition, try to answer the following questions.

- Why is the person 'unemployed'? Has he/she been looking for work? How is he/she supporting herself/himself? In what ways are they affected by the fact of not having any work? Is their lifestyle any different from when they were working?

Activity 5.1 invites you to rethink the widely held commonsense view that hard work alone can improve an individual's life chances. It is true that hard work matters, and so does individual ability. If all other things were equal, then personal effort, talent and luck would surely account for all the differences between individuals. But, as is almost always the case, all other things are not equal. It is these non-individual or group differences that explain social inequality and exclusion.

## 5.1 WHAT IS SOCIAL ABOUT SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND EXCLUSION?

The question being asked in this section has three broad answers which may be stated briefly as follows. First, social inequality and exclusion are social because they are not about individuals but about groups. Second, they are social in the sense that they are not economic, although there is usually a strong link between social and economic inequality. Third, they are systematic and structured – there is a definite pattern to social inequalities. These three broad senses of the 'social' will be explored briefly below.

### SOCIAL INEQUALITY

In every society, some people have a greater share of valued resources – money, property, education, health, and power – than others. These *social resources*

can be divided into three forms of capital – *economic capital* in the form of material assets and income; *cultural capital* such as educational qualifications and status; and *social capital* in the form of networks of contacts and social associations (Bourdieu 1986). Often, these three forms of capital overlap and one can be converted into the other. For example, a person from a well-off family (economic capital) can afford expensive higher education, and so can acquire cultural or educational capital. Someone with influential relatives and friends (social capital) may – through access to good advice, recommendations or information – manage to get a well-paid job.

Patterns of unequal access to social resources are commonly called *social inequality*. Some social inequality reflects innate differences between individuals for example, their varying abilities and efforts. Someone may be endowed with exceptional intelligence or talent, or may have worked very hard to achieve their wealth and status. However, by and large, social inequality is not the outcome of innate or ‘natural’ differences between people, but is produced by the society in which they live. Sociologists use the term *social stratification* to refer to a system by which categories of people in a society are ranked in a hierarchy. This hierarchy then shapes people’s identity and experiences, their relations with others, as well as their access to resources and opportunities. Three key principles help explain social stratification:

1. *Social stratification is a characteristic of society, not simply a function of individual differences.* Social stratification is a society-wide system that unequally distributes social resources among categories of people. In the most technologically primitive societies – hunting and gathering societies, for instance – little was produced so only rudimentary social stratification could exist. In more technologically advanced societies where people produce a surplus over and above their basic needs, however, social resources are unequally distributed to various social categories regardless of people’s innate individual abilities.
2. *Social stratification persists over generations.* It is closely linked to the family and to the inheritance of social resources from one generation to the next. A person’s social position is *ascribed*. That is, children assume the social positions of their parents. Within the caste system, birth dictates occupational opportunities. A Dalit is likely to be confined to traditional occupations such as agricultural labour, scavenging, or leather work, with little chance of being able to get high-paying white-collar or professional work. The ascribed aspect of social inequality is reinforced by the practice of *endogamy*. That is, marriage is usually restricted to members of the same caste, ruling out the potential for blurring caste lines through inter-marriage.
3. *Social stratification is supported by patterns of belief, or ideology.* No system of social stratification is likely to persist over generations unless it is widely viewed as being either fair or inevitable. The caste system, for example, is

justified in terms of the opposition of purity and pollution, with the Brahmins designated as the most superior and Dalits as the most inferior by virtue of their birth and occupation. Not everyone, though, thinks of a system of inequality as legitimate. Typically, people with the greatest social privileges express the strongest support for systems of stratification such as caste and race. Those who have experienced the exploitation and humiliation of being at the bottom of the hierarchy are most likely to challenge it.

Often we discuss social exclusion and discrimination as though they pertain to differential economic resources alone. This however is only partially true. People often face discrimination and exclusion because of their gender, religion, ethnicity, language, caste and disability. Thus women from a privileged background may face sexual harassment in public places. A middle class professional from a minority religious or ethnic group may find it difficult to get accommodation in a middle class colony even in a metropolitan city. People often harbour prejudices about other social groups. Each of us grows up as a member of a community from which we acquire ideas not just about our 'community', our 'caste' or 'class' our 'gender' but also about others. Often these ideas reflect prejudices.

**Prejudices** refer to pre-conceived opinions or attitudes held by members of one group towards another. The word literally means 'pre-judgement', that is, an opinion formed in advance of any familiarity with the subject, before considering any available evidence. A prejudiced person's preconceived views are often based on hearsay rather than on direct evidence, and are resistant to change even in the face of new information. Prejudice may be either positive or negative. Although the word is generally used for negative pre-judgements, it can also apply to favourable pre-judgement. For example, a person may be prejudiced in favour of members of his/her own caste or group and – without any evidence – believe them to be superior to members of other castes or groups.

Prejudices are often grounded in **stereotypes**, fixed and inflexible characterisations of a group of people. Stereotypes are often applied to ethnic and racial groups and to women. In a country such as India, which was colonised for a long time, many of these stereotypes are partly colonial creations. Some communities were characterised as 'martial races', some others as effeminate or cowardly, yet others as untrustworthy. In both English and Indian fictional writings we often encounter an entire group of people classified as 'lazy' or 'cunning'. It may indeed be true that some individuals are sometimes lazy or cunning, brave or cowardly. But such a general statement is true of individuals in every group. Even for such individuals, it is not true all the time – the same individual may be both lazy and hardworking at different times. Stereotypes fix whole groups into single, homogenous categories; they refuse to recognise the variation across individuals and across contexts or across time. They treat an entire community as though it were a single person with a single all-encompassing trait or characteristic.



### ACTIVITY 5.2

- Collect examples of prejudiced behaviour from films or novels.
- Discuss the examples you and your classmates have gathered. How are prejudices reflected in the manner a social group is depicted? How do we decide whether a certain kind of portrayal is prejudiced or not?
- Can you distinguish between instances of prejudice that were intentional – i.e., the film maker or writer *wanted* to show it as prejudiced – and unintentional or unconscious prejudice?

If prejudice describes attitudes and opinions, **discrimination** refers to actual behaviour towards another group or individual. Discrimination can be seen in practices that disqualify members of one group from opportunities open to others, as when a person is refused a job because of their gender or religion. Discrimination can be very hard to prove because it may not be open or explicitly stated. Discriminatory behaviour or practices may be presented as motivated by other, more justifiable, reasons rather than prejudice. For example, the person who is refused a job because of their caste may be told that they were less qualified than others, and that the selection was done purely on merit.

## SOCIAL EXCLUSION

**Social exclusion** refers to ways in which individuals may become cut off from full involvement in the wider society. It focuses attention on a broad range of factors that prevent individuals or groups from having opportunities open to the majority of the population. In order to live a full and active life, individuals must not only be able to feed, clothe and house themselves, but should also have access to essential goods and services such as education, health, transportation, insurance, social security, banking and even access to the police or judiciary. Social exclusion is not accidental but systematic – it is the result of structural features of society.

It is important to note that social exclusion is involuntary – that is, exclusion is practiced regardless of the wishes of those who are excluded. For example, rich people are never found sleeping on the pavements or under bridges like thousands of homeless poor people in cities and towns. This does not mean that the rich are being ‘excluded’ from access to pavements and park benches, because they could certainly gain access if they wanted to, but they choose not to. Social exclusion is sometimes wrongly justified by the same logic – it is said that the excluded group itself does not wish to participate. The truth of such an argument is not obvious when exclusion is preventing access to something desirable (as different from something clearly undesirable, like sleeping on the pavement).

Prolonged experience of discriminatory or insulting behaviour often produces a reaction on the part of the excluded who then stop trying for inclusion. For example, ‘upper’ caste Hindu communities have often denied entry into temples for the ‘lower’ castes and specially the Dalits. After decades of such treatment, the Dalits may build their own temple, or convert to another religion like

Buddhism, Christianity or Islam. After they do this, they may no longer desire to be included in the Hindu temple or religious events. But this does not mean that social exclusion is not being practiced. The point is that the exclusion occurs regardless of the wishes of the excluded.

India like most societies has been marked by acute practices of social discrimination and exclusion. At different periods of history protest movements arose against caste, gender and religious discrimination. Yet prejudices remain and often, new ones emerge. Thus legislation alone is unable to transform society or produce lasting social change. A constant social campaign to change awareness and sensitivity is required to break them.

You have already read about the impact of colonialism on Indian society. What discrimination and exclusion mean was brought home to even the most privileged Indians at the hands of the British colonial state. Such experiences were, of course, common to the various socially discriminated groups such as women, *dalits* and other oppressed castes and tribes. Faced with the humiliation of colonial rule and simultaneously exposed to ideas of democracy and justice, many Indians initiated and participated in a large number of social reform movements.

In this chapter we focus on four such groups who have suffered from serious social inequality and exclusion, namely Dalits or the ex-untouchable castes; adivasis or communities referred to as 'tribal'; women, and the differently abled. We attempt to look at each of their stories of struggles and achievements in the following sections.

## 5.2 CASTE AND TRIBE – SYSTEMS JUSTIFYING AND PERPETUATING INEQUALITY

### THE CASTE SYSTEM AS A DISCRIMINATORY SYSTEM

The caste system is a distinct Indian social institution that legitimises and enforces practices of discrimination against people born into particular castes. These practices of discrimination are humiliating, exclusionary and exploitative.

Historically, the caste system classified people by their occupation and status. Every caste was associated with an occupation, which meant that persons born into a particular caste were also 'born into' the occupation associated with their caste – they had no choice. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, each caste also had a specific place in the hierarchy of social status, so that, roughly speaking, not only were occupational categories ranked by social status, but there could be a further ranking within each broad occupational category. In strict scriptural terms, social and economic status were supposed to be sharply separated. For example, the ritually highest caste – the Brahmins – were not supposed to amass wealth, and were subordinated to the secular power of kings and rulers belonging to the Kshatriya castes. On the other

hand, despite having the highest secular status and power, the king was subordinated to the Brahmin in the ritual-religious sphere. (Compare this to the '*apartheid*' system described in Box 5.1)

However, in actual historical practice economic and social status tended to coincide. There was thus a fairly close correlation between social (i.e. caste) status and economic status – the 'high' castes were almost invariably of high economic status, while the 'low' castes were almost always of low economic status. In modern times, and particularly since the nineteenth century, the link between caste and occupation has become much less rigid. Ritual-religious prohibitions on occupational change are not easily imposed today, and it is easier than before to change one's occupation. Moreover, compared to a hundred or fifty years ago, the correlation between caste and economic status is also weaker – rich and poor people are to be found in every caste. But – and this is the key point – the caste-class correlation is still remarkably stable at the macro level. As the system has become less rigid, the distinctions between castes of broadly similar social and economic status have weakened. Yet, between different socio-economic groupings, the distinctions continue to be maintained.

Although things have certainly changed, they have not changed much at the macro level – it is still true that the privileged (and high economic status) sections of society tend to be overwhelmingly 'upper' caste while the disadvantaged (and low economic status) sections are dominated by the so called 'lower' castes. Moreover, the proportion of population that lives in poverty or affluence differs greatly across caste groups. (See Tables 1 and 2) In short, even though there have been major changes brought about by social movements over more than a century, and despite changed modes of production as well as concerted attempts by the state to suppress its public role in independent India, caste continues to affect the life chances of Indians in the twenty-first century.

### Race and Caste – A Cross-Cultural Comparison

### Box 5.1

Just like caste in India, race in South Africa stratifies society into a hierarchy. About one South African in seven is of European ancestry, yet South Africa's White minority holds the dominant share of power and wealth. Dutch traders settled in South Africa in the mid-seventeenth century; early in the nineteenth century, their descendants were pushed inland by British colonisation. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British gained control of what became the Union and then the Republic of South Africa.

To ensure their political control, the White European minority developed the policy of **apartheid**, or separation of the races. An informal practice for many years, apartheid became law in 1948 and was used to deny the Black majority South African citizenship, ownership of land, and a formal voice in government. Every individual was classified by race and mixed marriages were prohibited. As a racial caste, Blacks held low-paying jobs; on average, they earned only one-fourth what whites did. In the latter half of the twentieth century, millions of Blacks were forcibly relocated to 'Bantustans' or 'homelands' – dirt-poor districts with no infrastructure or industry or jobs. All the



homelands together constituted only 14 per cent of South Africa's land, while Blacks made up close to 80 per cent of the country's population. The resulting starvation and suffering was intense and widespread. In short, in a land with extensive natural resources, including diamonds and precious minerals, the majority of people lived in abject poverty.

The prosperous White minority defended its privileges by viewing Blacks as social inferiors. However, they also relied on a powerful system of military repression to maintain their power. Black protestors were routinely jailed, tortured and killed. Despite this reign of terror, Blacks collectively struggled for decades under the leadership of the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela, and finally succeeded in coming to power and forming the government in 1994. Although the Constitution of post-apartheid South Africa has banned racial discrimination, economic capital still remains concentrated in White hands. Empowering the Black majority represents a continuing challenge for the new society.

"I have fought against White domination and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

*Nelson Mandela, 20 April 1964, Rivonia Trial.*

**TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION LIVING BELOW THE POVERTY LINE, 2011-12**

CASTE AND COMMUNITY GROUPS	RURAL INDIA	URBAN INDIA
	Spending Rs.327 or less per person per month	Spending Rs.454 or less per person per month
Scheduled Tribes	45.3	24.1
Scheduled Castes	31.5	21.7
OBCs	22.7	15.4
UC-Muslim	26.9	22.1
UC-Hindu	25.6	12.1
UC-Christian	22.2	05.5
UC-Sikh	06.2	05.0
ALL GROUPS	25.4	13.7

Note: OBC = Other Backward Classes; UC = 'Upper Castes', i.e., not SC/ST/OBC

Source: Report of NITI Aayog, 2014

**TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION THAT IS AFFLUENT, 1999-2000**

CASTE AND COMMUNITY GROUPS	RURAL INDIA	URBAN INDIA
	Spending Rs.1000 or more per person per month	Spending Rs. 2000 or more per person per month
Scheduled Tribes	1.4	1.8
Scheduled Castes	1.7	0.8
OBCs	3.3	2.0
UC-Muslim	2.0	1.6
UC-Hindu	8.6	8.2
UC-Christian	18.9	17.0
UC-Sikh	31.7	15.1
UC-Others	17.9	14.4
ALL GROUPS	4.3	4.5

Note: OBC = Other Backward Classes; UC = 'Upper Castes', i.e., not SC/ST/OBC

Source: Computed from NSSO 55<sup>th</sup> Round (1999-2000) unit-level data on CD

### EXERCISE FOR TABLES 1 AND 2

Table 1 shows the percentage of the population of each caste/community that lives below the official 'Poverty Line' for 1999-2000. There are separate columns for rural and urban India.

Table 2 is organised in exactly the same way except that it shows the percentage of population living in affluence rather than in poverty. 'Affluence' is here defined as a monthly per person expenditure of Rs.1000 for rural India and Rs.2000 for urban India. This is equivalent to a family of five spending Rs.5000 per month in rural India and Rs.10,000 per month in urban India. Please take some time to study the tables carefully before you answer the questions below.

1. What is the percentage of the Indian population that was living below the poverty line in (a) Rural India and (b) Urban India?
2. Which caste/community group has the highest proportion of its members living in extreme poverty in a) rural and b) urban India? Which caste/community has the lowest percentage of population living in poverty?

3. Approximately how many times higher than the national average is the poverty percentage for each of the lower castes (ST, SC, OBC)? Is there a significant rural-urban difference?
4. Which caste/community has the lowest percentage of population living in affluence in rural and urban India respectively? How does this compare with the national average?
5. The affluent population of 'Upper' caste Hindus is roughly how many times larger than the percentage for the 'lower' castes (ST, SC, OBC)?
6. What do these tables tell you about the relative position of the OBCs? Is there a significant rural-urban difference?

## UNTOUCHABILITY

'Untouchability' is an extreme and particularly vicious aspect of the caste system that prescribes stringent social sanctions against members of castes located at the bottom of the purity-pollution scale. Strictly speaking, the 'untouchable' castes are outside the caste hierarchy – they are considered to be so 'impure' that their mere touch severely pollutes members of all other castes, bringing terrible punishment for the former and forcing the latter to perform elaborate purification rituals. In fact, notions of 'distance pollution' existed in many regions of India (particularly in the south) such that even the mere presence or the shadow of an 'untouchable' person is considered polluting. Despite the limited literal meaning of the word, the institution of 'untouchability' refers not just to the avoidance or prohibition of physical contact but to a much broader set of social sanctions.

It is important to emphasise that the three main dimensions of untouchability – namely, exclusion, humiliation-subordination and exploitation – are all equally important in defining the phenomenon. Although other (i.e., 'touchable') low castes are also subjected to subordination and exploitation to some degree, they do not suffer the extreme forms of exclusion reserved for 'untouchables.' Dalits experience forms of exclusion that are unique and not practised against other groups – for instance, being prohibited from sharing drinking water sources or participating in collective religious worship, social ceremonies and festivals. At the same time, untouchability may also involve forced *inclusion* in a subordinated role, such as being compelled to play the drums at a religious event. The performance of publicly visible acts of (self-)humiliation and subordination is an important part of the practice of untouchability. Common instances include the imposition of gestures of deference (such as taking off headgear, carrying footwear in the hand, standing with bowed head, not wearing clean or 'bright' clothes, and so on) as well as routinised abuse and humiliation. Moreover, untouchability is almost always associated with economic exploitation of various kinds, most commonly through the imposition of forced, unpaid (or





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under-paid) labour, or the confiscation of property. Finally, untouchability is a pan-Indian phenomenon, although its specific forms and intensity vary considerably across regions and socio-historical contexts.

### The Everyday Ordeal of a Dalit Scavenger

### Box 5.2

Among the estimated 8 million manual scavengers in India is Narayanamma, who work in a 400 seat public latrine in Anantpur municipality in Andhra Pradesh. From time to time, after the women using the toilet file out, Narayanamma and her fellow workers are called inside. There is no flush. The excrement only piles up at each seat, or flows into open drains. It is Narayanamma's job to collect it with her broom onto a flat, tin plate, and pile it into her basket. When the basket is filled, she carries it on her head to a waiting tractor-trolley parked at a distance of half a kilometre. And then she is back, waiting for the next call from the toilet. This goes on until about ten in the morning, when at last Narayanamma washes up, and returns home.

"*Ai, municipality come, clean this*", is how most people call out to Narayanamma and her fellow workers when they walk down the road.

It is as though we do not have a name, she says. And often they cover their noses when we walk past, as though we smell. We have to wait until someone turns on a municipal tap, or works a hand-pump, when we fill water, so that these are not polluted by our touch. In the tea-stalls, we do not sit with others on the benches; we squat on the ground separately. Until recently, there were separate broken teacups for us, which we washed ourselves and these were kept apart only for our use. This continues to be the practice in villages even in the periphery of Anantpur, as in many parts of the state.

*Source: Adapted from Mander 2001: 38-39.*

The so-called 'untouchables' have been referred to collectively by many names over the centuries. Whatever the specific etymology of these names, they are all derogatory and carry a strongly pejorative charge. In fact, many of them continue to be used as forms of abuse even today, although their use is now a criminal offence. Mahatma Gandhi had popularised the term 'Harijan' (literally, children of God) in the 1930s to counter the pejorative charge carried by caste names.

However, the ex-untouchable communities and their leaders have coined another term, 'Dalit', which is now the generally accepted term for referring to these groups. In Indian languages, the term Dalit literally means 'downtrodden' and conveys the sense of an oppressed people. Though it was neither coined by Dr. Ambedkar nor frequently used by him, the term certainly resonates with his philosophy and the movement for empowerment that he led. It received wide currency during the caste riots in Mumbai in the early 1970s. The Dalit Panthers, a radical group that emerged in western India during that time, used the term to assert their identity as part of their struggle for rights and dignity.



## STATE AND NON-STATE INITIATIVES ADDRESSING CASTE AND TRIBE DISCRIMINATION

The Indian state has had special programmes for the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes since even before Independence. The 'Schedules' listing the castes and tribes recognised as deserving of special treatment because of the massive discrimination practiced against them were drawn up in 1935, by the British Indian government. After Independence, the same policies have been continued and many new ones added. Among the most significant additions is the extension of special programmes to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) since the early 1990s.

The most important state initiative attempting to compensate for past and present caste discrimination is the one popularly known as 'reservations'. This involves the setting aside of some places or 'seats' for members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in different spheres of public life. These include reservation of seats in the State and Central legislatures (i.e., state assemblies, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha); reservation of jobs in government service across all departments and public sector companies; and reservation of seats in educational institutions. The proportion of reserved seats is equal to the percentage share of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in the total population. But for the OBCs this proportion is decided differently. The same principle is extended to other developmental programmes of the government, some of which are exclusively for the Scheduled Castes or Tribes, while others give them preference.

In addition to reservations, there have been a number of laws passed to end, prohibit and punish caste discrimination, specially untouchability. One of the earliest such laws was the Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850, which disallowed the curtailment of rights of citizens due solely to change of religion or caste. The most recent such law was the Constitution Amendment (Ninety Third Amendment) Act of 2005, which became law on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2006. Coincidentally, both the 1850 law and the 2006 amendment related to education. The 93<sup>rd</sup> Amendment is for introducing reservation for the Other Backward Classes in institutions of higher education, while the 1850 Act was used to allow entry of Dalits to government schools. In between, there have been numerous laws, of which the important ones are, of course, the Constitution of India itself, passed in 1950; and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989. The Constitution abolished untouchability (Article 17) and introduced the reservation provisions mentioned above. The 1989 Prevention of Atrocities Act revised and strengthened the legal provisions punishing acts of violence or humiliation against Dalits and adivasis. The fact that legislation was passed repeatedly on this subject is proof of the fact that the law alone cannot end a social practice. In fact, as you will have seen from newspapers and the media, cases of discrimination including atrocities against Dalits and adivasis, continue to take place all over India today. The particular case mentioned in Box 5.3 is only

one example; you can find numerous others in the newspapers and media.

State action alone cannot ensure social change. In any case, no social group howsoever weak or oppressed is only a victim. Human beings are always capable of organising and acting on their own – often against very heavy odds – to struggle for justice and dignity. Dalits too have been increasingly active on the political, agitational, and cultural fronts. From the pre-Independence struggles and movements launched by people like Jyotiba Phule, Iyotheddas, Periyar, Ambedkar and others (See Chapter 3) to contemporary political organisations like the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh or the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti of Karnataka, Dalit political assertion has come a long way. (For an example of a contemporary struggle, see Box 5.3) Dalits have also made significant contributions to literature in several Indian languages, specially Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu and Hindi. (See Box 5.4 which features a short poem by the well known Marathi Dalit poet, Daya Pawar.)

### ACTIVITY 5.3

Obtain a copy of the Constitution of India. You can get it from your school library, from a bookshop, or from the Internet

(web address: <http://indiacode.nic.in/>).

Find and list all the articles and sections (laws) that deal with the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, or with caste-related problems like Untouchability. You can make a chart of the most important laws and put them up in your class.

### D for Dalit, D for Defiance

Gohana is a small, dusty town on the Sonapat-Rohtak highway of Haryana with billboards promising progress... Past the town square, Gohana's largest dalit neighbourhood, Valmiki Colony, has risen from the ashes. On 31 August 2005, it was looted and burnt by a mob of Jats after a Jat youth was killed in a scuffle with some dalit youngsters. Dalits had fled their homes fearing attacks by Jats after the murder; the patrolling police had chosen not to stop the mobs from torching 54 dalit houses. "The arson was the Jats' way of teaching the dalits a lesson," said Vinod Kumar, whose house was burnt. "The police, administration and the government are dominated by Jats; they simply watched our houses burn."

Five months later, the burnt houses have been rebuilt, their facades painted in bright pink, red and green. Marble tiles with bright pictures of Valmiki adorn the facades of every house, asserting the dalit identity of the residents. "We had to return. It is our home," said Kumar, sitting on a newly acquired sofa in the drawing room of his house painted blue.

Kumar embodies the spirit of the dalits of Gohana. In his early 30s, he is not the scavenger the caste society ordered him to be, but a senior assistant in an insurance company. Most dalits have embraced education and stepped across the line of control of the caste system. "There are many of us who have a masters degree and work in private and government jobs. Most of our boys go to school and so do the girls," he said. (...) The young men of the Valmiki Colony are not the stereotyped, submissive, suffering dalits that one would traditionally expect to encounter. Dressed in imitation Nike shoes and Wrangler jeans, their body language is defiant. However, the journey of upward social mobility remains tough for the vast majority of

### Box 5.3

landless dalits in Haryana. "Most boys drop out after high school because of acute poverty," said Sudesh Kataria, an assistant engineer working for a multinational. He has a diploma in electrical engineering from the Industrial Training Institute, Gurgaon. Kataria's best friend at ITI, a Jat, once invited him to a family wedding but insisted that he shouldn't reveal his identity. "At the wedding a guest asked me about my caste and I lied. Then he asked me about my village and I told him the truth. He knew my village was a dalit village." A fight broke out between the hosts and the guests — how can they let a dalit in? "They washed the chair I sat on and threw me out," Kataria recalls.

Kataria wants a new life for the dalits — he campaigns throughout the villages of Gurgaon with other educated dalits. "Our people will rise, stronger and powerful. We need to unite. And once we unite and fight back, there will be no Gohanas or Jhajjars. Not any more."

(Source: Adapted from an article by Basharat Peer, in *Tehelka* February 18, 2006)

## The City

by Daya Pawar

One day someone digs up a twentieth century city  
and ends on this observation.  
Here's an interesting inscription:  
'This water tap is open to all castes and religions'.  
What could it have meant:  
That this society was divided?  
That some were high while others were low?  
Well, all right, then this city deserved burying—  
Why did they call it the machine age?  
Seems like the Stone Age in the twentieth century.

## Box 5.4

## THE OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES

Untouchability was the most visible and comprehensive form of social discrimination. However, there were a large group of castes that were of low status and were also subjected to varying levels of discrimination short of untouchability. These were the service and artisanal castes who occupied the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. The Constitution of India recognises the possibility that there may be groups other than the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes who suffer from social disadvantages. These groups – which

need not be based on caste alone, but generally are identified by caste – were described as the 'socially and educationally backward classes'. This is the constitutional basis of the popular term 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs), which is in common use today.

Like the category of the 'tribe' (see Chapter 3), the OBCs are defined negatively, by what they are not. They are neither part of the 'forward' castes at the upper end of the status spectrum, nor of the Dalits at the lower end. But since caste has entered all the major Indian religions and is not confined to Hinduism alone, there are also members of other religions who belong to the backward castes and share the same traditional occupational identification and similar or worse socio-economic status.

For these reasons, the OBCs are a much more diverse group than the Dalits or adivasis. The first government of independent India under Jawaharlal Nehru appointed a commission to look into measures for the welfare of the OBCs. The First Backward Classes Commission headed by Kaka Kalelkar submitted its report in 1953. But the political climate at the time led to the report being sidelined. From the mid-fifties, the OBC issue became a regional affair pursued at the state rather than the central level.

The southern states had a long history of backward caste political agitation that had started in the early twentieth century. Because of these powerful social movements, policies to address the problems of the OBCs were in place long before they were discussed in most northern states. The OBC issue returned to the central level in the late 1970s after the Emergency when the Janata Party came to power. The Second Backward Classes Commission headed by B.P. Mandal was appointed at this time. However, it was only in 1990, when the central government decided to implement the ten-year old Mandal Commission report, that the OBC issue became a major one in national politics.

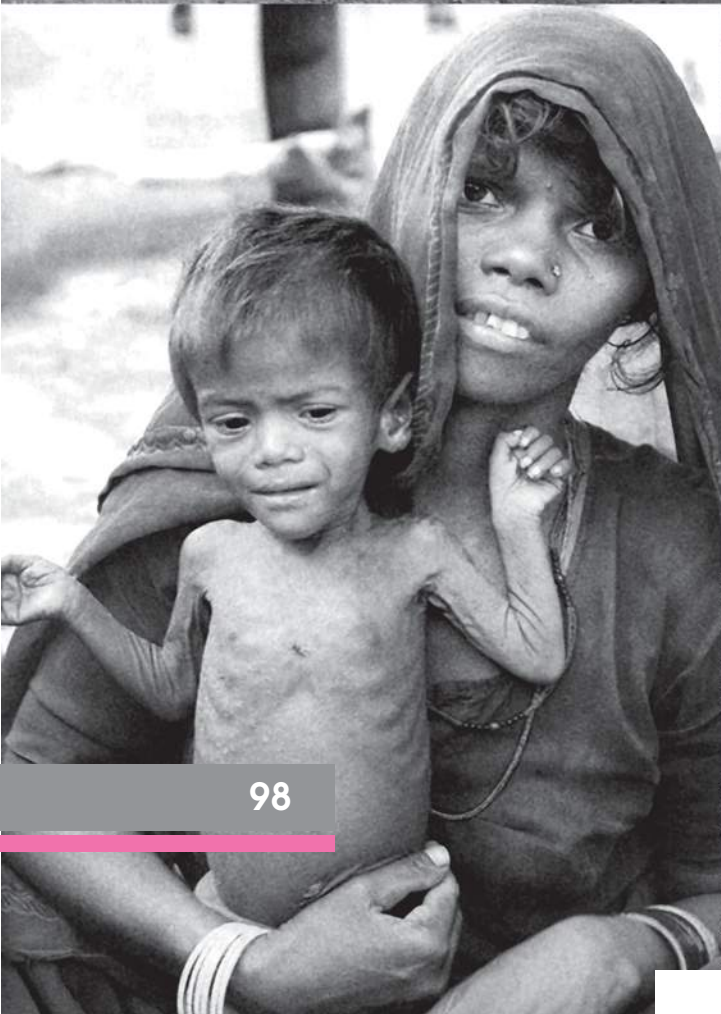
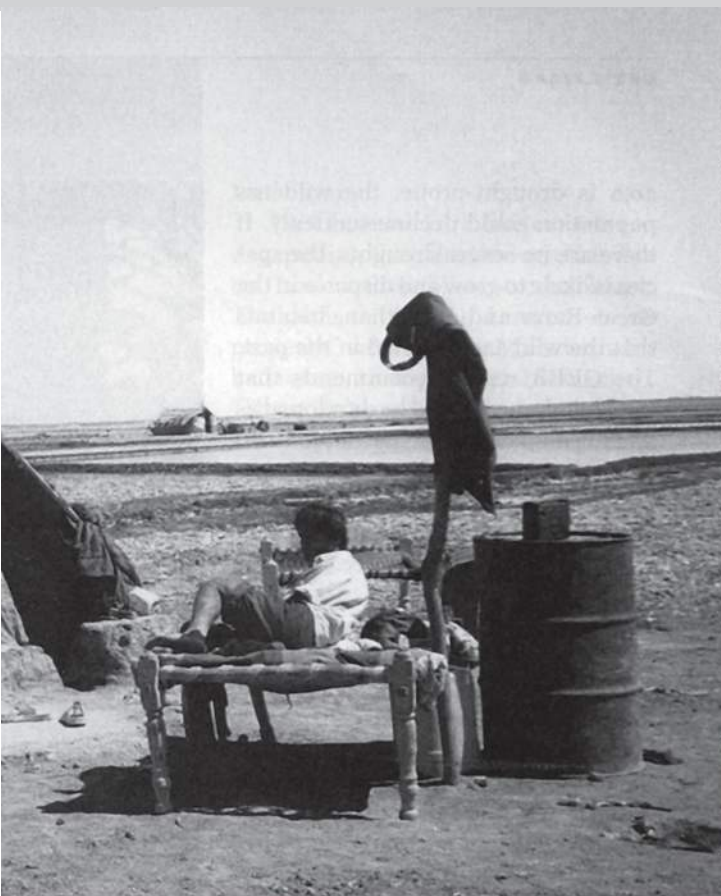
Since the 1990s we have seen the resurgence of lower caste movements in north India, among both the OBCs and Dalits. The politicisation of the OBCs allows them to convert their large numbers – recent surveys show that they are about 41% of the national population – into political influence. This was not possible at the national level before, as shown by the sidelining of the Kalelkar Commission report, and the neglect of the Mandal Commission report.

The large disparities between the upper OBCs (who are largely landed castes and enjoy dominance in rural society in many regions of India) and the lower OBCs (who are very poor and disadvantaged, and are often not very different from Dalits in socio-economic terms) make this a difficult political category to work with. However, the OBCs are severely under-represented in all spheres except landholding and political representation (they have a large number of MLAs and MPs). Although the upper OBCs are dominant in the rural sector, the situation of urban OBCs is much worse, being much closer to that of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes than to the upper castes.

## ADIVASI STRUGGLES

Like the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes are social groups recognised by the Indian Constitution as specially marked by poverty, powerlessness and social stigma. The *jana* or tribes were believed to be 'people of the forest' whose distinctive habitat in the hill and forest areas shaped their economic, social and political attributes. However, ecological isolation was nowhere absolute. Tribal groups have had long and close association with Hindu society and culture, making the boundaries between 'tribe' and 'caste' quite porous. (Recall the discussion of the concept of tribe in Chapter 3).







In the case of adivasis, the movement of populations from one area to another further complicates the picture. Today, barring the North-Eastern states, there are no areas of the country that are inhabited exclusively by tribal people; there are only areas of tribal *concentration*. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, non-tribals have moved into the tribal districts of central India, while tribal people from the same districts have migrated to plantations, mines, factories and other places of employment.

In the areas where tribal populations are concentrated, their economic and social conditions are usually much worse than those of non-tribals. The impoverished and exploited circumstances under which adivasis live can be traced historically to the pattern of accelerated resource extraction started by the colonial British government and continued by the government of independent India. From the late nineteenth century onwards, the colonial government reserved most forest tracts for its own use, severing the rights that adivasis had long exercised to use the forest for gathering produce and for shifting cultivation. Forests were now to be protected for maximising timber production. With this policy, the mainstay of their livelihoods was taken away from adivasis, rendering their lives poorer and more insecure. Denied access to forests and land for cultivation, adivasis were forced to either use the forests illegally (and be harassed and prosecuted as 'encroachers' and thieves) or migrate in search of wage labour.

The Independence of India in 1947 should have made life easier for adivasis but this was not the case. Firstly, the government monopoly over forests continued. If anything, the exploitation of forests accelerated. Secondly, the policy of capital-intensive industrialisation adopted by the Indian government required mineral resources and power-generation capacities which were concentrated in Adivasi areas. Adivasi lands were rapidly acquired for new mining and dam projects. In the process, millions of adivasis were displaced without any appropriate compensation or rehabilitation. Justified in the name of 'national development' and 'economic growth', these policies were also a form of internal colonialism, subjugating adivasis and alienating the resources upon which they depended. Projects such as the Sardar Sarovar dam on the river Narmada in western India and the Polavaram dam on the river Godavari in Andhra Pradesh will displace hundreds of thousands of adivasis, driving them to greater destitution. These processes continue to prevail and have become even more powerful since the 1990s when economic liberalisation policies were officially adopted by the Indian government. It is now easier for corporate firms to acquire large areas of land by displacing adivasis.

Like the term Dalit, the term Adivasi connotes political awareness and the assertion of rights. Literally meaning 'original inhabitants', the term was coined in the 1930s as part of the struggle against the intrusion by the colonial government and outside settlers and moneylenders. Being Adivasi is about shared experiences of the loss of forests, the alienation of land, repeated displacements since Independence in the name of 'development projects' and much more.

In spite of the heavy odds against them and in the face of their marginalisation many tribal groups have been waging struggles against outsiders (called 'dikus') and the state. In post-Independence India, the most significant achievements of Adivasi movements include the attainment of statehood for Jharkhand and Chattisgarh, which were originally part of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh respectively. In this respect adivasis and their struggles are different from the Dalit struggle because, unlike Dalits, adivasis were concentrated in contiguous areas and could demand states of their own.

### **In the Name of Development — Adivasis in the Line of Fire**

### **Box 5.5**

The new year brought death to Orissa. On 2 January 2006, police opened fire on a group of adivasis, killing twelve and injuring many others. For the past 23 days, the Adivasis had blocked the state highway at Kalinganagar, peacefully protesting against the take-over of their farmlands by a steel company. Their refusal to surrender their land was a red rag to an administration under pressure to expedite industrial development in the state. The stakes were high — not only this piece of land but the entire policy of accelerated industrialisation would be jeopardised if the government were to entertain the adivasis' demands. The police were brought in to forcibly clear the highway. In the confrontation that followed, twelve adivasi men and women lost their lives. Many of them were shot in the back as they were trying to run away. When the dead adivasis' bodies were returned to their families, it was found that the police had cut off their hands, the men's genitals and the women's breasts. The corpses' mutilation was a warning — we mean business.

The Kalinganagar incident, like many horrors before it and after, briefly made the headlines and then disappeared from public view. The lives and deaths of poor adivasis slid back into obscurity. Yet their struggle still continues and by revisiting it, we not only remind ourselves of the need to address ongoing injustice, but also appreciate how this conflict encapsulates many of the key issues in the sphere of environment and development in India today. Like many adivasi-dominated parts of the country, Kalinganagar in Jajpur district of central Orissa is a paradox. Its wealth of natural resources contrasts sharply with the poverty of its inhabitants, mainly small farmers and labourers. The rich iron ore deposits in the area are state property and their 'development' means that Adivasi lands are compulsorily acquired by the state for a pittance. While a handful of local residents may get secure jobs on the lower rungs of the industrial sector, most are impoverished even further and survive on the edge of starvation as wage-labourers. It is estimated that 30 million people, more than the entire population of Canada, have been displaced by this land acquisition policy since India became independent in 1947 (Fernandes 1991). Of these, almost 75 per cent are, by the government's own admission, 'still awaiting rehabilitation'. This process of land acquisition is justified as being in the public interest since the state is committed to promoting economic growth by expanding industrial production and infrastructure. It is claimed that such growth is necessary for national development.

To these arguments has been added a new justification. Since 1990, the Indian government has adopted a policy of economic liberalisation — divesting the state of its welfare functions and dismantling the institutional apparatuses regulating private firms. Economic policy has been re-oriented to maximise foreign

exchange earnings, with concessions and subsidies given to Indian and foreign firms to encourage them to invest in production for export. Kalinganagar's iron ore attracted increased interest due to the booming international demand for steel and spurred a steel company, which had bought land from the Orissa state government, to start work on a new steel plant by building a wall enclosing the factory site. It was the construction of this wall that sparked off protests leading to the killing of adivasis. The state government had forcibly acquired this land from them years ago by paying them a few thousand rupees per acre. Since the meagre compensation did not enable adivasis to invest in an alternative livelihood, they had continued to live in the area and cultivate the land that legally no longer belonged to them (after acquiring the land, the administration had not put it to any use). The move in December 2005 to enclose this land directly deprived adivasis of their sole source of livelihood. Their desperation was fuelled by anger when they learnt that the state government had sold the acquired land to the steel firm at a price roughly ten times the compensation amount paid to the original owners. Adivasis took to the streets, refusing to give up the land that they survived on.

The struggle of adivasis in Orissa and its violent reprisal highlight how conflicts over land and related natural resources remain central to the challenge of India's development. Kalinganagar is now marked along with Narmada, Singrauli, Tehri, Hirakud, Koel Karo, Suvarnarekha, Nagarhole, Plachimada and many other sites, on the map of environmental conflicts in India. Like the others, its contours too reflect the deep social and political divides that characterise contemporary India.

To read more about the Kalinganagar issue see: Frontline, v. 23, n.1, Jan 14-27, 2006 or the People's Union for Civil Liberties report at <http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Dalit-tribal/2006/kalinganagar.htm>

### 5.3 STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY AND RIGHTS

Because of the obvious biological and physical differences between men and women, gender inequality is often treated as natural. However, despite appearances, scholars have shown that the inequalities between men and women are social rather than natural. For example, there are no biological reasons that can explain why so few women are found in positions of public power. Nor can nature explain why women generally receive a smaller or no share in family property in most societies. But the strongest argument comes from the societies that were different from the 'normal' or common pattern. If women were biologically unfit to be inheritors and heads of families, how did matrilineal societies (as the Nairs of Kerala used to be, and as the Khasis of Meghalaya still are) work for centuries? How have women managed to be successful farmers and traders in so many African societies? There is, in short, nothing biological about the inequalities that mark the relations between women and men. Gender is thus also a form of social inequality and exclusion like caste and class, but with its own specific features. In this section we will look at how gender inequality came to be recognised as inequality in the Indian context, and the kinds of responses that this recognition produced.

The women's question arose in modern India as part of the nineteenth century middle class social reform movements. The nature of these movements varied from region to region. They are often termed as middle class reform movements because many of these reformers were from the newly emerging western educated Indian middle class. They were often at once inspired by the democratic ideals of the modern west and by a deep pride in their own democratic traditions of the past. Many used both these resources to fight for women's rights. We can only give illustrative examples here. We draw from the anti-sati campaign led by Raja Rammohun Roy in Bengal, the widow remarriage movement in the Bombay Presidency where Ranade was one of the leading reformers, from Jyotiba Phule's simultaneous attack on caste and gender oppression, and from the social reform movement in Islam led by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan.

Raja Rammohun Roy's attempts to reform society, religion and the status of women can be taken as the starting point of nineteenth century social reform in Bengal. A decade before establishing the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, Roy undertook the campaign against "sati" which was the first women's issue to receive public attention. Rammohun Roy's ideas represented a curious mixture of Western rationality and an assertion of Indian traditionality. Both trends can be located in the over arching context of a response to colonialism. Rammohun thus attacked the practice of *sati* on the basis of both appeals to humanitarian and natural rights doctrines as well as Hindu *shastras*.

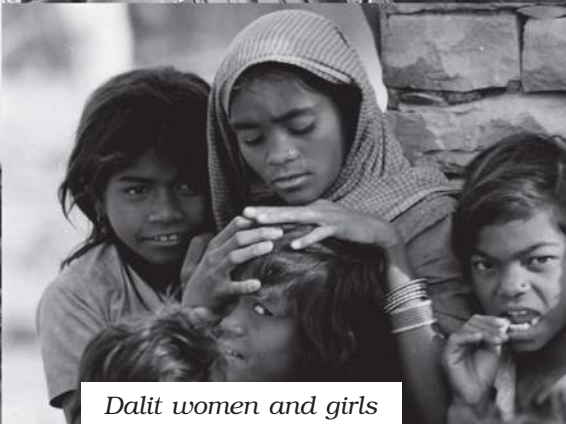
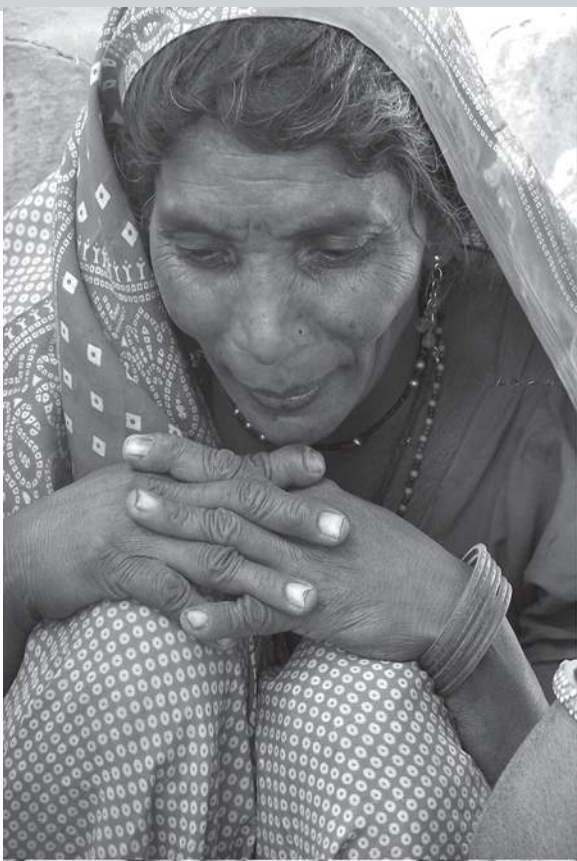
The deplorable and unjust treatment of the Hindu upper caste widows was a major issue taken up by the social reformers. Ranade used the writings of scholars such as Bishop Joseph Butler whose *Analogy of Religion* and *Three Sermons on Human Nature* dominated the moral philosophy syllabus of Bombay University in the 1860s. At the same time, M.G. Ranade's writings entitled the *The Texts of the Hindu Law on the Lawfulness of the Remarriage of Widows* and *Vedic Authorities for Widow Marriage* elaborated the *shastric* sanction for remarriage of widows.

While Ranade and Rammohun Roy belonged to one kind of nineteenth century upper caste and middle class social reformers, Jotiba Phule came from a socially excluded caste and his attack was directed against both caste and gender discrimination. He founded the Satyashodak Samaj with its primary emphasis on "truth seeking". Phule's first practical social reform efforts were to aid the two groups considered lowest in traditional Brahmin culture: women and untouchables. (See Chapter 3)

### ACTIVITY 5.4

- Find out about a social reformer in your part of the country. Collect information about her/him.
- Read an autobiography/biography of any social reformer.
- Can you see any of the ideas they fought for existing today in our everyday lives or in our constitutional provisions.







### ACTIVITY 5.5

- Make a list of professions in which women are involved today.
- Can you think of any educational field where women are barred today? Perhaps the recent discussion on women in the Indian armed forces may throw some light on this.

As in the case of other reformers, a similar trend of drawing upon both modern western ideas as well as the sacred texts characterised Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's efforts to reform Muslim society. He wanted girls to be educated, but within the precincts of their homes. Like Dayanand Saraswati of the Arya Samaj, he stood for women's education but sought for a curriculum that included instruction in religious principles, training in the arts of housekeeping and handicrafts and rearing of children. This may appear very stereotypical today. One has to however realise that once rights such as education for women were accepted it started a process that finally made it impossible to confine women to only some kinds of education.

It is often assumed that social reform for women's rights was entirely fought for by male reformers and that ideas of women's equality are alien imports. To learn how wrong both these assumptions are, read the following extracts from two books written by women, *Stree Purush Tulana* written in 1882 and *Sultana's Dream* written in 1905.

*Stree Purush Tulana* (or Comparison of Men and Women) was written by a Maharashtrian housewife, Tarabai Shinde, as a protest against the double standards of a male dominated society. A young Brahmin widow had been sentenced to death by the courts for killing her newborn baby because it was illegitimate, but no effort had been made to identify or punish the man who had fathered the baby. *Stree Purush Tulana* created quite a stir when it was published. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was born in a well-to-do Bengali Muslim family, and was lucky to have a husband who was very liberal in outlook and

#### From *Stree Purush Tulana* 1882

#### Box 5.6

...Who are these women you give such names to? Whose womb did you take your birth in? Who carried the killing burden of you for nine months? Who was the saint who made you the light in her eye, ...How would you feel if someone said about your mother, "That old chap's mother, you know, she's a gateway to hell". Or your sister, "That so-and so-s' sister, she's a real storehouse of deceit". ...Would you just sit and listen to their bad words?...

...Then you get blessed with a bit of education and promoted to some important new office- and you start feeling ashamed of your first wife. Money works its influence on you and you begin to say to yourself, what does a wife matter after all? Don't we just give them a few rupees a month and keep them at home like any other servant, to do the cooking and look after the house? You begin to think of her like some female slave you've paid for....If one of your horses died it wouldn't take long to replace it, and there's no great labour needed to get another wife either. ..The problem is Yama hasn't got time to carry off wives fast enough, or you'd probably get through several different ones in one day!

### From *Sultana's Dream* (1905)

### Box 5.7

...“What is the matter, dear?” she said affectionately.  
 “I feel somewhat awkward,” I said, in a rather apologising tone, “as being a purdahnishin woman I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled.”  
 “You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm...”  
 ...I became very curious to know where the men were. I met more than a hundred women while walking there, but not a single man.  
 “Where are the men?” I asked her.  
 “In their proper places, where they ought to be.”  
 “Pray let me know what you mean by ‘their proper places.’”  
 “Oh, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors.”  
 “Just as we are kept in the zenana?”  
 “Exactly so.”  
 “How funny.” I burst into a laugh. Sister Sara laughed too.

encouraged her education first in Urdu and later in Bengali and English. She was already a successful author in Urdu and Bengali when she wrote *Sultana's Dream* to test her abilities in English. This remarkable short story is probably the earliest example of science fiction writing in India, and among the first by a woman author anywhere in the world. In her dream, Sultana visits a magical country where the gender roles are reversed. Men are confined to the home and observe ‘purdah’ while women are busy scientists vying with each other at inventing devices that will control the clouds and regulate rain, and machines that fly or ‘air-cars’.

Apart from the early feminist visions there were a large number of women’s organisations that arose both at the all India and local levels in the early twentieth century. And then began the participation of women in the national movement itself. Not surprisingly women’s rights were part and parcel of the nationalist vision.

In 1931, the Karachi Session of the Indian National Congress issued a declaration on the Fundamental Rights of Citizenship in India whereby it committed itself to women’s equality. The declaration reads as follows:

1. All citizens are equal before the law, irrespective of religion, caste, creed or sex.
2. No disability attaches to any citizen, by reason of his or her religion, caste, creed or sex, in regard to public employment, office of power or honour, and in the exercise of any trade or calling.

### ACTIVITY 5.6

- Find out the names of a few women’s organisations that emerged both at the national level and in your part of the country.
- Find out about any woman who was part of a tribal or peasant movement, a trade union or one of the many strands of the freedom movement.
- Identify a novel, a short story or play in your region which depicted the struggle of women against discrimination.

### ACTIVITY 5.7

Divide your class into groups. Each group can choose a topic relating to women's rights on which they must collect information from newspapers, radio, television news or other source. Discuss your findings with your classmates.

Possible examples of topics could be :

- 33 per cent reservation for women in elected bodies
  - Domestic violence
  - Right to employment
- ... there are many other topics of interest, choose the ones which interest you.

3. The franchise shall be on the basis of universal adult suffrage.
4. Woman shall have the right to vote, to represent and the right to hold public offices. (Report of the Sub-Committee, 'Woman's Role in Planned Economy', 1947: 37-38).

Two decades after Independence, women's issues re-emerged in the 1970s. In the nineteenth century reform movements, the emphasis had been on the backward aspects of tradition like sati, child marriage, or the ill treatment of widows. In the 1970s, the emphasis was on 'modern' issues – the rape of women in police custody, dowry murders, the representation of women in popular media, and the gendered consequences of unequal development. The law was a major site for reform in the 1980s and after, specially when it was discovered that many laws of concern to women had not been changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As we enter the twenty-first century, new sites of gender injustice are emerging. You will recall the discussion of the declining sex ratio in Chapter 2. The sharp fall in the child sex ratio and the implicit social bias against the girl child represents one of the new challenges of gender inequality.

Social change whether on women's rights or any other issue is never a battle won once and for all. As with other social issues the struggle is long, and the women's movement in India will have to fight to defend hard won rights as well as take up new issues as they emerge.

## 5.4 THE STRUGGLES OF THE DISABLED

The differently abled are not 'disabled' only because they are physically or mentally 'impaired' but also because society is built in a manner that does not cater to their needs. In contrast to the struggles over Dalit, adivasi or women's rights, the rights of the disabled have been recognised only very recently. Yet in all historical periods, in all societies there have been people who are disabled. One of the leading activists and scholars of disability in the Indian context, Anita Ghai, argues that this invisibility of the disabled can be compared to the *Invisible Man* of Ralph Ellison. Ellison's novel of that name is a famous indictment of racism against African Americans in the USA.

*I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in the circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of*

*hard distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, figments of their imagination. Indeed everything and anything except me (Ellison, 1952:3).*

The very term 'disabled' is significant because it draws attention to the fact that public perception of the 'disabled' needs to be questioned.

Here are some common features central to the public perception of 'disability' all over the world —

- Disability is understood as a biological given.
- Whenever a disabled person is confronted with problems, it is taken for granted that the problems originate from her/his impairment.
- The disabled person is seen as a victim.
- Disability is supposed to be linked with the disabled individual's self perception.
- The very idea of disability suggests that they are in need of help.

In India labels such as 'disability', 'handicap', 'crippled', 'blind' and 'deaf' are used synonymously. Often these terms are hurled at people as insults. In a culture that looks up to bodily 'perfection', all deviations from the 'perfect body' signify abnormality, defect and distortion. Labels such as *bechara* (poor thing) accentuate the victim status for the disabled person. The roots of such attitudes lie in the cultural conception that views an impaired body as a result of fate. Destiny is seen as the culprit, and disabled people are the victims. The common perception views disability as retribution for past *karma* (actions) from which there can be no reprieve. The dominant cultural construction in India therefore looks at disability as essentially a characteristic of the individual. The popular images in mythology portray the disabled in an extremely negative fashion.

The very term 'disabled' challenges each of these assumptions. Terms such as 'mentally challenged', 'visually impaired' and 'physically impaired' came to replace the more trite negative terms such as 'retarded', 'crippled' or 'lame'. The disabled are rendered disabled not because they are biologically disabled but because society renders them so.

*We are disabled by buildings that are not designed to admit us, and this in turn leads to a range of further disablements regarding our education, our chances of gaining employment, our social lives and so on. The disablement lies in the construction of society, not in the physical condition of the individual (Brisenden 1986 :176).*

### ACTIVITY 5.8

- Find out how different traditional or mythical stories depict the disabled. You can draw from any of the innumerable regional sources of folklore, mythology, and traditional storytelling in India, or from any other part of the world.
- Make a list of popular sayings or proverbs that show negative attitudes towards the disabled.







The social construction of disability has yet another dimension. There is a close relationship between disability and poverty. Malnutrition, mothers weakened by frequent childbirth, inadequate immunisation programmes, accidents in overcrowded homes, all contribute to an incidence of disability among poor people that is higher than among people living in easier circumstances. Furthermore, disability creates and exacerbates poverty by increasing isolation and economic strain, not just for the individual but for the family; there is little doubt that disabled people are among the poorest in poor countries.

### ACTIVITY 5.9

Have you seen the film, *Iqbal*? If you have not do try and see it. It is an exemplary story of the grit and determination of a young boy who cannot hear and speak but has a passion for cricket, and finally, excels as a bowler. The film brings alive not just Iqbal's struggles but also the many possible concrete meanings of the phrase 'differently abled'.

### Approach adopted for the disabled in Census 2011

### Box 5.8

- Information on disability was collected during the Population Enumeration phase of Census 2011 through 'Household Schedule'.
- Questions on disability were asked about all persons in the household.
- Enumerators were instructed to contact the disabled person in the households, besides the respondent, to collect information.
- All types of household, i.e., 'National', 'Institutional' and 'Household', were covered.
- Questions and instructions on disability were finalised after field trial of selected questions, including disability in selected area, extensive deliberation with civil society organisations and nodal ministry, pre-test of all census questions covering rural/urban sample in all States.
- Aspects considered in finalising questions were simple nomenclature of the types/categories of disability for easy comprehension by both enumerator and respondent, relevance of data for the planners and policy-makers, feasibility of canvassing the question to cover all types of disabilities as listed in the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995, and the National Trust Act, 1999.
- A filter question to ascertain disability status was included.
- Attempt was made to collect information on eight types of disabilities as against five in Census 2001.
- The placement of the question on disability in the census Schedule was changed and the question was brought forward.
- Special efforts were made to improve the coverage, which included extensive training to the enumerators and publicity measures.

Significantly, efforts to redress the situation have come from the disabled themselves. The government has had to respond as the notification in Box 5.8 shows.

It is only recently with the efforts of the disabled themselves that some awareness is building in the society on the need to rethink 'disability'. This is illustrated by the newspaper report on the next page.

Recognition of disability is absent from the wider educational discourse. This is evident from the historical practices within the educational system that continue to marginalise the issue of disability by maintaining two separate streams – one for disabled students and one for everyone else.

**'Disabled-unfriendly' Courts****Box 5.9**

Describing the non-consideration of handicapped persons for Judge posts as an "exclusive" policy of the higher judiciary, a senior jurist says by continuing to ignore the handicapped, the judiciary is violating a statutory mandate. "The High Court building itself is far from disabled-friendly." All entrances to the actual court complex are preceded by staircases and none of them has a ramp. Even to access the limited elevator facility, one has to climb several steps.

The condition of the City Civil Court, where many handicapped or injured persons come to depose before courts hearing accident claims cases, is worse. One can see disabled, injured or old people being carried up the stairs by their companions, says an advocate.

*The Hindu* Wednesday 2 August 2006.

In this chapter we have looked at caste, tribe, gender and disability as institutions that generate and perpetuate inequalities and exclusion. However, they also provoke struggles against these inequalities. Historically, the understanding of inequality in the social sciences has been dominated by notions of class, race and more recently, gender. It is only later that the complexities of other categories like caste and tribe have received attention. In the Indian context, caste, tribe and gender are now getting the attention they deserve. But there remain categories that are still in need of attention, such as those who are marginalised by religion or by a combination of categories. More complex formations like groups defined by religion and caste, gender and religion, or caste and region are likely to claim our attention in the near future, as shown, for example, by the Sachar Committee Report on the Muslim community.

In a country where half the children in the age group of 5-14 are out of school how can there be space for children with disabilities, especially if a segregated schooling is being advocated for them? Even if the legislation optimistically tries to make education available to every disabled child, parents in a village do not see this as instrumental in achieving any autonomy for their disabled child. What they would prefer is perhaps a better way of fetching water from the well and improved agricultural facilities. Similarly, parents in an urban slum expect education to be related to a world of work that would enhance their child's basic quality of life.

Source: Anita Ghai 'Disability in the Indian Context', 2002:93

**Box 5.10****Activity 5.10**

Read the quote above and discuss the different ways in which the problems of the disabled are socially constituted.

1. How is social inequality different from the inequality of individuals?
2. What are some of the features of social stratification?
3. How would you distinguish prejudice from other kinds of opinion or belief?
4. What is social exclusion?
5. What is the relationship between caste and economic inequality today?
6. What is untouchability?
7. Describe some of the policies designed to address caste inequality.
8. How are the Other Backward Castes different from the Dalits (or Scheduled Castes)?
9. What are the major issues of concern to adivasis today?
10. What are the major issues taken up by the women's movement over its history?
11. In what sense can one say that 'disability' is as much a social as a physical thing?

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## Notes