

Béteille on Inequality

B. Debroy

André Béteille's new collection of essays (Béteille, 1983b) examines various aspects of equality and inequality with particular attention being devoted to the Indian context. They deal with alternative normative conceptions of inequality as well as with the morphological forms and dimensions of inequality. These six essays were delivered as lectures in London (Auguste Comte Memorial Lecture), Cambridge (Kingsley Martin Memorial Lecture), Sydney, and Bombay (Ambedkar Memorial Lectures, Duhr Memorial Lecture, G.L. Mehta Memorial Lecture). As an indicator of the crystallisation of Béteille's views on inequality, it is pertinent to note that all of the lectures, except the Sydney one, were delivered between March 1979 and March 1982. The lecture in Sydney on "Harmonic and Disharmonic Social Systems" was delivered in 1971. It is not that these six essays have not been published earlier. "Equality of Opportunity" is the only one to be available in published form for the first time. Of the remaining five, three had been published as Béteille (1979, 1980, 1981a), while the other two had been published in slightly different form as Béteille (1971, 1981b). Apart from the question of accessibility, the justification for bringing together these six essays in one volume is the usual one of a certain common thread running through all of them.

"The Idea of Natural Inequality" focuses on the two types of inequality that might exist, at least conceptually, in human society. On the one hand, there are inequalities that are fostered by social institutions. Examples of such social inequalities could be inequalities in status, inequalities in rewards, inequalities in opportunities and inequalities in power. As opposed to this type of social inequality, one can conceptualise inequalities which can be variously defined as non-social or extra-institutional. This refers for example, to the unequal natural talents or endowments of different individuals. Béteille's essay addresses itself to the question of whether it is ever possible logically to demonstrate the existence of such natural inequalities.