Artha Vijnana
June 1985 V 27 N 2, 96-114

Equality of Opportunity and the Equal Distribution of Benefits

Andre Beteille

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

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

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