

7th – Struggles for Equality



History is full of examples of persons who have come together to fight against inequality and for issues of justice. The Indian constitution recognizes all Indians as equal before the law and states that no person can be discriminated against because of their religion, gender, caste or whether they are rich or poor. All adults in India have the equal right to vote during elections and this 'power over the ballot box' has been used by people to elect or replace their representatives. But this feeling of equality that the ballot box provides, because the vote of the person is as good as that of another, does not extend to most people's lives.

The increasing privatization of health services and the neglect of government hospitals have made it difficult for most poor people to get good quality health care. These people do not have the resources to afford expensive private health services.

Similarly, the man who sells juice does not have the resources to compete with all of the major companies who sell branded drinks through expensive advertising. Swapna does not have sufficient resources to grow cotton and, so, has to take a loan from the trader to grow her crop. This forces her to sell her cotton at a lower price. Poverty and the lack of resources continue to be a key reason why so many people's lives in India are highly unequal.

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

Often, poverty and lack of dignity and respect for certain communities and groups come together in such powerful ways that it is difficult to identify where one aspect of inequality ends and the other begins. As you have read, Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim girls drop out of school in large numbers. This is a combined outcome of poverty, social discrimination and lack of good quality school facilities for these communities.

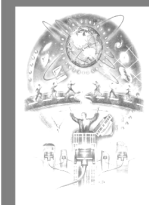
Struggles for equality: Throughout the world- in every community, village, city and town- you will find that there are some people who are known and respected because of their fight for equality. These people may have stood up against an act of discrimination that they faced or which they witnessed. Or they may be well-respected because they treat all persons with dignity and are, therefore, trusted and called upon to resolve issues in the community.

Often, some of these persons become more widely recognized because they have the support or represent large number of people who have united to address a particular issue of inequality. In India, there are several struggles in which people have come together to fight for issues that they believe are important. The Tawa Matsy Sangh in Madhya Pradesh is another example of people coming together to fight for an issue. There are many such struggles such as those among beedi workers, fisherfolk, agricultural laborers, slum dwellers and each group is struggling for justice in its own way. There are also many attempts to form cooperatives or other collective ways by which people can have more control over resources.

Tawa Matsya Sangh: When dams are built or forest areas declared sanctuaries for animals, thousands of people are displaced. Whole villages are uprooted and people are forced to go and build new homes, start new lives elsewhere. Most of these people are poor. In urban areas too, bastis in which poor people live are often uprooted. Some of them are relocated to areas outside the city. Their work as well as their children's schooling is severely disrupted because of the distance



7th – Struggles for Equality



from the outskirts of the city to these locations. This displacement of people and communities is a problem that has become quite widespread in the country. People usually come together to fight against this. There are several organizations across the country fighting for the rights of the displaced.

Tawa Matsya Sangh: a federation of fisher worker's cooperatives -an Organization fighting for the Satpura forest in Madhya Pradesh.

Originating in the Mahadeo hills of Chindwara district, the Tawa flows through Betul, before joining the Narmada in Hoshangabad.

The Tawa dam began to be built in 1958 and was completed in 1978. It submerged large areas of forest and agricultural land. The forest dwellers were left with nothing. Some of the displaced people settled around the reservoir and apart from their meager farms found a livelihood in fishing. They earned very little. In 1994, the government gave the rights for fishing in the Tawa reservoir to private contractors. These contractors drove the local people away and got cheap labour from outside. The contractors began to threaten the villagers. Who did not want to leave, by bringing in hoodlums? The villagers stood united and decided that it was time to set up an organization and do something to protect their rights.

The newly formed Tawa Matsya Sangh(TMS) organized rallies and a chakka jam (road blockade), demanding their right to continue fishing for their livelihood. In response to their protests, the government created a committee to assess the issue. The committee recommended that fishing rights be granted to the villagers for their livelihood. In 1996, the Madhya Pradesh government decided to give to the people displaced by the Tawa dam the fishing rights for the reservoir. A five-year's lease agreement was signed two months later. On January 2, 1997, people from 33 villages of Tawa started the New Year with the first catch.

The Indian constitution as a living document: The foundation of all movements for justice and the inspiration for all the poetry and songs on equality is the recognition that all people are equal. The Indian constitution recognizes the equality of all persons. Movements and struggles for equality in India continuously refer to the Indian constitution to make their point about equality and justice for all. The fish workers in the **Tawa Matsya Sangh** hope that the provisions of the constitution will become a reality through their participation in this movement.

By constantly referring to the constitution they use it as a 'living document', i.e., something that has real meaning in our lives. In a democracy, there are always communities and individuals trying to expand the idea of democracy and push for a greater recognition of equality on existing as well as new issues. Issues of equality are central to a democracy.

This is the core of the struggle for equality in a democracy. The dignity and self-respect of each person and their community can only be realized if they have adequate resources to support and nurture their families and if they are not discriminated against

Dam:

A dam is built across a river at sites where one can collect a lot of water. This forms a reservoir and as the water collects it submerges vast areas of land. This is because the wall of the dam across the river is high and the water spreads over a large area.