

Idea of Inequality in *Andre' Beteille's* Writings: A Review

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Abstract: *Professor Beteille is one of the most distinguished sociologist and a prominent architect who had given a new perspective for the understanding of society in India. His writings on inequality are unique for its balanced approach devoid of taking extreme philosophical positions. Apart from inspiring scholars in social sciences through his lectures and writings on comparative sociology, caste, class and power, his contributions to the pursuit of science and scholarship in the study of inequality is also of serious academic interest cutting across disciplines. In the present paper, the authors have taken into account some of the Beteille's major writings on inequality and related aspects and attempted to understand them as constituting a single larger framework.*

Keywords: Inequality, Equality, Merit, Rewards.

1. Introduction

Inequality is a difficult term to be discussed. In addition to the complexities in defining it, one who takes a neutral position in discussing it will also be easily labeled as a supporter of it. Beteille has also recognized this trend in his writings. He contends, "... in an age where the ideal of equality has so much fascination, any attempt to interpret inequality runs the risk of being condemned as being by implication a justification of it." He refrained from any attempt to define it as well. Despite this challenge, he attempted to show how inequalities are inherent in the makeup of all human societies and what are the various elements constitutes it.

He has also refrained from giving utopian expectations to the people about the scope of a discipline in this regard. According to him, "people either expect too much from the science of society or are too easily disposed to believe the worst about it". But, the scope of a discipline is mostly limited to make the actors aware of their predicaments in the society. We are of the opinion that his analysis of inequality shall also be understood within this parameter. One who forego these limitations of any discipline in the understanding and analysis of inequality in his writings will run the risk of indiscriminating an academic writing from a propagandist one. His writings on inequality must be understood as a sociological reasoning for a major social issue.

2. Discussion

Beteille portrayed the universal nature of inequality, though he does not support it. On the one hand, the examples he has given from various societies and anthropological studies show his belief that inequality cannot be eradicated completely and its disposal in one form will reappear in some other form. On the other hand, he suggested the ways by which it can be tamed and made benevolent. According to him, "...every statement that inequalities are decreasing in some spheres of social life seems to call forward a counter statement that they are increasing in others". This also shows

his departure from the structural position of understanding various systems of stratification as timeless and static.

This notion of changes in the type of inequality must not end up in the misunderstanding that the manifestations of inequality itself are changing. According to him, the forms and elements of inequality can change with space and time for the fact that inequality is static as one or another form of it is always present in all human societies. The following idea is worth of mentioning here. According to Beteille, though we attempt to ensure equality of opportunity in a competitive society, equality can be there till the end of the competition and not after it. Thus, equality of opportunity need not always ensure equality in result. In fact, it leads to inequality of reward and reproduction of inequality in another form. This is one of the most practical and obvious observation that one can notice in the contemporary India.

I

Conceptualizing equality by recognizing the differences in the natural abilities of human beings has always been a problematic issue in social sciences. Beginning from the early philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Tocqueville and classic sociologists like Marx, Weber, Durkheim, this has been a serious matter for consideration while defining equality. Most of them believed both in the importance of equality and differences in the (natural) abilities of human beings. Many of them maintained that human beings are endowed with unequal abilities whereas equality is a necessity for progress. This made it complex for them to understand equality, as finding a balance between differing 'natural abilities' and thirst for equality has always been a paradox.

Beteille believes in the transfer of intellectual traditions from one generation to the other and is of paramount importance in his writings. He always refers to other scholars in his writings and critically scrutinizes their ideas in relation to that of his. But at the same time, he has no hesitation to refute any idea which is for him utopian. He always does it in an academically qualified way. His writings on inequality are of no exception. His position on Durkheim's ideas of

equality is a best example of it. Beteille contends, "Durkheim did not deny that the division of labour might lead to the increase of inequality; only, he maintained that such inequality, when established by free competition, would be just and efficient". But Beteille, unlike Durkheim, is more concerned about the endless nature of inequality and its reproduction. His analysis of inequality cannot be understood in isolation from the ideas of the above mentioned authors. Beteille's position in relation to Marx is also different in this regard. According to Marx, division of labour is not a necessary condition for social existence. But, Beteille gently disagreed with it. He says that one can find different forms of division of labour in different societies across the world. One form of it may replace/dominate the other. But, it does not mean that the division of labour itself could be abolished.

Beteille has attempted to answer the question of natural inequality in a qualified way with a lot of examples from the happenings in the society. Rousseau's idea has been used by Beteille as an anchorage to develop his idea of natural inequality. Rousseau struggled to disprove the presence of natural inequality. For Rousseau, the inequalities in social institutions increased the natural inequalities of mankind. At the same time, his stand that the nature of distributes 'talents' unequally among men needs serious attention. Though Rousseau questioned the role of nature alone in creating inequalities, according to us, this also shows his belief in natural inequalities leading to social inequalities as he has downplayed the role of social institutions to a mere catalyst.

In this regard, though the approach is different, Beteille aligned himself with Rousseau. For him, Rousseau's conceptualization is ambiguous as he talks at the same time about (i) natural inequality among men, and (ii) inequality among men in a state of nature (society). In this conceptualization, one can talk about natural inequality among men in a state of nature only in axiomatic terms and thus the concept of natural inequality dominates the entire conceptualization. He further elaborates: "...there are inequalities specific to the state of society, created by it and without any basis at all in the state of nature. On the other hand, the state of society magnifies and transforms, sometimes beyond recognition, natural inequalities that have been carried over into it from a prior state". It is the latter claim about the societal magnification and transformation of natural inequalities which would serve as an answer to the dilemma of the relation between natural and social inequality.

For Beteille, creation on inequality is a necessity for mankind to organize effectively. But, unlike animals, human beings seek and create reasons to fit themselves in the division of labour. Concept of natural inequality is an artificial reason created by them to justify certain forms of social inequality. The gradation of qualities depends on the scales used to assess. Rewards will be distributed in accordance with the gradation of the qualities. Therefore, for Beteille, it is not only the allocation of rewards, but the recognition of merit itself is a social process. According to him, the society would decide what constitutes merit. It is also clear from this explanation that the scales used to

recognize merit could not be natural but, are socially constructed.

Illustrations given by him in this regard are exemplary and simple. According to him, the artificial ranking of varnas in Hindu society is a good example. Hindu's believe that varnas represent natural order of gunas. The latter as a 'natural quality' decides the status of the person in the order of things. But for an outsider/non-believer, this hierarchy is arbitrary. He can also understand the social process involved in the gradation of gunas. His reference to racial discrimination in relation to the distinction between phenotype and genotype is of worth mentioning here. He asks, if natural inequality exist devoid of social process of gradation, why phenotype (he refers to race in terms of skin colour) is reckoned with than genotype (blood groups) for gradation of people though geneticists say genotype is more important? Thus he establishes the role of culture code over the genetic code in the gradation process.

He concludes that the idea of natural inequality has little independent value in itself. In fact, according to him, its value depends on the reality of social inequality. He says, "if there had been no social inequality to contend with, it is doubtful that people would give very much thought to natural inequality." He also contends that it is through this social process of gradation, people are made to recognize inequality as inherent and justify social inequality as a manifestation of 'natural inequalities'. For him, this is important as inequality is a necessity of modern men for the distribution of rewards based on merits wherein rewards and merits are decided through a social process.

II

The above section on Beteille's treatment of the idea of natural inequality will lead one to query for the source of inequality. It is a commonsensical question that if natural inequalities are not, what else the source of inequality is. He attempted to answer this question by attributing the significance to evaluation and organization, which are necessarily present in all societies. For him, evaluation is an inherent feature of culture and organization is an inherent quality of the distribution of force, power and domination. Both (evaluation and organization) are the two sources of inequality. The interplay between these two is also significant for Beteille.

To recognize evaluation as a source of inequality, his understanding of the term 'intelligence' and of its appraisal in the society is important. He acknowledges the importance given to intelligence over other attributes such as beauty, health, bodily strength etc. in the modern society. Here the importance of evaluation could be recognized at two levels; (i) the social process by which intelligence (or any other attribute in a society) has been awarded supremacy over other attributes, and (ii) the process by which we give value to differences of intelligence level (in comparison to differences in beauty, health etc. in the same sense). In both the cases, there involves a process of evaluation which makes them (intelligence, beauty, health etc.) the elements of inequality. In fact, they are just differences, in the first sense of the term, before undergoing the evaluation process. Therefore, differences become inequality through an

evaluation process which leads to the gradation of differences. Thus, for him, the process of evaluation, which is inherent in human nature, is one of the sources of inequality. The role of culture in this process of evaluation is also of paramount importance in his writings.

According to him, organization is the second source of inequality. Men in all societies have rights and obligations. For the distribution and realization of them, proper organization of them is essential. In this process, the play of power is important to be understood. Power makes it convenient for some to define the obligations of the rest. But, he is of the view that most of the philosophers considered power and state interchangeably. He cautioned that such a view of power will lead us to either consider state as the only source of power or to think that with the elimination of state, power cease to exist. For him, subordination and domination are inherent in all human societies and prefers to see state as one among the various organizations of power. What is also important in his conceptualization is the condition for the recognition of the play of power. He says that the nature of any social system is to define the rights and obligations of people towards each other to a certain extent. And, the play of power is visible only if such definitions of rights and obligations are ambiguous to some extent.

Thus for Beteille, evaluation and organization are the two sources of inequality. Inequality is inherent in the human society and culture and power are the roots which facilitates evaluation and organization. Though, there is no direct mentioning about the connection between evaluation and organization, it is not a difficult task for a careful reader to understand that both are present in any given society and could not be separately understood.

III

To an extent, it is clear now that some forms of inequality are always present in the arrangements of all societies. The two sources of inequality mentioned are also universal. But, the forms of inequality it creates differ according to the culture and the dominant form of power in the particular society. Though evaluation and organization are the two sources of inequality, how inequality has been reproduced remains a question. According to Beteille, inequalities never cease to exist. Irrespective of its form, one can also see the reproduction of it in all societies. It means that the social position that a particular set of people enjoy in a given society will be mostly transferred to the next generation. Earlier caste played an important role in this regard. Is still the role of caste vital in this regard? If not, what else is important? These questions need to be addressed taking into account the social reality wherein achieved status overturns the ascribed one in many ways.

For him, it is very true that the spirit of modern society is the possibility for greater upward social mobility by the liberation of the individual from the shackles of his group identity. Each individual is free to earn a better social position in the society by virtue of his hard work. But in practice, there is certain amount of stability in the social position that different individuals enjoy and in many cases this position/status has been transferred to their own heirs or

next generation. Thus, the existing inequality between different people, if not groups, has been reproduced so as to maintain the status quo. For instance, the amount of power, prestige and social esteem those members in a family enjoy will be in most of the cases transferred to the successive generations of the same family members cutting across caste and class. We may find families in our neighbourhood with three generations of doctors or engineers or businessmen etc. On the other hand, it is also not uncommon to see families which survive on casual or other manual works for generations. Beteille has extended his analysis of inequality to bring this phenomenon of reproduction of inequality under the ambit of his understanding.

He acknowledged the fundamental changes taken place in the social mechanism of the reproduction of inequality. For him, it is the institutions of family and school which play an active role comparing to that of caste in the reproduction of inequality. Existence of inequality among the members of the same caste is the best example in this regard. Occupational and economic status of family play a vital role in this regard as it determines the life chances. To support the argument, his following explanation is worth of mentioning here. It is an obvious fact that different families are differently endowed in terms of their means and motivations. For instance, the atmosphere in which a child grows up differs according to the occupational and economic status of their parents. Their quality of schooling will also differ. Accordingly, their access to the amount and type of resources would also vary. He is cautious not to define these resources only in terms of wealth and income. He has included the importance of cultural capital (knowledge, skills etc...) and social capital (network of relationships partly acquired from the past) in addition to that of the material one. Therefore, by virtue of better cultural, social and material capitals that the children in the wealthy families enjoy during competitions, they have an upper hand over the rest. Thus, the status quo gets maintained and inequality sustained even for generations. Thus, he had drawn attention to the importance of the institution of family in the reproduction of inequality.

3. Conclusion

Thus, Beteille's writing on inequality is definitely a complete perspective. This has opened a new avenue for the understanding and analysis of inequality in the modern society. Contemporariness of his writings and the applicability of his conceptual framework stand testimony for his effervescent scholarship on the study of inequality. His seminal writings on inequality such as; *Natural Inequality*, *Two Sources of Inequality*, *Individualism and Inequality*, *A Critique on Homo Hierarchicus and Homo Aequalis* (original emphasis Louis Dumont), and the *Reproduction of Inequality* needs to be considered as parts of a single framework on inequality. This framework emerged from the writings of Beteille on inequality has the ability to overcome the problem of understanding inequality from its own manifestations.

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