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Poverty— A challenge to human rights

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Abstract

Human rights are regarded as basic for the development of personality of any person. It covers the whole range of civil liberty, political rights and socio-economic rights. It is well documented in the UN declaration of Universal Human Rights. In fact, different schools of thought explain the nature and status of human rights differently. As a result, we see divergent policies are to be followed by the states regarding the issue of human rights. However, in the post-cold war phase, the discussion and dialogue on human rights are found to closely relate with the moral ingredients of liberalism. On the other hand, poverty is a socio-economic issue. It (poverty) is the inability of the people to fulfill their basic needs to lead a life with dignity. Poverty is the major challenge of the realization of human rights. Throughout the world the poorest people are found to be excluded from enjoyment of human rights. They compel to spend their lives in severe inhuman conditions. In such backdrop, the present study attempts to focus on the current human rights thinking and practices as well. Side by side it also illustrates, based on secondary data, how poverty violates human rights and finally it gives suggestions for safeguarding human rights for all members in our human community.

Keywords: Poverty, human rights, structural adjustment programmes, sustainable development goals

Introduction

The concept of human rights is a nebulous one and is comparatively recent origin in the social science discourses. It comes from the concept of natural rights. It is said that it has a long past but a short history ^[1]. The concept of human rights is based on the principle of human reason. It emanates from the sense of right and wrong, good and evil of human being. It is commonly said that human rights are those rights to which an individual is entitled by virtue of his/her status of human being. These rights are inherent in human dignity and as such are inalienable. Human rights are viewed as universal moral rights which aim at the elimination of inhuman treatment to any person in society and also the security of every person of our human family with basic needs of life. It covers the whole range of civil liberty, political rights and socio-economic rights. It, in fact, is well documented in the UN declaration of Universal Human Rights (UDHR) on 10 December, 1948. This document is regarded as the starting point of current human rights thinking and practices as well.

In fact, despite having the tension to a certain extent between Western liberal democracies and the socialist states, a broad consensus was found among the member states of UNO at the platform of General Assembly regarding formulating the content of Universal Human Rights document (UDHR). We see the influence of both ideologies- liberalism and socialism- in the process of formulation the content of the declaration. The declaration consists of thirty articles with one preamble. The preamble states that the 'recognition of the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings and their inalienable rights is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world' ^[2]. The cluster articles three to twenty one deal with the civil liberties and political rights and the other cluster articles twenty two to twenty seven deal with socio-economic and cultural rights.

Human rights are regarded as basic for the development of personality of any person, and without these rights he or she cannot be truly happy in life. The document of UDHR draws due attention of the policy makers to ensure an adequate standard of living for all people in the world. It provides a coherent framework for the policy makers both at national and international levels to eradicate poverty and make sure a decent standard living for all human beings in the world.

Methodology

This paper aims at narrating the current human rights thinking and practices as well. Side by side it also illustrates, based on secondary data, how poverty violates human rights and finally it argues the necessity to eradicate poverty for the promotion and protection of human

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rights for all the members in our human community. The study is based on secondary data which has been collected from the different relevant literature consisting of research studies both published and unpublished, journals, information also collected from internet and publications by different researchers.

Human rights and the role of the state

UDHR provides a normative framework for the policy makers to protect and promote the most important interests of all human beings. However, different states are found to take different public policies for promoting human rights based on their ideological different stand points. It is a matter of fact that, different schools of thought explain the nature and status of human rights differently. As a result, we see divergent policies are to be followed by the states regarding the issue of human rights.

Although both types of rights-civil and political, social and economic rights- are enshrined in UDHR and subsequently adopted international Covenants (the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)) and officially given equal importance by the UNO, but in practice civil and political rights are found to give much more emphasis by the western democratic states compared to socio-economic and cultural rights. Western democracies officially follow liberal and capitalist approach of development and see human rights basically 'as an expression of liberal individualism' [3]. Liberal individualism - a philosophy - gives soul importance to the individual rights and insists on minimal role of the state in economic activities of individuals. It seeks to formulate public policy in such a manner that allows individuals maximize their own advantages. It treats competitive market society as the model of social organization where state has no role in redistributive transfers of property among its citizens. The advocates of this philosophy do not reject the fact of inequality regarding distribution of property among the members in society. But they explain it as a natural phenomenon and argue that any artificial social policy designed to disturb this process will lead to wastage of the human resources and also social progress. They reject welfare state and treat free market society as an essential condition of maximization of individual advantages. One of the proponent of this philosophy, Herbert Spencer holds the view that, if the state gives any support to the incapable, the imprudent and the weak it would amount to depriving the capable, the prudent and the strong of their genuine share and thereby impeding social progress [4]. Another exponents, Nozik, Hayek hold the view that, the right to property is an important ingredient of individual liberty. They were not worried about the plight of the poor and largely opposed to the concept of welfare state.

On the contrary, socialist countries precedence to economic rights compared to civil and political rights documented in UDHR. The advocates of socialism argue that, economic rights of persons are most important element of human rights and without recognition of these rights it is hardly possible for a man to enjoy other kinds of human rights in practice. These rights are the prerequisite to enjoy other kinds of human rights by human beings in reality. Hence, the discussion of economic rights is very important in any debate and dialogue on human rights at national as well as international levels. The spokesmen of socialist countries

repeatedly expressed this above statement in various international conventions related to human rights. The proponents of socialism put emphasis on the role of the state in eradicating the existing inequality regarding property distribution and also extension of adequate opportunity to the poor and under privileged people in society to improve their miserable condition. As a result, they can be able to enjoy human rights in a true sense for self-development.

However, after the collapse of the USSR in 1989 and the rapid growth of global capitalism, the discussion and dialogue on human rights are found to closely relate with the moral ingredients of liberalism. Many scholars argue that for the promotion and protection of human rights, it is required to remove the obstacles on the way of actualization of free market society. It is said that 'an unregulated, free market capitalist system not only delivers economic development, but also promote important political and social values such as freedom of choice and individual human rights' [5]. But, the existing inequality in the distribution of property creates obstacle for a large number of people to effectively participate in the open market system. As a result, poor become poorer and they are being excluded to enjoy human rights in a minimal extent.

Poverty: a violation of human rights

Poverty is a socio-economic issue. There are many definitions of poverty and therefore many ways to analyze it. UNDP attempts to take a more comprehensive approach to poverty analysis. 'It (poverty) is not simply a lack of adequate income; it is a cruel mix of human deprivation in knowledge, health, dignity and rights, obstacle to participation and lack of voice' [6]. On the other hand, World Bank put emphasis on the low income as the soul indicator to identify the poor people across the world. We commonly say that, poverty is the inability of the people to fulfill their basic needs to lead a live with dignity.

However, identification of poverty with low income is a convenient way. This yardstick, in fact, has widely been in use by the national and international organizations to measure poverty. Reviewing the purchasing power in different parts of the world, World Bank decides time to time the poverty line and it decided poverty line at \$1.90 per day on October 2015. It was estimated by the World Bank that, on September, 2019 ten percent of the world population or 734.5 million people lived on less than \$1.90 a day [7]. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of poor people would enormously be increased. In a report published on 7th October, 2020, the World Bank estimates that the COVID-19 push an additional 150 million people into extreme poverty in 2021 and eight out of 10 'new poor' will be in middle income countries [8]. It is important to note here that, women and girls comprise the majority of the world's poorest people.

Poverty exists in every part of the world but it is found to be mostly confined to the regions of Southeast Asia, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Worldwide promotion of neoliberal economic policies by the agents of globalization has been accompanied by rising levels of inequality within and among states. A UNDP report (2014) reveals the fact that, between 1990 and the 2000s inequality in developed countries increased by nine per cent and in less developed countries by eleven per cent [9].

Poverty is the greatest challenge on the way of realizing human rights. Throughout the world the poorest people are

found to be excluded from enjoyment of human rights. They compel to spend their lives in inhuman conditions. They have very little access to food, shelter, save drinking water, health care facilities, and also education. These are regarded as basic necessities for human living. The lack of these basic amenities leads to make short the span of lives of the poor. It is estimated that almost 6.2 million children under the age of 15 years die every year mostly from preventable diseases^[10]. The number of undernourished people in the world has been on the rise over the years, and in 2018 it was counted near about 821.6 million, corresponding to about one in every ten people suffered from hunger in the world^[11]. Hence, The UN High Commissioner for human rights Mary Robinson commented that 'extreme poverty was the worst violation of human rights in the world today'^[12]. It is observed in a final draft report of the guiding principles on extreme poverty and human rights that, "Persons living in poverty are confronted by the most severe obstacles-physical, economic, cultural and social- to accessing their rights and entitlements. Persons experiencing extreme poverty live in a vicious cycle of powerlessness, stigmatization, discrimination, exclusion and material deprivation, which all mutually reinforce one another"^[13]. 'Poverty is really about a shortage of rights'^[14]. People living in extreme poverty do not have enough scope of freedom in their live to lead a meaningful life that they wish. Instead, they compel to spend their entire life within a great misery. For the poor, labour is usually the only means they can use to improve their miserable conditions. But the scope of employment opportunities is not at all enough in the present world order. It is estimated by the ILO that near about 188 million people across the world were unemployed in 2019^[15]. Thus, when the basic means for human surviving is lacking, what use do people have for their rights to free expression, association or political participation? We see in reality that civil and political rights are given much more emphasis than socio-economic rights. "Yet several social and economic rights, such as the right to subsistence, are more basic than most civil and political rights, in that, if these materially basic rights are neglected, then those involved will not live to enjoy their other rights"^[16]. Right to live with dignity is one of the important human rights in a democratic political system which is out of reach for the people living in poverty. In fact, poverty is both a cause as well as a form of human rights violation. Theoretically, human rights are inherent to the human person and belong equally to all the members of our human family, but in case of enjoyment of these rights we see a vast disparity. The people live in extreme poverty cannot exercise these rights as they cannot afford them, and spend their lives in extremely inhuman circumstances. The reality— poverty is the major challenge of the realization of human rights— is realized various international platforms. The Vienna Declaration on human rights (1993), stated that 'the existence of widespread extreme poverty inhibits the full and effective enjoyment of human rights'^[17]. The observation of the Human Development Report 2003 was that 'poverty is an infringement on freedom, and the elimination of poverty should be addressed as a basic entitlement and a human right- not merely as an act of charity'^[18].

Poverty eradication and the promotion of human rights

Poverty is the root cause of human rights violation. A decent

living or a life of dignity is not possible without the eradication of poverty. In that sense, poverty eradication and the materialization of human rights are similar, they are the both sides of the same coin. In this respect, state cannot ignore her responsibility to protect the rights of the poor. It should provide social security and social assistance to attain decent standard of living for its inhabitants, especially for poor. In fact, UDHR endorses a democratic welfare state that might undertake development projects to promote the vital human interests of its residents. Other human rights instruments such as; ICESCR directs the states "to undertake steps, individually and through international assistance and co-operation, to the maximum of their available resources with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized"^[19].

UDHR provides a lucid framework at the both national and international levels to eradicate poverty. Under the patronization of UNO, poverty eradication has become a part of international development agenda. In 2000, UN formulated MDG and targeted of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty in the world (people living on less than \$1.25 a day) by 2015. In 2015, the UN claimed that it had achieved notable success regarding poverty eradication and the number of people living on less than \$1.25 a day fallen by over half.

In the same year (2015), UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was taken where the first goal has been fixed to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030^[20]. Actualization of this goal, in fact, is utmost essential to ensure the enjoyment of human rights by all members of our human family. Various national and international actors have to play significant role in this regard. In this context, it is important to note that, some critiques often argue that the role of some UN agencies such as IMF, WB is not conducive to eradicate poverty from the world. These institutions are found to force developing and under developed countries to adopt free market, neoliberal policies as a condition of debt rescheduling. The adverse impact of neoliberal policies is being felt on these countries. In the name of structural adjustment programmes, withdrawal the role of the state from socio-economic spheres does not promote the interests of the poor. Rather it leads to increase the inequalities within the states. It is a matter of fact that, most of the poorest people of the world living in those countries.

The poor people are struggling for surviving with dignity. Outside supports are required to enable them to live a meaningful life on their own capacity. State has an obligation to assist these people to their struggle against poverty and also to attain an adequate standard of living. The Vienna conference on human rights (1993) declares the right to development as inalienable human rights. In this respect, states have specific obligations to respect, protect and promote human rights through taking the policy of pro-poor growth and poverty eradication.

Concluding Remarks

As a successor of natural rights, human rights have emerged with the aim of ensuring basic necessities of human living for all members of our human family in the world. It is the cherished duty of the policy makers both at the national and international levels to protect and promote these rights for all human beings. As poverty is the main barrier for realizing human rights, poverty eradication should receive the highest priority to the policy makers in the process of

policy formulation. Side by side, it is the duty of human beings, being member of human community, to protect and promote these rights not only in their own live but also for others. Forming of an active and vigilant public opinion has a very important role in promoting and protecting the human rights. When there is a violation of human rights, the mass media, human rights organizations and other civil society organizations should come forward to form public opinion against that. Public opinion is the key protector in realizing the final goal of safeguarding human rights in society.

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