



Human Rights

Chanchal Shakuntala Anil Mattu

Research Scholar, Pemraj Sarda College, Ahmednagar, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune.

Corresponding Author – Anil Tukaram Lole

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Abstract:

Human rights represent the fundamental principles necessary for the protection of human dignity, liberty, equality, and justice. These rights are universal and inherent, belonging to every individual by virtue of being human, irrespective of nationality, gender, caste, religion, or social status. Although the modern concept of human rights emerged prominently in the twentieth century, its philosophical roots can be traced to ancient civilizations and classical political thought. This research paper examines the concept, philosophical foundations, historical evolution, international development, and constitutional protection of human rights, with special reference to India. It also analyzes the role of the Indian judiciary in expanding the scope of human rights through progressive constitutional interpretation. Further, the paper highlights contemporary challenges such as gender inequality, human trafficking, digital surveillance, environmental degradation, refugee crises, and the tension between national security and civil liberties. The study concludes that while significant progress has been made, effective enforcement, public awareness, and institutional strengthening remain essential to ensure the realization of human rights in practice.

Keywords: *Human Rights, Human Dignity, Constitutional Rights, Judiciary, Equality, International Law.*

Introduction:

Human rights constitute the foundation of a just and democratic society. They define the minimum standards necessary for individuals to live with dignity, freedom, and equality. These rights protect individuals from arbitrary state action, discrimination, exploitation, and injustice. The universality of human rights implies that they apply to all human beings without distinction, while their inalienable nature ensures that they cannot be lawfully taken away.

The idea of human rights did not emerge suddenly but developed gradually through philosophical thought, political struggles, and social movements. Ancient civilizations emphasized justice and moral duty, while modern revolutions transformed these ideas into legally enforceable rights. In the contemporary world, human rights serve as the moral compass of

constitutional governance, international law, and democratic institutions. In India, human rights occupy a central place within the constitutional framework, reflecting the nation's commitment to justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights:

The philosophical origins of human rights lie in the theory of natural law. Ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle emphasized justice as a universal moral principle rooted in reason. The Stoics further argued that all human beings are equal because they share rationality, thereby laying the groundwork for universality.

Roman jurists distinguished between natural law and civil law, recognizing that certain rights belong to all humans regardless of citizenship. During the modern period, social contract theorists significantly shaped human

rights philosophy. Thomas Hobbes acknowledged natural rights but justified strong state authority. John Locke advanced the idea that individuals possess inherent rights to life, liberty, and property, and that governments exist primarily to protect these rights. Rousseau emphasized popular sovereignty and collective will, reinforcing democratic legitimacy. These philosophical ideas profoundly influenced modern constitutionalism and human rights discourse.

Historical Evolution of Human Rights:

Human rights evolved through historical struggles against oppression. The Magna Carta (1215) introduced the principle that rulers are subject to law. The English Bill of Rights (1689) further established constitutional limits on power and protected civil liberties.

The eighteenth century marked a turning point with the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789), which proclaimed liberty, equality, and popular sovereignty. These documents asserted that rights are universal and inherent.

Despite these advances, the nineteenth century witnessed colonialism, slavery, and exploitation. It was the devastation of the two World Wars, particularly the Holocaust, that compelled the international community to adopt a universal human rights framework. The establishment of the United Nations and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 transformed human rights into a global moral and legal standard.

International Human Rights Framework:

The UDHR laid the foundation for international human rights law. It was followed by binding treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Together, these instruments form the International Bill of Human Rights.

Specialized conventions addressing women, children, refugees, and persons with disabilities further strengthened the framework. Institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council, International Criminal Court, and global NGOs play a crucial role in monitoring violations and promoting accountability. These mechanisms reflect the internationalization of human rights protection.

Human Rights in India: Constitutional Framework:

India's commitment to human rights is deeply rooted in its freedom struggle and constitutional vision. The Constitution of India guarantees human rights primarily through Part III (Fundamental Rights). These include the right to equality, freedoms of speech and expression, protection against exploitation, freedom of religion, and the right to life and personal liberty.

The Directive Principles of State Policy emphasize socio-economic justice, reflecting the aspiration to build a welfare state. Though non-justiciable, they guide governance and judicial interpretation. Fundamental Duties highlight citizens' responsibilities toward society and the nation. Together, these provisions reflect a holistic approach to human rights.

Role of the Judiciary in Protecting Human Rights:

The Indian judiciary has played a transformative role in expanding human rights. Article 21, initially interpreted narrowly, has evolved into a broad guarantee of dignified life. In *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court established that any procedure

depriving life or liberty must be fair and reasonable.

Judicial decisions have recognized rights to livelihood, education, health, clean environment, and privacy as integral to Article 21. In *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan*, the Court addressed workplace sexual harassment, while Justice K. S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India affirmed the right to privacy. Public Interest Litigation (PIL) further democratized access to justice, enabling marginalized groups to seek remedies for rights violations.

Institutional Mechanisms for Human Rights Protection:

India has established several institutions to protect human rights. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) investigates violations, monitors custodial abuse, and promotes awareness. State Human Rights Commissions perform similar functions at the regional level.

Specialized bodies such as the National Commission for Women and National Commission for Protection of Child Rights address the concerns of vulnerable groups. These institutions complement judicial mechanisms and strengthen the human rights framework.

Contemporary Challenges to Human Rights:

Despite legal safeguards, human rights face serious challenges. Human trafficking, gender inequality, child exploitation, and caste-based discrimination persist. Women continue to face violence, unequal pay, and social exclusion despite constitutional and legal protections.

Technological advancements have raised concerns about surveillance and data privacy. Environmental degradation threatens the right to life and health, while climate change disproportionately affects marginalized communities. Refugees and migrants face

insecurity and lack of legal protection, highlighting the need for inclusive human rights approaches.

National Security and Human Rights:

Balancing national security with civil liberties remains a complex issue. Anti-terror laws and surveillance measures, if unchecked, can undermine due process and personal freedoms. The judiciary has emphasized proportionality and oversight to ensure that security measures do not erode constitutional rights.

Human Rights Education and Awareness:

Human rights awareness is essential for effective protection. Education empowers individuals to recognize violations and seek accountability. Integrating human rights education into schools, professional training, and public institutions can foster a culture of dignity, tolerance, and equality.

Highlight: Women and Third Gender Rights in the Human Rights Framework:

While concluding the discussion on human rights, it is essential to highlight the rights of women and third gender communities as a critical and evolving dimension of contemporary human rights discourse. These groups have historically faced systemic discrimination, social exclusion, and denial of dignity, despite formal guarantees of equality and liberty.

Women's rights form an integral part of human rights. Persistent issues such as gender-based violence, unequal wages, limited access to education, and underrepresentation in governance demonstrate the gap between constitutional ideals and social realities. International instruments like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and constitutional protections under Articles 14, 15, and 21 of the Indian Constitution emphasize the

state's obligation to ensure substantive gender equality.

Equally significant is the recognition of third gender rights as a milestone in human rights jurisprudence. The Supreme Court of India, in *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* (2014), affirmed the right of transgender persons to equality, dignity, and self-identified gender identity under Article 21. This recognition reflects a shift from biological determinism to human dignity as the foundation of rights. However, effective implementation, social acceptance, and institutional support remain crucial for transforming legal recognition into lived equality.

Highlighting women and third gender rights at the conclusion reinforces the idea that human rights are dynamic and inclusive, requiring continuous expansion to address historically marginalized voices. A human rights framework that prioritizes gender justice is essential for achieving equality, social justice, and sustainable development.

Conclusion:

Human rights form the cornerstone of a just and democratic society. Their evolution reflects humanity's continuous struggle for dignity, equality, and freedom. In India, constitutional guarantees and judicial activism have significantly expanded the scope of human rights. However, persistent challenges such as inequality, environmental crises, digital surveillance, and security concerns reveal gaps between law and practice.

Effective realization of human rights requires strong institutions, informed citizens,

responsive governance, and international cooperation. Ultimately, protecting human rights is not merely a legal obligation but a moral imperative essential for justice, peace, and sustainable development.

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