

Understanding the Rights and Dignity of Humans: The Hindu Perspective

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Abstract

This study represents Hinduism as a duty-based religion (*Seva dharma*) that attaches extraordinary significance to the responsibilities and duties of an individual towards humankind. By stressing selfless service and humanism as the core of religion, it attempts to discover how Hinduism plays a role in establishing peace and solidarity in society. This research paper also examines human freedom, equality, nonviolence, and the status of women in terms of human rights and dignity, both from theoretical and practical perspectives. The contribution of different religious faiths to human beings' moral, social, and spiritual advancement is undeniable. However, it is a matter of sorrow that most of the conflicts and bloody wars in the world have been held in the name of religion. Lack of knowledge about the religions of others is the main reason behind such religious-based violence. According to Hindu beliefs of reincarnation, many argue that it is meaningless to serve the helpless because they are suffering the consequences of the deeds of their previous lives. This paper strongly rejects such an argument. We can know from the Vedas that a perfect man lives for the sake of helping others. The main objective of Hinduism is to attain spiritual prosperity through service to all humankind. Therefore, this research work seeks to prove that Hindu teachings on human responsibilities and duties can be the basis for promoting universal human rights and dignity. This study aims to establish a duty-based and welfare society by discovering Hindu perspectives on human rights and dignity.

Keywords: Hinduism, Human Rights, Dignity, Freedom, Equality, Selfless Service, Humanism

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Introduction

The protection of human rights and dignity is the biggest challenge in today's world. In the twenty-first century, responsibility is the prime issue for human rights and dignity. This paper attempts to dispel misconceptions about human rights imposed on Hinduism. This study attempts to relate Hinduism with human rights by analyzing concepts such as *dharma*, nonviolence, equality, justice, and freedom of religion. These components are universal in defending human rights and dignity. Hinduism considers man a divine being as it gives utmost importance to human rights and dignity. The researcher attempts to decipher the notions of human rights and dignity depicted in the sacred texts of Hinduism. As a humanistic religion, Hinduism is an ideal place for universal aspects of morality, and it advocates religious pluralism. It is well known for its generosity and tolerant approaches toward individuals of other faiths. According to Hinduism, different paths or religions lead us to the same Reality. Several people claim that Hinduism lacks universal principles to protect human rights and dignity. This paper examines that sacred scriptures of Hinduism preach all-embracing messages of tolerance, equality, justice, freedom, and equality. These components pave the foundation of human beings' social, political, economic, religious, and cultural rights. In addition, in a befitting manner, this paper tries to solve the misconception regarding the caste system imposed by followers of other faiths by analyzing the concepts of the caste system, human rights (*adhikara*), and moral duties (*dharma*) mentioned in Major Hindu sacred texts.

At the outset, unbounded right is nothing but arbitrariness, as immoral rights and duties cannot bring welfare to society. As a religion and philosophy, Hinduism advises people to be aware of their moral obligations and responsibilities. It believes in the divinity and equality of all human souls and condemns disrespecting and harming others. That is why this paper gives more emphasis on human dignity. The researcher considers that dignity is the prerequisite for ensuring human rights. The study aims to discover Hinduism's universal approaches to preserving

human rights and dignity. Hinduism is a humanistic religion, and it considers the 'service to humankind' as the best religion (*dharma*) of man. Therefore, the study examines that the proper implementation of human rights and dignity is not the sole responsibility of a state or an organization, but performing the duties of every individual can ensure the rights and dignity of human beings in a society.

Additionally, this qualitative research is purely conceptual, and primary and secondary sources have been used in this article to collect relevant data and information. Available books, journals, and online articles have been used as secondary sources to update the doctrinal method of the study. In this study, the researcher would like to give a very delicate look at how is Hinduism compatible with human rights in the present global context? The researcher has followed the discourse analysis of related books and journal articles to find the answer.

1. Hinduism

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world. It is the bearer of a rich and distinct religious and cultural heritage. It is called the *Sanatana* or eternal religion with no beginning or end. Hinduism is also said to be the Vedic religion because no one can claim to be a Hindu without believing in the authority of the Vedas. Surprisingly, the word 'Hindu' is not mentioned anywhere in the ancient Hindu scriptures like Vedas, Upanishads, and Mahabharata. The term 'Hindu' does not belong to religious or ethnic terms. It belongs to the Indo-Aryan term '*Sindhu*' (Mahajan, 1999). The term '*Sindhu*' refers to the river. The Persian people used to utter 's' as 'h.' Later, 'Hindu' refers to the Indus (*Sindhu*) River and the inhabitants living around the Indus area (Hansraj, 1999). After the 8th century C.E., the term 'Hindu' gradually came to be used in a narrower sense only in the case of Indian non-Muslims. Finally, in the nineteenth century, Raja Ram Mohan Roy used the word 'Hinduism' for the first time, adding the suffix 'ism' to the term "Hindu" (Jacobs, 2010). In this way, Hinduism became known as a distinct unified religious and cultural heritage.

2. Understanding Rights and Dignity in Hinduism

The highest obligation of a Hindu is *karma* (enactment of his duty). Hinduism does not separate rights from duty. Western thinkers focus mainly on liberation, human rights, and independence, whereas Hinduism emphasizes the duties and responsibilities of human beings. The word ‘rights’ is absent in Hinduism. The sacred texts of Hinduism have used the Sanskrit word ‘*adhikara*’ in terms of ‘rights’, which usually signifies the notion of ‘just claim.’ The concept of *Adhikara* in Hinduism is related to the rights and dignity of every individual. We notice the Upanishads’ unequivocal statement in defending the rights and honor of neighbors: “Thy neighbor is in truth, is thy self and what separates thee from him is a mere illusion” (Basu, 1990, p. 42; Banerjee, 1979, p. 58). So, individuals indeed injure themselves by injuring their neighbors. Most human rights are duty-based, e.g., the right to equality and justice, security, protection, education, humane treatment, freedom, and happiness. Society or state cannot guarantee such rights without harmonious relations among the citizens.

Human dignity is inviolable. The state and its citizens must protect and respect the dignity of every human being. The idea of the dignity of man developed from the very beginning of human civilization, and religions of the world have attached extraordinary importance to it. According to Hinduism, as the best creation of God, human beings are innately entitled to dignity and worthy of respectful treatment. Human dignity is the basis of human rights (Hartogh, 2014). Thus, human rights, dignity, and duty are inextricably related to one another. The Vedas, The Upanishads, The Mahabharata, The Bhagavad Gita, and The Manusanghita are famous Holy Scriptures that are the primary sources of human rights and dignity in Hinduism. Besides, the Arthashastra, a well-known work in India, is also considered a renowned Hindu source of human rights and dignity. It was written in the 4th century BCE by Kautilya and dealt with national security issues, administration of justice, and economic development policies (Muniapan, 2008).

2.1 Selfless Service (*Sewa Dharma*)

Selfless service to humankind is considered Hinduism's most influential aspect. Hinduism is a religion of humanity. Humanism is a philosophical doctrine that motivates a person to lead a moral life by fulfilling all his responsibilities towards human beings. Hinduism is a humanistic religion that is fully compatible with different humanist principles. In Hinduism, one may not believe in a personal God, but none is approved to deny *dharma* (duty), the path of righteousness (Nadkarni, 2007). Since Men are created in the image of God, the Gita suggests men be the likeness of God through the elimination of hatred, animosity, and inhuman attitudes (The Bhagavad Gita: 4:10). Humanitarian activities bring people into a truly spiritual world. The idea of worshipping God in Hinduism through serving others works as a milestone in determining human dignity.

Dharma is the central concept of Hinduism that has rich and diverse meanings. In Hinduism, *dharma* is related to human rights and dignity. *Dharma* consists of universal principles acceptable to all, irrespective of religion, caste, or nation. It refers to the duties and responsibilities of all men and women as human beings. Hinduism considers that 'self-realization' is the highest *dharma* of man (Banerjee, 1979; Chowdhury, 2012). The welfare of the whole world through service to all humankind is not merely a social duty but the highest goal in their spiritual career. In the Mahabharata, the person who provides medicines to the sick free of cost would enjoy immunity from diseases himself (Basu, 1990). According to Hinduism, *dharma* is a virtue: victory over vice, and good triumphs over evil. Gita suggests upholding righteousness and being bold against oppression:

Whenever religion becomes corrupt
And irreligious rises on earth
I come to embody myself a-new
And take a human birth.
For protecting well, the good and the pure;
And for destroying the wicked and fain,
For establishing religion on a firm footing
I am born again and again (The Bhagavad Gita, 4: 7-8).

Consequently, one of the ways to understand the concept of dharma in Hinduism is to understand the concept of “unity in diversity.” The basic foundation for *Sewa Dharma* (service to all) is the belief that God exists in everything that moves in the universe. Therefore, Hinduism believes that serving people means serving God.

On the contrary, Hinduism hates amassing wealth and advises the rich to spend and provide wealth and food to the neglected and destitute people. Bhagavad Gita represents "A person has the right to property to the extent that it is necessary for his maintenance; one who desires for more deserves punishment like a thief" (The *Gita*, 7:14). Hinduism welcomes economic development but condemns earning unlimited wealth for its own sake by dishonest means. The two vital concepts of Hinduism, *dharma*, and *artha*, are deeply intertwined. By following the principle of *dharma*, the Shanti Parva of Mahabharata points out the gain of *artha* (wealth). However, it is also a fact that *dharma* cannot survive properly in a state of extreme poverty (Nadkarni, 2011).

Happiness is also considered a natural human right in Hinduism, the highest expectation of everyone. Human life becomes bitter and meaningless without happiness. Pleasure is transient and relative to the individual, and happiness is absolute and universal to the other (Banerjee, 1979). Hinduism always seeks both material and spiritual welfare for all human beings around the earth. It is said in the Upanishad, as cited in Cohen (2018):

May He protect us all, may He feed us all, may we all work together more vigorously, may our study be more effective and vigorous. May my tongue say the sweetest things. May my ears hear the wealth of sacred lore. May we not abhor one another, and may there be peace all over the world (p. 458).

This verse centers on the worldly welfare of all human beings, and it serves as a guide for defending human rights and dignity. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya claims that a king's happiness lies in the subjects' prosperity. Many think that in Hinduism, it is meaningless to help individuals suffering in worldly life because their sufferings are due to their previous life's actions (*karma*).

This claim is unacceptable because the identity of a true devotee has given in the Vedas in this way: “He alone lives who lives for the sake of helping others” (Redmond, 2001, p. 95). Besides, empathy for the underprivileged is highly encouraged in Hinduism. The Bhagavad Gita says: “without the sacrifice of wealth, no one can be happy in the universe and through different types of sacrifices one can be freed from all sins” (The *Gita*, 4:31-32). Thus, Hindu principles of charity, earning, preserving, and spending wealth are consistent with the socio-economic rights of human beings today.

2.2 Human Freedom

Freedom is essential for leading a happy and prosperous life. The right to freedom is inevitable in the question of human rights and dignity. Denying or obstructing this freedom is a violation of justice. Freedom has become a dominant value in modern political philosophy, referring to the reconciliation between liberty and equality (Nadkarni, 2011). The individual's freedom is an essential regulator for exercising proper moral responsibilities. Hinduism believes in the law of karma through which individuals generate their fate. The elements of human freedom exist in both theory and practice in Hinduism. Freedom of will, freedom of thought and conscience, and freedom of religion are remarkable human freedoms.

Hinduism considers the earth a suitable workplace (*karma-bhumi*) for human beings in terms of freedom of will. It advises everyone to perform *karma* based on morality. Moral life is a distinct ability of human beings, and only the human race is worthy of leading an ethical life. Freedom of will consists of different moral responsibilities an individual or organization can choose freely. It is an essential constituent of humanism and the idea of freedom of choice is vivid in the Gita. Lord Krishna gives the message to Arjuna in the last chapter of the Bhagavad Gita: “You have listened to all these from Me. Now reflect over it critically and fully, and then do what you want to do” (The *Gita*, 18:63). The first clause of Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 says about an individual's free choice of occupation (Sharma, 2010). Hinduism encourages

people to act according to their conscience. Freedom is the opposite of luxury; these two cannot go together. In his famous work *Manusmriti*, Manu diligently advises avoiding actions that make individuals dependent on others. It encourages individuals to engage in activities under their control (Buch, 2003).

Freedom of religion is one of the fundamental human rights, and it is an inalienable part of establishing harmony in a society. Hinduism represents an integrated form of universal principles. According to Hinduism, the Ultimate Truth is universal and ubiquitous, and individuals can reach the Ultimate Truth through diverse paths and experiences (Coward, 2004). Sri Ramakrishna, the great seer of Bengal, used to say that each school of thought on the spiritual plane leads to God: “as many views, so many are the paths” (Basu, 1990, p. 1). Hinduism emphasizes freedom of religion, tolerance, religious pluralism, and equal respect for all faiths, vital for ensuring human rights and dignity.

The idea of secularism occupies a remarkable place in Hinduism. Hinduism introduces more liberal and meaningful secularism than the Western world because it considers different religions merely diverse paths leading to God. It condemns no religion as false or misguided. The *Rig Veda* conveys that “Truth is One, the wise call It by different names; God is One, but we can reach Him in many ways” (The *Rig Veda*, Mandala-1, Sukta-164, Mantra-46). The *Bhagavad Gita* also gives the same message: “I reward him whoever worships me in whatever manner. O Partea! People follow my path in all ways, that is, no matter which path people follow, they will find me in all paths”. Hinduism has set a shining example to the world through its teachings of universality, elasticity, catholicity, and unlimited tolerance. Due to this immense tolerance, some reformers like Buddha and Mahabir could revolt against Hinduism's roots, yet Hinduism never considered them heretics because they were also seekers of Truth (Basu, 1990). In this way, Hinduism impedes violence against all creatures. It instructs everyone to be non-violent and avoid injury to living beings (Doniger & Smith, 1991). Hatred cannot be diminished by hatred but only by love. Hinduism also condemns hating people. The main objective of Hindu prayers is

to seek the welfare of all created beings. The Bhagavad Gita determines: “The one who does My work, who considers Me his ultimate destiny and is devoted to Me in every way, and who is free from all selfish desires and is not hostile to anyone, is the one who comes to me” (The Gita 11:55).

2.3 Equality and Justice

Equality and justice are prerequisites for ensuring human rights and dignity in society. Hinduism affirms that human beings are the children of the same Creator because the Supreme Creator has no bias favoring or against any class, group, or nation. Lord Krishna declares in the Bhagavad Gita: “I am impartial and equal to all beings, none do I envy nor love more than any other” (The Gita, 9:29). Rationality and equality are the leading principles of justice. Hinduism suggests all working for the overall betterment of all human beings. None of us is higher or lower in status; we all are brothers and sisters, and we should work together for the good of all mankind (The Rig Veda, Mandala-5, Sukta-60, Mantra-5). The real *dharma* is to be righteous or equitable in the actions of humans. *Dharma* and justice are identical in Hinduism. Therefore, whatever is unjust and oppressive is *adharm*. Hinduism is uncompromising on the question of justice, and is determined to resist injustice even through armed conflicts. The Gita prescribed the advice of Lord Krishna to Arjun in the matter of justice. Arjun, who felt depressed at the prospect of fighting his kith and kin, Krishna motivates the performance of his duty as Kshatriya to fight a righteous war (Sundararajan, 1969). Now, to what extent these principles of equality and justice are consistent with the traditional practices of the caste system in Hinduism is a matter of great debate.

The caste system is an institution of Hinduism. It is impossible to determine the role of Hinduism in protecting human rights and dignity without the proper knowledge of the caste system. The word “caste” came from the Portuguese term “casta,” which means pure or clean. It designates the purity of descent (Klostermaier, 1998). The caste system in Hinduism is misunderstood in various ways, but it was developed purely from economic motives. It is not the essence of Hinduism; initially, it

was functional and not hereditary (Basu, 1990). According to the Hindu point of view, caste was created not to divide Hindu society but to bring unity and order in actions and establish friendly relations among the people (Banerjee, 1979). We can get the first idea of the caste system in the Purusha Shukta hymn of the Rig Veda. Some Hindu scholars claim that the verse is incorporated later because the conventional strict classification of the caste system did not exist during the period of the Rig Veda. The saying of one Rig Vedic sage in this regard is: “I myself am a bard; my father is a physician; my mother is a stone-grinder” (Sundararajan, 1969, pp. 48). This division of labor in socio-economic development later became known as the caste system.

2.4 Right to Security and Protection

Security and protection are two essential elements of human rights. Hinduism emphasizes the security and protection of human beings, and it urges to punish the unrighteous to safeguard those who are righteous. Hinduism teaches not to break the agreement and not to injure anybody. Truth is the basis of all morality because it leads to the experience of what is right and wrong. According to the Ramayana, a kingdom is to be based upon truth, and an untruthful king is harmful to his subjects: “untruthful persons harass people as much as serpents” (Buch, 2003, p. 56). Therefore, the prime responsibility of a ruler is to protect the helpless and the oppressed and ensure the security and protection of the people because protecting human life and personal freedom is equally urgent for living a comfortable life with dignity and happiness.

2.5 Right to Education

Education is a leading component of socio-economic development, and it plays the most efficient role in promoting human rights and dignity in any society. The Upanishads consider ignorance (*avidya*) as the foundation for all desires. Besides, the Vedas are the basis of Hinduism, giving topmost priority to acquiring knowledge. The Vedas have compared an uneducated man to an animal. Therefore, Hindu culture can be

called a knowledge-based culture. Hinduism postulates in four stages of life: Brahmacharya, Garhastya, Vanaprastha, and Sannyasa. Brahmacharya is the period of education that begins with the sacred thread ceremony known as *Upanayana*. The literal meaning of *Upanayana* is “opening of the third eye at the teacher's house.” It was mainly an integrated education related to arts, philosophy, astronomy, astrology, yoga practices, law, and medicine (Banerjee, 1979). Therefore, knowledge can affect every aspect of human nature. A knowledgeable man is fully aware of his disposition, potentiality, and relationship with fellowmen around him. The Mahabharata presents the quality of an ideal man in this way: 'He integrates his character with learning, but he has no arrogance about that character or goodness; that is why he is honoured everywhere' (Mahabharata, X11: 230: 5). Education stimulates tolerance, empathy, and love in human nature. It helps individuals stay away from prejudices in the name of religion.

2.6 Status of Women

The position of women in Hinduism is criticized by using some quotations from Hindu scriptures. Against this criticism, it is noticeable that women could move freely and contribute to various creative activities even in ancient Hindu society. In the Rig Vedic age, women enjoyed much freedom, equal rights, and dignity with men, especially in religious life. We find several women *Rishis* in the Vedas and the Upanishads who are considered to receive revelations from God. Romasha, Lopamudra, Visvavara, Sashvati, Apala, Ghosha, Aditi, Gandhar-vagihita, Vak, Surya, Indrani were prominent among them (Basu, 1990). There are also examples of female teachers in ancient Hindu society. The Mahabharata presented Sabitri as a well-versed woman in the Shastras (Buch, 2003). Manusmriti has mentioned women as subordinate to men in some places, but it also represents men and women as equal halves. Manusmriti suggests that men should have sincere respect towards women; otherwise, all religious festivals are fruitless, and the family only thrives if women are not unhappy (Manusmriti 3:55-57).

Many contemporary socialists and humanitarian activists opine that the role of Hinduism centering on women's rights and

dignity is highly controversial. In particular, the position of women in Hinduism is criticized in terms of property rights. According to Hindu custom, married daughters do not receive property from their fathers' families. Nonetheless, married women in Hinduism own property in various ways, and no one has any right to their property. Manusmriti advocates that the property and gifts received from the loving family, from her father, mother, and brother before the wedding and at the wedding ceremony, are called the six-fold property of a woman. Even after her death, such property and gifts received from her beloved husband will go to her children (Manusmriti, 9:194-195). On the other hand, unmarried girls have the right to receive wealth and property even if they have brothers. The Vedas proclaims: "O Indra, since the daughter lives with her parents, she asks some of the property from her family" (The Rigveda, 2:17.7).

Conclusion

The duties and responsibilities of individuals are the basis of human rights and dignity. Human society can be beautiful and livable only if everyone properly fulfills his responsibilities. As a comprehensive way of life, Hinduism presents inspiring ethical duties inviolable in all aspects of human life. Human rights in the modern world signify the opportunities of human beings, but Hinduism, as an ancient religion, refers to duties and obligations in terms of human rights. This paper is an outcome of the objective analysis of Hindu religious and cultural roots of human rights from a universal perspective. The concept of "unity in diversity" is prominent in Hinduism. It further strengthens the role of Hinduism in ensuring human rights and dignity. Hinduism believes in the fundamental oneness of all religions, which can play a unique role in establishing a peaceful world. The researcher has tried to reach its findings based on the doctrinal foundations of human rights in Hinduism. It is a very vast area of research. Hence, it is only possible to decipher some aspects of this issue in such a short research paper. On the other hand, the careful analysis of the relationship between the so-

called caste system and the doctrine of its origin mentioned in ancient Hindu scriptures can be a significant aspect of this work.

The dignity of man, in effect, is the basis of human rights. According to Hinduism, human beings are naturally divine and should be respected. This paper focuses on the holistic development of human beings that encompasses several aspects of human rights like security and protection, education, freedom, justice, nonviolence, and right to property, which accelerate the development of society and the dignity of its citizens. The study seeks to prove that a duty-based ethical system, along with the constitution and state initiatives, can assure the rights and dignity of human beings. Therefore, with the particular emphasis on the weak points of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, how it differs from the concept of human rights in Hinduism regarding the protection of human rights and dignity might be the focus of further study in this field.

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