

# 5 Human Rights and the Subordinated People<sup>1</sup>

## A Cross-Cultural Study of Dalit and Black Life World

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Human rights discourse and the life world of the subordinated people stand in opposition to one another. This poses a serious philosophical problem as much as it becomes a sociological issue to be tackled. To understand and locate the identities and life world that is experienced by the subordinated communities around the world, the author conducted an empirical survey between the Dalits (former untouchables) of India and the African Americans/Blacks (former slaves of African descent in North America) of the United States as a cross-cultural empirical survey for a fresh understanding of the subordinated discourse. This study is indicative in nature and inspirational in approach as one subordinated community was compared to another as cross-cultural and imitative process. This attempt becomes very significant when human rights discourse has been very much in the limelight in sociological, political, and philosophical disciplines and also very much in the activist world of grassroots organisations. It is very significant that human rights discourse stipulates the paradigm model for sociopolitical and economic emancipation of marginalised communities across the globe.

The preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights sets the tone hitherto to all types of rights discourse that addresses the issues and life of the marginalised communities as their rights have been grossly vitiated and their livelihood resources have been ruthlessly and snobbishly taken away from them as it states, The recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. In the same preamble, it is stated,

The disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and an advent of the world in which human rights shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.

This already presents the possibility of the denial and violation of human rights and the subordinate people's yearning for justice as the a priori inquiry and necessity. The life world of the Dalits and Blacks will strengthen the philosophical search as they present the realities of life in day-to-day experience.

## Who Are the Subordinated People?

A subordinated people are a sociological group that does not constitute a politically dominant voting majority of the total population of a given society. It may include any group that is subnormal with respect to a dominant group in terms of social status, education, employment, wealth and political power. From the sociopolitical and economic and cultural conditions, one can easily conclude that Dalits in India and Blacks in the United States are the most subjugated and subordinated in the name of caste and colour respectively. The word “minority” was used during the time of Ambedkar especially in the western context to denote the subordinated community of various categories like social minorities, linguistic minorities, ethnic minorities, and religious minorities. Ambedkar remarked, “minorities are an explosive force, which, if they erupt, can blow up the whole fabric of the state ... it is for the majority to realize its duty not to discriminate against the minorities” (C. A. Debates, Vol. VII, 39). His idea of minority people is what we call today the subordinated people.

## Dalit Life World Is Marked by Oppression and Discrimination

*Jeya Subramaniam*, a social activist and educator from Madurai, Tamilnadu, experienced more social exclusion both in her neighbourhood as a child and in educational institutions, schools, and colleges. She experienced such exclusion in her neighbourhood in daily chores, in the school, and in college as an SC student. She would cringe at the revelation of her identity as her peers would look at her as if she was a *dirty thing thrown* in their midst (interview, 2009).<sup>2</sup> *Jakkian* experienced the worst form of exclusion/identity crisis when he was forced to introduce himself in the college as a cobbler. He locates his Dalit existence in its social ambience which denies his/her psychical, physical, socioeconomic, intellectual, and even moral space; the dominant world view ghettoises his being (Dalitness) within the walls of human wretchedness. The personal narrative of *Jakkian* is the case in point which foregrounds the whole gamut of the Dalit life world. According to him,

for a Dalit the surrounding of our living, the historicity of our life world from childhood, the social and spatial setting of our living quarters everything imposes certain pressure upon us. Take my case; I come from a large but very humble and poor family; my father is a folk musician, plays Nagaswaram (a pipe instrument) for living. My mother is a daily wager (coolie) and my grandfather a cobbler and my uncles are all scavengers. This is my family background which is wrought in poverty and humiliation.

(interview, 2009)

He contrasts the life of dominant castes through the occupation of their parents as

when others introduce themselves in the school or college, “I am so and so; my father is a doctor, my father is an engineer, my father works in the bank, in the railway, etc.” but when we introduce ourselves, we have to say, “my father is a drummer or my father sweeps the streets or cleans the toilet,” is humiliating.... In short, our identity is inscribed on the tag of humiliation. So, this is the social background we have come from; on the whole the society looks at us as filth and dirt.

(ibid.)

*Yesumarian*, a Jesuit lawyer and social activist from Tamilnadu, identifies three major areas where Dalits have been discriminated against. One is *denial of land*. Land has been the benchmark of a person’s identity in the Indian context. Dalit lands have unjustly been appropriated by the dominant forces for centuries including the *Panchami* land accorded by the British regime. The same point is asserted by *Uma Shankar IAS*, an Indian Administrative Officer from the Dalit community. In his keynote address at the Mission Assembly held in Loyola College, Chennai, in December 2009, he said that land owning is self-esteem. Since Dalits in general are landless labourers, discrimination against them is very high. Number two is *denial of education*. Education has been a rarity for Dalits from the beginning of the Indian education system. Dalits have been grossly denied their share in education, especially, when education is considered the vehicle for mobility and social change. And the third is *denial of housing*. Dalits don’t have proper housing as poverty and landlessness have been born with them and would never part with them. How it is possible even after so many centuries and millennia that Dalits have been kept under such a condition is the pertinent question one is inclined to ask (Yesumarian, interview: 2009).

*T.K. John* traces the root of the problem in the Hindu social order and traces the locus of Dalit self thus:

I think in Indian society mud, cow dung, wood, rock all these are more appreciated than Dalits. Mud, you want for brick, you touch it no problem; rock also a Brahmin has touched, and anybody can touch it no problem; sleep over it, use it for a building and any of these materials is rated higher than Dalits in the Hindu consciousness.

(interview, 2009)

This is the core value attached to Dalits by the Hindu social order which follows them like their shadows wherever they go, whichever religion they embrace, and whatever they do and achieve.

This clearly explains and expresses how Dalits have been denied their human dignity and respect for so long and so cruelly that today their struggle

is not even to establish their human rights which is still a farfetched dream; it is very much a fight for their right to be human. This demolishes all logic, morals, and even human sensibilities that there is a community which has been grossly violated against all norms of human rights that are enshrined in every sensible human mind.

### **Black as Despised and Denigrated Colour**

The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the colour line is the famous words of Du Bois, the world-renowned first African American sociologist. It is very relevant even today when racial discrimination is rampant in the United States. One will be shocked to notice the similar experience that the Blacks of America go through as the Dalits in India. The first and inevitable challenge that American society poses to any serious and systematic inquiry of knowledge about African Americans is that American social, religious, and cultural norms and values are foregrounded in its “white social frame”. Anything other than this is treated as the “unwanted other”, “alien”, and ‘radical’ and even “anti-American”. Hence the core of Black experience in the United States lies in either accepting the “white frame” and surrendering their uniqueness as people of different ethnic and cultural entities or contesting it to assert their legitimate social space to establish their specific life world to the effect of multicultural and pluralistic social milieu. This also implies that African American life world is viewed as the anti-thesis to the established white norms and allied practices. The black-white relationship has been marked from the very beginning by vertical relationship, not horizontal. A closer look at the life of the African Americans in narrative form to the researchers during his field survey will prove that it stands antithetical and critical to the white world view and framework. In this light, it is very insightful to view American society from the white and Black perspectives.

*Eileen*, an African American woman pursuing her doctoral studies in Chicago, USA, speaks about how she perceives America. She quips,

*most of my experience personally has been in mostly African American settings. The neighbourhood that I grew up in Detroit was black, African American. The schools that I went to were mostly black schools, the grade school, junior high and high school with another minority may be another Asian or two. But I think most of the students are African Americans and most of the teachers are African Americans. So, I really didn't have an experience of an exposure to a lot of white students until I got to college. So, my world is pretty black in that sense.*

*(interview, 2009)*

This is how America presents itself, two different and opposite worlds forced to co-exist: one world (the subordinated world) exists as the subservient



society for the other (the dominant world). It is very interesting to note what Dr. Christopher Manning, an African American professor of History at Loyola University, Chicago, feels about American society. According to him, “there are two different worlds, the wretched one and the blessed one; the former is despised and deplored as the necessary evil while the latter as intrinsically good and noble” (interview: 2009). This is the social definition that the dominant world has constructed for itself by which the subordinated people are forced to live. In other words, the subordinated world exists for the sake of the dominant world. The former is made to believe that it does not have meaning, purpose, and goal independent of the latter. It implies that the dominant world has unlimited power, aspirations, and mode of existence, while the subordinated world has a borrowed and limited existence, an existence of concession by the dominant. This creates a serious sociological issue as the subordinated people don’t have independent existence vis-à-vis the dominant people. This has been very much contested and confronted by the subordinated people and their allies in the wake of human rights discourse and sensibilities.

There is a split, a divide between these two social networks and their world views, perceptions, and perspectives. This is the basic structure based on the colour line upon which all other institutions and structures are constructed. One cannot understand America without understanding the divergent colour consciousness of different ethnic groups. But it is the white society which introduced colour consciousness in the society. When *Jonathan Swain* spoke about America and the place of African Americans in it, he makes a remarkable observation and says,

I think it is not one or two problems that the African Americans go through but the very system. In America this circle of things that operate and it is connected to generations of generation. What we tried to do as Americans is to cut the circle, stretch it out and where we cut and fix and that is our real problem in my view. I think it is very much like a wheel. The American kids sit on the wheel and push it all around. It is kind of take that wheel and break it that is the real challenge’. The black-white relationship is not in a linear setting but in a circular fashion.

(interview, 2008)

According to *Gregory Meyers*,

there is more racism now than it was earlier when I was here in the 70s and 80s, because it is now more indirect, it was not as affront as it is now. Racist elements expressed when you highly move up in an organization you really do not get the respect what should have. When you walk in to such a position, where you are a supervisor or a manager

you have to fight your way to earn respect, because most of the time you supervise not only blacks, so you have to earn their respect, show them what you are doing when they are not doing their job.

(interview, 2008)

*Mark Soderquist* realises what happens behind the back of every Black in the white world.

Still as you travel as an African American, you do notice that you draw undue attention in public places; when you examine a situation behind you what is going on, you find a lot still to know and be placed. And because we are building more relationship and friendship with Anglos, they begin to tell us things that are happening away from our presence. So, we know we are still a long way to match putting on our table of real brotherhood.

(interview: 2008)

He further clarifies how whites sit in their ivory castle and believe that racism is over. But when you shed off all the layers of masks and get down to brass-tacks of the African American life world, one is exposed to the real world. He acknowledges that when he says,

What I didn't see the systemic racism; racism and injustice that permeate our system; whether it is justice system, whether it is economic system, I didn't see that till I came down here; till I started working with Derrick (Derrick is an African American who works very closely with Mark in the black neighbourhood for its development). And it was like blinders in my eyes.

(ibid.)

*Cheryl Newson*, an African American woman who observes very closely what is happening in the United States says,

Life is very difficult for us. We just appear on the surface to have everything that everybody else has. ... African Americans are the last considered to have all that others have. We don't have the finance to buy whatever we want to.

(interview: 2007).

*Frantz Fanon* sounds exactly the same when he says,

the native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. It is a town of Niggers and dirty Arabs.

(Fanon, 1963)

*Erick Styles* describes it in a very philosophical language as *culture of deprivation* as the basic identity of African Americans when he adduces,

African Americans as Americans are apple pie especially when we talk about what is American. As the cultural landscape, we have been from the very beginning only preceded by the Native Americans. And yet the social vocation is always weak at best and challenging certainly collectively. But the situation of the African Americans continues to be one in need of work

(interview: 2007).

While Newson and Styles tried to locate the African American experience in the modern economic, consumerist world as how they are systematically impoverished, *Dwight Burrow*, another African American from Houston, Texas, goes to the heart of the issue. He speaks about how they have been treated from the time they were brought into this new land and why.

Our people were brought into this country from the countries of Africa. The people who brought them here did not consider them as human beings. They were considered properties, chattel. Some people like them to a work horse, or a work mule. In many cases they were not even considered to be human. So, they were not brought here to be citizens. They were not even brought here as people. That says a lot about how they were treated.

(interview: 2007)

Thus, the African American experience in the United States is denial of their humanity. Denial of humanity is the a priori status which accounts for all other discrimination and oppression. This is in a way a primordial experience of every African American which produced the institution of modern slavery based on race. This became a permanent blot on the mental map of African Americans.

Racism expresses itself in various ways. One of the most prominent ways it exhibits is in the education system. This is what Angela Swain experienced in the college. “I have had many experiences, especially in the college where I was discriminated against, because I was black” (interview: 2008). Educational institutions, instead of acting as temples of learning and character formation, building up human community of brothers and sisters, in fact serve as the breeding ground for division and discrimination, and animosity. We can quote a number of events and incidents wherein schools and colleges have played a detrimental role in race relations.

### **Denial of Human Dignity and Humanness**

From the foregoing case narratives, it is very clear that the subordinated people have to fight for their rights continuously and consistently until they

join the mainstream. Today, more than any other time in history, the subordinated consciousness is widely prevalent and forges into the social agenda of Dalits and Blacks in a very special and specific way. Today it has become even dangerous as people like Gandhi propagated only political emancipation as the national agenda pushing both social and economic emancipation to the background. This has been the most miserable turn of events that instead of bringing about integral freedom, the dominant section of the society used its economic and social high-handedness to unjustly wield and usurp political power with its cutting edge by coercion, vandalism, and intimidation.

Resolution 32/130 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that all human rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible and interdependent and that the realisation of civil and political rights is, therefore, impossible without the enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights. In addition, all human rights are seen as inalienable, and their promotion globally is understood to involve different emphases in different parts of the world. Finally, realisation of the new international economic order is identified as essential for the effective protection of human rights (Mazairac, 1993). Hence the task before us is very huge to ensure social and economic democracy to the subordinated masses more than political democracy.

### **The Conception of Humans as Beings of Praxis**

Mihailo Markovic speaks about human rights as seriously concerned about human beings. The ultimate foundation of human rights is constituted by those essential needs of each individual, the fulfilment of which is, under given historical conditions, a necessary condition of social survival and development. Law is just, humane, and universally valid only if statutes and legal acts express such universal needs; if they do not, then law is only the expression of naked force. If law is reduced to positive law, to what is written in the laws of a state, it is nothing but a justification of the particular interests of the ruling elite. In such a case law would be, as Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic put it, "what benefits the most powerful" (Markovic, 1981).

In this context, one has to ask if human history as a whole is a meaningful process or not. Before answering such a difficult and complex question, one could ask a simpler, more general one: What constitutes the meaning of any life process? Jacques Monod's answer was teleonomy: a unique, primary project of preservation and multiplication of the species. One could ask here: What makes this basic project "valuable"? Why is the preservation of species better than disappearance? Why is it better to multiply than to simply restore the already achieved quantitative level?

The only answer to such a question is the following: What is here described as "better" or "worse" is not merely a matter of subjective preference; it refers to a tendency which is a necessary part of the very definition of life. Surely not all individuals and species survive and multiply. But while they do, they are alive. In a similar way one should add that life involves a tendency to maintain and increase order and structural complexity; a process of change

in the opposite direction toward lesser order and complexity is “bad” for a living organism since it leads to the destruction of life. It is therefore being described in negative terms: as a process of degradation.

In the same vein, we can seek answers to questions like what made human history possible and indeed unique – in view of the explosive development of the last few thousand years – was a specifically human activity: praxis. Praxis is purposeful (preceded by a conscious objective), self-determining (choosing autonomously among alternative possibilities), rational (consistently following certain general values), creative (transcending given forms and introducing novelties into established patterns of behaviour), *cumulative* (storing in symbolic forms ever greater amounts of information and conveying it to coming generations so that they can continue to build on the ground already conquered), and self-creative (in the sense that young human individuals, after being exposed to an increasing wealth of information and new environmental challenges, develop new faculties and new needs). Praxis is a new, higher-level form of the human species. Many human activities are clearly not instances of praxis, nor are they characteristic of human history. The repetitive work of a slave, serf, or modern worker resembles more a beaver’s dam building than creative work.

### **Reconstruction of Social Democracy as the Historical Necessity**

This reconstruction demands a new social culture, which sends the old caste and race culture based on discrimination and inequality on holiday. It implies that social emancipation is not possible from the available models as the very pillars of democracy and development stand on the foundation of the Hindu religious system whose soul is *Varnashramadharma* and racial superiority-inferiority duality. We need to first and foremost carve out a new action plan (praxis) and based on this demolish the old one. In other words, social democracy is the pre-condition to political democracy. Social democracy lies in the defiance of the so-called political democracy, the dominant discourse romantically propagated as the gateway to economic and social freedom.

### **Social Praxis as the New Paradigm**

Social praxis of the subordinated people starts with their life experience. This life experience is basically and predominantly oppressive and discriminatory as we have seen above. Hence an action programme should be carved out to remove this oppression. The dominant discourse will never initiate social democracy as it would stand squarely against its own interest. It has always been from below. Just imagine, the Jesuits in India promulgate a policy not to employ anyone from Dalit or tribal community to service jobs like scavenging and cleaning and start rehabilitating in some other jobs all those who are already in such jobs. They can liberate not less than 50,000 Dalits and tribals from the social stigma of polluted identity within a year. If the



different churches in India which claim to be working for the uplift of Dalits and Adivasis do the same, we can see hundreds of thousands of Dalits and Adivasis liberated within a year after which they can boldly speak of social justice. Till then it will be another political quarters which mouths words without any meaning.

While political democracy in the world nations was initiated by the elites, social democracy has always been initiated by the social underclass. Both in the United States and in India it was the social elites who spearheaded the political freedom struggle while the Blacks in the United States and the Dalits and Adivasis in India started the social protest movements. As it was Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X who spearheaded the emancipation of African Americans through the Civil Rights Movement, it was Ambedkar who spoke about social democracy as the precondition to political democracy. In the First Round Table Conference Ambedkar submitted a memorandum, in which he laid down eight conditions on behalf of the Untouchables. They were equal citizenship, equal rights, protection against discrimination, adequate representation in legislature and administration, right to demand adjudication in case of their neglect, and some special privileges and places in ministry. Ambedkar at the same time criticises the agenda of political democracy of Gandhi which did not have any programme for the emancipation of the Untouchables. A.K. Vakil opines that "Ambedkar criticized that Gandhi was determined to repudiate the rights of the untouchables" (ibid.).

Casteism and racism are basically social construction. Hence it can be deconstructed and also reconstructed through social democratic principles. We need to construct a different social order which destroys both caste and race. Difference is there, but there are differences in so many things and in so many ways. In his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1964, Che maintained, prophetically, that

the time will come when this assembly will acquire greater maturity and demand of the United States Government guarantees for the life of the Blacks and Latin Americans who live in this country, most of them U.S. citizens by origin or adoption. This is possible only through social democracy, not political democracy.

### Forms of Social Democratic Processes

Paulo Freire proposes *dialogue* as the way of learning and teaching as against the banking system in the education of Latin America. Paulo Freire was very critical about how the education system in Latin America was deeply oppressive and divisive of the elite from oppressed communities. He lays out a programme which holds participatory negotiation as the overarching principle as the praxis. All other elements of praxis for liberation includes

in this (Friere, 1972). Sambiah Gundimeda contends that “rejection of any community’s culture is a way of injuring the human agency of that community, and such injury can be healed only by a dialogical process, namely, the assertion of positivity and pride in their own culture by the injured and positive recognition of such assertion by the injurer. Secondly, democratization of the public sphere can be effectively actualized not only by according to the representation of the marginalized cultures, but such representation needs to be accompanied with respect to the other”.

Ambedkar, the pioneer of and the ardent propagandist about social democracy as early as the 1920s while all other Congress politicians were busy with a transfer of political power without any real change, proposes a fourfold programme to Harijan Sevak Sangh which boasted of liberating the Dalits from their caste shackles as given under:

1. To try to get civil rights for the Untouchables: in order to achieve this objective, it was necessary to throw open schools, wells, *chavadis* (village Panchayat office), and means of transportation for the Untouchables.
2. To try to provide an equal opportunity to the Untouchables – the Untouchables were not allowed to sell milk, fruits, and vegetables. In the industrial sector low payment was given to the Untouchable workers. The Harijan Sevak Sangh should try to form a public opinion against such inequality.
3. To spread communication between the Untouchables and the *savarna* Hindus: Ambedkar opined that there should be constant communication between the *savarna* Hindus and Untouchables. He remarked that the *savarna* Hindus would not like it. Ambedkar appealed that as North America waged a civil war against South America, the progressive Hindus should wage a war against the orthodox Hindus.
4. To operate the organisation speedily – Ambedkar pointed out that organisations could not be run by mercenaries but by devoted social workers (Vakil, *ibid*: 34–35).

Equally important is *Advocacy and Networking*. It plays a very crucial role in social democracy. While the dominant discourse will not open its mouth either about its dominant approach to social and political policies as it would jeopardise its own interest, it will not even think of opening the subject of its subordinated people as the dominant discourse is the root of the issue. You won’t see any dominant caste person, organisation, or state talk about casteism on international platforms or a white person, organisation, and white government advocating against the crisis of African Americans. Hence the affected parties, the Dalits and the African Americans, should take their cases to the international forum, human rights organisations, and nations to expose their crude realities and demand social and political justice by way of pressure upon the wronged nations, communities, and organisations.

Also, through networking the subordinated peoples of different cultures and nations should connect themselves and discuss a common praxis and pedagogy for all the subordinated people.

## Conclusion

The Universal Declaration is remarkable in two fundamental aspects. In 1948, the then 58 Member States of the United Nations represented a range of ideologies, political systems, and religious and cultural backgrounds, as well as different stages of economic development. The authors of the declaration, themselves from different regions of the world, sought to ensure that the draft text would reflect these different cultural traditions and incorporate common values inherent in the world's principal legal systems and religious and philosophical traditions. Most important, the Universal Declaration was to be a common statement of mutual aspirations – a shared vision of a more equitable and just world.

Unfortunately, the celebrated ideals of human rights discourse were not translated into life and aspirations of the marginalised communities for whom it is more pertinent than to any other community. It has been mostly in the hands of the affluent majority whose interests and motives were taken care of by this philosophy. The present struggle for the practical realisation of civil and human rights is a new dimension of contemporary, emancipatory aspirations. To the extent that it stops being a mere phase of confrontation between governments and ideological camps, and achieves the character of a mass movement, it will contribute essentially to the abolition of present-day barriers to human freedom and social justice.

Human rights discourse has not so far appealed to the Dalits and Blacks in its full measure and dimension since it is still in the dominant hands of these countries as they set the standards and the interpretative tools by which they easily escape the international scanner. Hence the time calls for international human rights watch to monitor what happens with these communities and how they are still marginalised.

The next and very important movement of human rights discourse will be a movement from general and individual rights to specific, locational, social, and economic rights. One may argue that it is already enshrined in the Preamble and other periodic declarations. But it is also very necessary that geographic and other generic and specific dimensions like caste should be the benchmarks of human rights campaigns as the spirit of it is not just to stipulate the guidelines in terms of rights but also very much in terms of its stakeholders. This only can help different communities to take the cue directly from human rights recommendations in their own sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts. Finally, human rights discourse is the international law school that should find directions for all the social minorities who are still out of focus in the national and international development paradigm and programmes.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is a revised version of the article published in *Social Action: A Quarterly Review of Social Trends* (January–March 2011).
- 2 The author conducted an empirical survey between the Dalits (former untouchables) of India and the African Americans/Blacks (former slaves of African descent in North America) of the United States of America as a cross-cultural empirical survey for fresh understanding of the subordinated discourse. The interviews conducted at different time periods as part of the survey are indicated as interview, 2007; Interview, 2008; interview, 2009.

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