



Addressing human rights issues in the perspective of Gandhian philosophy of social work

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Abstract

The concept of human rights emerged from the Doctrine of Natural Rights wherein individuals have right to life, liberty and property. Human rights are intended for the existence as well as the development of human personality. Though, human rights are formed internationally, they are executed locally; social work also is a worldwide profession, which is made specific in its local application. As Social Work is a practice-based profession, working for protection of the rights of the people belonging to any sector, especially the vulnerable and the unjust society encountering varied human rights issues. The core value of social work is under-pinned with human rights which are focused on the individual worth and dignity. Social workers work with their clients on various levels: the micro level of individual and family, the mezzo level of community and the macro level of society-national and international. The concern for human rights must always be manifested by social workers at all levels and under Rights based approach of social work in the Code of Ethics. IFSW clearly states in its Code of Ethics (1976) about the role of professional social workers who are dedicated to the service for the welfare and self-fulfillment of human being, and to the achievement of social justice. To question the injustices or to respond to the domination and oppression, violence is not the only way of action, the better alternative to this is the non-violent action of Ahimsa promulgated by Mahatma Gandhi. His idea of "Sarvodaya", is very much connected with the modern human rights and humanity. To him non-violence is the force of active love and truth which seeks justice and peace for every human being. The social worker relying on the Gandhian ideology is appealing to the opponent's moral force by non-violent resistance and actions through symbolic protests, civil disobedience, economic or political non-cooperation, satyagraha, or other methods to gain over social injustice of human rights violations. Though this may bring results in a slow manner, but the result will have an enduring effect of gaining the worth and dignity of the individual.

Keywords: Human rights issues, Gandhian philosophy, social work

Introduction

Social work is widely esteemed in society due to its authorized role in providing crucial services that safeguard the welfare of individuals. Social work is a practice-based profession and hence the process of indigenization has been going on since its formation. In the earlier half of this century professional social work was transferred from the developed world to developing countries. The social work profession has originated from various humanitarian and democratic ideals. It has been focused on meeting human needs and on developing human potential and resources. The concept of human rights emerged from the Doctrine of Natural Rights wherein individuals have the right to life, liberty and property. Human rights are intended for the existence as well as the development of human personality, the rights that belong to all people. Human rights are unlike the rights that citizens possess due to birth or naturalization in any particular country. It is universal and internationally guaranteed. They focus on the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings, and they can neither be given nor taken away; also, and critically they impose obligations on states to respect, protect, and fulfill them (United Nations Population Fund & Harvard School of Public Health, 2010). Apart from the doctrine of natural rights, the roots of the concept of human rights can be traced back to Magna Carta (1215), the Petition of Rights (1628), Bills of rights (1689), American Declaration of Independence (1776), and French Revolution (1789). Humanity has faced continuous suffering and exploitation in world wars. Hence special

efforts were made by the UNO to protect human rights. Thus in 1948, human rights were universally declared by the UNO. It consists of 30 articles with its preamble. It is one of the greatest achievements for all people and nations. In the modern world, Human Rights also represent a body of law, a bureaucracy, and a field of practice.

Though human rights are formed internationally, they are executed locally; social work also is a worldwide profession, which is made specific in its local application. The purpose of this work is to provide an understanding and awareness of human rights issues and concerns about social justice. This article brings up the relevance of Gandhian philosophy in social work practice in addressing human rights issues. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of School Social Work (IASW) consider it vital that those connected with the field of social work education and practice have a clear and unconditional commitment to the advancement and protection of human rights and to the satisfaction of fundamental social desires. IFSW and IASW believe that greater knowledge and understanding of human rights will improve the actions and interventions of social work professionals for the benefit of those who require their services.

The concept of human rights emerged from the Doctrine of Natural Rights wherein individuals have the right to life, liberty and property. Human rights are formed for the existence as well as the development of the human personality and it is universal and internationally

guaranteed. They focus on the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings, which is one of the core values preserved by the social work profession and they can neither be given nor taken away. Human rights impose obligations on states to respect, protect, and fulfill those (United Nations Population Fund & Harvard School of Public Health, 2010). As the result of continuous suffering and exploitation faced by humanity, special efforts have been made by the UNO to protect human rights. Thus, in 1948, human rights were universally declared by the UNO. It consists of 30 articles with its preamble. It is one of the greatest achievements for all people and nations. Human Rights represents a body of law, a bureaucracy, and a field of practice. Though human rights are formed internationally, they are executed locally; social work is also a worldwide profession, which gives emphasis on indigenization.

Human Rights and Social Work

Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. Social justice is the core value of this practice-based profession. The social work profession has the responsibility of working to oppose and eliminate all violations of human rights. Social workers as professionals have the responsibility to ensure that human rights are protected from the unscrupulousness. Advocacy of human rights is an integral part of social work practice. Social Work is a practice-based profession, working for the protection of the rights of the people belonging to any sector, especially the vulnerable and the unjust society encountering varied human rights issues. The core value of social work is under-pinned with human rights which are focused on the individual worth and dignity.

Social workers work with their clients on various levels, such as the micro level of individual and family, the mezzo level of community and the macro level of society-national & international.

The following social work practice promotes the realization of human rights:

- Facilitating the inclusion of marginalized, socially excluded, dispossessed and vulnerable people.
- Addressing and challenging barriers, inequalities and injustices that exist in society.
- Forming short- and long-term working relationships with individuals to enhance their well-being.
- Formulating and implementing policies and programs that enhance the well-being of people, promote development, their human rights and harmony.
- Working towards the protection of people that are not in a position to do so. For example, children, youth and women who are in need of care and also persons suffering with mental illness.
- Engaging in social, political action to impact social policy and economic development and to bring change in society by eliminating inequalities.
- Promoting respect for traditions, cultures and ideologies, beliefs and religions among different ethnic groups and societies.
- Planning, organizing, administering programs and organizations dedicated to any purpose promoting human rights.
- Promoting stable, harmonious and mutually respectful societies that do not violate people's human rights.
- Acting with the principle to advocate changes in policies and social conditions that maintain people in marginalized and vulnerable positions and those that infringe collective social harmony.

Social workers work with their clients on various levels

- At the micro level of individual and family
- At the mezzo level of community and
- At the macro level of society-national & international.

The concern for human rights must always be manifested by social workers at all levels and under the Rights based approach of Social Work in the Code of Ethics. IFSW clearly states in its Code of Ethics (1976) about the role of professional social workers who are dedicated to the service for the welfare and self-fulfillment of human beings, and to the achievement of social justice.

Gandhian Approach and Social Work

Gandhism and Social work are interconnected in several ways. Gandhism, also known as Gandhian philosophy or the principles of Mahatma Gandhi, is a set of ideas and practices developed by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the leader of India's independence movement against British rule. Gandhi's principles have significantly influenced social work, both in India and around the world.

Important aspects of how social work and Gandhism are related:

- **Service to Humanity:** At the core of both social work and Gandhism is the principle of serving humanity and working for the betterment of society. Gandhi emphasized the idea of selfless service and working for the welfare of the less privileged. Social work, as a profession, is also founded on the principle of helping individuals, families, and communities to enhance their well-being and address social issues.
- **Non-violence (Ahimsa):** Gandhi is most renowned for his principle of non-violence (ahimsa). He believed that conflicts should be resolved through peaceful means and that violence only perpetuates more violence. Social work also promotes non-violent approaches to resolving conflicts and addressing social injustices, emphasizing dialogue, mediation, and peaceful advocacy.
- **Empowerment and Self-reliance:** Gandhism advocates for the empowerment of individuals and communities to take charge of their own development. Similarly, social work aims to empower clients and communities by promoting self-reliance, fostering their strengths, and encouraging active participation in decision-making processes.
- **Rural Development:** Gandhi laid significant emphasis on rural development and the upliftment of rural communities. He believed that India's soul resided in its villages and that sustainable progress should begin from the grassroots level. Social work has played a crucial role in rural development initiatives, promoting education, healthcare, and community organization in rural areas.
- **Social Justice and Equality:** Gandhism is also aligned with the principles of social justice and equality. Gandhi fought against discrimination based on caste, religion, and gender and advocated for a society where every individual is treated with dignity and respect. Social work shares this commitment for promoting social justice, equality, and human rights.

- **Satyagraha:** Satyagraha, which means "truth-force" or "soul-force," was Gandhi's method of nonviolent resistance against injustice. It involved passive resistance, civil disobedience, and appealing to the conscience of the oppressor. Social work can draw inspiration from this approach when advocating for social change, challenging oppressive systems, and promoting social justice.
- **Community Mobilization:** Gandhism emphasizes the importance of community living and collective action. Social work often involves community mobilization to address social issues and create positive change. By fostering a sense of community and collective responsibility, social workers can bring people together to work towards common goals.
- **Simple Living and Sustainability:** Gandhi advocated for a simple lifestyle, promoting the idea of "simple living and high thinking." This resonates with the values of sustainability and environmental consciousness, which are increasingly relevant in modern social work practice as the profession acknowledges the importance of caring for the environment and promoting sustainable development.

The profession of social work upholds social justice and human rights as the building blocks which guide the entire activities of the profession. The social work profession acknowledges its faith in respect for diversity and in collective responsibility and fostering community participation for the development. In promoting social change and development, it aims at enhancing the empowerment and liberation of people and social cohesion. According to the Journal of Social Work and Social Development, the core mandate for the profession acknowledges that in the contemporary context of practice, multiple structural barriers "contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities, discrimination, exploitation and oppression" (Neera Agnimitra & Seema Sharma).

Gandhian philosophy is a unique amalgamation of political, moral, and religious principles, embracing both traditional and modern elements. It draws inspiration from various Western influences that impacted Gandhiji, yet remains deeply rooted in ancient Indian culture, encompassing universal, moral and religious tenets. This profound philosophy manifests on multiple levels, encompassing the spiritual or religious plane, moral aspects, political inclinations, economic perspectives, social considerations, as well as individual and collective dimensions.

Gandhism can be described in a single quote "Simple living and high thinking". The social worker relying on the Gandhian ideology is appealing to the opponent's moral force by non-violent resistance and actions through symbolic protests, civil disobedience, economic or political non-cooperation, Satyagraha, or other methods to gain over social injustice of human rights violations. Gandhi's philosophical values have given greater importance to socialism. The Gandhian view of socialism is not radical in its approach but it aims for a non-hierarchical society with no poverty, no hunger, no unemployment and education and health for all and these are facts that the social work profession desires too. The social work profession itself recapitulates a commitment and solidarity with those who are deprived. The professional goals include: alleviation of

poverty; liberation of the vulnerable and the oppressed; and the promotion of social inclusion and social cohesion. Mahatma Gandhi held the virtues of social work who fought against all the evils of the society. Gandhi was always worried about the poverty of the nation and his political movements are similar to the social work discipline. Social work profession also focused on addressing the issues of poverty as it gave emphasis on charity work and it can be traced in its historical development. Social Work has given significant importance on interactions between people and the institutions of society that is important to contribute to the ability of people to accomplish the tasks, realize aspirations and values, and alleviate distress. These interactions between people and social institutions are for the societal good. Though this may bring results in a slow manner, the result will have an enduring effect of gaining the worth and dignity of the individual.

General themes under Human Rights and the vulnerable groups facing human rights violations.

Human rights encompass a wide range of fundamental rights and freedoms that are considered essential for all individuals, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, or any other status. These rights are typically protected by international law and national constitution to ensure the dignity, equality, and well-being of every human being. General themes under human rights include:

- **Dignity and Equality, Civil and Political Rights, Social and Economic Rights, Right to Life, Liberty, and Security:** This theme encompasses the right to life itself, the prohibition of torture and arbitrary detention, and the right to personal security.
- **Freedom from Discrimination:** This theme focuses on ensuring that individuals are not discriminated against based on their race, color, sex, language, religion, nationality, or other status.
- **Labor Rights:** This category covers workers' rights, including fair wages, safe working conditions, and the freedom to form trade unions.
- **Rights of Women, Children, and Minorities:** These rights focus on protecting the rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups, including women, children, ethnic and religious minorities, and indigenous peoples.
- **Freedom of Religion and Belief:** This theme encompasses the right to practice one's religion freely or hold beliefs without interference from the government or others.
- **Rights of Persons with Disabilities:** This area aims to ensure the inclusion and equal participation of persons with disabilities in society, providing them with necessary accommodations and protections.
- **Privacy and Data Protection:** This theme focuses on safeguarding individuals' personal information and protecting them from unlawful surveillance or intrusion.
- **Refugee and Asylum Seeker Rights:** These rights are concerned with the protection and treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, ensuring they are not subjected to persecution or returned to dangerous situations.

- **Environmental Rights:** This theme highlights the right to a healthy environment and sustainable development, addressing issues of pollution, climate change, and ecological preservation.

These general themes provide a framework for understanding and addressing human rights issues worldwide. It's important to note that these themes are interconnected, and violations in one area can often lead to violations in others.

The protection and promotion of human rights are crucial for fostering a just and inclusive society to regenerate response. Certain groups in society are more vulnerable to human rights violations due to various factors such as discrimination, marginalization, poverty, and lack of access to resources and opportunities. These vulnerable groups that frequently face human rights violations are:

- **Women and Girls:** Despite progress in women's rights, gender-based discrimination and violence persist. Issues include gender-based violence, lack of access to education and healthcare, economic disparities, and underrepresentation in leadership positions.
- **Children:** Children are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and neglect. Child labor, child marriage, trafficking, and lack of access to education and healthcare are significant concerns.
- **Racial and Ethnic Minorities:** Minority groups often experience discrimination, racism, and unequal treatment in various aspects of life, including education, employment, housing, and criminal justice.
- **Indigenous People:** Indigenous communities face challenges in preserving their cultural identity, land rights, and access to essential services. They often experience displacement and exploitation due to development projects.
- **Refugees and Asylum Seekers:** Displaced populations face human rights violations in the form of inadequate living conditions, denial of basic rights, and lack of access to legal protections and services.
- **LGBTQ+ Individuals:** LGBTQ+ people may encounter discrimination, violence, and legal restrictions based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.
- **Persons with Disabilities:** People with disabilities often face barriers in accessing education, employment, and public services, leading to marginalization and exclusion.
- **Elderly:** The elderly may experience neglect, abuse, and social isolation, leading to violations of their rights to dignity, care, and participation.
- **Migrants and Stateless Individuals:** Migrants, especially undocumented ones, can face exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to healthcare and legal protections. Stateless individuals may lack basic rights and protections altogether.
- **Prisoners and Detainees:** Individuals in detention or prison settings can be subjected to abuse, overcrowding, lack of access to healthcare, and denial of due process rights.

- **Sex Workers:** Sex workers often experience human rights violations due to the criminalization of their work, exploitation, and violence.
- **Persons Living with HIV/AIDS:** Stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS can lead to limited access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities.

Even after the proclamation of universal declaration of human rights, the struggle for human rights is still continuing. Today, we notice the cases of violation of human rights at various levels. The most prominent among them are unemployment, poverty, economic disparity, inhuman condition of work in factories, trafficking of women and children, sexual and mental harassment of working women, gender discrimination, terrorism etc. The process of globalization has also an adverse effect on human rights. Due to the rapid system of globalization, it creates mass poverty, unemployment and economic disparity are the major factors responsible for the violation of human rights. Although there has been lots of development at all levels, the disparity between the haves and have-nots has been increasing on one side and the violence on the other side.

Efforts to address human rights violations for these vulnerable groups require a comprehensive approach involving legal reforms, public awareness campaigns, social support programs, and international cooperation. Protecting the rights of vulnerable populations is crucial for building a more just and equitable society. Here through this article we are analyzing how we can address the human rights issues in Gandhian perspective.

Gandhi strongly advocated for grassroots decentralization, emphasizing the autonomy of villages in both production and administration. His aim was to uplift impoverished villagers, leading to the establishment of the Panchayati Raj system in India. Due to his deep concern for the welfare of the rural population, Gandhi placed significant emphasis on village industries such as spinning wheels and khadi. His belief was that empowering rural communities with these industries would enable them to meet their fundamental needs, considering such empowerment more potent than any weapon in the world.

Human Rights in Gandhian Perspective

The essence of what is to be human is expressed through the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi taught us the sincerity and love of humanity. His philosophy is rooted in the welfare of the whole of mankind. Gandhi was always ready to challenge the condition which destroyed peace in life. He was concerned with the upliftment of all human beings irrespective of caste, race, culture etc., and tried to protect them from various socio-political and economic evils. According to Gandhi, "Ahimsa" (Non-violence) is the best way to challenge the injustices rather than adopting violence to respond to the domination and oppression. His idea of 'Sarvodaya' is very much connected with modern human rights and humanity and it means 'welfare of all'.

The history of social injustices and conflicts caused by the powerful exploiting the weak, and it highlights the need for social justice and equitable distribution of wealth. It suggests that Gandhian socio-political thought based on

non-violence can help solve these problems (Munin, Baruah. (2013) ^[7]. Non-Violence and Gandhian Socio-Political Thoughts.

The emergence of globalization has increased the hostile competition that causes violence. Gandhi was aware of structural violence under which the mass poor people are oppressing around the world. He adopted the method of non – violence which he considered as the precious gift for saving humanity. Under the vulnerable situation of the society, Gandhian non-violence is the one of the enduring solutions to protect humanity. Gandhi always fought without weapons and he was able to get victory in different fields. He has defeated the opponents without a single drop of blood. To him non-violence is the force of active love and truth which seeks justice and peace for every human being. His philosophy is rooted in the welfare of the whole of mankind. As we know, every human on this earth has the right to live in peace. To him, in pursuit of these human rights the only hope for humans was for every one of us to become non-violent. To question the injustices or to respond to the domination and oppression, violence is not the only way of action, the better alternative to this is the non-violent action of Ahimsa promulgated by Mahatma Gandhi. His idea of Sarvodaya' means welfare of all, is very much connected with modern human rights and humanity.

The globalization of the commodity markets does not bring humanity close to peace and justice rather it may result in hostile competition which will lead to violence. Gandhi was aware of structural violence under which the mass poor people are oppressing around the world.

Gandhian Approach to Address Human Rights Issues

Gandhian ideology has a significant influence on human rights issues in the modern world. Gandhi's principle of non-violence, known as Satyagraha, provides a technique of resistance to evil and untruth ("Gandhian Ideology in the Fiction of Chaman Nahal" 2022). His fight against untouchability and the notions of superiority and inferiority by birth highlights his commitment to equality and human rights. Gandhi's emphasis on the limitation of wants and the promotion of self-sufficiency aligns with the need for sustainable living and respect for nature in addressing environmental challenges. Furthermore, Gandhi's critique of modern technology and its potential to devalue human values and promote exploitation resonates with the need to address the negative impacts of technology on human rights. Additionally, Gandhi's prioritization of duties over rights emphasizes the importance of individual responsibility and moral action in addressing social and legal issues.

His emphasis on sarvodaya, which means "progress of all," highlights the importance of considering the well-being of all individuals, including refugees. Additionally, his concept of satyagraha, or truth force, emphasizes the need for nonviolent resistance and the pursuit of justice in addressing human rights issues. Furthermore, Gandhi's idea of dharma, or duty, underscores the moral obligation to protect and support those in need, such as refugees. By interpreting Gandhi's ideals in the practical realm of refugee rights, India can develop a refugee policy that aligns with humanitarian concerns and promotes the principles of sarvodaya, satyagraha, and dharma.

Gandhi's political philosophy and experiences with refugees during the partition of India in the 1940s can contribute as guiding principles for future refugee policy in India.

Gandhi's approach to human rights was indeed deeply rooted in his understanding of human nature and his belief in human perfectibility. This idea of humanism was based on the interpretation revolving around 'what man can become' rather than 'what is man'.

Gandhi explained that considering human civilization's development, people became social by integrating into communities and willingly embracing love, empathy, compassion, and cooperation for mutual benefit. As the humans are in the process of becoming civilized and socialized, the people involved need a continuous articulation of moral virtues. But Gandhi admitted that mankind as they made substantive progress yet they did never abandon their inherent inclination towards a savage nature inherited from their ancestors. Gandhi stated that "We are perhaps all originally brutes. I am prepared to believe that we have become men by a slow process of evolution from the brute " (Iyer, 1973:90). Further Gandhi argued that violence is the law of the brute and non-violence is the law of human species. A man relinquishes the habit of clinging on to violence the moment he responds to the call of spirit residing within him. Therefore, mankind possesses the capacity to go beyond the confinement of mere passions, selfishness and violence. Gandhi earnestly believed that man is bestial but he is human precisely because he is potentially and essentially divine (Iyer, 1973:91).

These savage nature of humankind resulted in the emergence of various social and human rights issues. Gandhian Approach to Human Rights: i) Right of Self – Determination (ii) Right to Life, (iii) Prohibition of Torture and Inhuman Treatment, (iv) Prohibition of Slavery and Slave Trade, (i) Right to Work (ii) Right to Just and Favourable Conditions of Work (iii) Right to Social Security (iv) Rights relating to Motherhood and Childhood etc. The right to clean environment; the right to information; the right to development; the right of the indigenous people; the rights of women; the rights of children; The freedom of religious worship and study also enabled him to uphold the analogous right of a person to "intelligent conversion", that is, to voluntary change of belief and faith. The human rights of women and girl child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural like, at the national, regional and international levels. The children have right for food, right to play games, right to enjoy health, right to acquire education, right to express their views, right to follow the religion they aspire, and right to enjoy the atmosphere without pollution. (Selvan, 2020). We are in dire need of Gandhian methods for peaceful solutions to these human rights issues in contemporary society. According to him non-violence is a force of power for saving humanity and to him, to be human one must be non-violent. As we know, the most important threat for humanity is violence either created by religious fundamentalist or by nuclear weapons. Gandhi always fought with moral weapons such as non-violent resistance, non-cooperation, civil disobedience and was able to get victory in different fields. To him non-violence is the force of active love and truth which seeks justice and peace for every human being. We know that the direct requirement of today is establishing global peace and this will be possible only through Gandhian Non-violence. He also advocated numerous methods for saving human rights from

poverty, unemployment and economic disparity such as decentralization, village industry and spinning–wheel. The principle of serving humanity and working for the betterment of society are the core principles of Gandhism and he emphasized the idea of selfless service and working for the welfare of the disadvantaged groups. He strongly followed the principle of non-violence through which the conflicts should be resolved. The Gandhian philosophy advocated for the empowerment of individuals and communities to have a control on their own life as well as their development to foster their strength and decision making capabilities. Rural development and the upliftment of the village people were the major agenda of Gandhian philosophy because he believed that India's soul resided in its villages and that sustainable progress should begin from the grassroots level.

Gandhi also fought for establishing social justice and equity in the world and he raised his criticisms against the discriminations based on caste, religion and gender. He wanted to create a justful society where everyone should be treated equally. Gandhi adopted the method of nonviolent resistance to fight against the injustice, so Gandhi followed the strategy of Satyagraha which means the truth force or soul force. Gandhi's way of life was simple and humble and through his life he taught people to adopt a simple lifestyle for promoting the idea of "simple living and high thinking." Gandhi strongly advocated for grassroots decentralization, emphasizing the autonomy of villages in both production and administration. His aim was to uplift impoverished villagers, leading to the establishment of the Panchayati Raj system in India. Due to his deep concern for the welfare of the rural population, Gandhi placed significant emphasis on village industries such as spinning wheels and khadi. His belief was that empowering rural communities with these industries would enable them to meet their fundamental needs, considering such empowerment more potent than any weapon in the world.

Conclusion

In summary, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of human rights was deeply rooted in his optimistic view of human nature and the belief in human perfectibility. His emphasis on "what man can become " reflects a commitment to harness human potential on the grounds of human worth and dignity which is the core principle and values of social work. For Gandhi, striving for moral and ethical growth is a means to uphold human rights and create a more just and compassionate world.

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