

Irony of Human Rights Discourse in India: Apartheid in Perspective

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Abstract: India since its Independence until 1970s has played central role in mobilizing third world countries on issue of Self-determination and racial equality. This paper will critically analyse India's diplomatic move employing 'human rights' in United Nations General Assembly to counter racial discrimination in South Africa. Along with discussing a brief history of racism and colonialism this paper will also concisely discuss India's contradictory attitude towards human rights within its jurisdiction in contemporary times towards Dalits, Kashmiri and North-eastern separatist currently fighting for Self-determination in India.

Keywords: Apartheid, India, South Africa, Racism, Human rights.

Introduction

Contemporary India is in chaos. News of human rights crisis in Kashmir, mob lynching, vigilante violence aimed at religious minorities, marginalized communities, and silencing of critics of the government have adorned daily pages of newspaper¹. Clearly the discourse of Human rights is seriously challenged- by the government, and from its supporters.

However, things were different in 1960s-70s. India was the proud champion of human rights-particularly at the United Nations. Why so? This paper will analyse.

India was officially emancipated from the yoke of colonialism on 15th August 1947. It's oppressor, the British ruled India with- iron fist- for nearly two hundred years. During this time British colonialism have drained India's wealth, natural resources and humiliated dignity of its people. So, called great grandfather of India Dadabhai Naoroji aptly have written in 'Poverty and Un-British Rule in India' how British has plundered wealth of the nation and transformed India from one of the richest country (at the beginning of the 18th century) to the poorest of the world². This background assists us to understand causes of India's moral enthusiasm and diplomatic support to countries who were struggling against racial discrimination and colonialism- particularly South African nations in 1970s.

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/india>.

² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dadabhai-Naoroji>.

India's bitter experience with Western power

Establishment of British East India Company in AD. 1600 was the advent of British imperialism in India; later battle of Plassey on 23rd June, 1757 sealed the fate of Indian continent at least for next two hundred years. Under the British colonial rule Indians were no longer the arbitrator of their destiny; their political, military, economic, foreign-relations, even social and individual independence lost to their colonial imperial British master. Deep impact of colonialism, not only affected British India, but also, modern India and Indians; their thought process, political system, bureaucratic hierarchy, social stratification, to certain extent have led to suspicion to the discourse of Western human rights.

Under colonialism minimum human rights to people is denied; violence has become standard practice of state management and poverty is normalized as Jean-Paul Sartre (cited in Klose, p.240, 2011) affirmed, "Colonialism denies human rights to people it has subjugated by violence, and whom it keeps in poverty and ignorance by force." Under the British rule India bore the brunt of colonialism, its history was orientalist; basic human rights were taken away, poverty and violence has become the rule of the day. Approximately thirty-five million Indians died because of acts of commission and omission by the British in famines, epidemics, communal riots and wholesale slaughter (Tharoor, 2016).

British raj created a power structure in India that not only dominated at political and socio-economic level, but also, knowledge produced by British intellectuals (historian, civil servant, anthropologist) subjugated, distorted and humiliated Indian' intellectuals, its masses, history, sciences and literature (Said, 1979). Orient has helped defined Europe so that Western rule can be justified to the uncivilised Indian (Ibid).

Under the British colonialism institutional racism has become norm to subjugate Indian's body and minds. Relationship between British and Indians were hierarchical and charged with racial arrogance. Negative characteristics were related to Indians indiscriminately point to the unequal and racialized character of the relationship (Banerjee 2010). Racism when structured in the State functionaries becomes a system of oppression which divide between European and non-European. Not only this system constantly reproduces race and racial categories, but also colonialize and racialize the colonized (Hesse, Barnor and Sayyid, 2006) as occurred in colonial India.

Moreover, race was also a pretext to colonize savage Indian who were considered not modern by the British. The concept of modernity is built upon a set of indicators of superiority/inferiority on the human line (Grosfoguel, 2012) that helped sustained the ideological foundation of British colonial empire in India. The concept of coloniality leads to formal and informal manners of 'racial rule' (Goldberg, 2002) that are regularly maintained by administrative forms which reproduced structural racism.

In fact, colonial difference has created a mode of being human in the history of species on the basis of what Quijano identifies as the "coloniality of power," Mignolo as the "colonial difference," and Winant as a "racial longue durée- which finally resulted in enslavement of African, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation (Wynter, 2003).

However, on one the one hand, some have viewed Britain's Imperial hold over India as a case of simple plundering while others such as Lord Curzon considered it as enlightened despotism for benefit of the governed³. Nevertheless, British did introduce modern education, justice, polices, transportation, bureaucracy system, nevertheless, it was meant to exploit India and Indians from its resources and serve the British empire (Tharoor (2017). Tharoor (Ibid) has argued that so called 'imperial 'gift', from the railways to the rule of law, were served only Britain's interests.

Due to continued humiliation, and exploitation of economic resources Indian rage manifested against the British empire on different times on various places in the country in form of different rebellion (mutiny of 1857), revolution (Amritsar massacre of 1919) and non-violence movements. The Indian independence movement included activities to end the East India Company rule (1757–1857) and the British Indian Empire (1857–1947) in the Indian subcontinent. Indian struggle for Independence mobilised under Indian National Congress (hereafter INC) under the leadership (1915–1947) of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (hereafter Gandhi) who was barrister in South Africa fighting against racial discrimination in South Africa (1893–1914). Gandhi mobilised Indian masses carried out major nationalist movements, such as the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22), Civil Disobedience (1930), Salt Satyagraha, and the Quit India Movement (1942).

³ http://www.ampltd.co.uk/collections_az/curzon-india-1/description.aspx?h=curzon

Gandhi's policy of nonviolence and civil resistance prevailed over the Indian national movement (hereafter INM) until Indian independence in 1947. However, basic ideology of these movements was anti-colonial but not necessarily invoked language of human rights.

After gaining freedom in 1947, India vehemently supported anti-colonial movements globally and fought against South African apartheid regime where Indians were routinely being discriminated. Due to trade and slave trade, there was a large presence of Indians in Africa (Sadiq, cited in Dube, p.13, 2016). The interest and connections of Indian nationalist leaders in Africa date back to 1890 when Indian National Congress (hereafter INC) opposed deployment of Indian soldiers in Sudan and Ethiopia as they were not fighting for the cause of India.

Under Gandhi and later under Jawaharlal Nehru, INC opposed racist policies of British Government in African countries. Gandhi strategy of mass movement such as non-violence, civil disobedience, non-cooperation movement, boycott of foreign goods (swadeshi) and peaceful agitations became a model for African nationalists; later African leaders in their own struggles for self-determination were inspired by Gandhi (Guha, cited in Dubey, p.16, 2016).

This section has discussed India's colonial past. The next section will demonstrate India's response towards colonial powers, racial discrimination and its support to African freedom struggle.

India's diplomatic struggle against racial discrimination

Promise of self-rule of the Atlantic revolutions (1941) inspired many countries in Africa and Asia leading postcolonial liberation from colonial power. India supported freedom movements in South Africa. India's concerted effort drew world attention on racial discrimination (practiced by UN members against its own national) which Rajagopal (2009) has referred as a 'door-opening moment' in international human rights field.

India used United Nations (hereafter UN) as a diplomatic platform to counter and criticize Western colonial powers challenging their policy of racial discrimination while promoting and supporting agenda of 'Self-determination.' Some has suggested anti-colonialism was a Self-determination movement (Moyn, 2010). Indeed, for Indian politicians and diplomats at that time the discourse of human rights seemed like a substitute for Self-determination

movement. This was one of the reasons for India's increased human rights diplomatic activism during 1960-70s in United Nations General Assembly (hereafter UNGA).

Interestingly during his struggle for Indian independence Gandhi never invoked 'human rights' neither Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first prime minister of India. However, Gandhi did support petition in the UN to safeguard Indians living in South Africa under the apartheid rule of British colonizer (Ibid). United Nation began consideration on racism on petition from India in 1946. Chairman of the Indian delegation at the UNGA, Mrs Vijay Lakshmi Pandit invoked principles of UN charter while critiquing racism:

"India firmly believes that imperialism, political, economic or social, in whatever part of the world it may exist and by whomsoever it may be established and perpetuated, is totally inconsistent with the objects and purposes of the United Nations and of its Charter," (UN Doc. No.17/76, cited in Moolla, 2010).

Remarkably when India highlighted issues of racial discrimination at United Nations General Assembly in 1946, at that time UN was dominated by the colonial powers who quite often created diplomatic difficulties when issues of anti-colonialism brought for discussion as Klose (2010) has observed. In response to Indian petition against racial discrimination in South Africa, the General Assembly in Resolution 44 (I) of December 8, 1946, has called for a dialogue between the two member states with a final report to the General Assembly. This was the first time United Nations had seriously reflected over the racial issue.

In United Nations India referred, 'racial discrimination' as a grave danger to the world peace and supported African resolutions to boycott racist regime of South Africa. This particular Indian UN diplomatic move garnered world attention and criticism on racial discrimination especially against those colonial powers practicing discrimination on racial lines; during those times exposing colonial powers diplomatically was pattern of Indian human rights diplomacy in UNGA (Klose, 2012).

In addition, India co-sponsored 1960 Declaration on UN on Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples which proclaimed need to unconditionally end colonialism in all its forms and manifestations. However, approval of this declaration made the colonial system is an international crime as Moyn (2012) lamented. As a leading member of non-aligned movement, India supported South Africa's expulsion from Commonwealth of Nations

in 1961; as a member of the Afro-Asian groups at the United Nations supported expulsion and isolation of the Pretoria regime and for the recognition of African movements (Moolla, 2010).

India riding on high wave of international subaltern⁴ movement across Asian and African colonies challenged racial discrimination in African countries. India mobilized colonial grievances of colonized African and Asian nations linking their anti-colonial struggles and movements against imperial powers, and making linkages with subaltern cosmopolitanism and their agents such as black internationalist intellectuals and political activists⁵

By decentring the national in internationalism and situating forms of subaltern cosmopolitanism as constitutive of internationalist political activity, India reconfigured aspects of the spatial constitution of internationalism (Featherstone, 2013). Now postcolonial sovereignty linked to subaltern internationalism (Moyn, 2012).

Throughout the 1950s, as the South African government continued to codify racially exclusionary policies such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), the Population Registration Act (1950), and the Group Areas Act (1950). Gradually, India shifted its tactical approach from focusing on the treatment of its nationals to challenging apartheid in terms of human rights supporting all those fighting against racism and colonialism (Tsutui, Whitlinger and Lim, 2012).

By raising racial issue on the political agenda new African and Asian UN member states linked the human rights debate directly to the problem of colonial domination and confirmed their demand for self-determination (Moyn, 2012). Nevertheless, imperial powers such as Britain and France while manipulating UN human rights diplomacy ruthlessly crushed the anti-colonial movements in Kenya, Malaya, Indochina, Indonesia (Klose, 2011). Nonetheless, these human rights violations in colonies has become major source of embarrassment for colonial power attracting criticism from countries such as India and Africa, as Klose (Ibid) have noted.

India has argued colonialism is against the moral basis of UN charter. However, India's human rights enthusiasm, as a matter of fact, were about achieving postcolonial sovereignty externally, not enforcing it internally-as pattern of human rights violations in Independent

⁴ The term subaltern designates the populations which are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland. In describing "history told from below", subaltern was coined by Antonio Gramsci.

⁵ India gave open support to South African, Zambia, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau (Moola, 2010).

India regarding Caste discrimination against Dalits, Kashmir self-determination movement, and opposition to UN conference on Racism in 2001, suggests.

Interestingly, few have argued that Indians in South Africa benefited from apartheid because they were not equally oppressed as Black African (Bonke Dumisa, interview in IOL, 11 August, 2016). Moyn (2012) rightly asserted that anti-colonialism did not contribute to the substance to human rights rather privileged the anti-totalitarian values; however anti-colonialism did change power relations; challenged the hegemony of imperial and colonial values of domination.

This section has illustrated India's human rights diplomatic move against colonial powers in UNGA and its support to anti-racism in South Africa. Next section will highlight anomaly of Indian double standard towards application of human rights within its jurisdiction.

India's double standards towards human rights

Earlier discussion has demonstrated how colonial experience has guided India's perspective on human rights regime. India's insistence on absolute Sovereignty and policy of non-interference⁶ originated under the British Empire continued more or less until now seem big hindrance for enforcement of human rights. Since 1990s, India continued to view international human rights regime with suspicion, and avoided action which weaken state sovereignty. Its poor human rights record especially human rights violations by Indian security forces while combating insurgents fighting for secession, discrimination against Dalits and religious minorities⁷, and its fear of abetting Western intervention – are some factors which limits India's participation in human rights discourse.

India which once was staunchly protested against racial discrimination in UNGA, ironically, left no stone unturned to prevent reference to Caste based discrimination⁸ out of the United Nations conference on racism held in Durban, South Africa in 2001 (also known as World Conference against Racism, WCAR). India opposed any move to internationalise issue of Caste

⁶ Policy of non-interference was the part of the Panchsheel, or the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, enunciated by Nehru includes: i. Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, ii. non-aggression, iii. non-interference, iv. Equality and mutual benefit, and v. Peaceful co-existence.

⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/india>

⁸ India has worked hard to prevent conference documents referring specifically to discrimination on the grounds of caste, See at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-confronts-contentious-issue-of-dalit-atrocities-at-durban-conference-on-racism/1/231082.html>.

system and asserted Caste is purely a domestic matter and international community must not interfere in it.

For India, Caste is different from race thus related discrimination (originated from Caste) does not come under the purview of related UN conventions and covenants (Pinto, 2001). Nevertheless, non-governmental organizations committee together with the Asia-Pacific committee officially endorse view that issue of caste discrimination against Dalits is a serious human rights violation thus needs to be addressed in WCAR. For millions of lower class Hindus also known as Dalits- social and structural discrimination and rampant violence- is a harsh reality in India. In fact, under current Indian rule, atrocities against Dalits⁹ and Muslim minorities is high¹⁰. Growing instances of mob lynching, is also a case in this point¹¹.

India has been harsh while dealing with issue of 'secession' particularly against Kashmiri separatist. For India, Right to Self-determination¹² does not apply to Kashmiri secessionist which is clear case of India's double standard on human rights. Recent report by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (UNOHCHR, 2018) on gross human rights abuses in Kashmir and its immediate strong rejection¹³ by officials, demonstrate India is no longer care the discourse of human rights once it championed.

Almost similar situation prevails in the Northeast part (Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland) of India where since 1947 sustained separatist insurgencies is going on and harsh government response have caused serious human rights violations (Bhaumik, 2007). In such disturbed areas most notorious is, Armed Forces (Special Powers) Acts (AFSPA) under which military can search and detain anyone without any court order¹⁴. This act has been source of huge human rights violations in all secessionist areas (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

⁹<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/atrocities-against-dalits-at-17-year-high-in-gujarat-rti-reply-shows/articleshow/63388107.cms>

¹⁰<https://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/asia/2016/11/trial-india-dalits-muslims-tribals-161101150136542.html>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qj7qjYCbBog>

¹² Interestingly, Upendra Baxi believe that human rights to Right to Self-determination excludes the rights of secession, *The Legalization of Human Rights*, edited by Meckled-Gracia and Calhi, Routledge, New York.

¹³<https://scroll.in/latest/882624/un-releases-first-report-on-kashmir-calls-for-inquiry-into-alleged-human-rights-violations>

¹⁴ Armed Forces (Special Powers) Acts (AFSPA), grant special powers to the Indian armed forces in "disturbed areas. See at <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/2008/india0808/>

In addition, India harshly dealt with complex problems of Naxalite movement¹⁵, Caste and communal violence which to some extent are rooted in socio-economic deprivation of Dalits, untouchable and Muslim minorities (Mahakul, 2014). Indian response often has resulted in human rights abuses of vulnerable groups of her society since police, judiciary and politics are dominated by the Hindu upper class majority religious group.

Interestingly, Indian government hardly pay attention on international condemnation on human rights abuses occurring within its jurisdiction. In spite of many resolutions have been passed in European parliament¹⁶ and United Nations regarding atrocities against Dalits and minorities, ironically, India continue opposing such condemnations. Furthermore, India is against the expansion of jurisdictions of International human rights regime and often on opposite side of the fence on human rights at the U.N. (Rajagopala, 2009). In fact, most of newly independent third world countries which once resorted to human rights in their struggle toward independence objected to human rights claims as they became repressive regimes (Burke, cited in Tsutui, Whitlinger and Lim, p.371, 2012).

Contemporary Indian government's stance towards human rights is reflected in its tough stand towards its civil society members working on human rights issues in India. Rise of Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) in 2014 has brought immense trouble for human rights activist, human rights defender and to those critical to government policies. The anti-human rights attitude of Narendra Modi government is reflected in cancellation of thousands of NGO licenses and increased restrictions on NGOs, receiving foreign donations¹⁷.

However, on positive note, Griffin (2015) is hopeful that India has no trouble with handling with language of human rights since human rights values are ingrained in the Indian constitution, and believes that domestically, human rights situation in India, is most likely to improve due to domestic debate, actions by local NGOs and academia.

Nevertheless, in contemporary India, discourse of human rights being seen with scepticism among by some stakeholders, such as majority of NGOs, nationalist, political leaders, workers

¹⁵ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/04/india-maoist-rebels-explainer-170426132812114.html>

¹⁶ European Parliament resolution of 10 October 2013 on caste-based discrimination (2013/2676(RSP), available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2013-0420+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

¹⁷ <https://www.firstpost.com/india/fcra-licences-of-20000-ngos-cancelled-act-being-used-as-weapon-to-silence-organisations-3181560.html>

and government officials. Use of double standards of human rights by Western power and its intellectuals is also a case in the point. When Bhopal gas tragedy (Lal, 2017) struck in India, there was no hue and cry in West, in words of Peter deSouza (p.142, 2017), “why is western philosophy so schizophrenic, so vocal when in the classroom but so silent when in the colonial streets?”

Conclusion

Historical facts have determined India’s attitude towards racial discrimination and human rights. Guided by its colonial past inspired by cosmopolitan subaltern values, India staunchly used UNGA for anti-colonial politics to get rid of racial discrimination, particularly in South Africa. Indian diplomats strategically used language of human rights to promote the Right to Self-determination thus in some sense anti-colonial struggle became Self-determination movement. However, had it not been for struggle of anti-colonial movements, Self-determination movement would not have been possible.

Nevertheless, India’s human rights enthusiasm were, in fact, were about achieving postcolonial sovereignty externally, not enforcing it internally as this is apparent in the rampant abuse of human rights violations against Dalits, minorities, secessionist in India. Indian state is staunchly against International intervention in its domestic affair.

Condemnation and resolutions passed by European parliament may adversely affect bilateral ties without making any serious contribution to the human rights situation in India (Sachdeva, 2014). Finally, it can be said that there is no consistent policy on human rights, India accordingly to its realpolitik or realist needs employ human rights as it did during 1970s in UNGA. It seems discourse of human rights is slowly becoming the part of neo-colonialism in India complicit in human rights violations within its jurisdiction.

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