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HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CHALLENGES AND PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT:

There have been many improvements in human rights in the last decades as a result of international and national laws. Although many countries have improved their human rights records, violations continue to occur due to several political, social and economic challenges. There are many threats to human rights, including repressive governments, failure to protect human rights in the digital environment and inequalities as a result of globalisation, climate change and pandemics. There are violent and unjust situations against many vulnerable people and communities. There have been several improvements in human rights as a result of activities and initiatives at all levels and especially through the use of new means of communication. Each nation and region should be assessed to take advantage of available opportunities for improvement. There is an urgent need for improved global and local commitment to achieve the highest standard of human rights[1].

Keywords: Human rights, 21stCentury**,** climate change, economic inequality, Technology.

INTRODUCTION:

The 21st century has been a time of improving and extending human rights and also a time of challenges and threats against the enjoyment of human rights. Globalisation has broken down barriers and promoted exchange of ideas and information. This has created new opportunities and increased awareness for advocacy for the human rights of women, children, LGBTQ and other vulnerable groups.[2] However, it has also facilitated an increase in violations of human rights of many people around the world and enhanced the potential for threats against human rights. Challenges to the acceptance and implementation of human rights have increased during periods of severe social division and armed conflict. The promotion and protection of human

[1] Ebooks, Historical Development of Human Rights from Ancient Roots to Magna Carta – Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights; Duties and Responsibilities (last visited October 18, 2026).

[2] Nirmal Kumar Chandra, "Human rights in India: Historical, social and political perspectives". A.P.H. Publishing Corporation (2012).

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rights are needed now more than ever before, considering the new and emerging challenges of forced migration and climate change, particularly for those most vulnerable.[3]

Development Of Human Rights :

Codification of laws to regulate and govern society can be found in the works of ancient sages of the East and the West. Hammurabi, around 1754 B.C., developed a Code that governed legal proceedings and judgments. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle argued for a philosophical framework to govern the state and the rights of individuals. The Roman Empire developed a body of laws that laid the foundation for the rights of individuals. The medieval era, from 1215 A.D.,[4] witnessed the integration of a legal framework to protect the rights of the citizens, for example, Magna Carta. Other legal and philosophical works, for example, the Natural Rights Theory of Thomas Aquinas and the works of the Enlightenment (Locke, Rousseau, and Voltaire, among others), and the American and French Revolutions set a precedent for the affirmation of individual rights that shaped democracy. Thinkers of the Enlightenment like John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote about the idea of natural rights and liberty and the social contract. Later, during the 19th century, abolition movements and the Women's Suffrage movement also rose up and gained strength and popularity. International commitment to human rights also gained strength at this time, especially with the foundation of the United Nations (UN) and the work of Eleanor Roosevelt. The UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) on December 10, 1948[5]. The UDHR consists of 30 Articles and was immediately adopted by 56 of the 58 founding member states of the United Nations. The UN's Commission on Human Rights began its work to develop the international bills of rights. The first of these was the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which was adopted in 1966. The second of these, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)[6], was adopted the same year. In the following years, a series of other international covenants, conventions and declarations on various other human rights were developed. In more recent years, new social realities led to an

[3] Anuj Jain, "The evolution of Human Rights in the 21st Century: A study of India ". Journal of Social Issues and Humanities (2018).

[4] R.S. Dhaka, "Human Rights in India: A Critical Account" – Kaveri Books (2015).

[5] M.B. Rao, "Human Rights and Social Justice in India ", Rawat Publication (2012).

[6] Preeti B, "Human Rights, Development and social Justice: A critical Perspective– Journal of Law and social Justice (2021).

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increased focus and development of international human rights for marginalised groups, to include the environment and digital rights.

Challenges in Human Rights:

These are challenges: -

(1) Authoritarian Regimes and Democracy Erosion:

There are several countries that have authoritarian leaders who don't allow any criticisms or oppositions. As a result, many people are not able to fully enjoy their human rights.

(2) Global Displacement And Refugee Crises:

There are many reasons why people are forced to leave their countries. This includes armed conflicts or natural disasters. The Refugee crisis is a challenge for the international community. According to some sources, more than 100 million people became Refugees and were displaced from their countries during the first two months of 2023.[7] The largest numbers come from countries including Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Venezuela.

(3) Technology and privacy concerns:

New Technologies are a double-edged sword. While they help people enjoy their rights, they can also undermine people's rights and protections and harm people through violations of their privacy. For example, people's right to security can be compromised when people's private information is available through the Technologies.[8]

(4) Racial and ethnic discrimination:

Racial and ethnic discrimination negates the dignity and freedom of racial and ethnic minorities. It aggravates social and economic inequalities, and fosters social disputes and conflicts. Social media is a good starting point for campaigns and programs that use awareness activities, training, and various strategies to overcome racial and ethnic discrimination and to

[7] Ranjana Kumari, "Women and Human Rights in India", Gyan Publishing House (2013).

[8] Aditi Sharma, "Contemporary Issues in Human Rights: A case study of India– National Law University Journal (2022).

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promote equality before the law and opportunities for all, regardless of their racial or ethnic backgrounds.[9]

(5) Economic Inequality:

The inequality in the economy can be negatively circular in nature and affect the enjoyment of many human rights, including the fulfilment of economic needs, social needs, needs for participation and for justice, as well as the psychosocial condition and the responsive policy of the government.[10]

(6) Climate Change And Environmental Rights:

The adverse effects of human-induced climate change and the degradation of the ecosystem negatively affect all human rights through the loss of life and property, and the endangerment of the means of subsistence of humans and other living beings. The present state of the environment negatively affects human rights and creates social inequalities through the negative impact on particularly vulnerable groups, and by producing carbon and other greenhouse gases which contribute to climate change. Natural disasters become more frequent and of greater intensity, and are destructive to the environment, property, and human life. All this creates the deprivation of the enjoyment of the right to a healthy environment.[11]

Progress In Human Rights :

There has been steady advancement in the field of human rights this year due to numerous worldwide movements for the recognition and safeguarding of fundamental rights and freedoms of man.

(1) International Treaties and Agreements:

One of the fundamental documents of the international bill of human rights is the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights', which was adopted by the General Assembly in 1948. Later, several international conventions were adopted for the protection of human rights. A few of

[9] R.C. Hingorani – "Human Rights: A Comprehensive Study", Universal Law Publishing (2016).
[10] Susmita S. – "Emerging challenges to Human Rights in India". – Journal of Indian Law Institute (2019).
[11] S.K. Kapur, "International Human Rights", Universal Law Publishing (2017).

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them are the 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights' (ICCPR),[12] 'International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' (ICESCR), and 'Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women' (CEDAW).

(2) Human Rights Activism:

Human rights activism includes the protection and promotion of all the rights and freedoms of all individuals. There are different kinds of activism to raise awareness about human rights violations. Activism includes various methods and means like conducting campaigns, social mobilisation, education, etc. Human rights defenders are concerned with the protection and promotion of the rights of vulnerable groups such as women, children and people from minorities and refugee groups[13].

Awareness and Education:

Human rights depend on awareness and education to ensure that people and groups can recognise and uphold their rights and the rights of others. For awareness to occur, it is vital to educate and inform the public on ways they can protect their rights, how history has been unjust, and how people have been subjugated and continue to be victims of human rights violations. Above all else, teaching children,[14] youth and adults to have critical and reflective thinking on all issues that pertain to social justice and human rights will help attain a world that respects all rights of the different members of society.

The Role of International Organisation:

It is the responsibility of international organisations to draft, formulate, and adopt human rights instruments and human rights treaties, and provide a framework for states that have yet to accord their citizens' rights and fundamental freedoms. Some of these instruments are employed to monitor, examine, assess, and evaluate states' commitment to implement international human rights instruments.[15] It is crucial that international organisations promote

[12] J.P. Agrawal, "Human Rights in India: Historical, social and political perspective", A.P.H Publishing Corporation (2011).
[13] K.T. Thomas, "Human Rights in India: challenges and progress – Indian Journal of Human Rights (2020).
[14] Jack Donnelly, "The challenges of globalisation for Human Rights- Human Rights Quarterly (2013).
[15] Mary Robinson, "Human Rights in the 21st Century: New challenges for a new era– Fordham International Law Journal.

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dialogue between states and engage civil societies so as to bring to light existing and emerging challenges that affect the international community. International organisations are mandated to sponsor various education and awareness initiatives, create a human rights culture and serve as a resource centre.

The Future Directions for Human Rights:

The focus of work on human rights is shifting to the interrelated nature of human rights and other social and environmental issues, e.g. climate change, digital rights, and systemic inequities. There are growing concerns regarding the need for the protection and promotion of the rights of vulnerable groups due to the impacts of globalisation and the need for necessary and adequate legal frameworks to address the challenges of the 21st century[16] (e.g. disinformation and climate change). In the same vein, international human rights law will continue to play an important role in addressing situations that lack accountability. It is expected that the interaction of different human rights and development agendas and frameworks of the United Nations will create synergies and enhance positive impact on dignity, justice and human rights for all persons.

CONCLUSION:

There are both positive and negative aspects of human rights in the 21st century. New means of communication and technology have fostered global coordination in the defence of human rights and promoted various social movements concerned with economic and social justice, such as the movements for land and climate justice. In addition, a number of threats to human rights, including large-scale conflicts and humanitarian emergencies, forced displacement, and extremism and inequality, persist. One of the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was to make the gaps and inequities in the full enjoyment of human rights more visible. Importantly, to transform positive trends in human rights, we must all work to uphold dignity and address human rights violations.

[16] Amartya Sen, "Human Rights and Capabilities- Journal of Human Development (2005).

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