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On the Topic

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Tracing Human Rights: A Journey from Antiquity to the Present

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Abstract

Human rights are widely recognized today as universal, inalienable, and fundamental to human dignity. Although the contemporary framework of human rights emerged primarily in the twentieth century, particularly after the Second World War, the roots of these rights extend deep into human history. From ancient legal codes and moral philosophies to religious teachings and political revolutions, societies across the world have contributed to the gradual development of human rights ideas. This seminar paper traces the historical evolution of human rights from antiquity to the present. It examines early expressions of justice and rights in ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, India, China, Greece, and Rome, followed by the influence of medieval religious doctrines and landmark legal documents like the Magna Carta. The paper further explores the transformative role of Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment philosophy in shaping modern notions of individual liberty, equality, and natural rights. Special emphasis is given to the political revolutions of the eighteenth century and the expansion of rights during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, culminating in the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Finally, the paper discusses contemporary challenges and emerging dimensions of human rights in the twenty-first century. The study highlights that human rights are not static but continually evolving in response to changing social, political, and technological realities.

Keywords: Human Dignity, Universality, Human Rights, Natural Rights, Enlightenment, Universal Declaration of Human Rights

1. Introduction

Human rights form the moral and legal foundation of modern democratic societies and international relations. They represent standards of behavior that protect individuals from abuse, discrimination, and injustice while promoting freedom, equality, and dignity. Today, human rights are enshrined in constitutions, international treaties, and legal institutions across the globe. However, the idea that all human beings possess inherent rights did not arise overnight. Instead, it is the result of a long historical process shaped by philosophical inquiry, religious values, political struggles, and social movements.

The evolution of human rights reflects humanity's collective effort to define justice and moral responsibility in

changing contexts. Different civilizations interpreted rights differently, often emphasizing duties alongside entitlements. While early societies did not speak of "human rights" in modern terminology, they developed principles that safeguarded human dignity, limited power, and promoted social order. This paper aims to trace the historical journey of human rights from ancient times to the present, demonstrating how past ideas laid the groundwork for contemporary human rights norms and institutions.

2. Objectives of the study

1. To trace the historical origins of human rights from ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, India, China, Greece, and Rome, highlighting early ideas of

justice, law, and human dignity.

2. To examine the role of religious and medieval institutions in shaping moral and legal principles related to human dignity, equality, and the limitation of arbitrary power, with special reference to the Magna Carta.
3. To analyze the contribution of Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment philosophy in developing modern concepts of natural rights, liberty, equality, and constitutional governance.
4. To study the impact of major political revolutions and social movements-particularly the American and French Revolutions-on the expansion and formal recognition of human rights.
5. To evaluate the significance of twentieth-century developments, especially the establishment of the United Nations and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in institutionalizing human rights at the global level.
6. To identify contemporary challenges and emerging dimensions of human rights in the twenty-first century, including digital rights, environmental rights, and the role of international institutions in human rights protection.

3. Methodology of the study

The present study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research methodology to examine the historical development of human rights from antiquity to the present. The study is based entirely on secondary sources of data, including books, academic journals, research articles, historical documents, and reports of international organizations such as the United Nations. Classical philosophical writings, ancient legal codes, religious texts, constitutional documents, and international human rights instruments-particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights-have been critically analyzed. The research uses the historical method along with an analytical and interpretative approach to understand the continuity, change, and expansion of human rights ideas across different civilizations and historical periods.

4. Human Rights in Antiquity

4.1 Mesopotamian Civilization

The earliest known written laws emerged in ancient Mesopotamia. The Code of Hammurabi (c. 1750 BCE) is a significant milestone in the history of legal justice. Inscribed on a stone stele, the code contained laws governing social relations, property, labor, and family life. Although the code was hierarchical and differentiated punishments based on social status, it introduced the principle that rulers themselves were subject to the law.

The code emphasized proportional justice, aiming to prevent arbitrary punishment and ensure order. Its recognition of individual protection, compensation for injury, and accountability marked an important step toward institutionalized justice, a key element of human rights.

4.2 Ancient India

Ancient Indian civilization developed a strong ethical foundation centered on dharma, which signified moral duty, righteousness, and justice. Texts such as the Vedas,

Upanishads, Manusmriti, and Arthashastra discussed governance, social responsibility, and ethical behavior. Though hierarchical in social structure, these traditions recognized moral obligations toward others.

A notable advancement occurred during the reign of Emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE). After the devastation of the Kalinga War, Ashoka embraced Buddhism and promoted policies emphasizing non-violence, religious tolerance, public welfare, and humane treatment of prisoners. His rock and pillar edicts reflect concern for human dignity, compassion, and ethical governance, aligning closely with modern human rights principles.

4.3 Ancient China

Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism, emphasized moral governance and social harmony. Confucius advocated ethical leadership, compassion, and respect for human relationships. He believed rulers had a moral obligation to govern justly and ensure the welfare of the people.

The concept of the Mandate of Heaven reinforced political accountability. If rulers failed to act justly, they could lose legitimacy. Though not framed as individual rights, this principle limited tyranny and recognized the moral worth of the governed.

4.4 Ancient Greece

Ancient Greece contributed significantly through political and philosophical innovation. The development of democracy in Athens allowed male citizens to participate directly in governance. Philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle explored justice, equality, and moral reasoning.

Aristotle's idea of natural justice suggested that some principles of right and wrong existed universally. While Greek democracy excluded women, slaves, and foreigners, it inspired later concepts of political participation and civic rights.

4.5 Ancient Rome

Roman civilization advanced legal thought through the systematic development of law. Roman jurists distinguished between *jus civile* (civil law), *jus gentium* (law of nations), and *jus naturale* (natural law). Natural law, in particular, emphasized universal principles derived from human reason and nature.

Roman law introduced concepts such as legal personality, property rights, contracts, and due process, which became foundational elements of modern legal systems and human rights jurisprudence.

5. Human Rights in the Medieval Period

During the medieval era, religion became the primary source of moral authority. Christianity emphasized the inherent worth of individuals as creations of God, promoting values such as charity, compassion, and justice. Similarly, Islamic teachings stressed equality before God, social justice, and protection of the weak. Islamic law recognized rights related to life, property, family, and religious freedom.

A landmark political development was the Magna Carta (1215) in England. It limited the absolute authority of the monarch and affirmed principles such as the rule of law,

protection against arbitrary imprisonment, and the right to a fair trial. Although originally intended to protect the nobility, its symbolic importance influenced later constitutional developments.

6. Renaissance and Enlightenment Foundations

The Renaissance marked a revival of classical learning and humanism. Thinkers emphasized human dignity, reason, and individuality, challenging rigid religious authority. This intellectual shift paved the way for the Enlightenment, which transformed ideas about rights and governance.

Enlightenment philosophers played a crucial role in shaping modern human rights theory. John Locke argued that individuals possess natural rights to life, liberty, and property, and that governments exist to protect these rights. Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasized popular sovereignty and the social contract, while Montesquieu advocated separation of powers to prevent abuse of authority.

These ideas directly influenced democratic revolutions and constitutional governance.

7. Human Rights and Political Revolutions

The American Revolution (1776) and French Revolution (1789) marked decisive moments in human rights history. The American Declaration of Independence asserted that all individuals are endowed with inalienable rights. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen proclaimed liberty, equality, freedom of expression, and legal equality.

The nineteenth century saw the abolition of slavery, expansion of suffrage, and growth of labor movements. Industrialization exposed workers to harsh conditions, leading to demands for fair wages, safe workplaces, and social security. These struggles expanded the scope of human rights to include economic and social dimensions.

8. Human Rights in the Twentieth Century

The atrocities of the First and Second World Wars exposed the catastrophic consequences of unchecked power and discrimination. In response, the international community established the United Nations (1945) to promote peace and human rights.

The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) marked a historic milestone. The UDHR articulated civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights applicable to all human beings. Though not legally binding, it inspired binding treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

The twentieth century also witnessed movements for women's rights, racial equality, children's rights, and decolonization, strengthening the global human rights framework.

9. Human Rights in the Twenty-First Century

In the contemporary era, human rights face new challenges and opportunities. Technological advancements raise concerns about digital privacy, surveillance, and freedom of expression. Environmental degradation and climate change threaten basic human rights such as life, health, and livelihood.

New rights discourses include environmental rights, digital

rights, LGBTQ+rights, and indigenous rights. International institutions, civil society organizations, and human rights courts play a crucial role in monitoring violations and promoting accountability.

10. Conclusion

The evolution of human rights from antiquity to the present reflects humanity's enduring struggle to protect dignity, justice, and freedom. While ancient civilizations laid ethical and legal foundations, medieval religious teachings and landmark documents such as the Magna Carta strengthened ideas of moral equality and rule of law. The Renaissance and Enlightenment transformed these ideas into a rights-based political philosophy, inspiring democratic revolutions and constitutional governance. The horrors of the twentieth century underscored the necessity of international cooperation, leading to the establishment of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the twenty-first century, human rights continue to evolve in response to technological, environmental, and social changes. Despite persistent challenges, the historical journey of human rights demonstrates humanity's collective commitment to justice and dignity. Understanding this journey is essential for protecting rights today and strengthening global efforts toward a more just and humane world.

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