

[Hinduism's Human Rights Dilemma](#)

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Hinduism's Human Rights Dilemma

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We're hearing a lot about human rights of late, even here in our own paper. On page one in this issue you will read about women film-makers fighting courageously for the human rights and dignity of India's half-a-billion girls and women. Next month we will publish a painful story about child labor in India. Then there are the on-going public discussions about dowry and wife abuse. Tough topics, almost taboo you could say, but Hindus are finally facing them.

It was in Sri Lanka in 1949 that I encountered the Eastern vision of human rights, learned that duty is greater than privilege, service is superior to security. Hindu dharma is religion, duty and justice woven together, I discovered. I sometimes explain it as a simple box of controls which holds the actions of this life and those that preceded it and their corresponding reactions.

Just what is the Hindu view on human rights? It is the right of all humans to be free enough to experience their experiences and learn from their ability to overcome, without holding resentments or indulging in anger, giving out harsh words, their misdeeds, sins and other wrongdoings and reactions to their former actions. From a mystical point of view, what happens to us is important, but not as important as how we react and respond to things, good or otherwise, that happen to us. The human rights of Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela were terribly abused, yet they were not destroyed. Let us work for the most humane of human rights, but also teach that their absence in life need not destroy us. Greatness is in accepting whatever comes with open arms. All this abuse-which does exist despite the wishes of so many that it did not-can be a blessing when embraced by a pure soul. And we each have within us the power to

accept, a power no one can deprive us of under any conditions.

Many Hindus wonder why they should be the ones to judge actions of others when God and the Gods of karma do such a wonderful executive-like job-dispatching their duties through computer-like minds with expert accuracy. Remember, the being is more than human. According to the Hindu view, being human is just an epilogue to being divine, so the right to be human implies the freedom to evolve into something more than human.

When Hinduism Today was approached last month by the Project on Religion and Human Rights to provide a contemporary statement of the Hindu view of human rights, we searched for one unsuccessfully. That was a little embarrassing. Islam has a number of thoughtful declarations. Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity have dozens, one only has trouble choosing which to use. But there exists, to my knowledge, not a single modern statement from the Hindu tradition. How sad.

Of course, there is much to be found on the Hindu view of humanness, and it is the definition on what it means to be a human being that is the basis for every religion's ideal of human rights. In Hinduism all souls are Divine, all are evolving to God from whence they came. In the Vedas, Dharma Shastras, the great epics and Tirukural rest the raw materials for our statement-but who will assemble it? I hope our readers will take this challenge seriously, and send your responses to me in Hawaii.

It is important, because people, including far too many Hindus, use religion to foment conflict, to deprive others of their rights, even their lives. By understanding how it is that the same religion that inspires and uplifts can also incite cruelty and remain callous to the sufferings of others, perhaps we can bring a little more well-being and good-will into the world.

All people look at human rights through the eyes of their own faith-even if that faith is atheism-and the views of its founders, mentors and prophets. An American Indian's view of human rights is very different from that of the Muslims. Each religion has a different idea of human rights and where they come from. Most often political parties find their source of belief and strength from one religion or another, though they may never admit this.

Sanatana Dharma should, and with your help will, have the finest, most practical and profound summary of the rights due to every person on earth. We have unique contributions to make in matters of freedom, tolerance and noninjury, just as other faiths offer deep insights into human equality, education and care for the less fortunate.

Every nation needs to do better in not abusing its people. Someone can rot in a US jail, and crying human rights abuse will do him no good. But if that same person is arrested in Singapore and held without bail with the threat of caning, his cry can become an international moral issue. All human issues must become international moral issues, so we all feel equally offended when any person from any country and any spiritual tradition is denied basic rights.

What is unique about the Project on Religion and Human Rights is that it understands, while others dismiss, the importance of religion in any discussion about human rights. It knows how religious beliefs define and affect our treatment of others, whether they are women or children or political enemies. Take a moment and write to them. They welcome Hindu inquiries and contributions: The Project on Religion and Human Rights, 485 Fifth Avenue, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10017-6104, USA.