

## VEDAS: THE ROOTS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Dev Astha<sup>1</sup>

*“To deny people of their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.”*

- Nelson Mandela

Human Rights<sup>2</sup> are those fundamental, basic, inalienable rights that every individual possesses and must possess to live in a dignified manner, with freedom, justice and peace. These are inherent rights, if snatched away from a human will be equivalent to snatching away humanity. Violation of human rights can shake the very foundation of our society. Our ancestors seem to have realized this much earlier, at a time when even the seed of the United Nations was not sown and this is reflected very well in our vedas.

The origin of term ‘veda’<sup>3</sup> roots from the Sanskrit word ‘vid’, which means ‘to know’. Vedas contain in them vast and holistic knowledge, especially on the well-being of society. Every codified and uncoded law is governed by the supreme law enshrined in the holy vedas. So, it is not wrong to say that the foundation of all existing and known laws lies in the teachings of the vedas. The basic principles of the vedas have directly moulded human rights such as right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of speech and expression and so on.

Human rights is an ancient concept which has carved out many beautiful philosophies and social practices of that time. The timeless vedas and puranas have continuously emphasised on the concept of personal and social well-being. The ancient scriptures preach about the idea of respecting each and every creature and ensuring their well-being.

According to vedas, just as each and every limb<sup>4</sup> of the body is identified by an individual, he should identify each and every creation of the Almighty, be it living or non-living, as a part of himself. This could be better understood by an example. When we are hurt, it doesn't matter which part of the body is being struck, in general we say that ‘we’ got

---

<sup>1</sup> Law Student, 1<sup>st</sup> Year, Indian Institute of Management, Rohtak.

<sup>2</sup> Universal Declaration of Human Rights (*United Nation*) <<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>> accessed 12 January 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Dhananjay Vasudeo and Dwivedi, ‘Thoughts For Human Rights In Vedic Tradition’ 70 IJPS [2009] 1021-1034

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

hurt. ‘We’ feel the pain when our hand or leg is the one actually getting hurt. This means we naturally tend to internalise the pain which is actually being suffered by our limbs. Similarly, if we follow the path of the vedas and internalise the pain of others by putting ourselves into their shoes, no one will hurt another entity. This will ensure that everyone enjoys safety, respect, dignity, peace and thus, live with an experience enriched with bliss. The concept of ‘*vasudev kutumbakam*’<sup>5</sup> also talks about treating the whole world as a family and living in harmony, without any intention of inflicting harm to anyone.

The one who takes limitless risks for the interests of others is the greatest of all men. Our divine vedas are brimming with such noble ideas. The ancient text of Rig Veda established equality among all creatures and respect for each other’s’ human rights. This idea was carried on by the Atharva Veda as well. The core of the entire eighteen Puranas<sup>6</sup> is based on the idea that doing good deeds towards others is good and harming them is wrong.

*“Sarve bhavantu sukhinah sarve santu niramayah*

*Sarve bhadrani pashyantu ma kaschit dukh bhag bhavet”*

The beauty of ancient Indian literature is that it covers the intricacies of life and society. Its concepts are not only valid today but have in fact shaped the foundation of the modern laws which are further based on human rights.

---

<sup>5</sup> ‘The History and Development of Human Rights in India’ (*Knowlaw*, 8 November 2020) <<https://knowlaw.in/index.php/2020/11/08/history-development-human-rights-india/>> accessed 12 January 2023.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*