

HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN ANDHRA PRADESH:

A THEORETICAL REFLECTION

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‘Human Rights Movement’ is a very broad expression. It includes every striving for greater rights vis-à-vis political/social authority, and for greater equality of opportunity, worth, status or access to material resources. The history of such striving in the area presently called Andhra Pradesh is ancient, yet to be understood, and certainly not known, much less written. If, however, the topic is confined to that movement of recent times that has self-consciously described itself as a movement for human/democratic/civil rights, as distinct from political/social movements of different sections of the people for bettering their rights, its treatment would be manageable.

Between the striving of specific social groups or communities for their rights, and the democratic rights or human rights movement described as such, there is a relation whose elucidation is part of the on going debate about the human rights movement. At one extreme there is the view that the only human rights movement properly speaking is the movement of oppressed social groups and communities for a better life, and any notion of a human rights movement other than such struggles is but a conceit. The other extreme would be the hypothetical view that human rights can be striven for abstractly by well meaning humanists without reference to the rights of particular people, and then actualised as particular rights. This is hypothetical because I do not think there is any thinker/activist of such conceit as has made such a claim possible.

But first some actual history. The rights movement in Andhra Pradesh as we know it today began as a protest against brutal methods of policing that the communist-revolutionary movement that broke out at the end of the nineteen sixties was subjected to. Burning down tribal hamlets and forcing the tribals to leave the area, arresting and torturing them to reveal the whereabouts of the naxalites (the cadre of the Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist, or other Marxist Leninist formations), catching hold of real or supposed naxalite cadre and shooting them dead in cold blood, concocting cases of criminal conspiracy involving writers along with underground naxalite cadre: it was against this brutal police regime that the rights movement began as a protest.

The activists of the movement, if they did not have to conceptualise what they did, would probably not have bothered to extend their concern beyond the needs of the naxalite movement. Not that they were not concerned beyond those needs, but they regarded that activity as belonging to the terrain of political restructuring and not humanitarian tinkering. Even the espousal of the cause of the civil rights of the revolutionary cadre was not accompanied by any faith in the practical efficacy of such espousal in reducing the brutality of the policing. It was espoused as yet one more instrument for exposing the democratic pretences of the Indian State.

But they had to conceptualise because they had to explain what they were asking for. And when you conceptualise, you invariably generalise. This is more particularly true of conceptualisation of rights, since the language of rights is normative in character. A trade union can legitimately say that it will concern itself with only the rights and interests of workers in the chemical industry and will not take up the problems of workers in the automotive industry. That is perfectly legitimate since a trade union is concerned primarily with interests and not values, and when you are functioning in the realm of interests, there is nothing to bar you from confining your concern to particular interests, ignoring even similar interests lying by the side, for reasons of constraints of time, resources, experience, whatever. But it is different if you are functioning in the realm of values. No rights activist can, without a blush, say that he/she is interested only in the rights under detention of persons of a particular political persuasion, and not those of other people squatting in the lock-up by their side. That would go against the grain of the very notion of rights, which is primarily ethical and universal.

I am aware that the idea that rights are ethical and universal rather than political and particular will be resisted strongly by many in the human rights movement. And that the word universal has almost become a dirty word for progressive minded people (it always was, but has become more so after post-structuralism became fashionable). It is true that ethics applied to social concerns becomes politics, and in this secondary or derived sense rights are certainly political in character and importantly so. But only secondarily or derivatively. Primarily rights are ethical norms, and any attempt to treat them as primarily or explicitly political can only lead to sectarian divisions and stagnation in the human rights movement, which is indeed an observable fact about the movement in India.

As for universality, it only connotes that the categorical language of rights, namely that in such-and-such situation things ought to be or ought not be thus, admits of no exception within that situation or within like situations without robbing it of its persuasive force. For

when we use the language of rights we are declaring preferred principles that in our estimation should govern human affairs. Such language does not permit arbitrary encirclement of the category to which it applies, and still retain its value. For the further question why that should be so, the only possible answer is that that is how we human beings are constituted.

Similarly, the idea that political activity is concerned with interests and not values is also bound to be resisted for its seemingly cynical arrogance. It is true that interests are not only conceptualized but even *felt* as values, and indeed that is the most important source of values. And activity around interests, to the extent that it is successful, generates and spreads new values in society. But that is again derivative or secondary. In this derivative or secondary sense, political activity is value-activity, and again importantly so, but only in the derivative or secondary sense. Primarily it is centered on interests, not always necessarily narrow or selfish, some times very broad indeed, but interests nevertheless.

Political movements and the human rights movement-as-such exist in two planes, the planes of interests and values. The two are connected firstly by the peculiarly human fact that interests are never expressed without the aid of the language of values, though they can never be reduced to abstract expression of values because they express concrete needs, and secondly by the fact that values when applied to social situations express the interests of particular social groups, or human interests in particular situations, though once again they cannot be reduced to such interests and needs.

Human beings can never talk of their interests (even to themselves) as pure interests but always in normative language that universalises them. The unemployed can never merely say that it is in their need to have jobs, but must necessarily put it in normative terms, which can take varied forms: it is unjust that some should be jobless when others no more able than them have jobs; all people have a right to live, which includes the right to work; a society that cannot utilise the productive potential of its youth is a wasteful society; etc. Why this should be so with human beings is not at all clear, though it can be given a number of functional/teleological explanations (it certainly helps to bind human beings together), but it is undeniable that this trait is a facet of that expression shunned by progressive people: human nature. It is this trait that is often loosely described as our 'moral sense'. Whether the trait grew along with the capacity for speech – along with language – or is in some sense prior to it is an issue that I need not address now, but subject to that caution

the trait can be described as a characteristic innate to the species. If human beings did not possess this trait, human history would have been nothing like what it is. If the human basis of human material civilisation is the capacity for creative labour, as Marx found, the human basis of human moral civilisation is this inherent trait of the species, its 'moral sense'.

The plane or realm of interests and that of values require two distinct types of political practice. We are concerned here with the rights movement, which exists in the latter realm. If it must necessarily be conscious that the values it speaks of are not the product of the abstract humanism of high-minded thinkers but of the mundane society around, it must be equally conscious that even so, the task of working on those values for progressive purposes *is a task by itself*, and the task properly belonging to the human rights movement-as-such.

What is this task, what does it consist of? The democratic values and normative principles generated by particular life-situations (including struggles) need to be brought out and placed before society *as values*. That is not an easy task because democratic aspirations that go against existing social structures tend to be labeled as some thing bad, as expressive of a destructive principle and not a positive urge. To critique the critique and bring out the positive democratic norms and principles implied by the aspiration requires engagement at the ideological level that may not always be possible or easy for the people themselves whose life situation or struggle has given rise to the principles.

Secondly, the articulation of these principles to other life situations should be actively assisted so that the principles get realised in areas of life not imagined by the social groups whose existence/struggles gave rise to the values to begin with, and impel the values to by and by become part of the civilisational values that inform social life. This is a very important task which the struggles or life situations that gave rise to the norms or values in the first place rarely undertake.

Where possible, the principles should be worked into social institutions (not excluding State institutions) and life practices so that next time round the people do not have to struggle for them afresh but can taken the enjoyment of the rights implied by the principles for granted. Finally, any such institutionalisation will be followed by a constant effort on the part of the socially dominant to debase the values, destroy the institutions in which they have got embodied, trivialise them in popular consciousness, and generally get rid of them, which effort calls for a counter-effort to uphold the norms, protect them from destruction, debasement and trivialisation etc.

I have repeatedly said 'struggles or life situations'. The rights movement has paid disproportionate attention to struggles, theorising that it is struggles that change the world. There is little doubt but that the most efficacious way of changing social conditions is for the people who need or want change to organise themselves and fight for it. But to see things this way is to miss more than one point. Firstly, this is a prescription relevant to the political process. Why should it be a central consideration for the rights movement-as-such, which must be looking for sources of democratic, rights-giving values and norms, whose elicitation, generalisation, institutionalisation and effectuation is its vocation? Life situations too give rise to such norms, and not merely struggles. Environment rights are a recognised instance. The life situation of, for instance, tribal communities living in some kind of symbiosis with nature generates a norm of respect for one's habitat which is a major source of environment rights. Inarticulate aspirations which do not crystallise into struggles are no less sources of democratic, rights-giving norms of social organisation. Indeed, perhaps the majority of human beings at any given point of time are not organised, and are unable to organise themselves. Small communities with peculiar problems of their own, such as for instance the tribal groups which are yet to learn agriculture and are forced to subsist on food gathering which conflicts with private and public monopolies of what ought to be common property resources are an example. Yet their needs and aspirations are real. So are the values they teach for a more democratic organisation of human life, and the assistance they seek from the human rights movement. Women, the largest single oppressed group in society, are rarely in a position to organise themselves *qua* women to fight gender inequality and deprivation. Yet their aspirations are real and so are the norms of equality generated by the aspirations.

Since not only identification of democratic aspirations and their underlying values but *effectuation* of the corresponding rights, in the sense of their institutionalisation and subsequent implementation, is a task of the human rights movement, the assistance it can give to unorganised people – the majority at any given point of time – gets diminished to the extent that its sights are fixed on organised struggles. Not only because it then has less time to pay attention to unorganised aspirations but also because organised struggles and unorganised peoples require different types of assistance, calling for different attitudes, approaches and forms of activity, from the human rights movement. The former need protection of the rights relevant for organisation and organised protest: the rights of association, publication, mass action, etc. Opposing repressive administrative or legal action becomes a central task of the human rights movement in this context. This task all too often however turns into an oppositional attitude towards the law as such, the State as such, even without the assistance of that kind of radical theory. The latter on the other hand need a

different type of assistance. If the people are a small community, they require dissemination of their aspirations in society. The aspirations require legal protection so that they can be enjoyed in peace. Work for such legal protection gains little from oppositional attitudes towards the law, though it would learn much from critical perspectives of the law.

In general, being unorganised, such peoples, whether numerous or not, need statutory protection of their rights, where the rights are such as can be protected by law at all, and the honest functioning of the law-enforcing machinery. This requires a positive critique and not debunking of the law and the State. Where, however, the aspiration meets with opposition from entrenched social/cultural privilege rather than legally sanctioned power, the aid it needs is in the form of cultural counter-campaign. The nature of such a campaign would be quite different from the kind of campaign that the human rights movement has learnt in the course of its campaign against repressive exercise of executive and legislative power in the interests of organised struggles. If the law in principle favours the aspiration but the law-enforcing machinery is in collusion with the enemies of the aspiration, then again the attitude towards the law and the State would have to be more complex.

In the Indian context, it has been the experience that organised militant political struggles on the one hand and movements/aspirations of women, dalits and tribal communities on the other have called for seemingly opposed perspectives towards the law and the State. The Constitution of India is quite categorically opposed to discrimination on grounds of caste or gender. The law is more ambiguously so. Yet privilege along both these dimensions is well entrenched in society and does not easily submit itself to the law. Indifference of the law-enforcing machinery to its duties under gender and caste sensitive law is one – but only one – among the reasons. The attitudes this situation calls for towards the law, the State and the strategies of campaign are quite different than what an unthinking extrapolation from the tasks required by the assistance rendered by the human rights movement to organised – more particularly militant political – struggles has inculcated.

I have spoken of the democratic and rights-giving values implied or generated by various life-situations and struggles, and their spread or generalisation through their articulation to different situations. This needs some elaboration. The Workers movement, more particularly its philosophically cogent Marxist variant, has emphasised a few seminal democratic values, the central of which is that it is unjust that any one should live off the labour of another (Marx would never have put it in these words, for such normative declarations are foreign to his historical-scientific method of exposition, but this is one important value that the Workers' movement *does* throw up). This value implies a number

of rights for workers, but it does not stop there. It lends itself to generalisation as a value, which is task that the Workers' movement as such is in no position to undertake. We recall that the women's movement explicitly appropriated the value when it raised the same question about men living off the domestic toil of women. There could be other contexts too. What happens in the process is not merely that a value generated at one corner of society awakens or strengthens aspirations at other corners, but also that in the process the value itself ceases to be a particular value and becomes a norm of social life, a premise of civilisation.

The process keeps taking place spontaneously, but to identify it and encourage and assist it is a valuable task, which the human rights movement has been doing, though in an inarticulate and unconscious way. We also recall the way the logic of the argument against colonial exploitation, which belonged to a phase of history, got generalised through the subsequent development of the notion of internal colonialism into a right against unequal development. The women's movement – the life-situation of women in general as articulated in self-conscious writing by women – has raised the issue of power in human relations. It required a community that is daily faced with power to raise the issue, but once raised it ceases to be their issue alone. It becomes a principle of civilised life that no one has any inherent right to exercise power over another. And so also with the notion of equal value and worth of all human beings, articulated as a right most strongly by the dalit movement and dalit consciousness in general; the questions posed about the destructive nature of development and the right to resist such destruction, articulated most forcefully by adivasi communities living to their misfortune in areas prone to being taken over for development; and so on. To not only defend these values at their point of genesis, but to participate consciously in the articulation of such values generated at one corner of society to social life in general, in order that they may become norms of civilisation, and to work for the institutionalisation and effectuation of the norms in as many areas of life as possible is a central task of the human rights movement, understood as such.

This is the task which the human rights movement has in fact been performing, though it will not be explicitly acknowledged because too many in that movement are committed to philosophical views that make them feel uncomfortable at the 'idealistic' implications of this description of the task undertaken by them. At the least it appears to imply that there is a progress in human affairs on the civilisational front that is charted by the course of realisation and articulation of norms of human life that constitutes a moment of society's

moral life that cannot be described adequately in terms of the dialectic of the ideological/hegemonic practices of the dominant classes and the alternative practices of

the people/proletariat/subaltern classes. The more is the pity since a good job done with philosophical reluctance to name it can only be done incompletely. It further implies a painfully slow process of self-realisation for the movement. The rights movement has been a reluctant learner of its 'idealistic' essence.

To get back to the narrative: the fact that the rights movement in Andhra Pradesh took birth in the agitations against police brutality upon the communist revolutionary movement had its own consequences. It meant that the movement was staffed – and continues to be staffed – by persons having political sympathy and ideological affinity for that movement. It also impacted the concerns that came to be identified with the notion of civil rights: extra-judicial execution, torture in police custody, repressive legislation, preventive detention, right of association and free speech, etc became the archetypal civil rights concerns. Paradoxically, persons who were ideologically inclined to treat liberalism as an apologia for capitalism became the most ardent champions of liberal civil and political rights. This is, of course true of the civil rights movement all over India, and it is one basic reason why the civil rights movement has never theorised its work in this country.

It is needless to say that if the human rights movement-as-such had originated some where else – say, in the campaign against untouchability – its organisational and ideological contours would have been entirely different. Its analysis of the State, the Law, and of Society would have been equally different. If rights activists in our country would only realise this, the seemingly self-evident certainties they proclaim as the only view a civil rights campaigner could take would appear less certain. And then the least they would do is to widen their activity and permit the widening of their perceptions so that the rights perspective would be a more rounded world view that would equally serve the purpose of revolutionaries hunted down by the police and untouchables humiliated by Hindu society.

This is happening willy-nilly, but that is no substitute for a conscious structuring of a truly broad-based view of rights. It was some time before the rights movement in Andhra Pradesh was constrained to climb out of its chosen framework of agitation in defence of the rights of revolutionaries. But it had to, if only because the language of rights left it with no choice. From opposing police atrocities on revolutionary cadre or masses supportive of them to opposing all police atrocities, even the torture of criminal suspects, and thence to a critical look at the notions of crime and crime control in general, was one line of development. It

was with some initial embarrassment that rights activists found themselves defending the rights in custody of even 'hardened criminals', but introspection led them to a critical look at the notion of crime itself as engendered in social consciousness by the historical process. This awareness cannot by any means be reduced to the wisdom some times offered that crime is an ideological construct of the ruling classes, a piece of simple-minded radicalism that nobody has ever put to the poor

man whose bicycle has been stolen. It would however go well beyond the scope of this article to explain the rich and nuanced understanding that the experience of the rights movement has given it of the notion of 'crime' as received from history.

The real learning for the rights movement however came with the Karamchedu massacre of 17 July 1985, in which five dalit youth were hunted and killed and three dalit women raped by an upper caste mob. The assault cried out for recognition of a major dimension of suppression of rights, which the largely upper caste leftist activists of the civil rights movement had up to that time been happily indifferent to. Untouchability was of course condemned by every one, but it was on the one hand assumed to be to the wane and on the other seen as a 'social evil' rather than a question of rights. This was followed in quick succession by a lot of heat generated in the year 1988 by upper caste opposition to the enhancement of reservations to Backward Castes in Government services following the acceptance of the Muralidhar Rao Commission's recommendations by the then Telugu Desam Government of N.T.Rama Rao. The controversy forced a closer look at caste as a social system of entrenched inequality, which is in itself a violation of human rights. Andhra Pradesh is perhaps the one State where civil rights groups of radical vintage have conceptualised and integrated activity against caste domination and discrimination within their regular work, accompanied by an understanding of the caste system as a live instance of institutionalised denial of rights: the right to equal worth, opportunity and dignity. By the time the controversy created by upper castes over the Mandal Commission's recommendations came to the fore in the early nineties, the rights organisations of this State had learnt enough to be able to respond with positive support to the OBC's cause, whereas the rights movement in other parts of the country was found groping around the phenomenon of caste as a human rights issue.

Once caste had shown up Society itself – and not just the State - as an arena of violation of rights, the gates to a wider appreciation of the rights agenda were thrown open. There was no end to the variety of issues and concerns that the rights movement found it possible to focus on. Issues of gender, region, environment, minority rights, etc became over the years

acceptable concerns of the human rights movement. Gradually a negative marker of rights emerged: that wherever there is entrenched or institutionalised inequality (social/political/economic), there is denial of rights. It is an excellent rule of thumb for identifying issues of rights violation, though it cannot claim to be exhaustive: the right to ecological balance, for instance, is not properly formulated in terms of inequality, though it is linked to many entrenched inequalities. Issues of tolerance, pluralism and secularism too have over the years acquired recognition as issues of human rights, though they are not straight away definable in terms of inequalities. Every thing that goes to make life democratic and humane – and any thing that inhibits that - is of concern to the human rights cause, but institutionalised inequality remains the bench-mark of its concerns.

With the emergence of a wide agenda of activity, the need for a wide perspective that will put all the issues in place, and a wide organisational structure that will give equal place to all who accept the wide agenda, are needed. To revert to the earlier discussion of rights activity as value-activity, the values of equal opportunity, worth, dignity and access to resources, and the values of democratic and humane modes of living, generated by different life-situations and struggles need to be strung together in a coherent manner to give the rights movement a proper world view. Privileging of any one set of rights will distort the canvas. This remains an unfulfilled task because of political and philosophical blocks. This task needs to borrow from different theoretical and philosophical positions, for no one position can do justice to all the concerns that the rights movement is called upon to address. There should be no problem with this prescription of eclecticism, since the rights world view does not seek to offer any over-arching explanatory scheme nor a strategy of solution. It is interested in helping the expression and articulation of values, their institutionalisation, protection and effectuation, and all the political strategy it needs is to move around with its eyes open. The rights movement can learn values and normative attitudes from liberalism, Marxism, Ambedkarism, feminism, and perhaps even some aspects of honest Gandhism, and string them together without any difficulty so long it does not give in to the temptation to offer explanatory schemes (which is not the same thing as saying that it is not concerned with understanding causes and inter-connections), and strategies for achieving a rights-paradise.

This is blasphemy, and that is the problem. To forestall the kind of simple minded objections that constitute debate amongst us, I may add that I am not saying that ‘grand narratives’ are necessarily wrong or undesirable. Even if they are, the category of totality or the whole is neither wrong nor undesirable. On the contrary it is only as one makes as much

sense of the totality of things as one reasonably can that any fruitful existence is possible. What I am proposing is that the rights movement, for its effective and broad functioning, must maintain a neutrality between various 'grand narratives' (and the view that says that they are all false) without giving up a holistic view of matters, and build its world-view by extracting democratic and human rights values from each such political praxis and making a coherent collage out of them. This alone can go with a genuinely broad-based organisational structure which is absolutely essential if the movement is not to get bogged down in the quagmire of sectarianism that swallows up every progressive effort in this country.

This debate is where the human rights movement in Andhra Pradesh has reached, entirely through the process of learning in the course of working. Not only in this State but all over the country, the rights movement has never engaged itself theoretically with the considerable debate about the meaning and content of rights within the western liberal tradition. Hostility to liberalism, espousal of rights as a tactical requirement of revolution and not as a principle, general philosophical backwardness of progressive politics in India: there are a dozen reasons for this. Its positive outcome has been that the movement has over the years learnt to shape its world view from its own activity. But perhaps it is time to take this rich experience to the essentially theoretical work on rights in the western tradition and see what the interaction gives.

Andhra Pradesh has acquired a certain reputation as the State where civil rights activists get killed periodically. That is usually acclaimed as an index of effective activism. There is little doubt that the notion of civil rights as a theoretical category entered the day to day language of the people of Andhra Pradesh much before *manav adhikar* was officially consecrated as a respectable idea in India. And this was largely due to activism. There is in general little doubt that any effective activity in the human rights cause will entail serious personal risk to the activists, in any country perhaps, but certainly in countries like ours. But it is necessary to steer clear of the notion that 'sacrifice' proves the truth of your practice, an idea widely prevalent in leftist circles. Human rights activism is in any case risky, but it will be more so and needlessly so if it is undertaken as the middle class wing of the revolution. Recognition of the true vocation of the movement may not lighten the risks but will make them worthwhile. And that vocation would be of assistance to every progressive politics, though on its own terms and not as an appendage to any thing else.

