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## **LAJPAT RAI AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

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# Lajpat Rai and Human Rights

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**Abstract – The concept of human rights has been the centre to the concept of Indian thought. A large number of religious preachers, activists and visionaries have been the torch bearers for exploring the cause of the human rights. One may, recall the teachings of Budha, Mahavira, Kabir, Guru Nanak Dev, Sant Namdev, Sri Ramakrishan and many others. In the 20th Century Dayanand Saraswati, Vivekanand, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chander Vidyasagar, Mahatma Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, Lala Lajpat Rai created a movement for equality and end to social discrimination. They made intensive efforts to ensure various human rights to weaker and marginal sections of the society. They stoutly raised their voices against violation of human rights and worked to eradicate it through personal examples and missionary zeal contribution of one of these propagandists, Lala Lajpat Rai needs attention.**

**Most of us recognise Lala Lajpat Rai as a patriot, freedom fighter and one of the trio Lal-Bal-Pal. He was also known for his fearlessness and challenging spirit - the one who fought against the British empire and laid down his life as a martyr. His crusade for the rights of weaker sections of society especially the women, depressed classes labour and victims of natural calamities provide another aspect of his dynamic, multifacial personality.**

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## RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Lala Lajpat Rai was an ardent advocate of human rights of women. He stood for the eradication of the social practices which denied human rights to woman may it be child marriages, purdah system or denial of widow remarriage. He also championed the cause of woman education. His concern for women rights is reflected in his writing and speeches. However, as a social worker as well as educationists he tried to give these a practical shape.

Lala Lajpat Rai opposed discrimination on the basis of sex and believed in urgent need of restoration of rights and freedom of action to the women. He was very clear that for the empowerment of women, she must be given equal educational opportunities. Lalaji believed that "Just as boys need an education which will help his complete development to manhood, so a girl needs an education which would help her complete development to womanhood". For it he wanted the requisite infrastructure also. In India, a century ago, when the percentage of female education was miserable. He wanted at least one well equipped well-staffed 'Government High School in every district'. Apart from education Lalaji was equally concerned about the right to health and hygiene to Indian Women. He wanted legislation for the compulsory upkeep of women's health.

Lajpat Rai opposed child marriage. For him the child marriage was clear violation of human rights of young girls. It was not only 'criminal' but also adversely

affected their mental as well as physical health. There was high mortality rate at the time of delivery and hence their rights to life was compromised. Furthermore it increased the number and percentage of young widows too. He sought legislation to fix 16 years of age of consent for marriage. He also supported the free choice to girls also, to choose their life partner. No woman should be forced to marry a person she did not like. In his opinion if young boys are allowed to choose their spouses - same right must be extended to girls also.

He strongly advocated the remarriage of widows. He said, "In a matter of remarriage on the death of their husbands, they are differently treated from men". So they should have right to remarriage after the death of their spouse as the men have. He also strongly opposed the social practices which denied the human rights to women such as the practice of sati, practice of devdasis, practice of purdah system etc, and worked for their elimination.

## RIGHTS OF DEPRESSED CLASSES

To the rights of dalits Lalaji stood for Abolition of untouchability. He condemned untouchability as "disgrace to our humanity, our sense of justice and feeling of affinity". Lala Lajpat Rai strongly advocated the rights and equal opportunities to dalits and the depressed classes in India. The present arrangement is cruel and unjust arrangement. It is in best interest of the nation that the education of these should be taken in hand and pushed on with zeal and change.

To him these classes had equal rights to dignified life and right to education and should be treated on the basis of equality. He worked against untouchability and segregation of specific sections in the society. He strongly opposed the division of society in the watertight compartments and denial of socio-political and educational rights to dalits. He advocated that the birth or caste should not be the determining factor for deciding the question of rights. He organized meetings and conferences in different parts of UP and Northern India against untouchability. In a speech at Varanasi, Lala Lajpat Rai condemned the practice of denial of common rights to the depressed classes. He started a campaign against untouchability.

He himself practically worked against, untouchability, visited the house of dalits and accepted eatables from them, dined with them to dismantle their segregation and denial of equal rights. He said, "I have no hesitation in saying that the practice of uplift of lowly classes is the question of life and death of the whole Hindu Society, so as long as the Hindus do not embrace their brethren of these lowliest classes, no progress, whatever is possible. He considered the upliftment of depressed as social and religious duty." He started a movement for the upliftment of untouchables and established organizations like Achhut Uddhar Samiti. Servants of the people society to ensure equal rights to untouchables. Lalaji vigorously supported their upliftment and believed that "At present they are a drag, but with a little care they can be converted into a source of power and strength.

Lalaji stood for empowerment of the depressed classes through education. He even worked out a well thought out plan to give it a practical shape. He suggested the constitution of a Central Provincial Organization with substantial financial support and start to take up the cause of educational interest of these castes. It should coordinate and facilitate opening up schools for education to depressed classes and providing them all the needed help. In 1911, he formed the Punjab Hindu Elementary League to meet this objective and made liberal donations for the same.

## RIGHTS OF THE LABOUR

Lala Lajpat Rai was a champion of the Rights of the labour. To ensure the rights of working class he worked for the formation of All India Trade Union Congress on 31 October, 1920. He was its founding President. Thus Lalaji gave a practical shape to the efforts to defend the rights of working class. He wanted a strong, united and effective trade union at national level to work for the rights of working class. Out of the total membership of AITUC, which stood at 1,40,854, in 1920, Punjab's share was 70,000. It reflected the ground work of Lala Lajpat Rai amongst the workers in the area he belonged to. He was always concerned about the denial of rights to the working class and its exploitation by the capitalists. Lalaji complained that the workers in India were treated as a

commodity where interests of capitalists and industrialists were held supreme. In many cases workers were denied several human rights. So he wanted the industry to provide minimum human requirement to the workers to lead a respectable and dignified life. He opined, "if labour must remain half starved, ill clothed, badly housed and destitute of education, it would have no interest in the development of Indian industries.

To make the working classes conscious of their rights and organize them to fight for their rights, he was of the view, that trade unions were the best option. Workers could better protect their interests by collective bargaining. As a representative of the working class he attended International Labour Conference in Geneva in 1926 and advocated formation of strong labour laws. He stood for decent wages to the labour, abolition of forced labour, fixed working hours, improvement in the condition of the workers through collective bargaining and labour unions. He pleaded that a part of the profits of our industry should go to the workers.

## RIGHTS OF ORPHANS

Lala Lajpat Rai also stood for the rights of the victims of natural calamities. He was a committed social worker who made tremendous contributions during natural calamities. During these holocausts in the shape of large scale famines in 1897, 1900, 1908 in Rajpuatana, central provinces, and other parts of the country or the earthquake in Kangra in 1905 - he not only rescued thousands of people but also stood for their human rights especially the orphans. First, he removed the famine stricken children, who had either lost their parents or were deserted, to Punjab and setup relief camps. Then for their proper restoration after the famines, he wanted permanent arrangements. For it he took up the task of setting up of orphanages in various parts of Punjab.

He made special efforts to educate these children so that they could stand on their own. Lala Lajpat Rai strongly took up their case with famine commission of India. It was because of Lalaji's efforts that the commission asked the Government of India to formulate suitable policy for the protection of the rights of these orphans. Resultantly, first, the rights to discover the natural parents/guardians of the famine stricken children was acknowledge and the duty was assigned to the state. For it certain obligations were placed on orphanages to maintain proper record and register, to facilitate trace out the children in such orphanages. As a matter of right, "the persons claiming as relatives and guardians should be allowed free access to all orphanages to find their lost children" was ensured.

## EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Lala Lajpat Rai stood for universal popular education. To him modern education to all the Indian was must

and it is the duty of the government to provide full, free, compulsory education for every child, male or female so to help him to become useful citizen. Depriving education to human beings was a crime Lalaji concept of education had a special place for the weaker and the depressed section of the society. He was not only ardent supporter of women education but established many institutions and started various projects for education to the depressed classes. A century ago, when he advocated their case the education to these sections of the society was almost negligible. He was quite clear that empowerment of neither the women nor the dalits or any marginal sections is possible without providing them education. Education not only facilitated allround personality development but also made these sections conscious of their rights. So education and empowerment were directly related in his scheme of things.

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