

## Lord Parekh Comment on Human Rights in Democratic Nations

Margaret Ali  
December 9, 2013



Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh, Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Westminster, brought a more philosophical perspective on human rights as he delivered a speech that invoked a great deal of contemplation on the topic of human rights and democracy as a whole. It was very appropriate to consider during 'Parliament Week'. Parekh pointed out that democracy is more than a system but is also a way of life. It requires the people to behave differently towards the running of their country and is not easily transported to a nation that is new to the concept of democracy.

“There are no all-encompassing solutions,” an important message that Lord Parekh reminded us of, and that we run the risk of liberating nations from tyranny to become democratic, assuming that things will just work without considering any shortcomings of a system subject to interpretation and subjectivity. (Remainder of Session Link)

Lord Parekh said 'I am not an activist but an academic so I would like to make three points:

- 1) Promoting democracy is a way of life that you cannot export to others. Human rights are easy to identify and enforce. There is an international consensus about Human rights that is not there about democracy. Therefore people are talking about human rights now rather than democracy.
- 2) Human rights do not apply to minority rights but to individual rights. You can walk into a trap of a liberal thinkers perspective that is individualistic.
- 3) What is the content of human rights? A young professor said this does not connect to my experience. For me the right to touch is very important. I am an untouchable. No one would touch me. Something deeply human was missing in my life. Under which human right is the right to touch.'

Much of the dalit thinking on human rights is very different to the UN thinking. In Latin America the right to an identity and the right to die in dignity is important because so many people disappeared. In China the right to taken care of by your children when you get old is now a law with tax incentives. These are culturally specific examples.

We are right to concentrate on the promotion of human rights rather than on the promotion of democracy, which has been in the air for quite some time. The rights are easy to identify and monitor, and there is greater international agreement on what rights are worth preserving and what rights are human rights. There is also greater international pressure for implementing those rights as opposed to the promotion of democracy, because democracy can mean many different things in many different contexts. Therefore, I particularly welcome our discussion of violation of human rights rather than violation of democratic norms.

It is also right to point out that we cannot deal with violations of human rights in the whole world; we have to be selective. In that context, it is important for us to concentrate on those countries with which we have close ties, and where we can make an impact. In that context I particularly thank the Prime Minister for the stand he took at CHOGM in Sri Lanka. He was right to go. I think that the Prime Minister of India was not right not to go. Our Prime Minister was right to visit Jaffna, commiserate with the Tamils, condemn the army operations which killed thousands of Tamils, demand an investigation into what actually happened during the war and afterwards, and meet the representatives of the Tamil group.

An equally sensible attitude is increasingly being taken with reference to Gujarat, the Indian state from which I come, where genocide took place in February 2002, when a large number of Muslims were killed with the complicity of the state. The American Government denied a visa to the Chief Minister but the British Government took a very sensible view and said nothing. Increasingly, the British Government

began to recognise that we had no conclusive evidence that the Chief Minister had been directly and actively involved in what had gone on; after all, he had been in power for only four months. Nor did we ignore the fact that this sort of thing had happened in other parts of India, and therefore we could not single out one state alone. About 18 months ago, or perhaps a little less, the British Government asked the British high commissioner to India, Sir James Bevan, to visit Mr Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat. More recently, the Foreign Office Minister, Mr Hugo Swire, visited the place. In Kolkata recently, the Prime Minister said that he would be more than happy to meet any elected leader. This is not to exonerate the leader of his responsibility but simply to indicate that not talking to people is not the answer.



I wish to make three general points. First, as we cannot promote all kinds of human rights we obviously have to prioritise. Of the six priorities listed by the Government there is not much reference to the rights of trade unions, which in my view have played, and continue to play, an extremely important role. Business rights are fine but they are not supposed to include trade union rights. During the Arab spring, trade unions were the vehicle through which important radical change was achieved. Minority rights are also important. Generally, the standard definition of human rights concentrates on individual rights and tends to ignore minority rights.

Secondly, while we are right to condemn violations of human rights, we sometimes tend to ignore our own complicity in these violations. Large corporations based in our country sometimes engage in practices abroad that violate human rights or lead indirectly to violations of human rights. We ought to tighten up the monitoring of our corporations. Many violations take place during civil wars. We are sometimes complicit in instigating or tolerating civil wars in other countries, which can result in gross violations of human rights.

Thirdly, we tend to be selective about where we condemn violations of human rights and where we do not. Violations of human rights in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia are by and large ignored, whereas we tend to concentrate on them in countries such as China. This sometimes gives the impression that we are unprincipled and that we are using human rights discourse or issues to promote a particular political agenda. We need to ensure that we are principled when we condemn violations of human rights.