

BOOK REVIEW

Human Rights in Eastern Civilisations: Some Reflections of a Former UN Special Rapporteur.

By Surya P. Subedi. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2021. Pp. 320. \$126.00 (cloth); \$40.00 (digital). ISBN: 9781800883611.

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In his seminal work, *Human Rights in Eastern Civilisations: Some Reflections of a Former UN Special Rapporteur*, Surya P. Subedi embarks on a profound journey to unravel the intricate relationship between human rights and the rich tapestry of eastern civilizations. Drawing upon his distinguished tenure with the United Nations, Subedi explores the complex terrain of cultural heritage, tradition, and philosophical thought to offer a nuanced examination of human rights principles within eastern religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. Writing in the context of growing interest in eastern human rights values within the framework of universalizing human rights values under the auspices of the United Nations, Subedi navigates discussions of religion, law, history, and human rights values: “This study aims to unearth and bring to light the historical religious evidence of the early notions of human rights in Eastern civilizations and the contribution that these civilizations have made to modern conceptions of human rights (3).

In each of Subedi’s six chapters, he offers his unique insight into various aspects of human rights in eastern civilizations. In the first two chapters he traces the evolution of eastern belief systems and human rights values entrenched within eastern civilization. In the third chapter Subedi elaborates on the principles of humanitarian law as emanating from Hinduism. He next explores Chinese perspectives on human rights and the tension between Chinese perspectives and the UN agenda, particularly in relation to democratization and political rights. In the last two chapters, he focuses on how the shift in soft power to the East may have an impact on the universality of human rights, and then draws on his firsthand experiences as special rapporteur to analyze human rights challenges in Cambodia.

To begin his exploration, in chapter 1 Subedi delves into the influence of Vedic thought and later Hindu and Buddhist philosophy on eastern civilization. He meticulously analyses selected Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, tracing their impact on the lives and philosophies of individuals in the East and their subsequent contributions to the development of modern human rights principles. He elucidates the profound connection between ancient eastern wisdom and contemporary human rights discourse. Subedi offers a compelling analysis of the social and religious discord within Hinduism, which catalyzed the emergence of Buddhism as a distinct philosophical tradition. Through concise teachings from Hindu epics

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and scriptures, he sheds light on fundamental concepts such as *dharma*, *karma*, and the caste system, illuminating their implications for human rights in eastern societies. Subedi further discusses the integration of Buddhism into Hinduism, highlighting its transformative influence on both religious and social practices, and elucidates resonances of similar philosophies such as nonviolence, tolerance, and equality.

Continuing the focus on Hinduism and Buddhism, in chapter 2, Subedi delves deeper into the human rights traditions within the East. He explores the intrinsic values embedded within Hinduism and Buddhism, such as *dharma* and *dhamma*, which serve as the ethical guides for individual conduct. He confronts the complexities of the caste system and its implications for human rights, offering a nuanced analysis of its historical evolution and contemporary manifestations. He interrogates the tension between tradition and modernity, highlighting the transformative potential of eastern philosophies in promoting social justice and inclusivity.

In chapter 3, Subedi ventures into the realm of humanitarian law within Hinduism, offering a comprehensive analysis of ancient texts and epics to elucidate a Hindu concept of *just war* and its relevance to contemporary legal frameworks. He delves into Hindu scriptures such as Vedas, Puranas, and Mahabharata, unraveling the ethical dilemmas surrounding warfare and conflict resolution. Through a meticulous examination of *dharma yuddha* (righteous war) and *adharmā yuddha* (unrighteous war), Subedi probes the moral complexities inherent in armed conflict, drawing parallels between ancient Hindu conceptions of justice and modern principles of international humanitarian law. He explains the ways that Hindu thought has contributed to the evolution of norms governing warfare, emphasizing the importance of ethical conduct and restraint in times of crisis. Subedi explores the broader implications of Hindu philosophy for global peace and security, highlighting the concepts of peaceful coexistence, universalism, and secularism embedded within ancient texts. By contextualizing Hindu perspective within contemporary debates on the laws of war, he underscores the enduring relevance of eastern wisdom in shaping international legal discourse.

In chapter 4, Subedi examines China's evolving stance on human rights within the framework of international diplomacy. He critically assesses China's role as a major economic power and its impact on the global human rights regime, probing the tensions between state sovereignty and universal norms. He also analyses China's engagement with the United Nations and its willingness to adhere to international human rights standards. Subedi interrogates China's approach to such issues as the rule of law, democracy, and freedom of expression, offering a nuanced appraisal of the country's progress and challenges in promoting human rights. He further examines the broader geopolitical implications of China's rise, particularly its influence on the UN's human rights agenda in a multipolar world. He navigates the complexities of power politics and ideological contestation, highlighting the need for constructive dialogue and collaboration to address global human rights challenges effectively.

In chapter 5, Subedi explores a reflection on the universality of human rights in the context of a multi-polar world order. He interrogates the Western-centric narrative surrounding human rights discourse, challenging assumptions about cultural relativism and the primacy of Western values. Drawing upon his extensive experience as a UN special rapporteur, Subedi navigates the intricacies of global power dynamics, particularly the resurgence of what is known as the BRICS countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—particularly China and India. He examines the challenges and opportunities presented by multi-polarism for the UN's human rights agenda, probing the need for adaptive strategies and inclusive governance structures. Subedi further reflects on the evolving role of the UN in promoting human rights worldwide by advocating for greater representation and participation from diverse regions and stakeholders.

In chapter 6, Subedi presents a focused case study on Cambodia, a nation with a rich Hindu-Buddhist heritage, exploring its complex journey towards embracing contemporary human rights standards as outlined in various UN treaties. His discussion is particularly reflective as it draws on his experiences during his six-year tenure as the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Cambodia. His insights offer a unique lens for viewing the interplay between international human rights mechanism and local cultural, political, and historical context.

Subedi begins by outlining the historical backdrop of Cambodia and the country's more recent traumatic history under the Khmer Rouge, setting the stage for its ongoing struggles with democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. He discusses the role of UN special rapporteurs in shaping international law and influencing local policies, emphasizing their capacity to act as catalysts for change while navigating sensitive political terrains. Subedi provides detailed account of his initiatives to promote human rights in Cambodia, including efforts to strengthen judicial systems, enhance political freedoms, and address violations through international advocacy. He shares both success and obstacles, reflecting on the complexities of implementing human rights in the Cambodian context and lessons for other post-conflict environments.

Subedi provides a profound contribution to the field of human rights. By weaving together theoretical analysis, historical context, and personal reflections, Subedi successfully challenges the reader to reconsider the narrative that the notion of human rights is predominantly a Western construct. His exploration of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, his case study of Cambodia, and his broader discussion of global dynamics provide a rich, layered understanding of how human rights can be universally applicable yet culturally distinctive.

Human Rights in Eastern Civilisations is an essential read for anyone interested in the global discourse on human rights, offering a comprehensive and enlightening perspective that bridges eastern philosophies and Western principles. Subedi's work is a testament to the ongoing dialogue between civilizations, highlighting the potential for mutual learning and respect in the pursuit of a more just and humane world.

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