

Thinking ‘Dignity’ as a basis towards inclusive development

M. Satish Kumar

In an era of increasing political disenfranchisement, deep economic inequalities and associated social humiliations encountered by the rapidly globalising planet, this paper seeks to chart the current thinking about the paths that civil society need to take in order to achieve distinctive peace. Here commitment as part of the universal cosmopolitan order is critical to go beyond the binaries of religious and cultural differences. The role of dignity, of interdependency, respect and understanding has become all the more critical to sustain hope and life in this age of austerity. The paper argues for an empowered citizenship, based on dignity and respect to think socially towards inclusive development.

Key words: *dignity, respect, Kant, Montaigne, civic, unfreedom, entitlements, tolerance, and ‘cosmic humanism’.*

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Montaigne (Bakewell, 2011:136) as a philosopher pursued a hobby of visualising and imagining a world from multiple perspectives. This was done primarily to remind himself, of the strangeness of human behavioural patterns, patterns that were not habitual and familiar to us. That which was habitual was normalised as natural. His response to his cat is illuminating, “when I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a pastime for her more than she is to me?” Likewise when he observed his favourite dog dreaming, he surmised whether the dog was chasing a hare, a hare without fur and bones”. The fact is that the dog has his own inner world, which was nevertheless true of Montaigne too! The point I am making is that the difference between the animal worlds where the majestic elephant grieves the demise of its partner or child is as real as humans grieving and dreaming. It’s a pity we don’t share our dreams any more! Dignity is not confined to humans and extends to the animal world too.

In this paper, I aim to demonstrate the relevance of the concept of dignity, its genealogy and its reaffirmation in contemporary usage. Its relevance is particularly evident for the debates on issues of ‘cosmopolitanism and solidarity’. Today this concept of dignity has assumed relevance and value when discussing issues relating to human suffering either from the outbreak of the dreaded Ebola virus or to the heart wrenching challenges faced by asylum seekers who are escaping from wanton violence and destruction. The paper highlights the way dignity as a concept is embedded in modern discourses and its relation to rights. The final section outlines and assesses the relevance of dignity

and respect in the context of inclusive development.

The emergent images of incarceration of human beings huddled into the cramped spaces of dinghies, lorries, sprinting across the razor sharp barriers of Port Calais have become commonplace for a reasoned response. This was also true when earliest images of Guantanamo Bay prisoners were leaked out across the cyberspace. The horrors of the Holocaust survivors, those of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and indeed to the wanton debasement of human life under the Pol Pot regime in Khmer Rouge was seen as something that happened in the past. Today these images are being replaced by the horrors visited by extreme forms of Islamic revivalism in the Middle East and Africa from Boko Haram to ISIL traversing the geographical frontiers of nascent civilization. In tandem to these rising horrors of civilizational challenges are the social inequities, of political disenfranchisement and 'unfreedom' (Sen, 1997) experienced by the majority of the inhabitants. The precariousness of human existence is multiplied since the worst financial subprime crisis due to speculative forms of capitalism based on futures and insiders trading (Posner, 2010). Democracy is at stake and so is capitalism. Such forms of disenfranchisement is further reinforced as a result of the environmental challenges, triggered to a tipping point in human sustainability (IPCC Report, 2014).

The question is where do we stand as a collective of human race along with the insentient beings? What is the path available to the civil society of human participants in seeking a dignified existence in this chaotic world? This paper will attempt to conceptualise the idea of 'dignity' in underpinning a socially inclusive notion of development. Here commitment towards fostering a cosmopolitan civic society is equally important to go beyond standard binaries of differences advocated by religious and cultural divergences. As Sen et al (2007:5) calls it 'civil paths to peace' which can engender institutional changes, whereby different ethnic groups can engage together as members of a common human race. Such an approach is more fruitful than simply calling for inter-faith dialogues.

It has been observed that focusing merely on religious dialogues tends to undermine the importance of civic engagements, which are more usefully linked to language, literature, cultural functions and

political dialogues. This fosters resistance against cultural, religious, ethnic and political exploitations. The relevance of and adherence to the concept of dignity of life is pivotal in realising such a civic identity. This provides a framework to combat economic inequalities, social humiliations and political disenfranchisement, which are responsible for fostering disrespect and endemic hostilities across geographical regions of the world. International development activities therefore require greater acknowledgment of civic paths to peace and prosperity than ever before. Recuperating the concept of dignity will definitely allow for a greater understanding of respect and foster mutuality among civil societies, particularly as members of a common humanity. Disrespect it seems tends to stem from lack of understanding of the concept of dignity, of human rights and responsibilities. The persistence of under development in major regions of the world too reiterates such a lack of freedom, lack of dignity and respect.

Dignity: from antiquity to the present

In conclusion to his recent Peace Proposal, Dr. Daisaku Ikeda (2015:56) noted, “Rooted in an expanding foundation of friendship and dialogue, we will continue to work for a world without nuclear weapons or war and to eliminate misery from the face of the earth, to create a new society in which all people may fully enjoy the blessings of human dignity”. He further goes on to explain that “the foundation of human dignity is the existence of a world in which we can fully experience and express our identity; to be cut off from this world and all the human rights associated with it is the source of the suffering of displaced persons” (Ibid: 33).

One can trace the history of the idea of dignity or *dignitas hominis* from the classical Roman thought. It meant status, honour and respect. So dignity was accorded on someone who fulfilled all the three criteria. In this respect the exalted position of the Queen of England implied dignity and gravitas. Dignity is seen here as a derivative of social class and rank thereby evoking esteem. In this respect dignity was not just the preserve of particular individuals, but was applicable to the institution, e.g. monarchy and the state. In order to preserve and protect ‘dignity’, there is a requirement for a legal sanctioning of privileges and status

endorsed by the state (McCrudden, 2008:657) in terms of constitutional and judicial safeguards.

The dignity of 'hu-man' [sic] was a major point of discourse during the Renaissance period. In an effort to distance themselves from medieval bondages and tradition, emergent thinkers of the sixteenth century made arduous efforts to humanise the 'human'. The key commentator of the period was Montaigne who started out with an incipient belief in man's worth and then gradually decried man's unworthiness. He believed in the lofty achievements of human beings and of acquiring an elevated stature. Gradually he lost hope of turning ordinary men into giants and found it more reasonable to make his giants into men and ended by extolling the feats of ordinary persons imbued with great human strengths and weaknesses (Keller, 1957).

More recently Sensen (2011) put forward discourses on 'human dignity', which was categorised into 'traditional versus contemporary'. The emphasis being that traditional ideas of dignity were based on the theoretical positioning of human beings within the universal order of species. This relates to Cicero's idea of humans having an elevated position in the universe. Here human beings are distinguished from other species because they possess critical capacities namely, ability to reason and to appreciate the concept of freedom. Here not being slave to the worldly pleasures refers to the acquisition of this specific position based on the innate qualities embodied in humans. Dignity acquires a moral positioning and relevance due to the fact that it is now incumbent on individuals to realise this dignity by fulfilling one's duty. This is referred to as 'realised dignity', distinct from 'initial dignity' (Sensen, 2011:75). Distinction can also be made on the aristocratic idea of 'dignity' or what the Romans called 'dignitas' (Glare, 1996) and has a specific class connotation related to positions in the society. Thus class connotation implied that 'dignity' is not an ascribed attribute to all humans, but restricted to a selected few and controlled by the gatekeepers. In other words dignity could be gained or lost depending on favours that one accrues through the virtues and privileges of birth, wealth and rank. Therefore dignity is related to esteem and excellence. On the obverse side, having dignity may not necessarily imply excellence or high esteem. So under the traditional concept, dignity is a relational idea of being

elevated, in relation to others.

Traditional conceptualisation of dignity also endorsed the idea that humans are created in the image of God and therefore has '*inherent*' dignity. This dignity is reflected by their soul (Leo the Great, 440–461, referred to by Sensen, 2011:78). Among the Renaissance thinkers such as Pico della Mirandala (*Oration on the Dignity of Man*, 1486), who believed that initial dignity of man was not a fixed position and he had the freedom to chose his place with the universal order of things. In other words only by virtue of intellect and reason was a human being capable of acquiring this freedom of choice and to be dignified. 'Freedom' became the quintessential trait to achieve dignity.

Before Montaigne's (1532–92) time, it was customary to argue that humans had dignity because a) they had a soul, unlike the animal world and therefore had a privileged position with the transcendental God. This closeness to God made humans worthy of respect and therefore had inherent dignity. The relationship here is between divinity and dignity, which spurs the realisation of human potential. b) The dignity of humans was based on their innate power of reasoning based on their intellect and formed part of the classical view of man. c) The great argument for the dignity of man was related to the freedom of choice. Thus these three ennobling qualities of humans-divinity, intellect and free will came to be enshrined in the word 'dignity' (Keller, 1957:45). Montaigne related more easily to the idea of power of mind or intellect in his early years. Subsequently, after 1586, he exposed the fallacy of man's reasoning and the imperfections of the intellect. At the same time he held out hope for the future by reaffirming the importance of judgement, not intellect or learning as a key to human's worthiness (Keller, 1957:48).

Thus Montaigne challenged the idea of 'stature' that elevated humans from other less fortunate brethren. He was least interested in what men were capable of delivering and definitely was not amused about man's place in relation to other species. He therefore rejected the cosmological and moral realms of comparisons among humans. He subscribed to the idea that each of the species has a standard to adhere to and this was his idea of 'dignity'. He therefore refused to discuss dignity in terms of rank and hierarchy. As he maintained, "man's worth

is all inside, and independent of outward glory. Worldly success, the outcome of events, whether based on good fortune or on reliability, proved nothing of a man's worth; on the contrary it diverts attention from his true substance and ought to be disregarded" (Keller, 1957:54). Montaigne was indeed the most humanistic thinker who presented a novel explanation of dignity. Kant (1724–1804) on the other had ascribed free will or freedom above all else to acquire a sense of dignity, unlike the animals. Dignity was seen as worthy only in so far as it relates to an innate sense of duty or morality towards the self. Dignity in other words is achieved based on one's commitment to humanism and morality. Moral worth therefore becomes the inherent core of the idea of 'dignity'.

What were the key discerning ideas from the traditional conceptualisation of dignity? Firstly, dignity does not allude to rights, but to duties. To make use of our duties and responsibilities to fulfil our moral obligation is crucial here. Secondly, dignity is based on the acceptance that all human beings reflect varying capacities and capabilities. Therefore dignity is not perceived as a "non-relational value property" (Sensen, 2011:83). Here Kantian sense of duty overrides the demand for rights. Finally, dignity also relates to achieving high standards towards perfectionism. So the teleological view of dignity differs much from the contemporary usage of dignity.

Dignity for the contemporaries

The contemporary understanding of dignity provides a perspective, which mirrors the traditional spirit without necessarily subscribing to the idea in letter. Dignity today is understood as an inherent value property from which one could claim our rights or entitlements. Following World War II, the word 'dignity' was foregrounded by the prominent French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain in the Charter of the United Nations, 1945 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. For Maritain, "dignity was a fact (a metaphysical or ontological status, as well as a moral entitlement) and it was he who brought it into practical international politics in the post-Second war period" (McCrudden, 2008:662). The Covenants of 1966 takes the view of dignity as being central to the question of human rights. The concept of dignity has since shaped all discourses from the reaction against Nazi

engineered Holocaust to the recent humanitarian crisis of fleeing refugees from war-torn Syria.

Dignity as a concept today has become an accepted norm in decrying global poverty, inequality (Mandela, 2005, Trafalgar Square) and also highlighting the questions of indigeneity, of the rights of indigenous population from Australian aborigines to the First Nations of Canada to the Tribals of India and the Amerindians of the Amazons. The word has also acquired sustenance from bioethics, from reproductive rights, organ transplants to the right to euthanasia. It has also spurred reactions against all forms of slavery and bondage, including human trafficking and prevention of torture (1984) and against all forms of discrimination against women (1979) and children (1989), right of migrant workers (1990) and the rights of disabled persons (2007). Dignity therefore became the central organising principle on matters related to human rights. Dignity today is seen as a right in itself, particularly a privileged right whereas in other jurisdictions it is seen as a general principle (McCrudden, 2008:675). Invariably, dignity as a concept is utilised as a right, as an obligation, as a justification and as a principle within specific contexts. It takes diverse forms such as freedom from humiliations, from slavery, to upholding individual autonomy, e.g. women's freedom, prohibiting torture and following humane treatment of prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention. In all it relates to the prevention of inhuman treatment of human beings and has now been extended to non-humans as well.

Dignity therefore became a core human value or distinct value or property inherent in human beings. This concept gained widespread acceptability, since the ravages of the Great War. Human dignity as a concept also emerged in a majority of national constitutional texts. Europe and America incorporated dignity into their constitutions in the early 20th century; Mexico (1917), followed by Weimar Germany and Finland (1919); Portugal (1933); Ireland (1937); Cuba (1940); Japan (1946); Israel (1948); Italy (1948); West Germany (1949) and finally India (1950). The Constitution of India provides Fundamental Rights under Chapter III, rights, which are guaranteed by the constitution. Article 21 assures the 'right to live with human dignity, free from exploitation'. The state is under a constitutional obligation to see that there is no violation

of the fundamental right of any person, particularly when they belong to the weaker section of the community and is unable to wage a legal battle against a strong and powerful opponent who is exploiting them. Thus goals of 'human dignity and social justice' became the cornerstone for India's development irrespective of caste, creed or ethnicity.

The contemporary usage of dignity has been organized around calls for political, social and economic reforms. The notion of dignity was utilized by Wollstonecraft to demand change to the status of women in the world. Likewise Lassalle argued for a dignified existence for all workers or proletariats of the world (van der Graaf and van Delden, 2009:157; Misztal, 2012:102, 107). Habermas (2010:464) too notes, "Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity". The increased usage of the concept of dignity can be traced to a plethora of writings alluding to diverse interpretations (Misztal, 2012; Sensen, 2011; Kateb, 2011; Habermas, 2010; Nussbaum, 2008; McCrudden, 2008; Waldron, 2007; Dworkin, 2006; Iglesias, 2001). Over time there has been an attempt towards social theorization of the concept of 'dignity', especially since dignity replaced the old concept of 'honour' (Berger, 1970) and has helped in the revitalization of the idea of 'respect' (Sennett, 2003).

The concept of dignity has become part and parcel of the policy dialogues on health care, livelihood, right to life, right to security and peace. Respecting human life, respecting human dignity has become all the more significant whether retrieving the drowned child from the beaches of Turkey or Italy or ensuring the terminally ill and the aged are not discarded as irrelevant (Ricoeur, 2007). Dignity has acquired a universal norm that is relevant for each and every person irrespective of ethnicity, religion, caste or creed. In fact the meaning of dignity is spatially contingent and context—specific varying from nation to nation across jurisdiction (McCrudden, 2008:724). Today reinforcing the idea of dignity calls for humanizing ethical principles for engagement across a range of alternatives (Misztal, 2012; Sandel, 2009; Glover, 1999). Denial of this 'dignity is one of the fundamental challenges faced by the global population (Moellendorf, 2009; Smith, 2006). Ensuring the integrity of a human race, its dignity is critical to the survival of 'humanness'.

Dignity in development

Following from Dworkin's (2006) assertion that only a democratic state can orient and provide for equal treatment of all citizens treated as unique individuals with dignity. Global ethics and justice further reinforce this universality of the idea of 'dignity'. All forms of protest and resistance reaffirm the struggle for dignity, as exemplified by the recent migrant crisis (Auyero, 2003). This can be further elaborated when we consider the links between dignity and peace, dignity and inclusive development. Here entitlement and capabilities becomes central core of the debate. Entitlements include social, political and economic and helps to reinforce the inherent dignity of the actors and participants in this endeavour. The idea is that every individual is born free and can develop to shed all forms of unfreedom (Sen, 1997). Nussbaum (2008) too reiterates the significant point that a capabilities approach to development ensures "people are able to do and to be" in order to preserve a life of dignity. Given that the ethical and the moral resides in individuals will allow for human dignity to be a relevant concept, a goal, as well as an aspiration (Smith, 2010).

Respect and dignity together encapsulates the key human values and principles of a modern society. These also relate to democracy, human rights, gender equality, liberties and the rule of law, besides transparency and accountability in the context of rights and responsibilities. This calls for nurturing an understanding based on awareness and knowledge of the other. The poor suffer from all forms of 'unfreedom', from marginalisation to disenfranchisement thereby reinforcing all forms of disabilities. There is a call for respect and understanding labelled as the "Commonwealth approach" (Sen et al, 2007:17). This approach places primacy on dialogue, which is based on mutual self-respect and adhering to be heard and the right to express across all forms of diversity, ethnicity and religions. Such a perspective reinforces the Declaration of Commonwealth Principles (1971) in Singapore and reaffirmed in Harare (1991). Besides emphasising human rights and dignity it also calls for nurturing the active civic participation through free and democratic processes. We need to assess the unevenness of opportunities for the citizens, the discrimination in the labour market, in housing, long institutionalised structural inequalities and their attendant cultural

attitudes such as racism, ethnocentrism, religious intolerance, lack of citizenship and appropriate policies and laws all contributing to intolerance embedded in our society. Reconciliation, which is based on respect and dignity, can be progressive and successful. The *Commonwealth Commission for Respect and Understanding* came into the fore to respond to growing structural violence, widespread disrespect and anger fostered in the wake of 9/11. The focus on dialogue and development based on acknowledgment of dignity and respect of all people has become the enduring bulwark against all forms of violence, which has been unleashed across the major regions and fault lines.

Conclusions

Dignity therefore offers a space in which both religious and secular humanism can meet and interact meaningfully. Dignity in that sense is the supreme worth of an individual and at the same time, it cannot be selective along individual lines (Dan-Cohen, 2011:17). The value embodied in the idea of dignity has relevance beyond the religious and metaphysical explanations.

Dignity has played a significant role across cultures, regions and spaces, enabling specific practices of human rights endorsement. That each human being possesses an intrinsic value or worth calls for a consensus on what constitutes 'dignity'. Today we find that dignity is called into debates when individual autonomy is at stake, (e.g. when relating to issues of abortion, or sexual practices), or when personal security is at stake, (e.g. relating to issues of torture, or death), and when equality is at stake, (e.g. limiting freedom of civil and political rights, seen in the context of LGBT groups). Such a transnational and communitarian idea of dignity has taken on a whole new meaning from the traditional idea of Kant, Montaigne and Cicero.

Dignity has greater relevance now than ever before especially since the boundary between humans and non-humans are rapidly diminishing in our daily lives. Indeed autonomy and respect are not fundamental values in the same way as dignity, which refers to the universal moral claim of a common humanity. A person's dignity far outstrips the idea of respect, which is person-contingent and changes with the whims, and fancies of the individuals (see Habermas, 2010;

Waldron, 2007). Likewise rights and respect are not the same. Thus being human reiterates the idea of dignity more than anything else, especially when we have stripped away all other exterior accoutrements (Fukuyama, 2002).

Among other religious philosophies, Mahayana Buddhism relates dignity in terms of all living beings possess the essential *Buddha nature*. Ikeda (Wilson, and Ikeda, 1987:74; Matsuoka, 2005) introduces the idea of 'cosmic humanism', which is based on the idea of human dignity. Here reason is married to ideas of compassion or '*karuna*', and helps to clarify the significance of dignity seen as the *raison d'être* of human and non-human life. The central idea is that humans reflect the subjectivity of life in the universe and as such have the inherent potential to support this life rather than destroy it. Such a cosmic human being focuses on the 'greater self' rather than the 'smaller-egotistical self'. The equality of this dignified self covers not just the sentient humans but also the flora and fauna, etc. In other words all lives share a common basic equality in terms of the idea of dignity of life. This is a relational idea, which focuses on the interdependency of all participants in the cosmos. Valuing of all lives is more important than some lives and goes beyond the binaries of acquired and inherent perceptions of 'dignity and respect'.

Toynbee and Ikeda (1976:368) note, "The dignity of human life has existed since man became capable of high level of consciousness, but man has walked a historical path filled with dissension, hatred and injuries. The only way for men to give dignity to all aspects of their lives on a practical plane is to abandon hate and injury and strive to act with beauty and love". How do we establish a commitment, not just an understanding towards dignity of life? In the Lotus Sutra or Sadharmapundarik sutra, "every individual possesses potential of the unchanging and eternal Buddha state in the core of their being. This is referred to as 'dignity'. Ikeda further goes on to state, "The highest value must be attached to the dignity of life as a universal standard"... and such an awareness of the dignity of life must be the basic principle on which all our actions rest" (Toynbee and Ikeda, 1976:62–63). He notes in his *Peace Proposal* (2013), that "In order to create a society that upholds the dignity of life, a sense of the irreplaceable value of each individual must live in the heart of every one of us; at the same time, this must be the

foundation of the human binds that sustain society” (Urbain, 2014; Goulah and Urbain, 2013). In this sense the ability to have and understand the importance of compassion, the ability to sense injustice, or demand justice and freedom are all collective characteristics of being a human with ‘dignity’. Therefore to revere is to dignify and dignity helps express our own value as individuals and as members of the human race. Such a pursuance of value as an end in itself becomes far more relevant than mere manipulation of means at any cost. As Kant notes, “In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. If it has a price, something else can be put in its place as an equivalent; if it is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent, then it has a dignity...” (Kant, 1976:90–97).

Acknowledgment: Grateful to Nuala McCarthy and Alan Jones for the support and help in conceptualisation of this idea.

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