Social Utopia: A Study of Perfect Socio-Political Setups

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Abstract

In all times 'utopian concepts' have been derived from the development of ideas about the physical and socio-political structuralism in the human settlements; and can be classified as - physical utopia and social utopia. The former improves and strengthens the built environment while the latter serves as the medium to help the former function favourably to improve the society and governance. Whatever roles one may attribute to these, any of these cannot function in the absence of the other. However, social utopia appears to be of greater importance as it involves the basic idea based on which the physical utopia is formed. The whole idea of utopia may fail if the socio-political environment is inhospitable, and one can expect the same to continue into the future. One among such examples is the change of form of governments in countries all across the globe over the time. In order to gain perfection in society, the study of the social utopia becomes important. An attempt is made herein to analyze social utopias of various concepts and argue the possibility of gaining perfect socio-political environment for future utopian concepts.

Keywords: Utopia, Physical Utopia, Social Utopia, Socio-Political Order, Perfect Society.

Introduction

Utopia means an imaginary perfect place or state of things. Perfect political order and perfect social order are parts of a utopian society. The word 'perfect' has ambiguity when referred to a utopian society as the degree of perfection could not be defined. What may be perfect for a community could appear imperfect to another. A city has two major parts- physical and social; out of which the social part deals with the socio-political order. In a utopian city (or concept), the need to define the socio-political order is very important as it would elucidate how the physical part of the city would function. In other words, social utopia is an algorithm to physical utopia. While some may argue it to be the other way round, but the

existence of the physical utopia has always evolved in the form of a well thought perfect society (social utopia).

Although social utopia is not found to be clearly defined and the ideas have often been critized, the longing to understand and define it has been since millennia. Henry Morley argues in 'Utopia' (Moore, 1516) that "The name of the book has given an adjective to our language — we call an impracticable scheme Utopian. Yet, under the veil of a playful fiction, the talk is intensely earnest, and abounds in practical suggestion". This idea of Utopia is found to be seriously prevailing amongst the thinkers and philosophers ever since times of Confucius (c. 500 BC). It proves that there have been attempts of social reconstruction based on the social observations. Alan Sica finds Lynn McDonald putting forward her view about history of sociology as "Most of the history of the social sciences consists of variations on themes developed in sixth and fifth centuries B.C.... By the fifth century B.C. there was fairly sophisticated understanding of many methodological issues. The earliest surviving book of social science, *The Peloponnesian Wars* [by Thucydides, c. 400 BCE] dates from this time" (Sica, 2012). The formation of utopia has always started with an idea and the idea is an outcome of thoughts arising in mind, based on socio-political structure of society. Thus the study and restructuring (or reconstruction) of society has been always a part of social utopianism.

Considering the quick emergence of several utopian ideas in the last three decades, all the ideas are found to be physical and materialistic. As observed by Waquar Ahmed (2011), people are found asking a fundamental question while referring to the utopian ideas – "Does utopia has any social function?" The criticism by Ahmed (2011) explains – "My use of the term utopia here is sarcastic, a critique of Thomas Moore's (1506/2007) notion of utopia—a utopia representing an exclusionary space, a space that is ideal for an elite and privileged section of society. Those considered to be ideal residents/citizens have legitimate claim to the benefits of utopian space, while non-conformists are excluded." This criticism arouses a curiosity to understand the socio-political orders from the past examples of utopia. This paper is to explore and to understand what various socio-political orders have existed in such examples and to find out the basis on which social utopia

can be defined. This study does not deal with what should be the perfect socio-political order or what should be the definition of the social utopia. It aims to study what socio-political orders have been applied in various utopias and are there possibilities of modeling a new socio-political order? It is to explore the social and political aspects of various utopian ideas (including Indian utopias) through content analysis and thus can lead to a basis of finding the solution to the planning of new utopian settlements and improving the existing socio-political structure.

The literature pertaining to this research is in the form of books, research papers, and reviews related to utopianism. The literature includes Utopia (Moore, 1516), The City and the Machine (Mumford, 1965), The Story of Utopias (Mumford, 1922), The Communist Manifesto (Marx and Engels, 1847), The Just City (Fainstein, 2010), The Situated Politics of Belonging (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten, 2006), The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Sociology (Ritzer, 2012), Can Utopia be achieved? (Gonsalves, 1998), Uttarakuru: The utopia of Ancient India (Bhattacharya, 2000), etc.

The Social Utopias

Thoughts and philosophies are an outcome of the human mind. These outcomes are used in different ways to improve our lifestyle, meaning that the ideal society is based on the very foundation created by the human thoughts and philosophy. Relating the existence of society to the work of philosophy, the first utopian proposal appears in Plato's Republic. Plato (c.380 B.C.) proposes in this fiction and policy proposal, a classification of the society into a three-tier rigid structure of "gold", "silver" and "bronze" depending upon their socio-economic status. Plato proposed to philosophically educate the rulers so that their wisdom can be used to remove the poverty and hunger. Though the proposal was defined, but no details were worked out about how to achieve this state to improve the society. Another work of ancient literature – Manusmriti (The Laws of Manu), expected dating back to time between 11th century B.C. and 6th century B.C., provides various 'laws' for the proper functioning of the society. Various authors including Basu (2005) have found Manusmriti providing helpful structural guidelines for the society and strong ethical values that should be incorporated for a successful (utopian) society. The basic structure based on the profession of

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people has been found to be four-tier classification – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Shudra; along with the guidelines for politics and governance. Datable to 6th century B.C., as found by Bhattacharya (2000), Uttarakuru is another utopian place in harmony with nature. At Uttarakuru, there is social equity, non-aggression and people feed on the natural resources without ploughing fields. However, Bhattacharya (2000) has found a conflict in the description of the political order between primitive communism and hierarchical type of society under a rich king – Kuvera, or Kubera (the Lord of wealth and god-king of Yakshas in Hindu mythology).

Later, Moore's (1516) book 'Utopia' defines a city by its title (Utopia). In this Utopia, whole society is run by the government – beginning from the location of settlements to the food and clothing of the citizens. Moore's work, since its publication, has been considered as the blueprint for achieving the state of Utopia. Following Moore, Lewis Mumford, in the works – The story of Utopias (Mumford, 1922) and The City and the Machines (Mumford, 1965), tried to explore how the society would be in a utopia, how will the citizens work and live, and how the various concepts of humanism would affect the people. These works are fascinating and defined, leading to the guidelines of how to achieve a state of utopia. Although Mumford's concepts have out-dated in the evolution of the new world but still they are the best guidelines to achieve a utopian order.

Meanwhile, emphasizing on the socio-economic aspect of an ideal society, The Communist Manifesto (Marx and Engels, 1847) tried to bring communism; defining a total state of equality, and society being run completely by the government. It inadvertently forgot that the ideal state cannot be achieved until a human mind gains some motivational aim to thrive for. The failure in the concept of the communism, as perceived, appears to be the provision of the state of equality. While the abilities and capabilities of the individuals vary, the equal distribution of the benefits clearly appears illogical. This way, the more productive section of the society would restrain from putting in the optimum efforts leading to slow decay of the society.

Later, proceeding into the democratic setup of the polity, Fainstein (2010) presents the view of dominance of economic growth and politics on city

planning. Breaking down the advocacy about justice it is classified into the concepts of equity, democracy and diversity (tested on Amsterdam, London and New York) to combine sociology and planning. It emphasises more on the meso-level and micro-level planning to be brought forward and judged by experts at the local level. For improving the cities, Fainstein suggests mobilization of public over a prescription of methodologies. While bringing justice to the society, the role of the ethics and values is disregarded, and thus deviating from equity it ends up in (materialistic) equality.

The society and polity of utopia is found to be changing with time. While Plato and Manu defined the government as monarchic, the transition to communism, representative democracy and direct democracy is observed. From a rigid framework and distinct classification in society to equity and justice, the society has also kept on changing with the polity while trying to improvise itself towards achievement of utopia. However, looking at the earliest works of utopianism, the structuralism of society, polity and philosophy go parallel to each other in settlements located in two different parts of the world with almost no mode of communication. The later period of time shows that all three (society, polity and philosophy) vary from community to community. While all the discussed philosophies are ideally correct in the ideal state, it is difficult to find them valid at the same time in various communities. Creating the classification of society and providing justice to every individual cannot be the only tool to attain utopian society. It can be agreed to the views of Gonsalves (1998) - "Can this be done in today's cynical and corrupt system when every political and elite grouping is interested mainly in power and pelf? A Hinduite Utopia is on offer, as also a middle class consumer heaven, which requires investment in governance and stability. But a Utopia based on grassroots democracy needs much more."

Conclusion

The utopian socio-political order cannot be defined in a rigid framework. When the space and time change, the social behaviour of the people varies; thus, a rigid structure for social utopia cannot be defined. However, it can always be controlled by certain moral laws. In order to execute such moral laws, legislation is needed to protect the society at large. As Sahgal (2006) highlights – "But the dream

goes awry when the Utopian vision is not merely imposed through legislation." The utopian society must be able to provide justice not only in materialism but also in the values and ethics. The citizens may rebel if the society is changed through the political change (Marx, 1847), so it should be changed through the change in the lifestyle backed by the change in customs and traditions (as observed in the Indian society in case of pre-independence and post-independence India). For the solutions of the prevailing problems in the society, the solutions lie in the earliest works of utopianism, but adhering to their guidelines appears impossible as the society has turned towards power and wealth. The society still has strong idealists who may be the key to move one step closer to utopia if the prescribed solutions framed out of earlier utopian literatures are applied over a period of time. Further, the possibility of exploring the social utopia remains intact with much more unexplored aspects including the behavioural tuning of the society.

Acknowledgement

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