

Rights Education Revamped

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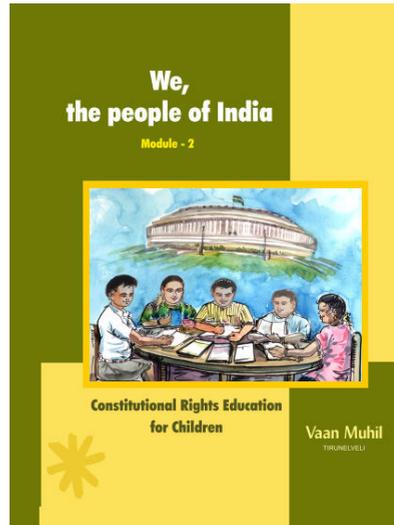
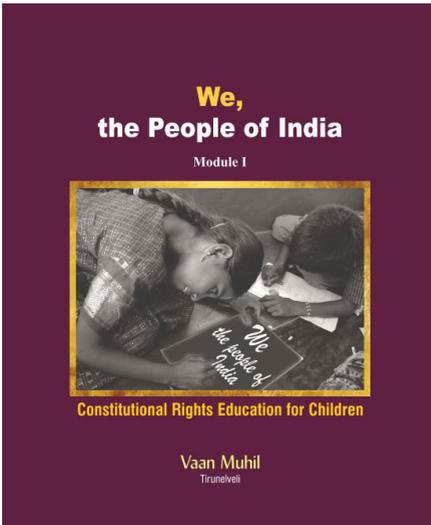
THE INSTITUTE OF HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION (IHRE) was set up as a program unit of People's Watch, Tamil Nadu in 1997 for just nine schools as an experimental measure.¹ The program was confined to Tamil Nadu from 1997 to 2005, and slowly grew into a larger program diffusing into other states of India. After some more years, IHRE covered 13,268 schools involving 16,000 teachers educating 2,600,000 children across twenty-two states. In Tamil Nadu alone, human rights education was offered in about three hundred Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes special schools run by the Government of Tamil Nadu, and about two hundred fifty aided and private schools. In 2016, IHRE and TNSSA jointly carried out a special program in the name of "Girl Children Rights Education in Government Schools;" involving 110,000 students in 10,000 schools with 11,000 teachers.

Human rights education talks about a way of life that is inherent and not just ideal. Therefore, it cannot be taught as a subject among other subjects using only analytical teaching. Human rights education needs to be a child-centred education, respecting the child's role as a constructor of knowledge rather than treating the child as a passive recipient of information. Since the IHRE expanded from being an experimental measure to a full-fledged initiative with a huge population of students garnered, the search for an appropriate pedagogy proved to be endless, one that constantly evolved while delving deeper into the mission of imparting human rights education. Every lesson was introduced by way of stories, dialogues, historical incidents, experiences, media reports of everyday violations of human dignity and so on. But at the pinnacle of its implementation, the IHRE came to an end owing to the unfortunate circumstance of lack of funds to continue induced by the reprisals on People's Watch, Tamil Nadu by the Government of India which revoked the organization's Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) license that allowed for funding to be received from outside the country.

Transition in Way of Reinterpretation

Lessons learned in life are to be taken and polished into useful shoes that fit the different occasions the feet demand. In the changing political climate of India where human rights was slowly being seen as an anti-government sentiment—in essence, standing up for human rights is expressing dissent to the government—the State started a crackdown on dissenting voices in order to protect its interests and safeguard itself from future compartmentalization.

The Age of Enlightenment in France led to the French Revolution in simultaneity with the Scientific Revolution. The Age of Reason is not merely enlightenment—that carried much significance on analytical thinking—but more importantly it taught us the underlying principle of questioning. This stems from the thirst to make things clear in a way that deduces the queries into slices of life lessons that everybody should be smart enough to understand and realize. Therefore, human rights education in schools not only teaches what rights are. It teaches the value of oneself, the truth of society and its invariably weak and piteous structure of weary impunity that ironically transpires to protect the structure while breaking it down simultaneously. That is the beauty of human institutions as we are flawed in various ways, but regardless of our flaws, the kind truth is that, we rise and fall be-



Constitutional Rights Education books

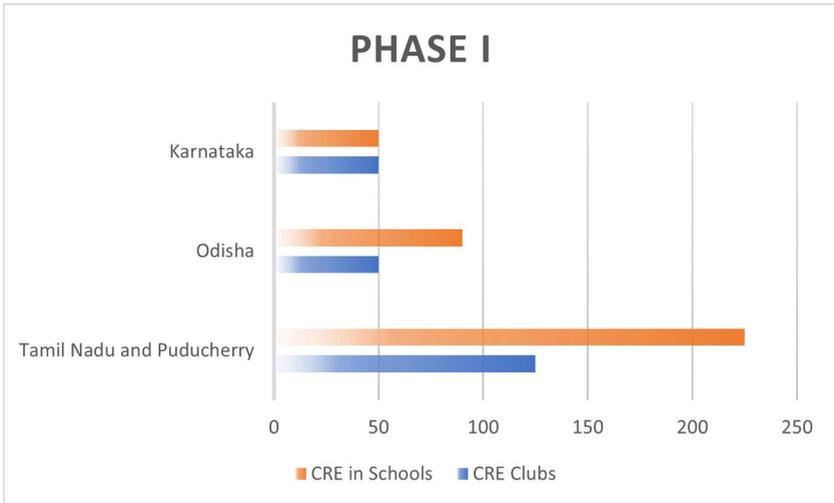
cause of those flaws. Therefore, the flaws are not only there to put us down, but also to lift us up. In this regard, the Constitutional Rights Education (CRE) Program was conceived in 2021 and started as a program of another civil society organization, namely, Vaan Muhil Trust. Fundamental rights, laid down in Part III of the Constitution of India, are human rights with a different title. Nonetheless, as pointed out, lessons learned lead to different polishes for different occasions. In the CRE Program, it is not only the book covers that are different but also the content, structure and methodology. This was never conceived to be a continuation of the earlier initiative but a new program that was built afresh with added vigor and strength in order that it would suit the changing times and challenges faced across the country.

The CRE books were first made colourful. This subtle change is no different than adding some salt to food as the children with their curious brains are more drawn towards such colourful blast of shades that makes them curious enough to explore what is inside. The children cannot be merely subjected to a closet of books with similar themes and attractions. They need to be given the choice and an avenue to understand that choice. To achieve this, the CRE Program not only focused on schools but also opened centers in communities and called them Constitutional Rights Education Clubs (CRE Clubs). These clubs welcomed a range of students, and allowed the children to mingle and have fun while playing and learning their constitutional rights. The target is mainly those from the marginalized and excluded. Now, if human rights are supposed to be imbibed by everyone, focusing only on the marginalized would feel hypocritical. However, the idea of human rights being propagated is that of the freedom one possesses that assigns the “Right” irrespective of any worldly categorizations. Hence, CRE mainly focuses on materials that talk about how to attain the highest regard that one is entitled to as a birth right - a distant yet intimate discourse for the marginalized and excluded. This is fundamental and natural in conception because this idea alone gives rise to an understanding about the image of human rights as an integral part of the structure of societal discourse we operate in.

The CRE Program was officially launched in January 2021. Due to COVID-19 measures, the schools were closed for the most part of the year. Phase I implementation occurred in these states:

- Tamil Nadu and Puducherry - CRE was introduced in around two hundred twenty schools and one hundred twenty-five CRE Clubs were formed;
- Karnataka - CRE was introduced in around fifty schools and fifty CRE Clubs were formed;
- Odisha - CRE was introduced in around ninety schools and fifty CRE Clubs were formed.

Table 1. Phase I implementation of the CRE Program



Two Modules (Module I & II) were developed titled “We, The People of India” inspired from the Constitution of India. Both modules carry enriching illustrations, case studies, interactive exercises and stories that aim to impart a wholesome sense of human rights. Two dimensions exist– Human Rights in Education and Human Rights through Education. Taking the latter into account, a separate Module titled *Vaandugal Payanam* (translated in English as “the Journey of energetic youngsters”) was introduced exclusively for CRE Clubs and contains much more practical and interactive exercises and engagements for students to participate in, given the freedom of being outside the school. This module provides students various opportunities of having participatory education involving activities and social engagements.

Recognizing the pertinence of digitalization, Module I was crafted into a visually appealing and interactive resource in an audio-visual format. These videos prove to be adept to the evolving age of education through digital means. This initiative has appealed to a lot of students as it is simple, fun, interactive and acts as a break from the traditional pen & paper learning in the classroom.

As the whole conception of the Module is student-centric, the idea of not limiting it to the books but also to the facets of interaction was envisioned. A few by-laws were noted exclusively for the CRE Clubs since the school had its own institutional structure that cannot be changed. In CRE Clubs, the by-laws gave a structure and direction to uphold. Some of which include students heading the CRE Club as coordinators. In the event of more than one student volunteering, elections are held. The by-laws allow election of co-coordinators with defined duties and responsibilities. This induces a sense of engagement and responsibility that furthers the students' interest in learning and actively participating.

This approach of directly engaging with the community without the institutional fabric of schools where the societal traits are absent, opens a new avenue of challenge and reach because of the bias present. To be specific, these CRE Clubs opened in different communities (Scheduled Caste communities, Scheduled Tribe communities, Fishing communities, Denotified Tribes, Urban Poor, victims of Forced Eviction) and have children from that community coming in with their own habits and sensitivities. Therefore, each club becomes different and the imparting of CRE takes different shapes tailored to each of them individually. Before opening a CRE Club, members of the community (children and adults alike) are consulted and introduced to the idea of CRE. The general habits and societal traits prevalent in the community are studied, and on the successful opening of a CRE Club, an audit is done using means of interaction and questionnaire distributed to the students to understand their knowledge level, skills and general attitude. This informs the tailoring of human rights education suitable to the particular community.

One solid example would be the Denotified Tribes (DNTs) Community like Kal Oddars. The colonial rule in India left with the enactment of a law - the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) - in 1871 that labelled the entire community as "criminal tribes" - people who are born criminals or will likely become criminals. Although, the independent Indian Government repealed the

Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) in 1952, the stigma of being “criminals” still persists among these communities. The everyday reality of police surveillance and attitude towards these communities has not changed in any part of the country. The children growing up with the birthmark of being “criminals” need to be addressed through CRE. Therefore, in these particular communities, unlike others, the idea of “birth right” relating to human rights rather than “criminalization” needs to be stressed. The children of these communities have to be exposed to the freedom of thought and freedom of ambition.

The prevalence of caste sensibilities needs to be addressed within the CRE Clubs. In schools, this is fairly eradicated, but in communities (i.e., society) it is not. Therefore, CRE Club as an idea takes shape in public community halls, which are present in the midst of communities, and need to be shielded from caste sensibilities. In this regard, each child present in a CRE Club is asked to interact and mingle with all others present irrespective of caste or sex.

In schools, the problems of societal sensibilities are evicted but other problems arise since it is an institution having bureaucratic branches within its structure. Nobody denies the need for a CRE Program in educational institutions. However, most teachers are conflicted when it comes to its concrete implementation. This is primarily because of the nature of the educational system and the customs relating to it. The traditional and modern educational systems do not or rather cannot get rid of rigid classroom settings. The idea of imparting education needs a scalable value to understand the extent of understanding, thereby, delegating a strict and confined system that is analytical. Human rights education cannot be confined to evaluating values laid down by the educational system since it relates less to knowledge accumulation and more to sensitization of life. It can only be evaluated in everyday settings through societal interactions and participation. This is the beauty of it. Yet, it is a complicated enigma to be merged with the educational system. Now, the question arises – though this may seem forced, how else can one impart these values to a child? The answer to this question cannot be a simple solution of adding it to an existing system or creating a new one in which it can be accommodated. Having said that, we need to change our lens by viewing the educational system through the eyes of the teachers. For teachers, the educational system levies a much stricter fidelity towards the curriculum set and the governing system in place. As a basic tenet of Freedom, i.e., all need to possess freedom for everyone to enjoy

it; even if one possesses it and the other does not, the freedom of the one who possesses it is curtailed. The freedom to learn for children can only be established if the freedom to teach for teachers is established. As a human rights idea, “freedom” is not so simple as to do whatever you want, but is about the flexibility of analyzing the right from the wrong and establishing a dialogue of negotiation to do what one thinks is right and what the system or society thinks is right. This dialogue is essential for teachers in order for them to operate outside the confines of generality and operate within a “student-centric” arena.

While the pertinence of CRE programs in schools was realized by officials in the School Education Department, they expressed hesitation in integrating it, given the additional burdens already placed on teachers. This is rationally undeniable, but the way to a solution would be to find an aperture in the schedule of the curriculum and make them use it for Constitutional Rights Education. One of the ways found was to introduce CRE Clubs in hostels in the state of Odisha. This blended the CRE Clubs and CRE Schools structure, and by doing so, garnered participation by hostel students with the cooperation of the Headmasters/Principals of the residential schools, and hostel wardens encouraging them to take forward this program in their hostels. In Odisha, fifty residential hostels have been engaging with CRE Club activities.

Drawing attention to the same thought, it was a new and unique revelation that having a proactive government and School Education Department is detrimental to the teachers. This irony persists in a way that is strange and flawed. In Tamil Nadu, the government has taken various initiatives to strengthen the educational fabric of the state. This has come at a cost of accountability and pro-activeness of the teachers. On the surface, this looks like a positive change, but deep down the teachers have been tearing apart as it leaves them suffocated. When approached to have Constitutional Rights Education in schools, they invariably deny the idea. The flaw in all this is that those proactive steps are demanded by the government without changing the existing system in which all operate. Further, a few instances of reports of external nuisance created in schools by a very miniscule range of NGOs/individuals have led to complete closure of outside influence in schools. This has led to almost no avenue of engagement with the government in taking up the CRE program, although lately things are slowly starting to change. As the political climate changes in India, some states are still immune to those

changing realities. Tamil Nadu is one of them and therefore there is still hope. Further, the diversity of India calls for the shaping of a contextual outlook. The Modules were first introduced in Tamil and then translated into English. On diffusion to other states, the state context and ideas were taken into account. The Karnataka and Odisha Module integrated local nuances and language to be taken forward to the students.

Although the CRE program is limited to school students and adolescents, it is also ambitious. College students are also engaged on special occasions and circumstances. Occasions include the 75th anniversary of Universal Declaration of Human Rights where college students were also engaged in addition to CRE Schools and Clubs in line with the anniversary theme of “Dignity, Freedom, and Justice for All.” Circumstances include some colleges that allow such inclusions within their outreach centers. The ambition is further kept alive by placing certain advancements to ensure structural firmness of the project. The facilitators and teachers handling CRE programs are constantly and periodically subjected to trainings and feedbacks. The CRE Module I’s audio-visual format is a success and was well appreciated by the students. It would serve as a catalyst for furthering digitalization of CRE programs leading to interactive, widespread and possibly even remote dissemination of values. Lastly, the Modules are being upgraded regularly with



Members of the community discussing CRE program in a *Grama Sabha* meeting.



Children engaged in CRE activities.

the advice of advisory committees instituted for each state/Union Territory. In addition to these intimate steps, lobbying and advocacy to address the political climate is also being taken as one of the steps to ensure widening of the CRE program. A testament to this is the effective lobbying in calling for a CRE program in schools in the Tamil Nadu State Legislative Assembly session.

While all rights violated are of equal significance, can one really choose in what order to address those violations? Human rights education is about pondering on the question of subjecting rationality and reason to circumstances in a way that allows for the element of morality and humaneness penetrating the callous human. This cannot be achieved in a classroom and certainly cannot be achieved if only taught about Fundamental Rights laid down in the Constitution. Over the course of implementation, since 2021, there have been numerous examples of children spearheading a human rights cause – children participating in *Grama Sabha* Meetings (local governance system in India) and questioning the resolutions taken in them; the idea of gender equality being addressed to the parents by the children themselves; the equality and oneness of all being promulgated by the children, etc. These have been predominantly realized in a number of CRE Clubs since the Module 'Vaandugal Payanam' includes visits to the society around them

while wearing a human rights lens. The students are asked to identify what is the reality, how it should function and how it is functioning. They then compare them with their own surroundings and jot down things that need to be changed or addressed in their surroundings. This list not only includes material objects but also values and freedoms. Sometimes, they even submit petitions in the *Grama Sabha* and there have been positive changes initiated owing to those petitions.

Therefore, the CRE Program is a wholesome account of human rights sensibilities that delivers values and understanding, not knowledge, in the form of interactions, stories, exercises and experiences.

Endnote

¹ See Henri Tiphagne, Experiment in Human Rights Education in Schools, *Human Rights Education in Asian Schools*, Volume II (1999), www.hurights.or.jp/archives/human_rights_education_in_asian_schools/section2/1999/03/experiment-in-human-rights-education-in-schools.html and Vasanthi Devi, Institute of Human Rights Education: India Experience, Schools, Volume X, (2007), www.hurights.or.jp/archives/pdf/asia-s-ed/v10/04Institute%20of%20HRE,%20India%20Experience-reduced.pdf.