

National Human Rights Commission, India: Awareness and Advocacy Activities

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THE NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION (NHRC) is an embodiment of India's concern for human rights. It was established under the Protection of Human Rights Act (PHRA),¹ 1993. Since its inception, the NHRC India has been consistently doing a pioneering work in the field of protection and promotion of human rights across the country. NHRC India discharges multifarious functions: examines and reviews the safeguards provided by the various legislations for the protection of human rights and recommends measures for their effective implementation; inquires into violations of human rights and recommends initiation of remedial proceedings; studies treaties and international instruments; periodically reviews existing policies, programs and makes recommendations for their effective implementation; undertakes and promotes research in the field of human rights; spreads human rights literacy and creates awareness of the safeguards available for the protection of these rights through publications, media, seminars and other available means.

Over the years, NHRC India has consistently emphasized the key features of human rights framework, which are principles of universality, non-discrimination and equality, principle of participatory decision-making, the notion of accountability and recognition of interdependence of rights, in the course of its advocacy on matters related to persons belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes; rights of women, children, persons with disabilities, LGBTQI+; vulnerable minorities and other marginalized communities.

NHRC India meticulously addresses the significant human rights issues either by taking suo moto cognizance, or when brought to its notice by the civil society, media, concerned citizens, expert advisers, etc. Furthermore, NHRC India strives for comprehensive partnerships with key stakeholders such as the judiciary, police personnel, media, representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations, industry

and academia. It functions most notably through sponsoring research, conducting consultations, seminars, workshops, internships, training programs and publications.

Mandate of NHRC India for Human Rights Advocacy and Training

Section 12 (g) to (h) of PHRA mandates the NHRC India to perform the following functions:

- (g) Undertake and promote research in the field of human rights;
- (h) Spread human rights literacy among various sections of society and promote awareness of the safeguards available for the protection of these rights through publications, the media, seminars and other available means;
- (i) Encourage the efforts of non-governmental organisations and institutions working in the field of human rights;
- (j) Such other functions as it may consider necessary for the protection of human rights.

Further, the 1987 Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (The Paris Principles)³ state that a national institution shall have the responsibility to publicize human rights and efforts to combat all forms of discrimination, in particular racial discrimination, by increasing public awareness, especially through information and education and by making use of all press organs.

NHRC India uses a wide range of measures to discharge the function of human rights advocacy and education. Prominent among them are flagship training programs, conferences, seminars, workshops, media interactions, publications for education, outreach programs, etc.

In order to discharge these functions, NHRC India has a dedicated training division which is responsible for spreading human rights literacy among various sections of the society. As such, it trains and sensitizes various government officials and functionaries of the State and its agencies, non-government officials, representatives of civil society organizations and students on different human rights issues. For this purpose, it collaborates with the Administrative Training Institutions/Police Training Institutions

and Universities/Colleges, Education boards, Civil Society Organizations/ Non Governmental Organizations, etc.³

Human Rights Education through Publications

Dissemination of human rights information and knowledge through publications is one of the prominent methods adopted by NHRC India. It publishes various priced and non-priced publications specifically designed to raise awareness regarding human rights among stakeholders, academia, public servants and the general public. NHRC India's publications cover a range of topics including Rights of Children, Criminal Justice system, Mental Health, Women's rights, Rights of Migrant laborers, etc. They also consist of some of the important guidelines, interactions, Annual Reports, various Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), etc. Some of the prominent publications of NHRC India include *Handbook on Bonded Labour*,⁴ *The Coasts, the Fish Resources and the Fishworkers' Movement*,⁵ and *Human Rights Best Practices Relating to Criminal Justice in Nutshell*,⁶ etc., among many others.

In the series of publications, the NHRC India has come up with a unique concept of *Know Your Rights*⁷ series of booklets on International Human Rights Conventions, Shelter, Manual Scavenging, Bonded Labor, Child Labor, Sexual Harassment of Women at the Work Place, Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Human Rights & HIV/AIDS. Interestingly, these publications are also available in several vernacular languages such as Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi, Assamese, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Gujarati, Oriya, Nepali and Manipuri. Publishing them in major vernacular languages enhances the accessibility of information to the masses from far flung areas and maintains India's unity in diversity.

MARG Booklets

The NHRC India undertook a project with the Multiple Action Research Group (MARG), an NGO working for legal empowerment of the vulnerable and the marginalized, to develop twenty-seven booklets on specific rights issues to generate awareness of human rights in the society. Each booklet of the series seeks to give information about a specific right and the remedies available for redressal of violations thereof. The booklets have been structured to deal with appropriate attitude towards the issue (respect for the right), explanation of rights (knowledge of law) and tips on how to use the

law (knowledge and skills to secure rights). These booklets are easy to use and accessible even to those with basic literacy skills. Booklets in the series have already been published in English and have been widely circulated to school education boards, stakeholders, and the general public.⁸

The booklets for ten subjects with a human rights perspective are the following:

- *Rule of Law*
- *Accessing Remedies in Law*
- *The Right to Information*
- *The Juvenile Justice Act*
- *Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles*
- *Child Labour and Child Marriage*
- *International Human Rights Covenants and Conventions*
- *The Right to Education*
- *The Criminal Justice System*
- *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO).*



MARG booklets on human rights issues (Image credit: *Human Rights Newsletter*, vol. 26, no. 5, May 2019 edition⁹)

Journals

NHRC India, in fulfilling its statutory responsibility of spreading human rights literacy among various sections of society and promoting awareness of the safeguards available for the protection of these rights, has been publishing the *Annual English Journal*¹⁰ and *Annual Hindi Journal* titled *Nae Dishae*¹¹ (Know your rights). The first English journal was published in 2002 while the first Hindi journal was published in 2004. These journals have brought together research and opinions from various subject experts, scholars, practitioners, activists, jurists, public servants, rights defenders and distinguished domain experts.

Seminars, Workshops and Conferences

NHRC India has been actively promoting a culture of human rights awareness and education by conducting workshops, seminars, and conferences. These activities aim to not only take up pressing human rights issues and present recommendations but also sensitize the general public about the basic human rights principles and standards. Through these means NHRC India has been able to empower individuals with knowledge about their rights and encouraged them to stand up against human rights violations. The activities are also useful in fostering a culture where human rights are respected and society and individuals have sound understanding of human rights and informed of human rights initiatives. Some of the recent activities of NHRC



NHRC INDIA's National Conference on "Moving Mental Health Beyond Institutions". (Image credit: NHRC Twitter account @India_NHRC)

India include National Conference: Human Rights in Indian Culture and Philosophy, National Conference on Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) and National Conference on “Moving Mental Health Beyond Institutions,” etc., among various others.

Human Rights Trainings

NHRC India collaborates with many administrative training institutions for public servants set up by Central and State Governments, including the police training institutions, to hold training/sensitization programs on human rights issues. Members and officers of the NHRC India lecture at these institutes as part of ongoing interaction with members of the bureaucracy and police forces at all levels to inculcate a rights-based approach to public service. NHRC India collaborates with a large number of universities and colleges for sensitization of faculty members as well as students on human rights issues. In addition, it also partners with several NGOs and funds them to organize such human rights training and advocacy programs. In addition, it recently initiated residential training of the trainer course at its premises to train the police personnel and Central investigative agencies as these agencies play a crucial role in the protection of human rights of people at the grassroots level.



NHRC, India's 2nd one-week Residential Training of Trainers course for officers of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) and various Central Investigation Agencies. (Image credit: NHRC Twitter account @India_NHRC)

Course on Human Rights

In order to reach out to the broadest possible audience, NHRC India in collaboration with National Law School of India University (NLSIU), Bangalore, uploaded a twelve-week Human Rights Online Course with four credits (Transferable) for undergraduate students on Swayam Online Portal of the University Grant Commission (UGC). NHRC India and NLSIU collaborated on unique online courses called Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC).¹²

The Course, videos, and materials have been put together by fifteen Faculty Experts from NLSIU. The topics discussed under the different modules reflect international mandates, national legislations, constitutional perspectives, comparative jurisdictions (which require a special reference), implementation mechanisms, etc. The topics covered relate to many important components of society, including the rights of the marginalized, including women, children, the elderly, workers, transgender people, refugees, etc., The Course follows a combination of discussion of theory, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Lectures and self-learning activities are included in the courses.¹³

Human Rights Internship Programs

NHRC India holds short internship program in alternative months throughout the year and month-long winter and summer internship for undergraduate and postgraduate students from various streams across the country. During the internship program, the students are exposed to lectures and discussions on various human rights issues. They are taken on field visits to police stations, prisons, and NGOs for exposure. In these internships, NHRC India invites experts from various sections such as senior Officers of Government of India, academicians, Human Rights Defenders, Special Rapporteurs, Monitors, and representatives of eminent NGOs, Thinkers, etc. to address and interact with the students. In addition to giving hands-on experience, the students do field visits to Central Jail, District Jail, Police Stations, NGOs and Shelter Homes and Deemed Commissions.¹⁴ The interns are also assigned to various Divisions of the NHRC India, and given project assignments on different aspects of human rights situation in the country to research and report on.



Visit of the interns of NHRC's month long winter internship program to Delhi's Tihar Central Jail. (Image credit: NHRC Twitter account @India_NHRC)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the short-term internship program of NHRC India successfully shifted to online mode which also resulted in maximum geographical coverage as it allowed students from far flung areas to participate easily.

Harmonization of International Treaties and Conventions with Domestic Laws: Comparative Studies by NHRC India

The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 mandates NHRC to study treaties and other international instruments on human rights and make recommendations for their effective implementation. Accordingly, the NHRC India has undertaken harmonization of two United Nations treaties with domestic laws of India. The study on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was conducted between 2017 and 2019 ti-

tled as *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) & Indian Legislations, Judgments & Schemes: A Comparative Study* By NHRC¹⁵ and United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) titled as *Women's Rights in India: An Analytical Study* (2021).¹⁶ For each study, a sub-committee consisting of subject experts, academicians, government representatives, Human Rights Defenders was formed. These committees held various consultations over the years to complete the studies. These comparative studies identified the gaps in implementing the UNCRC and CEDAW with respect to the Indian legislations, policies, schemes, judgments, and guidelines.

Awareness through Media

NHRC India has been successfully using media as a tool for advocating for change, and ensuring protection of human rights in the country. The media and communication division of NHRC India is responsible for dissemination of information through media on different issues and aspects of human rights by issuing press releases and publishing monthly newsletters¹⁷ in English and Hindi and by regular tweeting about various activities of NHRC India through its Twitter handle @India_NHRC. The monthly newsletter of NHRC India reports on its ongoing work, landmark judgments, compensation awarded and other major monthly activities.

NHRC India also organizes press conferences, interviews of the Chairperson, Members and senior officers with national broadcaster All India Radio (AIR), DD news and several other print and digital media organizations. These interviews are published in several Indian languages such as Marathi, Punjabi, and Urdu along with English for wider outreach.

NHRC award winning short film “Chirbhog” that highlights the caste discrimination in society.¹⁸ (Image credit: NHRC Twitter account @India_NHRC)



In addition, every year NHRC India invites short film entries for its “Short

Film Competition” which aims at recognizing the creative efforts towards promotion and protection of human rights. These films are accepted in any Indian language with a subtitle in English. The best three selected short films are awarded and few others get special mention.

Exposure Visits to NHRC India

One day or half-day exposure visit to NHRC India is a popular concept introduced for the students, faculty members, and officers of various colleges and universities across the country. These visits aim to introduce people about the functioning of the NHRC as well as make them become aware about the human rights situation in the country.



Exposure Visit of Students & Faculty Members of Department of Social Work, Voorhees College, Vellore, Tamil Nadu. (Image credit: NHRC Twitter account @India_NHRC)

Review of the Human Rights Education Initiatives

NHRC India has a comprehensive program on human rights awareness and advocacy. Numerous activities have been undertaken in pursuit of the need to protect and promote human rights across the country.

To illustrate, in 2023 NHRC India organized three short-term internship programs of fifteen days involving two hundred eleven students of various disciplines from universities all over the country as participants. In addition, there were two month-long winter internship programs with one hundred

thirty-three students in total and another month-long summer internship program with sixty-eight students participating.¹⁹

Throughout the year, NHRC India also organized twenty collaborative training programs with over a thousand participants in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and many others. These collaborative training programs have been organized through various academic institutions such as law universities, colleges and NGOs. In addition, over a thousand students of schools and universities have also visited NHRC India in order to have first-hand experience of its operations.

As a new element to its human rights advocacy and awareness program, training of trainers for police personnel and officers of the central investigative agencies was introduced in 2023. Two residential training activities were held for twenty-one and twenty-five trainers respectively belonging to Police Academies of states and Union Territories and Central investigative agencies.

Hence it is pertinent to state that NHRC India is expanding its human rights awareness and advocacy activities with commendable results after undertaking them through the years. But there are still some issues to overcome.

NHRC India implemented human rights awareness and advocacy programs and activities for students, bureaucrats and police personnel by involving various stakeholders such as academicians and government and NGO representatives. These activities and engagements are limited to the people belonging to the upper strata of society and specially those who can have easy access to NHRC India. In addition, the training and advocacy of human rights activities involved are short-term in nature and do not aim towards any holistic solution. For example, NHRC India organizes regular visit of students of schools and colleges to its premises. It is an excellent way of educating students about human rights, but it does not have massive impact on the students from all corners of the country. Therefore, there has to be continuous long-term efforts such as policy intervention on incorporating the discourse of human rights and introduction of NHRC India into the school syllabus, introducing professional degrees on human rights at tertiary levels, etc. This will help the students to become aware of human rights as citizens and stand for the rights of their own and their communities.

Further, to a certain extent, the awareness efforts of NHRC India also lack the direct and continuous engagement with communities and people to understand their specific human rights concerns and ways to address them. NHRC India is yet to introduce effective ways of reaching out to the masses of the society. The grassroots approach to advocacy efforts to address the unique challenges faced by different communities is yet to become part of human rights awareness and advocacy initiatives of NHRC India. The activities being done need to be taken to the districts, villages and rural communities, especially those of the marginalized and disadvantaged.

To translate this into reality, NHRC India has to strengthen its engagement with State Human Rights Commissions (SHRCs) and local self-governance system. India has a comprehensive framework of local self-governance in the country including the *Panchayati Raj* institutions and Urban Local Bodies as mandated by the 73rd²⁰ and 74th²¹ constitutional amendments of 1993.

There are two major forms of local self-government existing in India, one in the urban areas (towns and cities where local self-governance is carried out by municipalities and corporations) and other in the rural areas (villages and *panchayats*). The primary objective of these local governance bodies is to promote local economic development, infrastructure development, social justice and ensure the proper implementation of various development programs. These local self-governments have been playing extremely effective role in the development of the country and in ensuring people's participation and democracy even at the remotest corners of the country. NHRC India may effectively utilize these local self-governance bodies for human rights awareness and advocacy. As local self-governments function on the ground, they are better equipped with knowledge of the realities, challenges and the strategies needed to overcome them. Hence, they may play extremely vital role in spreading human rights awareness and advocacy at grassroots level.

At present, India has over 260,000 Gram Panchayats or equivalent bodies.²² NHRC India may design mass human rights awareness programs with training of representatives of these local self-government units in order for them to implement human rights awareness programs for the people in the districts, blocks, villages and communities. Since such mass human rights awareness programs may require expertise in implementation, the participation of grassroots NGOs and SHRCs is necessary. Under the PHRA, SHRCs

have similar function²³ of spreading human rights awareness and advocacy; hence, SHRCs along with the NGOs may act as the implementation and execution partners for such mass human rights awareness programs in their respective States. A comprehensive framework of this kind will ensure a strong reach of NHRC India at the grassroots level, along with having informed, sensitive and aware citizens of the country and a culture of human rights in the society.

Conclusion

As per its mandate and resources, NHRC India has developed a comprehensive mechanism for promotion of human rights, spreading human rights awareness and literacy and human rights advocacy at every possible level through a number of initiatives. These initiatives have been extremely important and commendable to produce societal changes and as response to social reality for the realization of a sense of social justice for weaker sections of society. Through its training and advocacy efforts, NHRC India has been paving the way towards creating a society that values and protects the inherent dignity and rights of its people.

Article 1(2) of United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training reads,

Human rights education and training is essential for the promotion of universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, in accordance with the principles of the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights.

In the Indian context, few of the considerable efforts for human rights education and literacy are seen as inculcating the ideas of Article 1(2), through the formal education system. But the success of such efforts at large scale level is still a distant reality and hence, there is a long way to go.

India being a diverse country of 1.4 billion people, reaching out to all of them and making them become aware about their rights and stand for their rights remains a challenge. In such a context, the role of institutions like NHRC India becomes extremely important.

Endnotes

- 1 The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/15709/1/A1994_10.pdf.
- 2 Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (The Paris Principles), www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/principles-relating-status-national-institutions-paris.
- 3 Training Division, National Human Rights Commission, https://nhrc.nic.in/about-us/organization-structures/specialized_divisions_and_staff.
- 4 *Handbook on Bonded Labour*, National Human Rights Commission, https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/Hand Book Bonded Labour_08022019_1.pdf.
- 5 *The Coasts, the Fish Resources and the Fishworkers' Movement*, National Human Rights Commission, <https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/The Coasts the Fish Resources and the Fishworkers Movement.pdf>.
- 6 *Human Rights Best Practices Relating to Criminal Justice in Nutshell*, National Human Rights Commission, <https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/Human Rights Best Practices Relating to Criminal Justice in Nutshell.pdf>.
- 7 Non-Priced Publications, National Human Rights Commission, https://nhrc.nic.in/publication-non-priced?field_publications_type_tid=All.
- 8 NHRC releases booklets on ten subjects with a human rights perspective, National Human Rights Commission, https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/2019_05_EN.pdf.
- 9 *Human Rights Newsletter*, https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/2019_05_EN.pdf.
- 10 *Journal*, https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/NHRC Journal V21_2022.pdf.
- 11 *Nae Dishae*, https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/NHRC_Nai_Dishayein_V19_2022.pdf.
- 12 For more information on MOOCs of National Law School of India University, Bangalore, visit <https://nludelhi.ac.in/moocs.aspx>.
- 13 Human Rights, National Law School of India University and CEC via Swayam, www.classcentral.com/course/swayam-human-rights-23778.
- 14 Refer to Chapter II, Section 3(3) of The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/15709/1/A1994_10.pdf.
- 15 *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) & Indian Legislations, Judgments & Schemes: A Comparative Study*, National Human Rights Commission, https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/UNCRC_2020.pdf.
- 16 *Women's Rights in India - An Analytical Study*, NHRC, https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/Women%E2%80%99s%20Rights%20in%20India%20complete_compressed.pdf.
- 17 See for example the recent issue of the newsletter in this url: https://nhrc.nic.in/media/nhrc-news-letter?field_date_value%5Bvalue%5D%5Bmonth%5D=10&field_date_value%5Bvalue%5D%5Byear%5D=2023.
- 18 NHRC selects Marathi short film “Chirbhog” for the first prize of Rs. 2 lakh; “Enabled” in Assamese and “Atcham Thavir” in Tamil get the 2nd and 3rd prize of Rs.1.5 lakh and Rs.1 lakh in its 8th Short Film Competition on human rights, National

Human Rights Commission, India, <https://nhrc.nic.in/media/press-release/nhrc-selects-marathi-short-film-%E2%80%98chirbhog%E2%80%99-first-prize-rs-2-lakh-%E2%80%98enabled%E2%80%99>.

19 Based on reports in several issues of NHRC's monthly newsletter from January 2023-December 2023, https://nhrc.nic.in/media/nhrc-news-letter?field_date_value%5Bvalue%5D%5Bmonth%5D=7&field_date_value%5Bvalue%5D%5Byear%5D=2023.

20 The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992, www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/73amend.pdf.

21 Seventy-Fourth Amendment Act, 1992, https://cag.gov.in/uploads/download_audit_report/2022/Chapter-I-06239c581cc6841.99798296.pdf.

22 Refer to the data of Ministry of Panchayati Raj, GoI at <https://meetingonline.gov.in/staffDetailsReport.do>.

23 Refer to Chapter V, Section 21 of The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/15709/1/A1994_10.pdf.