

Human Rights Education through TIE: A BITA Experience

Sisir Dutta

THE BANGLADESH INSTITUTE OF THEATRE ARTS (BITA) concentrates on spreading human rights culture, which promotes people's beliefs and practices based on the concept that every human being is entitled to dignity and rights, and to freedom to live and flourish. Gradual progression of the individual's development cements the norms and practices in the society and state. Hence, building a human rights culture is a relentless effort of introducing human rights norms and messages that influence people's perception and practice. To promote human rights culture, BITA must focus and work on human rights education broadly. BITA believes that human rights education is a major tool in changing the human rights situation in Bangladesh.

To promote human rights education, BITA innovated Theater in Education (TIE), an empowering tool to educate the common people especially young learners, in learning human rights as well as other development issues like agriculture, health, environment, etc. in an open and entertaining environment.

BITA

BITA is one of the non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh that initiated development activities through various modes of cultural interventions. It realized that empowerment is the precondition to the fulfillment of human desire and potential, based on a recognition and faith in people's own power and resources. It believed that the power, aspirations and resources of the communities could be nurtured, utilized and developed through systematic cultural interventions. With this realization and vision, BITA established itself since 1994 as a community-focused organization that performed different activities for cultural development. BITA is also committed to helping strengthen the process of broadening the core features of democracy and good governance.

BITA's mission is to become a partner of the poor and disadvantaged people in their culture-based approach of demanding for their human rights particularly those related to poverty alleviation. BITA envisions a society where respect and practice of rights by all is an integral part of life.

BITA involves marginalized and deprived communities in its initiatives and considers this process of engagement as rights education through culture-based approach, with strong local contents, and based on local situation. BITA's experience shows that this approach is an effective measure in raising people's awareness about the elements and conditions of poverty and in educating them to come out from the curse of poverty through capacity-building. The different innovative initiatives not only make people become aware but also help them organize to take collective efforts toward changing attitude and behavior, and develop their leadership quality essential in helping them improve their living condition. The approach includes equal participation of men, women and children, and collective efforts that create a better understanding of issues in their own communities.

BITA implements human rights programs at the grassroots level through its cultural approach, emphasizing the rights of marginalized people especially women, children and minority rights and aiming at fostering social harmony with respect for human rights. BITA has decided to focus on women and children because they are vulnerable to abuse and violence. Human rights and the law are intimately intermingled and interdependent in a rights-based society. Since the legal structure best protects the interest and rights of the people, BITA's awareness-raising initiatives help vulnerable groups know how to access informal and formal structures of the justice system.



BITA considerably addresses the trafficking and sexual exploitation of children and women issue through cultural initiatives. BITA has held campaigns on human trafficking issues in twenty-two districts in Bangladesh.

BITA Initiative: TIE Focusing on Human Rights

Theater-In-Education (TIE) has long been used as an exploratory tool in development. It has also been used as a tool in moral education and socialization. TIE is a new dimension of theatrical presentation that mainly concentrates on classroom-based performance and includes all the interactive theater practices that help support the educational process. It is a globally recognized process of enhancing the knowledge and information of people and/or children through a composite learning process. This process can be an educational tool for common people since the process instills trust and confidence instead of fear and uneasiness. Hence the process has the potential of propagating ideas and thoughts on people's rights, interests and liberation through education.

Since the early 1990s, BITA has been taking significant steps in exploring TIE as an educational form for young people. BITA has been emphasizing the formulation of communicative messages both to entertain and educate children in schools and in the communities. Under BITA's program, TIE has gained significant acceptance as a holistic learning process of two-way communication between instructor and the learner. As a result of its success in reaching young people's heart with messages, the intervention has been included in the core program on cultural promotion.

Theater assists all children in gaining confidence and a better sense of self-esteem. The activities for the classroom can be used as add-ons or even as integral parts of a regular curriculum. Based on such reflection, BITA from the very beginning has endeavored to carry out the interactive learning process to disseminate and exchange information and knowledge among the students. For this purpose, BITA targeted the marginalized and disadvantaged rural and semi-urban areas, where the traditional method in the education system continues to be employed. BITA is acclaimed as a pioneer organization for introducing TIE to support classroom-based education.

Earlier, through in-depth study, BITA observed that teaching in Bangladesh is mainly a one-way process. The active participation of the students is limited and cultural initiatives are totally absent in most schools.

Since the students do not find hilarity and entertainment in their lessons, they gradually lose interest in the activities inside the classroom that contributes to their dropping out from school as well as withdrawal from learning the lessons. Subsequently, these groups of children get engaged as child workers or with worse forms of earning money. As a consequence of this circumstance, the lower income families generally suffer. The situation argues that it is indispensable to bring about a change in the overall teaching method in the classroom-based education. Moreover, the dropped-out or non-school going children should be included in learning and information exchange processes.

Initially, only the curriculum-based topics were included in TIE. Gradually, some other issues have been included like motherland, environment, nature, climate, human rights, history, discrimination, protection of children and women, women's education, trafficking, juvenile crime, reproductive health, etc.

Following are some BITA projects that employed TIE as communication tool for children:

- Chittagong Cultural Upliftment project, supported by Heinrich Boll Foundation, Germany
- Child Rights Awareness Raising in Chittagong project, supported by Save the Children, Bangladesh
- Participatory Community Development through Cultural Initiatives, supported by Save the Children, Bangladesh
- Culture for the Promotion of Rights, supported by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Bangladesh
- Culture for Empowerment of People, supported by the Embassy of Denmark in Bangladesh.

TIE Basic Goal and Objective

BITA aims to develop a social education process for children that enhances their knowledge on human rights using blissful theatrical approach.

BITA sets three specific outcomes:

1. Deliver human rights information aiming to create awareness among the school-going children in a joyful learning process

2. Intensify the knowledge level of the children through their meaningful participation in cultural initiatives in the communities
3. Diffuse human rights education among the training participants.

BITA started to employ TIE in its work in 1995. In the course of time, BITA has been able to cover more than twenty-five thousand children from approximately one hundred schools. In terms of geographical coverage, the initiative has been tested and implemented in greater Chittagong Area, Chittagong Hill Tracts and coastal areas of Bangladesh.

Anti-Trafficking Campaign through TIE

BITA, while working on different social issues with different stakeholder groups, observed that a large number of marginalized people especially children and women are in most vulnerable condition. Trafficking of women and children has become a serious social as well as moral problem in South Asia including Bangladesh. Every year, thousands of women and children are being smuggled out of the country through the border areas and sold in India and Pakistan. The trafficking in women and children has reached alarming dimensions. Although the major cause is poverty, gender discrimination and the lower status of girls and women are also contributing factors to trafficking. The involvement of children from poverty stricken families in economic activities leads them to trafficking. A large number of children from rural areas are being trafficked to different countries in search of job, lured by the trafficking groups. The southern part of Chittagong has been identified as one of the trafficking-prone areas of the country.

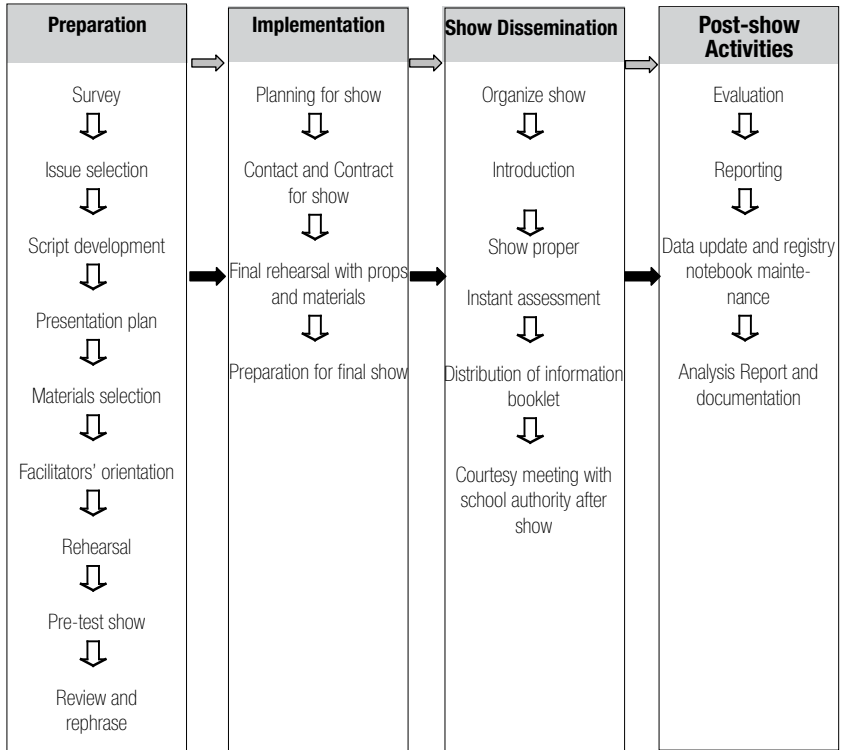
BITA has been undertaking national- and regional-level campaigns through different cultural activities, especially theater, to create broad-based understanding among the general populace about the importance of protecting women and children from being trafficked.

BITA started an alternative education process using TIE at rural and urban schools to inform students about trafficking: how the traffickers lured children, what happened after being trafficked, and how social-protection-net stopped trafficking. As result, the awareness of students developed and helped them become active in protecting children in their community from being trafficked.

BITA and the TIE Process and Tools

The TIE process designed by BITA has four major steps: Preparation, Implementation, Show Dissemination, and Post-show Activities. The whole process is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. TIE Implementation Process



BITA has employed the TIE process in its projects as shown in the experience of implementing the Chittagong Cultural Upliftment project.

Under the preparation stage, BITA studied the schools in Chittagong and observed the dropping out and irregular presence of students in school. It undertook a survey of the different formal and non-formal (community-based) primary schools in Chittagong and found that the one-way learning methods were mainly used, with the students having less scope to participate

in the sessions. It also learned that the primary school students preferred to learn more about the “seasonal variations” and “patriotism” topics found in the curriculum, though the students also found them hard to understand. BITA saw the need for an entertaining learning environment.

Under the implementation stage, BITA developed two stories and scripts in a workshop involving theater activists and BITA’s staff. The stories and scripts were about recreation and participation of children. The stories and scripts used in the theater productions employed various presentation styles such as songs, dances, acting, puppet show, and story telling along with the use of paintings, toys, colorful cloths, and masks. BITA decided to present the production on seasonal variations before students of classes II and III, and the production on patriotism before classes IV and V.

The production on seasonal variations was about the six seasons of Bangladesh. The objective was to introduce the students to nature, its changes, its impact on human life, the environmental changes due to the six seasons, etc. In relation to the rainy season, the story dealt with change in rivers, how people living near rivers survived during rainy season, the festivals observed to celebrate rain, cultivation during the rainy season, fishing activities during the rainy season, etc. For the summer season, the story focused on Bengali New year, and many events to celebrate the year, etc.

The other production on patriotism for classes IV and V dealt with the language movement and the way it ended with the war for liberation. It covered the International Mother Language Day and the heroes in the war for independence. The production aimed to inform the young students about the history of independence and the contribution of the people at different times in history in building the nation.

The performances were done both in schools and in training activities. BITA staff performed in schools while external resource persons joined the capacity-building training activities as TIE Facilitators.

Two BITA facilitators, female and male, were assigned to perform both in the school and in training activities.

A premiere show on the productions was organized to motivate and influence the school authorities. Afterward, with their appreciation and agreement obtained, BITA and interested schools signed contracts regarding show dissemination plan that considered the rainy season, social festivals, etc. in scheduling performances. The schools, selected through a survey, had most of their students hailing from underprivileged communities. Rehearsals for

the performance were done with the participation of children and school authorities. The schools organized the children, arranged the venue, and assigned teachers to assist in the dissemination plan implementation.

Under the show dissemination stage, the BITA facilitators brought materials that were displayed in the school premises. They started the activities by engaging the students in an amusing game, followed by an activity to introduce one another.

During the performance, the facilitators acted out stories that focused on certain issues. The students were very much involved in the performance; they were asked for reactions many times while some were engaged as performers.



After the performance, the students participated in a learning-based competition held in a joyful atmosphere and led by the teachers who remained present during the performance. The students themselves selected the “champion,” the student who shared the most learning. The competition was done through interactive discussion that involved all the students.

Before ending the activity, the students sang a song and were individually given a prize. At the last stage, two students (one male and one female) and the teacher expressed their views and opinions about the performance.

The show and interaction activities took around forty to forty-five minutes.

Under the post-show activities stage, BITA facilitators went back to the schools three months after the performances. The BITA facilitators con-

tacted the students and the teachers to assess the knowledge obtained and the practices learned. They observed that the students obtained adequate knowledge on the issues covered by the performances, and the students had shared their learning with fellow students. Most of them opined that TIE was an effective method of learning and suggested broader application covering other contents of the curriculum along with other social-cultural issues like child rights, human rights, discrimination, etc. The teachers had positive views regarding students getting a clear understanding of the issues disseminated through TIE and suggested a scaled up version for students of other classes. The experience revealed that TIE could be effective in educating as well as entertaining children of different ages and from different sectors.

BITA employed innovative tools to help students express their opinion. Ice-breaking activities helped the students enthusiastically participate in the session. The students played theatrical games, and drew pictures about the images of the productions that they remembered. The facilitators showed photographs used in the productions to engage the students in discussion.

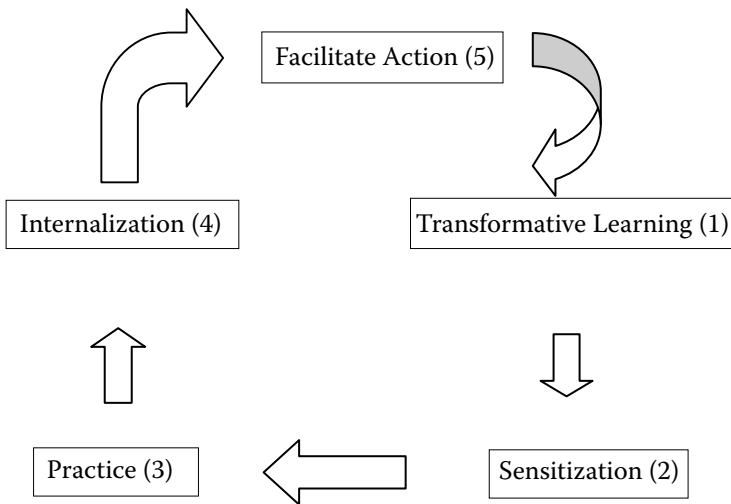
Using its experience and expertise, BITA has incorporated diversified rights-based topics, newer modalities and other capacity-building activities in training grassroots youth as TIE facilitators for other projects. Its shows gained expanded range of audiences from students of different classes to community children. Moreover, BITA developed attractive learning materials and distributed them to the children during TIE shows. These innovations have resulted in generating proactive role for the children within their capacities in protecting human rights in schools as well as communities. Some of the students constructively raised concerns to the teachers, helped poor children, returned back to school the dropped-out students, etc.

Following are the salient characteristics of the projects:

- The “Child Rights Awareness Raising in Chittagong project” keenly reflected child rights issues
- The “Participatory Community Development through Cultural Initiatives project” developed TIE production using ethnic language to make it comprehensible to ethnic children
- The “Culture for Promotion of Rights project” highlighted human rights issues
- The “Culture for Empowerment of People project” engaged and developed the skill of young people and capacitated the local partner organizations.

The acceptance and effectiveness of the TIE motivated BITA to incorporate the TIE tools as training methods. The tools were successfully applied in the training activities developed and organized by BITA such as those on human rights, culture and development, and theater practice and presentation trainings. It is worthy to mention that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child training provided to schoolteachers was in response to a need aroused by the TIE presentation.

Human rights education is the central point of BITA's TIE program. BITA designed modules on selected human rights-based themes with interactive and learner-centered participatory methods and techniques including brainstorming, meditation, group discussion, case study, role-play, debate, mime, puppetry, experience sharing, etc. Most of the techniques are experiential, reflective and action-oriented followed by analytical debriefing to sensitize the participants. The process is based on continuous traveling between the heart and the head, and rediscovering of feelings and understandings of individuals. The process includes a cycle of change in human mind by which the participants will be able to identify their role and responsibilities and can facilitate action against any kind of human rights violation or promote human rights culture in the society.



BITA's work led to the adoption of TIE by teacher groups in their teacher-training curriculum. It also affected students, as in the case of "Theatre Education Resource Forum." Young students created this Forum based on their own interest and enthusiasm with the "PPP" motto (Participation, Practice and Performance). BITA played a catalyst's role in this initiative. This young and dynamic group works in schools and colleges to educate students on rights, gender, child rights and other important issues that the formal educational institutions do not cover. The Forum educates on these issues by employing the TIE process that allows students to learn through games, and other fun and enjoyable activities. The Forum recruits as members those students who are really enthusiastic about its work and obviously not involved in any anti-social and anti-state activities.

BITA, on the other hand, received recognition as a distinctive communication media entity for learning and teaching. It also received international recognition for its work. It is part of the Asian Regional Theatre and Education Network (ARTEN) whose members employ TIE.

Challenges

BITA faces the major challenge of getting space to hold TIE program activities within the regular class schedule followed in schools as well as in satisfying the demand from students who experience TIE. The easy-to-understand presentations by skilled resource persons lead to more demand from the students for presentations on more difficult issues. This in turn means that the capacity of teachers to facilitate learning using TIE has to be improved to enable them to help build a congenial environment inside the classroom.

What is the Dream on the Way Forward for this Process?

The Bangladeshi education system requires radical change. BITA believes that this change is possible only if a progressive national educational policy was duly implemented. It is imperative that entertaining teaching and learning methods are enunciated in the educational policy. BITA endeavors to take the necessary initiatives that would facilitate the acceptance of a model teaching and learning practice in the educational policy.

Since people in some public universities acquire competencies on institutional theater education, they need access to or opportunity to explore the

skill of students through practicum. BITA aims to widen the access of these academics, theater practitioners and think-tank people to the field.

BITA also promotes the process of exchanging knowledge and information among the children who dropped out of school or never went to school.

From the perspective of indigenous and ethnic communities, classroom-based education system is a threat due to the gap between the language used inside the classroom and the ones in their own communities. Education using the mother tongue is a pre-requisite for the development of human resources in these localities. BITA sees the TIE process as a significant and relevant medium to be able to overcome this situation.

Conclusion

The development of a human rights culture in society is only possible when people know their rights and stand for their entitlements. In order for this to happen, human rights education is a prerequisite at the community level. Human rights education helps people see themselves as change agents. It is a participatory practice aimed at empowering individuals, groups and communities through fostering knowledge, skills and attitudes consistent with internationally recognized human rights principles. The youth are key players in this process. TIE is the best model for fostering human rights education in the society. And human rights education through cultural presentation plays a vital role in building social structures that support participatory democracy in the society.