

Human Rights Education in Schools in Bangladesh

NURUN NAHAR BAGUM

Human rights education is an important part of Bangladesh's school curriculums and a significant part of textbooks at the primary, secondary, and higher-secondary levels.

When Bangladesh emerged in 1971 as an independent country, it emphasized human rights education for children, who early on learn their civil, social, political, and legal rights from reading poetry, tales, essays, and their textbooks in social science, history, civics, and religion. At the same time, they learn about children's rights with the help of a supplementary reading material called *Child-to-Child Approach*.

In primary- and secondary-level textbooks, human rights are mostly taught as citizens' rights. The higher-secondary civics textbook clearly states that noncitizens enjoy all the social rights enjoyed by citizens. It also contains a chapter on human rights and lists all 30 clauses of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Human Rights Education

In the primary stage (classes 1 to 5), children are supposed to learn 53 terminal competencies, some of which are the following:

- love for all creation;
- respect and tolerance for all religions;
- respect for all people irrespective of sex, property qualification, occupation, and lifestyle;
- respect for parents, guardians, and neighbors, and performance of duties toward them;

- awareness of rights and duties as family members, as members of society, and as citizens;
- tolerance and respect for the opinions of others;
- nationalism; and
- independent thinking and the capability to express one's own opinion.

These competencies are directly related to the principles set forth in the Declaration. The appropriate articles of the Declaration are indicated for reference purposes.

The environmental social studies textbook (class 3, primary level) shows that children have the right to their parents' care. It describes the mother as cook, nurse, and family caretaker. The full-time duty of the father and the mother is to take care of the children (Article 25, UDHR). The duty of the children is to respect their parents, follow their orders, listen to what they say, nurse them when they are sick, and take care of them in their old age (Article 25, UDHR). It is also their duty to take care of other relatives living under the same roof. Rights and duties of children are also discussed in a later chapter of the textbook, although they should have been presented at the beginning.

Children are taught to abide by school rules, be attentive in class, respect teachers, behave properly with other children, and help their

neighbors, especially the poor ones (Article 26, UDHR).

They are also taught that they have the fundamental rights to food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and education, which the State has the duty to provide (Article 26, UDHR). In a developing country such as Bangladesh, however, not all children, especially the poor ones, enjoy them.

The class-4 textbook for environmental social studies elaborates on the duties of children toward their family and neighbors. The class-5 textbook teaches children their rights and duties as citizens (Constitution, and Article 29, UDHR).

The textbooks teach three kinds of rights:

- social rights, including the right to own property and observe one's religion (Article 18, UDHR);
- political rights, including the right to form or join political parties, vote, and run for election if qualified (Article 20, UDHR); and
- economic rights, including the right to work and engage in commercial activities or any other legal occupation (Article 23, UDHR).

The textbooks discuss the duties of citizens, such as commitment to the development of the country, following the law, paying taxes, voting in elections, and following the State's orders.

The class-5 textbooks teach that with rights come duties, and that citizens should possess three qualities—intelligence, conscience, and self-control.

Children are also taught that the people's fundamental rights were severely violated by the Pakistani army and their local cohorts during the War of Liberation, from 25 March to 14 December 1971, when as many as 3 million people were killed, 200,000 women raped, and countless others made homeless.

Child-to-Child Approach Program

Although the program, launched for classes 3 to 5 in selected schools, is not yet a regular part of the curriculum, it plays an important role in education. The content of the program is summarized below:

1. Who are children?

Boys and girls below 11 years of age are generally known as children. But the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that those below the age of 18 are entitled to enjoy children's rights.

2. Why human rights for children?

Children whose human rights are respected will grow up to be responsible citizens.

3. Why are the rights of children acknowledged by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

Thousands of children lost their parents and relatives during World War I. To care for them, an international conference was held in Geneva, where it was declared that children have rights. Then World War II orphaned millions of children, touching the people of the world. The Declaration has two articles that ensure the rights of children. Since the Declaration, the first Monday of October has been observed as Children's Day.

On 20 November 1989, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which came into force on 2 September 1990, after being ratified by most countries, including Bangladesh. Since then, children's rights have been incorporated into the legal system.

4. What are the most important articles in the Convention?

They are the following:

- right to an identity and nationality, which should be registered with the local government office soon after the child's birth;

- right to food, clothing, shelter, education, and medical facilities;
- right to education, with primary education free (or nearly so) and compulsory for all children;
- right to receive affection and love from their parents or legal guardians, relatives, neighbors, and others, and to develop mentally;
- right to live with a parent or legal guardian, although children may be adopted or placed in an orphanage if beneficial to them; right to be free from exploitation and discrimination based on birth, gender, group, language, color, or wealth;
- right to express their own views, form groups and assemble for good purposes, and develop artistic, literary, and other qualities;
- right to security and freedom from abduction, being held hostage, being sold, or recruitment into smuggling and drug trafficking;
- right to leisure and entertainment;
- right to be protected from repression, rigorous punishment, and torture; and
- right to be protected from excessive labor (no one under 14 years should be employed in a factory or other hazardous job).

Children's rights are listed in *Child-to-Child Approach* (in Bangla), a leaflet prepared by the Bangladesh National Curriculum and Textbook Board in collaboration with UNICEF. Children are taught to spread these ideas to their fellow students and companions.

The general objective of the lower-secondary and secondary curriculum is to help children develop healthy religious, moral, and cultural ideas, good character, patriotism, and a sense of duty. In class-7 social studies, the rights of citizens are divided into the following categories:

Moral rights

These are not enforced by law, and those who violate them are not punished by law but criticized by the public.

Legal rights

Violation of legal rights is punishable by law. Legal rights are divided into social and political rights.

Social rights

These are rights that allow people to live in a civilized manner. They include the following:

- right to life, which is the root of all other rights (Article 3, UDHR);
- right to own and enjoy one's property (Article 17, UDHR);
- right to move freely within the State, assemble anywhere, and form an association (Articles 13 and 20, UDHR);
- freedom of religion (Article 18, UDHR);
- right to education and health (Articles 26 and 25, UDHR);
- right to raise a family with the help of the State (Article 16, UDHR);
- right to be employed according to one's ability and capability (Article 23, UDHR) and the right of the old, disabled, and poor to economic and social assistance (Article 25, UDHR);
- freedom of thought, speech, and the press in order to broaden one's mental horizons and to maintain one's humanity and conscience (Article 19, UDHR); and
- equal rights of language and culture for all citizens irrespective of caste, creed, and class (Article 27, UDHR) as no nation or community can keep its identity otherwise.

The civics textbook for the higher-secondary class explains that noncitizens enjoy all the social rights that citizens enjoy.

Political rights

These include the following:

- right to live within the territory of the State, temporarily or permanently, without disturbing its interest and security (Article 13, UDHR);
- right to vote and be elected (Article 21, UDHR);
- right to petition the government for redress of grievances (Articles 7 and 8, UDHR) and to criticize the government's activities;
- right to aid from one's own country while residing abroad, if in danger (Article 8, UDHR); and
- right to be served by any department of the government, if one has the requisite qualifications, irrespective of caste, creed, race, color, and family position (Articles 2, 7 and 8, UDHR).

The social studies textbooks for the primary and secondary levels explain human rights in a manner suitable to the students' age and comprehension ability.

Conclusion

Text material, especially that related to social science, civics, and Bangla literature, is selected to inform pupils of their human rights. The school curriculum also lays special emphasis on the affective domain, so that the students may become humanistic, democratic-minded, and tolerant.

Finally, we are aware of the need to further improve the curriculum and to incorporate more and more democratic ideals and human rights concepts in the textbooks.