

Human Rights Education in India: The READ Experience

SAM A. CHELLADURAI

The 1986 National Policy on Education laid down, for the first time in the history of Indian education, a national curriculum framework as the basis for building the national system of education. Most of the common core elements identified in the policy are related to one or other dimension of human rights education: the history of India's freedom movement, constitutional obligations, and other content essential to nurture national identity. It has been laid down that "these elements will cut across subject areas and will be designed to promote values such as India's common cultural heritage, egalitarianism, democracy and secularism, equality of the sexes, protection of the environment, removal of social barriers, observance of the small family norm and inculcation of the scientific temper."

Present Status

Human rights education is not treated as a separate area of the curriculum but is integrated into various subjects at different stages of school education.

General guidelines for furthering human rights education

Human rights education should be promoted by

- identifying and eliminating from the school system all that is prejudicial to human rights,
- bringing to human rights education greater conceptual clarity and sharper focus, and
- articulating general guidelines to translate conceptual clarity and focus for each stage and for various subjects.

Basic Approach

The basic approach to human rights education in schools is to integrate it into various subjects

and not treat it as a separate area of study. Integration, however, does not preclude activities and projects specifically and exclusively related to human rights.

The main relevant subjects at the primary stage are environmental studies and language. The major subjects relevant to human rights education at the upper primary stage are social sciences, science, and languages. In the secondary stage, social sciences, history, civics, and science.

Higher Secondary Stage

The National Council of Educational Research and Training has recommended a core course in general studies, compulsory for all students. Besides themes such as science, technology and society, environment, society and development, and global issues of human survival, this course includes the study human rights in historical perspective; Universal Declaration of Human Rights; human rights conventions; the state of human rights; racism and apartheid and strug-

gle against them; unequal international economic relations and problems of world economic development; social structure and social justice; social and economic inequality; economic exploitation and atrocities against the weak; child labor; status of women and dynamics of the quest for equality; national unity (communalism, revivalism, casteism, and various kinds of chauvinism); and respect for diversity. The course also recommends placing local problems within the broad framework of these themes.

The higher secondary stage also provides ample scope for human rights education. However, courses and textbooks could be much improved. One aspect to be considered is the inclusion of concrete cases for discussion and clarification.

Cocurricular, extracurricular, out-of-class, and out-of-school activities, programs, and projects can be used to promote human rights education. Promoting it in preservice teacher training must be part of the larger exercise of revising the preservice teacher training curriculum. While this may be taken up as a long-term program, much can be done in the area of in-service training.

Human rights education program

Human rights are part and parcel of human dignity, which is secured by the Constitution. The importance of the concept of human dignity is well exemplified by its inclusion in national and international basic legal texts. The preamble to the Constitution assures, among other things, “dignity of the individual.”

Other rights are those to safety, to be heard, to know, to choose; and to have access to education, religion, shelter, food, and so on.

Human rights education is used here in the widest sense, comprising imparting information and knowledge, developing mental capacities and physical skills and abilities, inculcating values and attitudes, liberating minds, and sensitizing conscience and moral responsibility.

Objectives of human rights education among the youth

- Advocate increased allocation for all levels of education, bringing it up to the minimum percentage of gross national product.
- Advocate and promote availability of all physical and cultural inputs needed for healthy children, such as minimum caloric requirements, educational toys, playgrounds, etc., to all children of preschool age, free or subsidized.
- Promote the realization of the goal of free and compulsory education up to the age of 14.
- Promote the goal of equal educational opportunities.
- Advocate the weighted allocation of funds for preschool and school facilities for disadvantaged and “backward” groups.
- Advocate affirmative action for weak social sectors, including relaxation of admission for them.
- Special educational measures for the education of “backward” groups such as tribal people, *dalit* (outcasted people) and “backward” minorities, and girl students.
- Wipe out caste discrimination and class disparities, especially in rural areas.
- Promote educators at all levels, and humanistic education ideas and models conducive to the inculcation of the values of freedom, equality, and dignity of all.
- Advocate liberation of the education system from the grip of authoritarianism.

Anekal Rehabilitation Education and Development (READ) Centre

READ Centre is a grass-roots nongovernmental organization (NGO) promoting participatory development since 1984. READ has pioneered in health, human rights education, environmental protection, and economic development in Huliyaar and Handanakere, Tumkur district, Karnataka, south India.

READ has the following general objectives:

- Educate, motivate, and organize community-based organizations (CBOs) to strengthen their long-term goals for holistic development.
- Train and upgrade skills of community leaders, especially women and youth, in articulation, legal awareness, education, and local governance.
- Establish appropriate CBOs for women to improve their economic and social identity through microcredit and self-help group management.
- Share and promote indigenous learning and research methodologies to improve skills and capacities through participatory rural appraisal and allied subjects on development approaches.

READ has been training grass-root organizations, teachers, trainers, and students from primary schools to universities. It caters to the needs of university students from overseas through its participatory rural appraisal and social education. Japan sends 10–25 students per year.

Human rights education program

In 1999, READ conducted a preliminary survey with the help of Department of Education of Karnataka on the feasibility of teaching human rights in schools. The survey was done in 30 villages (Huliyar and Handankere blocks) covering 12 schools (10 primary and 2 high schools) where READ works.

The survey found that the general public was not aware of human rights education. People in rural areas have not been asked by government legal experts about human rights-related issues. Parents do not know what facilities are available within the constitutional framework to address human rights issues. Many people have issues related directly to human rights, such as land disputes, wage disputes, illegal occupation of land and property by the rich and powerful, caste discrimination, gender

discrimination, and human rights-related educational issues.

With permission of the Department of Education, READ started to teach human rights to middle and high school students in government-run schools in Mathigatta, Cholukatte, Huliyar, Soralmavu, Thammadihalli, and Yelanadu villages in Karnataka.

Orientation to teachers

Before starting the human rights education program, we started to work with the teachers. In all the schools we surveyed we had invited applications from teachers interested in human rights education and selected two senior teachers from each school.

The orientation course included the following:

- time frame for teaching human rights,
- selection of simple topics related to human rights,
- laws related to human rights education,
- the difference between conventional education and human rights education,
- why teachers need to know about human rights education,
- how human rights education can benefit teachers,
- examples and references on human rights education adopted in other countries,
- the psychology of students and teachers, and
- reflection and planning.

This orientation aimed at the following:

- promotion of understanding and cooperation from the teachers,
- creation of social responsibility to think and act clearly,
- molding of young people who will create a better world, and
- creation of opportunities and space to develop the nation and foster international cooperation.

Once a month, READ's staff and legal expert orient two batches of five teachers each. In

2002, more than 10 teachers were trained. Some were not from our working area.

Human rights education for students

After orienting the teachers we conducted human rights education for students in rural areas. Each class consisted of four topics each week:

- Right to education
- Basic rights of students relating to
 - Clean environment
 - Privacy for girls
 - Freedom of expression of opinions
 - Selection of subjects
- Punishment of students
- Roles and responsibilities of parents and teachers.

READ developed approaches to motivate teachers, students, and parents. The basic courses are monitored by teachers or headmasters. Each class is not more than 30 minutes. Traditional notion of education affects READ's program. Education is considered noble and teachers are revered, so students ask no questions that might irritate the teachers. Sometimes punishment for misbehavior or indiscipline is stern.

Monthly reflection meetings are held only on Saturdays, when classes are held for only half a day. Student assemblies feature programs to increase students' skills and knowledge, such as songs, plays, puppetry or folk dances, story telling, etc.

Human rights education is given special attention by the school authorities. READ is trying to improve teaching methods and resources. Since READ does not have a separate fund to carry on this program with dedicated staff and educational materials, it needs to look for funding sources.

From January to December 2002, READ covered the schools in Mathigatta, Cholukatte,

Huliyar, Soralmavu, Thammadihalli, and Yelanadu villages.

- Number of schools covered: 6
- Number of students benefited: 1,800
- Male-female ratio: 1,100:700 (11:7)
- Number of teachers responsible: 10
- Type of schools covered: State government-aided schools in rural areas where the READ Centre works among poor communities (50 villages) with 60 women's groups (1,200 members)

READ faces problems in implementing the program as a regular one in primary and secondary schools:

- During the 5 years that READ has been implementing the program in schools, securing permission from the school authorities has often been a problem.
- READ does not have funds to pay program staff.
- READ often takes part-time staff with low allowances, and volunteers who are paid even less.
- Demand is high, whereas working staff are sometimes inadequate due to lack of money.
- Government school teachers (trained by READ in human rights education) are transferred and new teachers then have to be trained.
- READ does not have skilled staff to document and report on all events on human rights education.

READ is striving to develop a program on human rights education in schools in line with READ's blueprint for human rights education in schools. Although it faces many problems, READ is able to continue its program in several schools and will continue to do so for many more schools.