

# Human Rights Education in Schools: The Experience of the Centre for the Study of Human Rights

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**S**ri Lanka is an island, 25,000 square miles in extent, situated in the Indian Ocean of the South Asian region. The present population of Sri Lanka is approximately twenty million, and is multireligious and multicultural.

The people of Sri Lanka had faced many challenges. The country was under colonial rule for almost 450 years. It finally gained independence from the British colonial rulers in 1948. In the early 1970s and early 1980s, political upheavals came about due to lack of confidence by the people in the political system. In 1977, a major change took place with the introduction of an open economic system.

Human rights violations occurred in the 1970s as a result of the 1971 uprising of youth in southern Sri Lanka against the government, mainly due to unemployment and the inability to secure employment that matched their qualification. Even worse situations occurred in 1988 and 1989 with killings and abductions by unidentified gunmen, as well as looting and damage to public and private properties.

In 1983, the killing of thirteen soldiers in the North by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) led to a backlash by the Sinhalese in certain parts of the country, resulting in ethnic riots known as “Black July.” Since then the conflicts continued in the North and East between the LTTE terrorists and the government military personnel.

In 2002, with mediators facilitating the entire process, the government and the LTTE en-

tered into a ceasefire agreement. This agreement resulted in a “no peace, no war” situation for a few years. However, the LTTE subsequently attacked government forces personnel and other political opponents leading to the failure of the peace building efforts. Both the government and the LTTE continued to accuse each other of actions detrimental to peace building.

A tragedy in another form occurred in Sri Lanka in December 2004. A tsunami hit the Northern, Eastern and the Southern coastlines, resulting in the death of approximately 35,000 people and displacement of over 480,000 others. Furthermore, the damage caused to the coastline was enormous.

## **Establishment of a human rights center**

With the conflict situation of the 1970s and 1980s, the need arose for the establishment of an organization that would educate people on human rights and the remedies for their violation. In 1991, the Centre for the Study of Human Rights (CSHR) was established within the environs of one of the oldest higher education institutions of the country, the University of Colombo.

CSHR aims to become “a centre of excellence in human rights education and research that contributes significantly to the creation of a human rights consciousness in the nation resulting in respect for the human rights of all.” Its overall vision is “to create a nation with a rights consciousness in which the dignity and rights of all people are respected.” Its specific mission is to become “a centre of excellence for human rights education and research using a multidisciplinary approach.”

CSHR intends to mainstream a gender and ethnic balance in all its programs. Furthermore, it sees the need to conduct programs in both Sinhala and Tamil mediums according to the requirements of the target groups.

### **Main programs**

CSHR delivers numerous services as a leading human rights educator at national, provincial, district, divisional, and community levels in the country. The main programs focus on the following areas:

- Human Rights Education
- Human Rights Research
- Human Rights Capacity Building
- Human Rights Knowledge Services
- Institutional Development.

The objective of the human rights education program is to enhance understanding about the multidimensional nature of human rights through formal educational programs. Specialized Diploma and Certificate courses have also been conducted using multicultural and multidisciplinary approaches and dynamic teaching methods that incorporate traditional and non-traditional means of assessment.

CSHR also plays an advisory role in developing human rights education curriculums and policies. In addition, it develops manuals and other literatures on human rights.

The second main area of CSHR is human rights research. CSHR conducts research by

considering the emerging trends and knowledge gaps in human rights and by identifying potential and imminent human rights issues in Sri Lanka.

Human rights capacity building, the third main area of CSHR, has the objective of empowering State actors, the members of the civil society and the community, at provincial, national, regional and international levels through the strengthening of their capacity through enhanced knowledge and skills relating to human rights. To heighten the awareness among the State actors of their responsibilities in relation to human rights, CSHR conducts training seminars, workshops, and awareness programs for the following target groups:

State actors:

- Education Sector
  - o School level: Pre- Service Teachers and Master Teachers
  - o University level: Academic and Non-academic Staff
- Law Enforcement Sector: Police Officers, Prison Officers, Members of the Armed Forces
- Public Administration Sector: Officers from Divisional Secretaries to Grama Niladaris (village-level government officers who may be in charge of one or more villages).

To enhance the skills of the civil society and vulnerable groups working in the field of human rights, CSHR carries out training programs, field visits/activities, and awareness programs for following target groups:

- Student Population: School Children, University Students
- Plantation Population: Community Leaders, Welfare Officers
- Rural Population: Community Leaders
- Vulnerable/Marginalized Population: Differently-abled People, Prison Inmates
- Media Personnel and General Public.

In addition, CSHR conducts programs to

recognize and reward contributors and achievers in the field of human rights.

### **Human rights education in schools**

Primary and secondary education (Grades 1 to 13) in Sri Lanka, which is entirely the responsibility of the State, is free. There are a small number of schools run by the private sector. There are three kinds of schools: Boys Schools, Girls Schools and Mixed Schools.

According to the latest Central Bank Report (2006), of the 10,455 schools, the total number of State schools is 9,709. Of the 4,104,000-student population, nearly 600,000 students are in the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level and Advanced Level) classes. In 2006, 118,770 students were successful at the Advanced Level Examination and qualified for university admission. However, only 16,622 or 14% were able to enter universities, as the number of available places was limited.

CSHR plays a vital role in human rights education relating to the schools in the country through 1) An advisory role, and 2) Capacity-building of students, Master Teachers and Pre-service Teachers.

#### *Advisory role*

CSHR is recognized by certain institutions of the government, as a partner in human rights education, primarily because of its affiliation to the prestigious University of Colombo. The National Institute of Education (NIE), therefore, requests input from the CSHR about the incorporation of human rights concepts into the school curriculum, and the preparation of teacher guides.

Human rights components have already been incorporated into the syllabus of Civic Education for Grades 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11. Furthermore, human rights components have also been incorporated into the teacher guides for Grades 8 and 9. At present, CSHR is collaborat-

ing with NIE and lecturers in the Faculties of Law and Arts in the University of Colombo in preparing supplementary reading material for Grades 10 and 11 students.

CSHR was also instrumental in including human rights as an Optional Subject in the Advanced Level (A/L) syllabus in the secondary school curriculum, together with the NIE. Since teachers need training to be able to assist students taking the human rights subject at the A/L, there is a need to strengthen their capacity in human rights education. Therefore, CSHR trained 2,000 school teachers islandwide to meet the needs of secondary school students.

#### *Capacity-building*

In terms of capacity building, CSHR attempts to empower and strengthen the capacity of students, Pre-service Teachers and Master Teachers by enhancing knowledge and skills relating to human rights. Furthermore, CSHR attempts to empower students on protection and promotion of human rights. CSHR plans to provide human rights training to Master Teachers who will in turn train the school teachers who teach Civic Education. In addition, CSHR trains Pre-service Teachers (Teacher Trainees) on various aspects of human rights. This group consists of those who are being trained as teachers over a three-year period in the National Colleges of Education (NCOEs). This group is also an indirect target group. The capacity-building activities thus target:

1. Master Teachers
2. Pre-service Teachers
3. Students.

#### **Capacity Building of Master Teachers:**

As mentioned earlier, CSHR helps incorporate human rights into the Civic Education subject. As part of its advisory role, it plans to train Master Teachers who train and supervise teachers on Civic Education with the assistance of the NIE.

**Capacity Building of Pre-service Teachers (Teacher Trainees):**

Pre-service Teachers are trained over a three-day period on the main aspects of human rights. From this group of Teacher Trainees, some will become teachers of Civic Education in the schools. This group is trained on how to teach human rights to the students.

The following are the objectives of the human rights education program conducted for Pre-service Teachers:

- To educate teacher trainees on the subject of human rights and the importance of forming correct values and attitudes among students with respect to human rights
- To make teacher trainees become aware of the human rights environment around them and in the country
- To develop skills among teacher trainees that are necessary to guide students in selecting and implementing project work in human rights
- To create partnerships with communities
- To work in collaboration with other stakeholders on common projects.

Since Pre-service Teachers are new in the education field, and have just successfully completed the Advanced Level Examination, it is easier to develop human rights and child rights values in their minds for positive change in behavior, as well as in the behavior of secondary school students with whom they will interact once they complete their pre-service training.

Through this project, a three-day training program on human rights is conducted to Teacher Trainees who are in the first year at the NCOEs. One hundred to two hundred students are given the opportunity to participate in the training program. The Teacher Trainees are divided into groups during the three-day training. They conduct field visits, and submit field visit reports to the CSHR.

Although this target group is not directly engaged in educating students in schools until

their internship (which is in the third year in the college), this training is expected to reflect a positive change in their behavior and attitudes, which will in turn have an effect on students in protecting and promoting human rights.

**Capacity-building of Students:**

CSHR implements the School Program, which aims at building the capacity of students on human rights.

The objectives of the School Program are as follows:

- To create an awareness of the rights and duties among students regarding the different dimensions of human rights
- To expose students to social realities and to the different dimensions of human rights
- To develop lifeskills related to both rights and duties among students
- To develop skills on creating linkages with institutions and organizations involved in human rights to enable them to assist in the protection of human rights.

**Implementation of the School Program**

Initially, in 1994, the School Program covered twenty-five schools in six provinces of the country. It is presently being implemented in seventy-eight schools in nine provinces including the North and East, and therefore, covers the entire country.

Year	Number of Schools	Number of Students
1994/1995	25	625
2005/2006	78	11,700

The schools are selected by the officials of the Provincial Education Ministries, based as much as possible on the criteria provided by the CSHR:

- Mixed schools

- Similar number of boys and girls' schools
- Senior secondary schools.

The program is implemented through the School Centers and their Coordinators in schools islandwide, where five human rights activities are conducted (on the average) in each school the whole year round. An organization of students called Manavayo Api (We are Human Beings) Circle is established in each of the selected schools and seventy to one hundred students are enrolled.

The program has the following objectives:

- To provide students the opportunity to analyze through hands-on experience the violation as well as protection of human rights in society
- To facilitate their learning of human rights and human rights laws through various activities
- To provide opportunities for them to realize through first-hand experience social injustices and social indignity that result from a lack of respect for or disregard of human rights
- To facilitate their realization that human rights are not only a means of gaining one's rights but also an instrument for correcting social behavior
- To provide them opportunities to develop various skills related to education (through writing, giving speech, enhancing creativity, art work, field observation, data collection, analysis and drawing conclusions)
- To provide them a suitable environment for sharing experiences, which promote personality development through enhancement of essential qualities such as leadership, acceptance of challenges, self-discipline, determination, commitment, and patience.

Accordingly, CSHR developed course materials under the following themes:

- Human Rights and Dignity
- Responsibilities and Duties of Students

- Child Rights and Duties
- Women's Rights and Duties
- How to Protect the Environment
- Fundamental Rights and Duties.

CSHR cautiously develops the materials, selecting issues that are closer to life, directly connected to natural and visual environment, and social relationships that are easy to observe, convenient to collect, analyze and arrive at conclusions.

The students of the Manavayo Api Circle carry out the activities during the year, using a three-stage process.

#### *Step I*

Trained school teachers or resource person or a lawyer enable students to acquire knowledge on human rights and its local and international legal framework.

For field-related activities, students visit the police station, State hospital, and the Divisional Secretariat and other government organizations. They also visit shops, factories, children's and elders' homes, slums, farms and places with environmental pollution problems. The following persons assist in the field visits:

- Teachers of the school
- Former students (graduates) of the school
- Parents
- Officials of the Provincial Ministry of Education.

#### *Step II*

In this stage students are divided into several groups and brought to the field. Activities are designed under one theme with corresponding sub-themes. The teachers

- Select a suitable site for an appropriate field activity under each theme
- Design the educational process in accordance with the proposed activity
- Decide on the person or group of persons to be interviewed.

*Step III*

In this stage the students analyze the collected data by:

- a. Determining whether human rights have been protected or violated
- b. Identifying the reasons and persons responsible for the violations
- c. Thinking of ways to prevent violations
- d. Developing recommendations on how to improve the human rights situation.

The program has the following activities, which comprise the main mediums to communicate to other students the findings of the field visits:

- a. Writing essays or articles
- b. Making speeches at the school assembly or school society
- c. Producing short plays/role plays for the school concert
- d. Recreating incidents relating to human rights through art
- f. Reproducing experiences through songs, poems, or short stories.

The above, being extra-curricular activities, are undertaken after school hours, on holidays, or during the end-of-term holidays.

**Identified beneficiaries**

The program is directly aimed at students who are in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level, the GCE Advanced Level, and students in Grades 7, 8, and 9. The latter group is provided with activities such as drama, song, art, and essay competitions. The program aims to improve knowledge, skills and attitudes of students on human rights. These students are primarily selected in view of their potential as future leaders of the country, who will become the core citizens of the 21st century Sri Lanka, and thus should be exposed to the different dimensions of human rights.

With regard to implementation of ‘Human

Rights Awareness in Schools’, the four-day Training of Trainer Program is conducted for Coordinators and Assistant Coordinators of new School Centers. At the end of the training, each school prepares the plans to be carried out during the year.

Through school visits, CSHR staff members monitor and supervise the progress of the program and guide the teachers on any issues that they may face. Reports sent by the schools to CSHR comprise another method of monitoring the progress of the program.

The School Centers keep, in a place designated for the program and accessible to students, the resource materials provided by CSHR. In addition, schools store many of the materials developed by students under the program, which are valuable records of the human rights education program and consist mainly of the following:

- Field notebooks of students
- Group reports
- Other reports in the form of artwork (paintings, sculptures) and songs.

The Coordinators and Assistant Coordinators of School Centers participate in a two-day, end-of-the year review workshop, which provides the opportunity to share experiences and discuss issues. Also, the human rights knowledge of the Coordinators is updated during the review workshop as they become aware of current human rights concerns.

The beneficiaries of this program, therefore, are the entire student body of the school, the Coordinators and Assistant Coordinators of the program, the parents and other guests who participate in program activities such as commemoration of Human Rights Day or Children’s Day.

**Practical Training Manual on Human Rights and *Manavayo Api***

A practical training manual on human rights and other teaching materials supplement the

program. These teaching materials are useful resources for teachers in guiding the students. The book *Manavayo Api* (We are Human Beings) that is also distributed to School Centers comprises of articles written by students.

The following extract from *Manavayo Api Magazine* prepared by the students provides an example of their human rights awareness.

### Street Children

In a society full of inhumane people who will assure a safe life for street children? The street is their only hope, only way of living and only survival. These streets are full of children whose parents are no longer with them. And not only this, streets also accommodate children who have been abandoned by their own mothers and fathers.

Happiness or love means only a dream that would never become true. It takes a lot of effort for these children to have their daily bread that would cost their precious time begging for a single rupee. The scruffy clothes reflect the innocence of their childhood.

Rain and a sunny day are their best friends. These daily changes help them enjoy their childhood just as they wish, because neither rain nor a sunny day would force them like ruthless humans to do things they dislike doing. It is when these children try to get a good night's sleep in the streets that the so-called rich enjoy their nights wasting heaps of food. While [street children have to] join hands to ease their burden, the rich and wealthy enjoy their nights even more.

Mother Theresa was a generous nun who tried her best to take children off the streets. She was a mother to children without parents, a doctor to all sick and wounded, and a guardian of the lost.

Since these children are deprived of their right to go to school, the wealthy businessmen use them to earn money for themselves. The street is not

their destiny; these children were not born to become beggars or slaves but deserve a better life higher than streets, safer than streets.

We all in this society should be equally responsible for this crime, because we never try to understand the value of childhood. We never think it is their right to be free from street life. And it is clearly a violation of human rights. There are only a few who would act to eradicate this gross violation.

Today we need to act or else the repercussions would be unbearable in society. Child labour and the ongoing war create more and more problems. Who will guide them across? We all must join hands and build the bridge so that they will cross over to a better life and enjoy rights as you and I.

GD Theohari Kumara, Year 9 B,  
from a school in Kuliyapitiya,  
North Western Province

### Review program for students

The CSHR has conducted province-based Review Programs for Students of School Centers. These programs provide students the opportunity to refresh and update their knowledge on human rights in a participatory manner. With group activities, they discuss the human rights issues they experienced and share such experiences with their colleagues from other School Centers.

### Problems Encountered

One of the problems faced by School Coordinators is the non-availability of students who use almost entire evenings to private tuition, due to the competitive nature of the secondary education system. This is one of the hindrances to the program. The students, on other hand, have the problem of limited opportunity for university education, due to the very small number

of students being admitted to the universities annually as mentioned before.

### **Feedback and evaluation**

The CSHR evaluates the program as part of its implementation scheme. In consideration of the nature of the program as an extra-curricular activity, the evaluation criteria used to gauge the achievement of program goals are necessarily different from those used to evaluate the formal school curriculum. Three types of methodology are adopted for this purpose:

1. Annual reports from schools requested by the CSHR after the completion of activities in each year. These reports are presented in the form of small booklets, written in a manner that anyone can understand. The information consists of three main areas:
  - Success or failure of methodologies adopted for field activities
  - Adequacy and relevance of data collected for the activities
  - Efficiency/inefficiency of the participants and School Coordinators based on their performances.
2. School-visit reports from the CSHR staff members which
  - Gauge the interest and commitment of School Coordinators
  - Discern the attitudes of the members of the student groups, other students in the school, staff and parents in relation to the program
  - Identify the basic principles that should be observed when making modifications on the program.
3. Review meetings held by the CSHR with the School Coordinators for them to have the opportunity to express their ideas as well as discuss issues more freely and voluntarily than in the reports. These meetings are usually in the form of seminars, which are attended by the CSHR staff and Coordina-

tors of all School Centers. These Review Meetings are significant to the program in several ways:

- The Coordinators and Assistant Coordinators of all School Centers are provided the opportunity to meet each other and share experiences in working on similar themes but in different social and economic contexts.
- Trainers are given the opportunity to learn ways to assess the level of their achievement by analyzing the results obtained, and by adopting different assessment methodologies for similar kinds of activities.
- The Coordinators honestly reveal the problems and obstacles they face. This openness results from the feeling of strength when in the company of people with equal responsibilities and aims. They make requests to the CSHR on their needs in the School Centers, which the CSHR has not been able to meet. The most common problem is the CSHR's inability to provide adequate funds to meet the expenses of field activities. A Coordinator is paid a sum of two thousand Rupees per year (equivalent to twenty US dollars), a very nominal amount.

Considering the different methods used to evaluate the program, it can be said that the CSHR sufficiently monitors the School Program.

The program is also evaluated through the feedback received from the students, teachers, and school officials. The following issues have been raised:

1. Some mature students and young teachers share the view that limiting the program to simply "education" on human rights is somewhat an ineffective task. They say that in a society where people's rights are constantly violated, mere education of students on human rights without empowering them



to act against human rights violations leaves them in a difficult position. This is because society expects them as human rights trainees and trainers to act against human rights violations. CSHR, however, ensures that the study of remedies for violations is part of the program for both trainers and students of School Centers. Furthermore, there is adequate evidence that the program is effective not only in the short term, but also in the long term. After leaving school, students want to join the CSHR or other human rights organizations to work voluntarily in the human rights field. Students have sent letters inquiring about opportunities for involvement in human rights work. Several students, who were part of the Manavayo Api Circle and who have also completed their Law Degree, have chosen a career in the field of human rights.

2. Some school Principals are concerned that the program favors students, and thus makes them reluctant to support it. They argue that the moment students begin to fight for their rights in the school, discipline suffers and the school management is placed in a difficult position. CSHR uses the Review Meetings to present to the School Coordinators examples of students who have participated in the program and who as appointed prefects effectively maintain school discipline. Students who are part of the human rights group have not only gained leadership skills but also the skills attributed to responsible students, this in turn leads to their recognition as good and capable students who can assist in maintaining discipline in the school. Several school Principals have reported on their experiences reflecting the manner in which the program has helped build self-discipline and a sense of dignity among students.
3. Some school Principals were not pleased with the amendment to the Penal Code of Sri Lanka that included a new offence (called 'cruelty') that has relevance to school teachers, and which exposed them to criminal

liability if implemented. The CSHR, however, has been able to reassure teachers that in a country practicing the Rule of Law, it is the responsibility and obligation of the citizens to respect State laws and to act accordingly.

4. The period of terror in the country in the recent past was a time when talking about human rights was considered an anti-government act. It left bad memories that have now faded away to a certain extent. However, some parents are still concerned about the safety of their children who are involved in the program. In view of this, CSHR insists that the program is formally inaugurated in schools with the participation of parents and the CSHR staff members who reassure them (parents) of the nature of the program by explaining its mandate, importance, and benefits. Opportunities are also given to parents to express their views through discussions.

In the Review Meetings, the teachers do not hesitate to reveal that the program has assisted students to develop skills including writing, reading, communication (delivering speeches) and acting. This is evident to the CSHR staff members who visit the School Centers to monitor the program as well as to participate in ceremonies commemorating Human Rights Day and other commemorative activities.

Finally, it can be stated that the program is significant because it attempts at bringing about positive behavior patterns in students. The changed behavior of students has greater impact on their community, where young people are aware of the responsibility of protecting the rights of others while protecting their own.

The education system in Sri Lanka is exclusively designed to cater to several highly competitive national-level examinations and does not focus on the formation of well-balanced personality. The absence of such focus makes the education system unable to help create a society that is aware of its obligations. Aiming

at behavior change, the activity-based method of learning of the CSHR program enables the development of 'rights consciousness' among people in society that leads them to respect the dignity and rights of all.

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