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## Human Rights Education in Small Schools in India

MONISHA BAJAJ

In the past three decades, the rise of Human Rights Education (HRE) in global educational policy discourse and practice has paralleled the unrelated rise of small, independently run schools that operate separately from government structures, whether they are private, charter, religious, or affiliated with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This essay examines the intersection of these two phenomena—small schools and HRE—in India to understand better how the praxis of human rights is infused into schools in distinct ways based on the ideology of the respective school’s founders, donors, teachers, and families.

Several studies of educational research have examined innovative small schools for marginalized populations worldwide. I seek to complement and advance the conversation here by presenting examples of various private and NGO-run schools in India that infuse human rights principles in diverse ways, demonstrating that even in a single nation-state, HRE can have multiple definitions, approaches, and practices. The data and observations for this essay come from a multi-year project on HRE in India that included over 700 participants and that I have written about more extensively elsewhere. The purpose of this essay is to explore the possibility of formal schools as sites of transformative learning and the fostering of a “critical human rights consciousness.”

School-wide approaches to human rights or related social justice issues offer students a framework to practice alternative values and attitudes that are emphasized in the school environment. Amnesty International identifies four components of school life that must align with human rights principles in order for a school to qualify as a “human rights friendly” institution: the structures of school participation and governance; the approach to and nature of community relations; the curriculum; and the extra-curricular domain and school environment. Moreover, other peace and human rights education initiatives have noted that the prioritized values be introduced via a combination of a separate course for all students (on human rights, for example), integrated

instruction through traditional subjects (examining human rights issues in math, history, and so on), and co-curricular activities, such as clubs, sports, assemblies, and field trips that reinforce rights. In India, a number of small, usually private, schools are innovating with alternative curriculum, structure, pedagogy, and school culture.

Nongovernmental and school-based human rights education initiatives in India provide intense localized, and, arguably, sustained and deep interactions between educators and students on human rights. There are many initiatives in India that boast an emphasis on Gandhian, peace, citizenship, and other forms of alternative education; this essay does not provide an exhaustive list of efforts in this area, but rather a sampling of school-wide approaches to HRE in India today. While Indian schools range in quality from dilapidated and overcrowded outposts to some of the world's finest schools, a variety of educational institutions with distinct size, scope, objective, and purpose serve a nation-state of over 1.2 billion residents. Persistent educational challenges in India include out-of-school children involved in child labor, poor facilities, teacher absenteeism, and gender and caste discrimination in schools, among others. This section first profiles private schools serving primarily affluent and urban students and continues on to examine NGO-run schools working with students on the margins of Indian society.

Several elite schools have adopted content, pedagogy, and extracurricular approaches to human rights, citizenship, and social awareness in India. Since 2001, the Riverside school in Ahmedabad, Gujarat has been structuring its educational experience around civic responsibility and leadership development among students. While the school is novel in many ways (its design focuses on the lived environment, international partnerships, and artist residencies, for example), Riverside's citizenship curriculum partners its economically and socially privileged students with NGOs in Ahmedabad where students regularly interact with children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Sixth standard students, for instance, are given a project that simulates the conditions of a child laborer. One secondary school student at Riverside, reflecting back on her experience, narrated the following:

We were all put in a small room and we had to make *agarbattis* (incense sticks) from 9 o'clock to 5 o'clock. We were given the same sort of food that child laborers typically get. The main idea was to really experience being stuffed into that room where we hardly get space to even stand, and we had to make 1000 *agarbattis*. After the experience, we shared it with our parents. Some of the parents had child laborers working in their homes and factories. After that, after us experiencing this and sharing it with our parents, those child laborers are no longer in our homes [and workplaces]. We also told others about what we did and sold the *agarbattis* we made for a higher price, and gave the money raised to a charity that works with child laborers.

Human rights awareness is meaningful for affluent children who may continue to be in positions of power and privilege in the future. Significant experiences in early adolescence, when children's sense of justice and morality are being formed, can contribute to greater social responsibility. Moreover, student transformations can have a ripple effect on the actions of, for example, their parents. Riverside is a high-cost private school and works primarily to prepare socially conscious and responsible future leaders. Other schools focus on integrating students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds as part of their approach to human rights and citizenship education.

The Loreto Sealdah Day School in Kolkata similarly works within an elite educational tradition begun in the mid-nineteenth century when Irish Catholic nuns in the Loreto order set up their first schools in colonial India. There are now five Loreto schools in Kolkata, the most distinctive in terms of human rights approach being the Loreto Sealdah Day School. Sister Cyril Mooney had been working in India since 1956, but after taking charge of the private Loreto Sealdah School in 1979, she decided to develop an approach that linked her privileged students with the realities surrounding the school in Kolkata's (formerly Calcutta) slums and streets. She developed the Rainbow Program, which sought to use the school's premises from four in the afternoon to eight the next morning (while the school was unused) as a residential and educational center for street children.

Over the years, the most promising of these street and slum-dwelling children were slowly enrolled in the Loreto Sealdah school, which now has half of its 1400 students on full scholarship (including waived fees and free uniforms, shoes, books, and materials). In addition, students in all grades volunteer after school in the Rainbow center above their classrooms to teach street children, and, once a week, students visit construction sites on the outskirts of the city where the Loreto Sealdah school has set up educational tutoring for children involved in brick-making. Sister Cyril, who was awarded India's highest civilian award, the *Padma Sri* for excellence in education in 2007, described her impetus for the changes she has introduced over the past three decades:

When I got here in 1979, it was a respectable sort of school where everybody sat quietly all day long and did their lessons, took their examinations and everything went very smoothly. But I wasn't satisfied with that because, I feel that in India, there is a huge group of very badly looked after and deprived children. I couldn't see any justification of a big English Medium School, which will cater primarily to the very well off and maybe 90 or so who are poor who were admitted because they were Catholics. There is a huge crowd of non-Christians who are very poor too. So that's why I decided that I would change the situation: every time I did admissions I would take 50 percent of the poorest children and over the years, it changed the whole ethos of the school. We stopped dropouts among the poorer children by simply streaming

the children who are very quick learners into one section and those who are the slow learners in the other. We gave the slow learners special attention; we gave them the best teachers and we brought them along. Now we are up to 1400 students, 700 who are paying fees and 700 who are free.

Many teachers at Loreto Sealdah School are graduates of its unique program, and students responded very favorably about the impact of the approach on their worldview and development. While human rights infuse the approach to the Rainbow program in an integrated way, the School officially adopted a HRE curriculum in 2006 through the national Institute of Human Rights Education, which develops curriculum on HRE and operates in 4000 schools across India.

Private schools run by NGOs and serving extremely marginalized groups in society are also innovating with human rights instruction. Whereas students at the Riverside school were simulating the lives of child laborers for a day, some of the children at the NGO-run Navsarjan schools were themselves former child laborers. Navsarjan is a human rights and advocacy organization focused on the rights of Dalits (formerly called “untouchables”), and one of their primary areas of work is on human rights education. Navsarjan’s five self-operated schools and hundreds of afterschool clubs, called *bhimshalas*, constitute this program area of the organization’s work.

In response to widespread caste discrimination in schools and the high dropout rate for Dalit students as a result, Navsarjan has set up several residential schools for Dalit children, which are free of cost to them. These schools draw on children from the poorest communities and most excluded castes in the state of Gujarat. Children reported that prior to joining these schools, they were forced to sit separately, beaten, and mistreated in other ways by teachers in government schools. The basic provision of an education that does not discriminate against these children is the first element of HRE in Navsarjan’s schools.

Navsarjan’s schools also seek to disrupt conventional educational practice through the curriculum and structure of its schools. Navsarjan’s curriculum, for example, includes greater participatory activities, such as children performing skits and sitting in a circle in class to facilitate interaction. Classes and assemblies reiterate messages about caste equality and eradicating the notion that Dalit children are less than their higher caste peers. In terms of structure, the schools use eco-sanitation toilets that all students and teachers are required to learn about and empty once they are full, a significant intervention given common discriminatory practices of making Dalit children clean toilets while other children are in class. Eco-sanitation toilets are latrines that collect fecal matter, sanitize it, and then make it useable as fertilizer for farming. The founder of Navsarjan, well-known Dalit activist Martin Macwan, noted that:

To eradicate manual scavenging (the practice of cleaning fecal matter relegated to those of the lowest castes), there has to be a change in mindset, but there is also a science to it. We got in touch with experts from Switzerland who were working on an eco-sanitation toilet system in Bangalore. When I went and saw it, it was the most disgusting model I had ever seen because there was an open chamber at the back and once the chamber was full, they had to put it on a truck to take to the farms. When the fecal matter spills over the truck or when the drum has to be cleaned, the entire management is done by manual scavengers [who are Dalits] again. The average life span of a manual scavenger is 45 years and they are much more vulnerable to respiratory diseases and stomach parasites. I told him we have to find a bag that decomposes and luckily we found one in Singapore. We had it re-designed. For us, human dignity is at the center of eco-sanitation. . . . The school children learn how to use it beautifully. They will clean everything, will remove the compost and will mix it perfectly. For us, education is the most powerful instrument that we have for social [change].

Eco-sanitation latrines have been introduced in all of Navsarjan's educational spaces (schools, offices, and vocational training center) as a way to propose and ensure alternative and more equal social relationships that counter Dalit disempowerment.

Children in Navsarjan schools are not only introduced to innovative sanitation practices, but also to distinct practices around gender. Both boys and girls take part in cooking school meals, with boys often learning to make *chapattis* (flat bread) for the first time. One male student in the fifth standard (grade) narrated the following experience with the alternative instruction received from his school:

When I went home for the holidays, I wanted to help make *chapattis* at home like we do at school. At first, my mom protested and did not want me to help her since I'm a boy, but after insisting, she let me do it and I helped her and my sister with the cooking. Even my father came in and helped us do the cooking. I was encouraging them so that they would see we can all do this equally like at school.

**B**oys and girls wear the same uniforms, unlike government and other schools where girls wear skirts and boys trousers. Children's books written by the organization's founder focusing on caste and gender equity are also utilized in the classroom. The impact of the alternative norms related to caste and gender equity in Navsarjan educational programs are more extensively discussed elsewhere, but several of the deliberate practices and initial responses explored by this study suggest promising results for this variant of HRE.

The selected school-based models that impart human rights concepts provide a range of ways that individual institutions have localized and adapted messages to youth learners in India. These initiatives are, by nature, limited in scope given the size of private or donor-funded schools. In all initiatives

that operate independently and counter to larger social norms, the following questions consistently emerge: to what extent are such efforts sustainable when operating in isolation and dependent on donor aid or tuition; in what ways are learners forced to renegotiate the norms imbibed when faced with new realities beyond the alternative educational space; and for graduates of such education, how might frustration with unequal structures and backlash from others be minimized while acting on rights-based norms? While these questions are valid and small schools must engage with them, the alternative that posits their absence hardly seems preferable.

Additional arguments exist that small, innovative schools provide a dis-service to students by socializing them into unrealistic and idealistic norms. On the other hand, scholars have also pointed out that these schools may serve as laboratories or beacons elucidating a path forward for more rights-friendly educational practices aligned with the four areas highlighted by Amnesty International's framework (curriculum, governance, community relations, and school environment/extra-curricular activities).

Proponents of innovative schools as incubators of new ideas can remain optimistic about the promise of such initiatives in places like India where there is a history of reforms emanating from the practice of small schools. The Activity-Based Learning (ABL) methodology—developed by Rishi Valley School's RIVER program in Andhra Pradesh and incorporating elements of Montessori pedagogy and multi-grade instruction—for example, was experimented with in a few hundred urban schools in Tamil Nadu from 2003 to 2006. After positive evaluation, ABL was subsequently scaled up to nearly 40,000 schools across the state (with a population of 60 million), changing the way that teachers are trained and instruction is imparted in primary schools. Although critiques exist about the level of implementation, arguably a move away from rote memorization and students “drinking the textbook” toward more student-centered pedagogy and participatory methods will gradually increase respect for children's rights over time.

While scaling up is one direction, small schools can also serve as important exceptions when blanket reforms threaten to undermine the achievement of low-income youth in places like the United States. Hantzopoulos' research on a small New York City public high school that has fought to secure an exception to high-stakes testing in favor of more comprehensive and holistic evaluation practices (among other unique innovations) illuminates the possibility for resistance and social justice-infused approaches despite countervailing macro-level forces.

Those programs that combine small school environments with HRE praxis offer us the opportunity to re-imagine education in productive and creative ways. Rather than supplemental or drop-in approaches to HRE, comprehensive whole-school models provide not just a rights-based approach to

content, but one that influences pedagogy, structure, social interactions, and co-curricular offerings. In short, the “life of the school” becomes centered on human rights norms and values. Given the potential of schools to reproduce social inequalities through curriculum and practices, sometimes leading to violent conflict in places like Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, school-based models of HRE can be promising exemplars of coexistence, active citizenship, and transformative learning. Such experiments, and greater research on them in diverse locales, can offer scholars and practitioners of education important insights into pathways toward greater equity and social justice.

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