



Human Rights Awareness among Higher Secondary School Students: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

Human rights form the moral and legal foundation of a democratic and just society, and awareness of these rights among young citizens is essential for the growth of a rights-respecting culture. Higher secondary school students, standing at the threshold of adulthood and active citizenship, represent a critical population for the cultivation of human rights consciousness. This theoretical paper examines the concept of human rights, the meaning and scope of human rights education, and the psychological and pedagogical theories that explain how awareness of rights develops in adolescents. It further discusses the constitutional and policy framework governing human rights education in India, the role of the school curriculum in shaping rights consciousness, and the socio-educational factors that influence the level of awareness among students. The paper concludes that a well-structured, theoretically grounded, and curriculum-embedded approach to human rights education is necessary to enable higher secondary students to become informed, responsible, and rights-conscious citizens.

Keywords: *Human Rights, Human Rights Awareness, Higher Secondary Students, Human Rights Education, Theoretical Perspective*

1. Introduction

Human rights are the basic entitlements that belong to every individual by virtue of being human, irrespective of nationality, sex, religion, language, or any other status. They encompass civil, political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions and are considered universal, inalienable, and indivisible. Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the promotion of human rights has become a shared responsibility of nations, institutions, and



citizens alike. Education has been repeatedly identified, both in international instruments and in national policy documents, as the most effective and sustainable means of building a culture that respects and protects human dignity.

Higher secondary school students, typically in the age group of fifteen to eighteen years, occupy a unique developmental position. They are old enough to grasp abstract moral and legal concepts, yet young enough to be significantly shaped by the values transmitted through school, family, and society. It is at this stage that adolescents begin forming stable attitudes towards authority, justice, equality, and social responsibility. Awareness of human rights during this formative period, therefore, has long-term implications for the kind of citizens they become. A student who understands their own rights and the rights of others is more likely to resist discrimination, question injustice, and participate constructively in democratic processes.

Despite the significance of the theme, human rights education in Indian schools has often remained peripheral, embedded indirectly within subjects such as Political Science, History, or Value Education, rather than being taught as an independent and systematically developed area of study. This theoretical paper attempts to build a conceptual understanding of human rights awareness among higher secondary students by examining the underlying concept of human rights, the psychological theories that explain awareness formation, the policy and constitutional framework in India, and the school-related factors that influence the depth of this awareness.

2. Concept and Meaning of Human Rights

The term 'human rights' refers to those rights that are inherent to all human beings, without distinction of any kind. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, articulates thirty articles covering civil and political rights such as the right to life, liberty, and freedom of expression, as well as economic, social, and cultural rights such as the right to education, work, and an adequate standard of living. These rights are considered universal in the sense that they apply to all people everywhere, and inalienable in the sense that they cannot be taken away except in specific circumstances defined by law.



Human rights are commonly classified into three generations. First-generation rights relate to civil and political liberties, including freedom of speech, the right to a fair trial, and protection from torture. Second-generation rights pertain to economic, social, and cultural entitlements such as the right to education, health, and work. Third-generation rights, which are more recent in origin, include collective rights such as the right to development, a clean environment, and peace. Understanding this classification helps students and educators recognise that human rights are not confined to political freedoms alone but extend to the social and economic conditions necessary for a dignified life.

In the Indian context, human rights find constitutional expression primarily through Part III of the Constitution, which guarantees Fundamental Rights, and Part IV, which lays down the Directive Principles of State Policy. Part IVA further prescribes Fundamental Duties, which complement rights with corresponding civic responsibilities. The Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, which led to the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and State Human Rights Commissions, provides the institutional mechanism for the protection and promotion of these rights within the country.

3. Human Rights Education: Meaning and Scope

Human rights education (HRE) may be defined as all learning that develops the knowledge, skills, and values of human rights. It is not restricted to the transmission of factual information about rights but extends to nurturing attitudes of respect, empathy, and responsibility, and to building the skills required to exercise and defend those rights. The United Nations has consistently emphasised that human rights education should aim at strengthening respect for human rights, the full development of the human personality, and the promotion of understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations and social groups.

At the school level, human rights education has three interrelated dimensions: education about human rights, which concerns knowledge of rights and the mechanisms for their protection; education through human rights, which requires that the teaching-learning process itself be conducted in a rights-respecting manner; and education for human rights, which aims at



empowering students to become active defenders and promoters of human rights in their own lives and communities. A theoretically sound programme of human rights education for higher secondary students must integrate all three dimensions rather than restricting itself to rote learning of rights listed in a textbook.

4. Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights Awareness

The formation of human rights awareness among adolescents can be understood through several established psychological and educational theories. These theories collectively explain how cognitive development, social interaction, moral reasoning, and critical consciousness contribute to the growth of rights-based understanding.

Jean Piaget's theory of moral development suggests that children move from a stage of heteronomous morality, where rules are seen as fixed and externally imposed, towards autonomous morality, where rules are understood as flexible principles based on mutual respect and fairness. By the higher secondary stage, most adolescents have reached a level of cognitive maturity that allows them to grasp abstract principles such as equality, justice, and dignity, making this an appropriate stage for structured human rights education.

Lawrence Kohlberg extended this line of thought through his theory of moral development, proposing that individuals progress through pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional stages of moral reasoning. Awareness of human rights is closely associated with post-conventional reasoning, in which individuals evaluate laws and social norms against universal ethical principles rather than simply conforming to authority or social convention. Encouraging higher secondary students to question and reflect upon issues of justice and fairness can facilitate their movement towards this higher stage of moral reasoning.

Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory highlights the role of social interaction and cultural tools in cognitive development. Applied to human rights awareness, this theory suggests that students construct their understanding of rights through dialogue, guided instruction, and participation in classroom and community activities, with teachers and peers acting as mediators who help learners move through their zone of proximal development towards more sophisticated understanding.



Albert Bandura's social learning theory adds that attitudes and behaviours related to human rights, such as respect for diversity or intervention against discrimination, are learned significantly through observation and modelling. Students who observe teachers, peers, and family members practising respect for rights are more likely to internalise these values themselves, underscoring the importance of the overall school climate and not merely the formal curriculum.

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy offers a further theoretical lens, arguing that education should move away from a 'banking' model, in which knowledge is simply deposited into passive learners, towards a dialogical and problem-posing approach that develops critical consciousness. From this perspective, human rights awareness is not merely the acquisition of information about rights but the development of a critical capacity to recognise, question, and act against violations of human dignity in one's own social context.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that effective human rights awareness at the higher secondary stage requires cognitively appropriate content, participatory and dialogical teaching methods, positive role modelling within the school environment, and opportunities for critical reflection on real social issues, rather than reliance on textbook-based, examination-oriented instruction alone.

5. Constitutional and Policy Framework for Human Rights Education in India

India's commitment to human rights education is rooted in both its constitutional values and its international obligations. The Preamble to the Constitution itself embodies the human rights philosophy through its resolve to secure justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity for all citizens. Part III of the Constitution guarantees Fundamental Rights, including the Right to Equality, the Right to Freedom, the Right against Exploitation, the Right to Freedom of Religion, Cultural and Educational Rights, and the Right to Constitutional Remedies, while Article 21A, inserted by the Eighty-Sixth Amendment, guarantees the Right to Education as a fundamental right for children between six and fourteen years of age.

At the policy level, the National Policy on Education, 1986, and its Programme of Action emphasised the inculcation of values such as social justice, secularism, and respect for human



dignity through education. The National Curriculum Framework, 2005, developed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), explicitly identifies human rights, along with peace, gender equality, and value education, as cross-cutting themes to be integrated across subjects rather than confined to a single course. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, operationalises the constitutional right to education and simultaneously reinforces the rights-based approach by prohibiting discrimination, physical punishment, and mental harassment in schools.

Institutionally, the National Human Rights Commission and the corresponding State Human Rights Commissions, established under the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, play an important role in promoting awareness of rights, including through outreach programmes directed at educational institutions. At the international level, India's ratification of instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, obliges the state to ensure that education is directed towards the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, further reinforcing the case for embedding human rights education within the school curriculum, and particularly at the higher secondary stage where students are approaching the age of full civic participation.

6. Role of the School and Curriculum in Fostering Human Rights Awareness

The school functions not merely as a site for the transmission of academic knowledge but as a miniature social system in which students experience rights and responsibilities in practice. The manner in which teachers exercise authority, the extent to which student voice is respected in school governance, the fairness of disciplinary procedures, and the inclusiveness of the school environment towards students of different genders, castes, religions, and abilities, all constitute a hidden curriculum of human rights that operates alongside the formal syllabus.

The formal curriculum contributes to human rights awareness through subjects such as Political Science, History, Sociology, and Value Education, where concepts of democracy, justice, equality, and constitutional rights are introduced. However, theoretical analysis suggests that awareness is strengthened considerably when such content is supplemented by participatory pedagogies,



including classroom discussions, debates, role play, case studies of rights violations, project-based learning, and engagement with real or simulated grievance redressal mechanisms. Co-curricular activities such as human rights clubs, legal literacy camps, and interactions with resource persons from human rights commissions or non-governmental organisations can further reinforce classroom learning by connecting abstract principles to lived social realities.

7. Factors Influencing Human Rights Awareness among Higher Secondary Students

A theoretical review of the literature suggests that the level of human rights awareness among higher secondary students is shaped by a combination of individual, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. At the individual level, factors such as gender, academic stream, and cognitive maturity influence how readily students grasp and internalise rights-related concepts. At the institutional level, the quality of teacher preparation, the availability of curricular time for value and citizenship education, the nature of school leadership, and the overall disciplinary climate of the institution play a significant role in determining whether human rights principles are merely taught or actually practised.

At the broader socio-cultural level, factors such as family upbringing, media exposure, community norms, and exposure to instances of discrimination or injustice in everyday life shape the lens through which students interpret formal human rights instruction. Urban-rural differences, socio-economic background, and access to digital media further mediate the extent to which students are exposed to human rights discourse outside the classroom. A comprehensive theoretical understanding of human rights awareness must therefore account for the interaction between what is formally taught in schools and the wider social environment in which adolescents are situated.

8. Conclusion

Human rights awareness among higher secondary school students is not an incidental outcome of schooling but a deliberate educational goal that requires theoretically informed planning. Psychological theories of moral and cognitive development indicate that adolescence is a developmentally appropriate stage for cultivating sophisticated, principle-based understanding of rights, while socio-cultural and critical pedagogical perspectives emphasise that such awareness



must be nurtured through participatory, dialogical, and reflective classroom practices rather than rote instruction alone. India's constitutional values, national education policies, and international commitments together provide a strong normative foundation for embedding human rights education within the higher secondary curriculum. Realising this potential, however, requires coordinated efforts in curriculum design, teacher preparation, school climate, and pedagogy, so that higher secondary students not only know their rights in a formal sense but also internalise the values of dignity, equality, and justice that underlie them, and are prepared to exercise and defend these rights as informed and responsible citizens.

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