

## Teaching to transform, transforming to teach: exploring the role of teachers in human rights education in India

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*Background:* Human rights education initiatives have proliferated in the past three decades and can be found in policy discussions, textbook reforms and grassroots initiatives across the globe. This article specifically explores the role of teachers in human rights education (HRE) by focusing on a case study of one non-governmental organisation's (NGO) programme operating across India.

*Purpose:* This article argues that teachers' own transformation should be central to discussions of the educational reform, and presents data from an NGO-run HRE initiative in India. Additionally, while HRE teachers may be encouraged to equalise power relations within the classroom, many semi-literate communities hold teachers (and textbooks) in high regard, suggesting that their advocacy of human rights may prove instrumental for HRE to go beyond the school walls, the ultimate aim of the educational project. Evidence from India contributes to the discussion of HRE by presenting teachers' experiences with training and their use of existing hierarchies to effect change in primarily rural, semi-literate communities.

*Sample:* Participants in this study included 118 HRE teachers, 625 students, 80 staff and policy makers of HRE, and eight parents. Observations of teacher trainings included hundreds more participants. The majority of student respondents came from 'tribal' (indigenous) or Dalit (previously called 'untouchable') communities, both comprising the most marginalised sections of Indian society.

*Design and methods:* This study was primarily qualitative and was carried out from August 2008 to January 2010. Methods included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations of teacher trainings in human rights and human rights camps for students.

*Results:* The study found the following: (1) teacher training that is appropriate, contextualised and engaging incentivises participation and legitimises both the message and messengers of human rights; (2) teachers' own transformation and interest in human rights can benefit their households, schools and communities in multiple ways; and (3) teachers and textbooks can provide legitimacy for human rights and be vital community resources for intervening in abuses.

*Conclusions:* Further attention to the role of teachers in HRE can illuminate how HRE overlays and is mediated by existing community realities and societal structures.

**Keywords:** human rights education; teacher training; civil society; South Asia; social inequality; gender

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Human rights education has created a lot of change in the school itself. Earlier, there was this big tree behind my school and if you take a stick from that tree, and hit someone on the hand or anywhere, it will swell up a lot. We used to get beaten black and blue with those sticks before human rights education. Once we got the book, our teachers came and told us, 'Hereafter, we are not going to touch the stick'. That really took us aback and we were shocked. That increased our interest and curiosity about the entire book because they became so different and they became so friendly. After that, they never took the stick once. They believed that they could teach us just by affection and love. The teachers became so friendly that we could even go and stand close to them which we couldn't do earlier because you would not know what kind of mood they were in, and if they were just going to hit you and take it out on you. Now we even go in the staff room and ask any questions we have. All the teachers have changed because the human rights education teachers mingle with the other teachers. And they not only impart the knowledge on the students, but they also share it with the rest of the teachers. If there are any administrative decisions they have to make among the teachers, it always comes through the human rights teacher. So we really like school now. (8th standard student, Tamil Nadu, individual interview, 18 May 2009)

### Introduction

Human rights education (HRE) initiatives have proliferated in the past three decades; in policy discussions, textbook reforms and grassroots initiatives across the globe.<sup>1</sup> This article specifically explores the role of teachers in HRE by focusing on a case study of one non-governmental organisation's (NGO) programme operating across India. Literature on HRE has emphasised the important role of teachers who are knowledgeable about rights, committed to participatory pedagogy and democratising the classroom, and willing to engage in critical self-examination to root out prejudices and discriminatory practices (Flowers et al. 2000). Teachers are generally viewed as catalysts and messengers of HRE, and their training is generally discussed as an intermediate step towards imparting knowledge of, and attitudes and behaviours in line with, human rights principles among young learners.

This article argues instead that teachers' *own* transformation should be central to discussions of the educational reform, and presents data from an NGO-run HRE initiative in India. The reasons for teachers' centrality are twofold: the role of teachers in propagating and sometimes addressing human rights violations in their immediate spheres of influence as well as the ripple effect of teacher practices in the larger communities around them.

In this article, I look at evidence from India to address two larger themes: first, teacher transformation and corresponding action, and second, the use of existing hierarchies – that legitimise information endorsed by teachers and textbooks – as a means of addressing violence and oppressive practices in semi-literate communities. In many cases (in India and elsewhere), teachers are the *cause* of human rights abuses or are indifferent in the face of them, and HRE can, to a certain extent, counter these practices through personal changes that transform teachers' own abusive practices in schools. Once teachers become allies to students, they can work to provide community education, material assistance and intervene in abuses they encounter in schools and the broader community. Teachers' experiences with training are critical in understanding why they become motivated to change their own behaviour and take action.

A related finding emerging from the data is the authority of teachers (and to a certain degree, textbooks) in relation to both students and the wider community.

While HRE teachers may be encouraged to equalise power relations within the classroom, many semi-literate communities hold teachers and textbooks in high regard, suggesting that their advocacy can have an instrumental role in promoting respect for human rights beyond the school walls, the ultimate aim of the HRE project (Flowers et al. 2000; Tibbitts 2002). Students can also utilise teachers as resources in confronting abuses by leveraging their authority against current and would-be violators. In many students' accounts, textbooks complemented teachers' authority suggesting that the status afforded to the printed word (in India and perhaps in other parts of the global South) offered human rights norms legitimacy and credibility for students and teachers seeking to intervene in situations of abuse.

The data that follow come from 13 months of fieldwork on HRE initiatives in India utilising primarily qualitative<sup>2</sup> methods to understand the diverse approaches to and experiences of the educational reform at national, regional and local levels. Data were coded for significant themes and the information that follows is based on a subset of the data that related to teachers' experiences and how social hierarchies privileged teachers' actions when confronting abusive social practices. Here, a review of previous scholarship on teachers and HRE, including a consideration of critical questions discussed and possible gaps, can help highlight the utility of examining data on the centrality of teachers in HRE in India.

### **Review of previous scholarship on teachers and HRE**

Teachers, obviously, play a fundamental role in HRE efforts. Given teachers' functions as the messengers, models and mediators of rights instruction, scholarship on HRE frequently takes up teacher education as a means of developing awareness about human rights, typically through teacher knowledge, pedagogical skills and behaviours that can be utilised in the classroom (Osler and Starkey 1996, 2010). However, little previous scholarship on HRE has examined teachers' own transformation and their corresponding actions as a result of learning about human rights; this study sought to address this gap through an in-depth examination of teachers' experiences with HRE, including both personal changes and actions, and how HRE students utilised their teachers as resources in countering injustices they faced. I emphasise the often-missing dimension of personal transformation as well as the role of hierarchies and relative social positioning of teachers *vis-à-vis* possibilities to influence social change. Reviewing the insights gleaned from previous scholarly treatment of teachers' role in HRE can help underscore the key themes offered by the data that follow from Indian schools.

Many scholars have focused on the need to examine pre- and in-service training on human rights for educators (Flowers et al. 2000; Magendzo 2005; Osler and Starkey 1996). Within that training, commentators have differentially focused on the development of a more critical pedagogy that can give teachers confidence to stand up for human rights in the community (Magendzo 2005), the emphasis on the affective dimension of human rights learning (Müller 2009; Osler and Starkey 1996), and the fostering of networks among trained teachers and resource centres to support them (Cardenas 2005). In these ways, human rights educators differ from conventional teachers when they are provided with additional content knowledge on human rights history, norms and standards, as well as participatory pedagogical

techniques in line with the goals of creating classroom communities that respect human rights.

Approaches to teacher training and HRE also vary. Osler and Starkey look at how NGOs have run courses just for teachers, such as those offered by the Geneva-based International Training Centre on Human Rights and Peace Teaching (Osler and Starkey 1996). Nazzari, McAdams, and Roy (2005) look at the use of short courses for educators and human rights activists, as seen with the International Human Rights Training Program run by the Canadian NGO Equitas. University departments have also developed (in some cases compulsory) courses and certificate programmes in human rights for in-service and pre-service teachers. Meanwhile, the Council of Europe has facilitated such initiatives in the region through publications and support of training programmes in HRE.

Empirical research offers insights into perspectives on national-level initiatives towards incorporating human rights concepts into textbooks and schools (Meyer, Bromley, and Ramirez 2010; Müller 2009). In a recent study, Müller (2009) examines German teachers' attitudes towards HRE since the 1980 recommendations by a national educational body (*Kultusministerkonferenz*) for the introduction of human rights content. He finds, in the teacher component of his study, that teachers who were able to name human rights standards identified the media and personal interest as sources of such information rather than teacher training. Teachers were more interested in the emotive or affective dimension of human rights, but as Müller notes, the challenge lies in deciding 'where an educationally fostered motivation to human rights activism is legitimate and where it oversteps the boundaries of the school's mandate' (20).

Other scholarship is less concerned about the line between educators and activists, and is centred instead on providing techniques and tools for teachers. The Human Rights Education Handbook (Flowers et al. 2000), for example, places considerable responsibility on teachers stating that, 'To teach about and for human rights requires more than knowledge about human rights and experience in facilitating learning. The human rights educator must have a deeply felt commitment to human rights and a belief in their necessity for building a just and democratic society' (23). The authors pose four personal challenges to HRE teachers in order to be effective. First, following from 'the challenge to learn', HRE teachers must be willing to become learners in their classrooms and cultivate an environment in which all participants engage in critical inquiry and learn from each other. Second, pursuant to 'the challenge of the affective', learning about human rights goes beyond content and requires the educator to engage the feelings and responses of all learners. Third, under 'the challenge of self-examination', educators must critically examine their own prejudices and biases and be open to changing them. Finally, according to 'the challenge of example', educators must be willing to align their behaviour and attitudes with human rights principles in order to be credible.

Questions remain regarding whether over-burdened and, in many national systems, underpaid, teachers would assume the additional responsibility for democratising classroom relations and changing their own practices in line with human rights principles without the provision of additional status or other incentives. Nonetheless, this mix of scholarly and more prescriptive literature on teachers and HRE provides some context for understanding the following data on the role of HRE teachers in India.

## Teachers and HRE in India

### *Institute of Human Rights Education (IHRE)*

The IHRE grew out of the work of a human rights organisation, People's Watch, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. In 1997, during a training for women on human rights, teacher participants raised the question of how they could defend human rights when they were working in schools all day. Discussions led to the idea of having participants teach children about human rights – an idea which soon found global resonance in the then-ongoing UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004). From nine schools in one district of Tamil Nadu its first year, IHRE has expanded to operate a three-year course in HRE for middle-school level students ('standards' or grades 6–8) in approximately 4000 schools in 18 states across India. IHRE's model operates by securing government permission, asking each school to send one to two teachers for a three- to five-day residential training, and then having those teachers identify two periods per week in which to teach lessons on human rights from textbooks prepared in local languages by IHRE's team and affiliated curriculum experts. After the initial training, 'refresher' courses are given each year and teachers are integrated into ongoing activities of the Institute in their area.

Teachers come to the trainings with different levels of interest in and knowledge of human rights. Some teachers reported volunteering to become the human rights teacher out of a previous commitment to the topic; other reasons included being assigned by their headmaster because they were the most junior teachers or because no other teachers could attend. Once at the trainings, IHRE provided teachers a unique experience: retreats were held in naturally beautiful surroundings, notable speakers led sessions for teachers and participatory methods engaged teachers in ways unconventional in Indian teacher training and professional development. The following section highlights teachers' responses to trainings and the changes they reported experiencing as a result.

### *Teachers' responses*

#### *The role of training*

Trainings were central to the process of teacher transformation and their subsequent integration and action related to human rights in their homes, schools and communities. The residential training was some teachers' first contact with concepts of human rights and all teachers' first contact with the IHRE. As mentioned, trainings were designed to convince teachers of the importance of human rights and inspire them to carry out instruction. Of the 118 teachers interviewed for this study, the majority noted the distinctness of the training and how it secured in them an interest in human rights. Reasons for these successes included the sessions with noted speakers, introduction to new material, the participatory format, or even the chance to visit a new part of their state and the desire to stay connected to an organisation providing such opportunities. For example, in discussing a session by the former Vice-Chancellor of a university (now the chairperson of IHRE) and a senior government official who serves on IHRE's advisory board, one teacher noted, 'This training was very useful. I met those [notable people] as equals. They were very humble to come down and be with us, though they are so [well-known]' (teacher

focus group, 28 January 2009). I discuss these variegated motives for teacher interest in HRE elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> and for the purposes of this article, I focus on how teachers' interest in the programme then translated into its implementation.

While the messengers of HRE (trainers) may be the reason some teachers afforded legitimacy to the message, another factor could be the desire to effect change in their immediate sphere of influence, the classroom, after learning about the adverse impact of common practices in schools. Teachers in many Indian schools accept corporal punishment as normal and often argue that it is a needed motivation (though the practice has been outlawed). Additionally, discriminatory practices found in society at large seep into classrooms (NCPCR 2008). Examples of such practices include discrimination against Dalit<sup>4</sup> students through segregated seating or forcing such students to clean the school grounds or bathrooms while other students are in class. Scholars and investigative bodies have noted these practices throughout India (Nambissan and Sedwal 2002; NCDHR 2008), and instances of such discrimination emerged consistently in the data for this project as well.

### *Personal changes*

Teachers' transformation was a central goal of the NGO-run training and HRE programme in India. Given that teachers were often implicated in human rights problems in schools, a training that put teachers 'on the spot' to protect children's human rights, was seen by many as an important intervention in their socialisation into the unequal ways schools generally run. Mr Madan,<sup>5</sup> a teacher in a rural area of Tamil Nadu, noted the significant impact that training in human rights had on his approach to teaching:

After attending this training, I could understand the students from their point of view. For example, when I go to class, if I see a boy sleeping on the desk, I used to have the tendency to beat him or be harsh on him, without knowing if he may be hungry, without knowing anything about his family background. Maybe he is sleeping because he is having some problems in the family; maybe his father was drunk at night and beating his mother. So after attending this training, I have come to ask the children their problems instead of beating them; I try to understand the children, be friendly, and respect them. The students have started moving more freely and talking to me more also, so the distance [between us] is much reduced. If anything happens in their homes, if they have any family problems, they are sharing them with us. Even the District Education Officer has noticed these changes ... because a lot of teachers attended the training in human rights. (Teacher focus group, 28 January 2009)

Mr Madan indicated the transformation of his approach to teaching after instruction in human rights and the closeness he developed with students; these changes, needless to say, benefitted students with his decision to stop using corporal punishment and become a resource for them to discuss family problems with.

In addition to encouraging teachers to become allies to children at school, human rights training often took on a more instrumental role in resolving problems in teachers' homes as well. For women teachers, despite their economic contributions to the household, unequal gender relations and, oftentimes, domestic violence characterised their home lives. Several female teachers reported that, after attending trainings in human rights, they were able to stand up against abusive practices in their own homes. One teacher in the state of Karnataka noted that after the training,

she showed her husband the human rights textbooks and explained to him that domestic violence was illegal. Whether for fear of being reported or a genuine conviction that his previous behaviour was wrong, the teacher noted that her husband stopped hitting her. Mrs Devanesan, a teacher in rural Tamil Nadu, similarly noted the following:

Before, there were so many problems arising in my home between me and my husband. After learning human rights, I saw that there were rights for women also. The commissions are also listed there [in the textbook] and phone numbers are given. So I could say, ‘You can’t beat me’. Nowadays there is no problem. (Individual interview, 11 February 2009)

Other women teachers discussed standing up to their mothers-in-law who treated them in abusive ways – whether physically or psychologically – in the extended family household context (often related to dowry demands or the birth of daughters rather than sons). Related to such societal beliefs, one teacher noted ‘Earlier, I used to feel bad that I have two girls, why is there no boy? Now I know girls are also valuable’ (Individual interview, 27 January 2009). Importantly, many male teachers also discussed not beating their wives after attending human rights trainings and one teacher even encouraged his wife to re-enrol in high school since she had dropped out after the 9th standard in order to get married.<sup>6</sup>

At home and at school, teachers changed their attitudes and practices, such as corporal punishment, to be more aligned with human rights principles. For teachers, these changes represented the most significant type of response to HRE. Categorized as ‘personal changes’, these also included attitudinal shifts with regards to caste or religion and increased interaction with colleagues and students of different backgrounds. Many teachers also reported changing their attitudes towards teaching after HRE. Previously, as one teacher noted, ‘we’d come to school, give the lesson, and take the salary’. He further noted that HRE had given him the impetus to get further involved in students’ lives and advocate for human rights in school and beyond. Figure 1 shows that personal changes were most consistently mentioned by the 118 teachers interviewed in this study, but other responses to human rights training and teaching included their imparting education in community settings, intervening in abuses, reporting abuses and in some cases, providing material assistance to students. Notably, after a personal change or transformation occurred, teachers more willingly engaged in proactive steps to counter abuses or educate others about human rights.

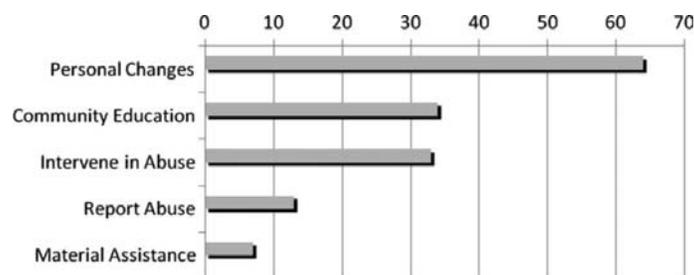


Figure 1. Distribution of teachers’ responses to the question, ‘What impact, if any, has HRE had on you?’ ( $n = 118$ ).<sup>11</sup>

*Community education*

After learning and becoming convinced about human rights, teachers often sought to share their new knowledge with others. HRE teachers were charged with teaching two periods of human rights weekly as part of the IHRE-sponsored programme, but several went beyond that responsibility to deliver instruction on human rights in other settings. Examples of this included teachers organising sessions on human rights for village leaders, women's micro-finance groups, and for parents and children more broadly. Sometimes these sessions focused specifically on domestic violence, child labour, caste discrimination and dowry, among other topics. Teachers repeatedly mentioned working together with students to organise and perform street-plays on human rights themes as well as community celebrations of international days, such as Human Rights day (10 December), Women's day (8 March) and the Day to End Child Labor (12 June).

Some teachers went even further to spread the message of human rights after being introduced to it through IHRE's programme. IHRE began recording songs on human rights (sometimes written by teachers themselves) and distributing CDs to schools a few years back. One teacher, Mr Kumar, discussed taking this compilation of songs to a nearby temple and asking them to play the CD during a village festival. He also bought prizes with his own money and organised competitions related to public speaking and singing about human rights in his community. Like Mr Kumar, Mr Ganesan became an advocate of human rights since his first HRE training in 2002. After serving as a teacher for many years, he was promoted to the position of 'warden' at a residential school. He decided to teach all the students in the hostel about human rights in weekly lessons in the evening. Mr Ganesan also founded a community organisation to protect children's rights and raise money for out-of-school children to make it easier for them to re-enrol. These teachers' interest in human rights was sparked through training and their further activities were facilitated through regular contact with IHRE and its staff.

*Intervening in abuse*

Another type of response that grew out of teachers' own transformation vis-à-vis human rights was the desire to take action and confront abuses they saw in their own or students' lives. Teachers repeatedly mentioned that HRE provided them with a framework to understand the legality of social problems and determine strategies to intervene when they saw abuses. Given teachers' status, this intervention often proved instrumental in changing situations of abuse. The types of situations that teachers intervened in ranged from child labour to gender, caste or religious discrimination to early marriage to corruption to female infanticide. Students often identified such issues occurring in their communities and sought out their teachers' help in addressing them after learning about human rights.<sup>7</sup>

In the eastern state of Orissa – the poorest state in India with 39.9% of residents below the national poverty line (Dhar 2007) – IHRE operates in all schools run through the Tribal Welfare Ministry, or government schools run for rural indigenous populations deemed 'tribal' because of their distinct languages and cultural backgrounds. Given the remoteness of these schools, various forms of corruption often ensue as highlighted by HRE teacher, Mr Patnaik, who teaches 7th standard:

After attending the human rights training, I've brought 13 drop out children back to school. I go village to village with the HRE students, sit with the community, and convince the parents. I ask them, 'Why are your children going for work? Send them to school. It is a government school, it is free'. Parents think school is expensive and how can they afford it; no one has told them it is free and the children are provided books, uniforms and school meals. It is the district's job to inform the parents and encourage them to send their children to school, but the headmasters don't want that. Their idea is to show the government false enrolments and then accordingly, [extra] facilities and funds are given to the school. They don't have any interest in getting more children to school. (Individual interview, 8 July 2009)

Similar to the experience of Mr Patnaik, several other HRE teachers in Orissa as well as other states said they sometimes faced resistance to HRE from headmasters and other teachers implicated in corrupt practices in schools related to pocketing funds sent for students' meals, uniforms and books.

These issues suggest a broader discussion of the structural limits to change based on human rights or any other educational intervention. Yet, to begin this discussion, the personal agency and efficacy of teachers in getting out-of-school children enrolled despite these limitations is salutary and humanises more anodyne discussions of larger social forces. Many teachers across several states discussed being able to get students back to school through talking with parents and convincing them of the value of education. Depending on the type of violation, one form of intervention was the reporting of abuses to authorities, which teachers also noted doing as a result of human rights training.

### *Reporting abuse*

With a newfound desire to intervene in abuses, teachers' authority sometimes proved insufficient to transform situations and reporting such abuses to local or state authorities became necessary. While officials did not always respond, the threat of police action or actual reporting to the police often was a way to stop abuses that children and teachers identified in the community.<sup>8</sup> Especially for young students of HRE, enlisting the help of a teacher was often necessary to confront adult neighbours and would-be violators in their communities. Mr Gopal from Tamil Nadu related the following incident, emblematic of several others offered by teachers wherein they reported an abuse:

In the first year of human rights education, my student, Sangita, overheard from a neighbour that if their child was born a girl, they would kill it since they already had three female children. The child was born a girl and what they planned to do was make the baby lie down on the ground without putting any bed sheets and put the pedestal fan on high speed in front of her. The baby can't live – she would not be able to breathe and then she would automatically die. Sangita told me and together we gave a complaint in the police station. The family got scared and didn't kill the baby. Now that girl is even studying in first standard. My student Sangita is now in high school. (Individual interview, 24 January 2009)

In many communities in Tamil Nadu and other states where HRE is being offered, female infanticide is a common practice, though illegal. Throughout the research, however, students and teachers reported encountering evidence of infanticide with young students happening upon dead (usually female) babies while playing or overhearing about cases such as the one above. Certainly the issue of rural poverty as

a driver of practices such as early marriage and female infanticide needs further consideration and attention, since HRE overlays existing socio-economic conditions. Even amidst these material realities, however, students identifying abuses and having teachers willing to help report or intervene, were critical components of making human rights come alive for students.

### *Material assistance*

The last type of response discussed by teachers after experiencing transformative learning through HRE was the desire to provide material assistance to children or others in need as a result of HRE. This was the least common response, but several teachers used human rights to inspire the donation of food, uniforms, books or school supplies to students. Students in Indian government schools are generally from lower class and caste backgrounds than the teachers who teach them; in fact, of the more than 100 teachers interviewed, not a single one sent their own children to government schools. One teacher noted that after HRE, instead of throwing a party for his son's birthday, he bought gifts and sweets for his students. In a context where government school teachers generally view their students as 'other people's children' (Delpit 2005), the desire of teachers to treat them as their own children and provide care and material assistance to them was indeed a radical shift in thinking. One teacher in Karnataka state sought corporate donations and raised money in the community to build school latrines (a major reason why adolescent girls drop out of school), additional classrooms and a school well so that children would have drinking water at school. Whether through increased closeness, a desire to intervene in their problems at home, or the provision of food or related items, the humanisation of lower class/caste children in teachers' eyes as a result of HRE was indeed noteworthy. The following section discusses the ways that students utilised teachers as community resources within existing hierarchies to influence change in (primarily rural) India.

### **Teachers as legitimating agents for human rights**

One of my cousins was made to work and drop out of school after 5th standard. I was in 7th at that time and learning about human rights. I went to his home and spoke to his parents. I quoted some of the examples from the human rights textbook, and told them, 'Why you are not allowing your child to come to school? This is a violation. You should send him to school.' The father told me, 'What do you know about our family? You are talking nonsense. Go away.' He slapped me and I left. I kept going for a week trying to convince them. I showed them the human rights books, the lessons on child labour being illegal. But they are illiterates so couldn't read what was in the book.

Finally, I told my HRE teacher what had happened. The teacher called the boy's parents to school by saying that she had to give him a certificate since he had dropped out. Then our HRE teacher spoke to my cousin's parents, saying, 'What you are doing is obviously the wrong thing. At this age, children are getting education for free. Because you didn't stay in school, you are now doing hard labour, menial jobs. Let him study. Later, he can go for a job and he can take care of your family. Why are you doing the same wrong thing that your parents did to you?' She counselled them for half an hour. Finally the father realised and sent him back to school. And now that boy is the first in his family ever to go for higher studies. (Rajesh, former HRE student, Tamil Nadu, individual interview, 19 May 2009)

As noted in the example above, a combination of student action and the legitimacy of human rights concepts afforded by teachers – and sometimes textbooks – could result in positive changes. The status of teachers in the community and the reverence given to them by parents lent credibility to the advice they gave. In the interaction between the parents and teacher highlighted above, a clear hierarchy is present where the teacher is reprimanding the parents for making what she believes to be a poor decision for their child. Thus, while the dynamic between students and teachers is equalised through HRE enabling Rajesh to tell his teacher about his cousin's predicament, the hierarchy between illiterate parent and educated teacher is sufficiently maintained in order for her counsel, backed by printed information in the textbooks, to be heeded. Several examples emerged where teachers' authority influenced changes to ongoing human rights issues that students identified or experienced.

Teachers' elevated status and greater connections, as well as the power of information contained in textbooks, at times could transform an abusive situation. In rural India, many young women are pulled out of school to get married during their middle school years and IHRE operates in such contexts. Mr Prakash, who is an HRE teacher in the state of Orissa, narrated the following case of his student:

Last year one of my students, Swati, who was in 7th standard was about to be forced into marriage by her parents. She appealed a lot to her parents saying, 'I'm only 12 years old, my physical and mental development is not yet complete. I want to study and be something in the future'. But this didn't affect her parents at all. They fixed the date for her marriage. She had her human rights book with her and she took a friend with her to report this to the police. But the police just told her to listen to her parents. Swati told the police, 'We are studying human rights education and we can approach our human rights teacher and the institutions listed in this book if you don't help'. Then the police changed their attitude and called her parents and made them understand what they were doing was illegal. They called off the marriage and now she's studying in 8th standard at our school. (Individual interview, 7 July 2009)

As mentioned by Mr Prakash, even without his own intervention, whatever the police believed could happen if reported to the teacher or to 'human rights authorities' spurred their action on behalf of the student who was going to be forcibly married.

While police are supposed to enforce the law (marriage is only legal after age 18 and with the consent of both parties in India),<sup>9</sup> students, teachers and parents reported throughout this study that the police were often complicit in ongoing abuses, indifferent when cases were reported, or motivated to act only through the provision of some form of bribe. What did assist in action, however, was the threat of well-informed teachers connected to outside institutions (e.g. highly visible NGOs located in state capitals or state-wide human rights commissions) that might take action against local police if they were to be informed. The fact that students had access to the phone numbers and even names of such institutions printed in their textbooks and could perhaps actually contact them, inspired action by authorities in several accounts. In the example of the two teachers who stood up to their abusive husbands provided earlier in this article, both referred to information in the human rights textbooks to demonstrate their knowledge of outside authorities that they could report what was happening to, thus inspiring changes in their husbands' behaviour.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that teachers' own transformation is an essential component of HRE and that their authority offers credibility to human rights information. Evidence from HRE initiatives in India was presented to support these arguments. In light of previous literature on teachers and HRE and the data presented above, three conclusions are presented for scholars and practitioners to consider:

- (1) *Teacher training that is appropriate, contextualised and engaging incentivises participation and legitimises both the message and messengers of human rights.* Teachers' transformation often flowed from their positive experiences with training programmes carried out by IHRE. Such trainings differed from routine government-run trainings because they utilised participatory methods, took place in nice locations that teachers may not have previously visited, and provided examples and advice rooted in teachers' lived experience. IHRE also drew on noted experts whom teachers enjoyed interacting with since there were few settings where such crossing of social boundaries might occur. All of these dimensions constituted the contextualised inputs that IHRE provided and resulted in a great degree of teacher transformation. Coverage of the required material in HRE textbooks comprised a small part of the teacher trainings; instead, teachers' support for human rights and integration of attitudes against corporal punishment, domestic abuse and discriminatory practices were prioritised. This approach, as reflected in the data, proved useful in garnering interest and facilitating attitudinal and behaviour changes among teachers. HRE trainings in other contexts might consider what components will attract teachers, facilitate their transformation and secure their commitment to the principles of human rights prior to their deployment as messengers of these concepts in the classroom.
- (2) *Teachers' own transformation and interest in human rights can benefit their households, schools and communities in multiple ways.* Once teachers' transformation occurs, several benefits ensued as seen in the data presented. Teachers stood up for themselves in some cases, and for neighbours and students in many more accounts. Through the process of becoming allies to students and counteracting many common practices of neglect and mistreatment, the social distance between teachers and pupils was minimised through HRE, allowing for increased democratisation of the classroom and school. Thus, advocates of HRE should consider centring action and the role of teachers in the larger community in their calls for the greater prioritisation of HRE in discussions of educational reform. Greater research and evaluation may also aid in this effort.
- (3) *Teachers and textbooks can provide legitimacy for human rights and be vital community resources for intervening in abuses.* Teachers, who are respected authorities in many contexts, as well as textbooks, can provide greater legitimacy to human rights concepts, facilitating student action in visible and sometimes invisible ways. Even when teachers themselves do not take the lead in intervening in abuses, their elevated status, others' knowledge of their connections to human rights organisations, and their willingness to assist can be useful resources for students. The presence of a cohort of teachers in

a community who are committed to human rights may prove to be a force for decreasing violations over time given their knowledge and vigilance. Investigating what critical mass is required for social dynamics to shift towards greater equity should concern scholars and practitioners of HRE, extending our gaze beyond the school.

These conclusions rooted in the findings from this study in India may inform the study and practice of HRE in other locales. While India's location in the global South, schooling structures and patterns of human rights abuses may be unique, certain realities and processes resonate with those found across the globe. Literature on the role of teachers in HRE to date has emphasised the need for teachers to aid in the creation of 'human rights friendly' spaces and insights from research on grounded practice in HRE can certainly be analysed *vis-à-vis* the many problems – from extreme competition in high stakes exams to school violence to dropping out because of child labour – that students face worldwide.<sup>10</sup>

HRE has been implemented in schools that serve students on the very margins of Indian society. In India and in other contexts, students' home realities as well as teachers' role in furthering rather than alleviating abuses in schools deserve greater attention. While not all teachers stayed with HRE after the trainings either because they were transferred to schools that did not have the programme or simply because they lost interest, it is noteworthy that many teachers discussed the reform as a transformative experience and the resultant changes in their behaviours, attitudes and actions. An NGO programme that operates in 4000 schools and has impacted students and teachers deeply offers instructive lessons for scholars and practitioners engaging with themes of human rights and citizenship in education. Case studies, such as the one presented here, can further illuminate the possibility of schooling to positively impact larger efforts towards social change.

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### Notes

1. Among the agencies most active in advocating and supporting the integration of HRE into national curricula are UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the UN High Commission for Human Rights and the UN World Programme for Human Rights Education, which was established in 2005 to build on the considerable momentum towards HRE generated during the UN Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004).
2. Semi-structured individual interviews were carried out with 118 teachers, 25 students, and 88 parents, staff and officials involved with HRE. As the primary researcher, I visited 52 schools and held 59 focus groups with an additional 600 students across several states where HRE is operating. HRE is offered in both rural and urban schools in India, but since the majority of the population still lives in rural villages, I focused a great deal on the role of teachers in rural, semi-literate communities. Document review and observation were also primary methods.

3. I further discuss the issue of teachers' interest in affiliation with IHRE in a forthcoming manuscript titled 'Schooling for social change: The rise and impact of human rights education in India'.
4. The term 'Dalit' refers to those caste groups that were previously considered 'untouchable' and fall at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Dalit communities constitute 15% of India's population (HRW 2007) and although outlawed, caste discrimination still permeates most social institutions, schooling being no exception.
5. All respondents have been assigned pseudonyms.
6. While in most school districts, adolescent girls are not prohibited by law from continuing in school after getting married, headmasters often dissuade married adolescents from continuing their studies because of beliefs that married girls may share information that will 'spoil' unmarried girls; the families into which women marry also often want their labour in agriculture or in the household for domestic chores and childrearing, limiting their time available for school and related activities.
7. I discuss the impact of HRE on students in India more extensively in an article entitled, 'From "time pass" to transformative force: School-based human rights education in Tamil Nadu, India' (Bajaj 2010).
8. It is important to note that in India, for the most part, reporting abuses would result in an investigation where evidence would need to be presented for prosecution to take place. With a relatively vibrant and independent press – aside from severe limits on the freedom of press in conflict-ridden areas such as Kashmir (RWB 2010) – false accusations would rarely result in a penalty without a trial. India's 2005 'Right to Information Act' has also resulted in greater accountability of government entities given citizens' right to request official documents that pertain to public offices, programmes and services. This is not true of many other contexts, particularly where authoritarian regimes may render 'reporting' of others' activities and behaviour necessary and where false allegations may have serious consequences. Attention to context in examining human rights promoting practices is of course tremendously important and a theme worth discussing in its own right.
9. A recent study analysing data from the Indian National Family Health Survey found that of 22,000 women aged 20–24, 22.6% were married before age 16, 44.5% were married between ages 16 and 17, and 2.6% were married before age 13 (Lyn 2009).
10. Amnesty International has published a report entitled 'Guidelines for Human Rights Friendly Schools' that outlines how schools – through structure, pedagogies and curriculum – can create atmospheres that respect children's rights (AI 2009).
11. A total of 118 teachers (*n* value) were interviewed for this study. Several teachers gave more than one type of response to the question asked about the impact of HRE. As a result, adding the responses of each of the five categories in Figure 1 calculates to an amount higher than 118 and closer to 155.

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