



Mapping human rights awareness among higher education students

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Abstract

Human rights, civic society, democracy and sustainable development all depend on human rights education. Therefore, education should focus on fostering respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as the complete development of the human personality. Moreover, human rights education raises the understanding of the society as a whole. As the students are the country's future and teachers are the architects, it's important to educate them about human rights. This research paper delves to explore the awareness of human rights among higher education students. A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the present study. A standardized human rights awareness test was employed for collecting data from 70 M.A. students from the Department of Education, Tezpur University. The findings indicate that, human rights awareness among M.A. students is largely average, with 47.2%, of students falling under grade D. Students show stronger awareness of the constitutional basis, human dignity and child rights as reflected in high agreement. Thus, the distribution suggests for a need for more focused academic interventions to improve human rights awareness among the students.

Keywords: Human rights, awareness, perception, M.A. students

Introduction

Human rights are the most fundamental rights that each person must have, independent of all other factors, against the state or public authority simply because they are members of the human family. In the history of humanity and the development of society, the idea of human rights is undoubtedly a relatively recent development. It makes sense since the history of mankind and the development of societies worldwide have been shaped by several historical periods, including anarchy, monarchy, feudalism, and colonialism, during which the idea of human rights was more of a taboo than the rule. But in contrast to earlier times when "might be right" and "exploitation of the meek, weak, and ignorant was a regular norm" prevailed, human rights have only recently started to be universally recognised. Prior to this, they were exclusively available to a select few or privileged. According to Dictionary of the English Language, Human rights are "The basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled, often held to include the right to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and equality before the law". Oxford Dictionary of Law (2009) describes Human rights as "Rights and freedom to which every human being is entitled. Protection against breaches of these rights by a state (including the state of which the victim is a national) may in some cases be enforced in international law. It is sometimes suggested that human rights (or some of them) are so fundamental that they form part of natural law, but most of them are best regarded as forming part of treaty law". Human rights are those that are inalienable to every person, regardless of gender, age, or physical characteristics, only by virtue of their humanity. A civilized society can only exist when the citizens are aware of their rights and respect the right of others and show their obligation towards the society. Hence, we can state that the knowledge as well as awareness of human rights and exercising of these rights are the very basic factors of a civilized and democratic country.

"All human beings are equal, and they are all brothers", Rig Veda.

Rationale of the Study

Ponmozhi, & Kowsalya (2023) [8], investigated the level of human rights awareness among students in Tamil Nadu Cuddalore District's higher secondary schools. The study of Kyeremeh (2019) [11], revealed that the administration of the University has shown great commitment to the application of the principles of human rights, but some traces of structural violence have been transferred from society into the University. Songcayawon (2017) [13], conducted a study on the "Level of Human Rights Awareness and Experiences among Southeast Asian Students in the Philippines: Basis for a Proposed Human Rights Empowerment Program for International Students". Singh & Singh (2015) [12] studied the relevance of the awareness of Human Rights in the students of Teacher training college. Kumar (2014) concluded that the human rights awareness among the B.Ed. student teachers was found to be low. The female student teachers are more aware with human rights as compared to the male student's teachers. The rural and urban student teachers didn't show significant difference in their awareness of human rights. Therefore, after analysing the various literature reviews, the researchers found that limited studies have been conducted to explore the awareness and perceptions to promote human rights among higher education students leading to the betterment of life. Hence the researchers took keen interest to undertake research work in this particular area. This study seeks to contribute to the academic discourse on human rights education by providing empirical insights into how the students of higher education perceive and engage with human rights. This can be valuable for educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in enhancing the impact of education on fostering a culture of human rights. The study is grounded in the belief that understanding and enhancing the awareness and perceptions of higher education students regarding human rights can serve as a catalyst for positive societal change. Hence, the researchers were encouraged to take up the study, an exploration of human rights awareness and perceptions among the higher education students.

Objectives

1. To explore human rights awareness among higher education students.
2. To investigate the perception of human rights awareness among higher education students.

Methodology

Research Design: The present study employed the descriptive survey research design.

Sample: The first and the third semester Master of Arts (M.A.) students (N=70) of the Education Department of Tezpur University were chosen as the respondents (sample) for the present study.

Tool Used: Considering the objectives of the study, the researchers have used the “Human Right Awareness Test [(HRAT-svva) English Version]” designed by Dr Vishal Sood and Dr. Arati Anand for measuring the level of awareness of the participants with regards to concept and principles of human rights as well as awareness with regard to situations involving human rights violations.

Analysis and Interpretation

Objective 1: To explore the levels of Human Rights Awareness (HRA) among higher education students.

Table 1: Levels of Human Rights Awareness (HRA) among higher education students

S. No.	Frequency	Percentage	Interpretation	Grade
1	10	14.3%	Above Average	C
2	33	47.2%	Average	D
3	19	27.1%	Below Average	E
4	8	11.4%	Low	F
Total	70	100%		

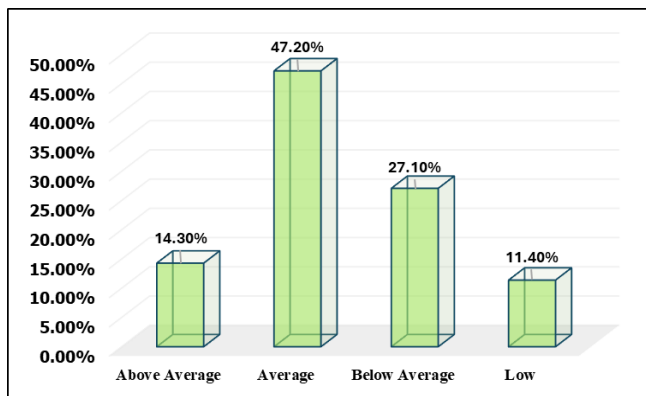


Fig 1: Graphical representation of the levels of Human Rights Awareness (HRA) among higher education students

The above table and fig. indicates that the level of Human Rights Awareness among the MA students, is predominantly average. Nearly half of the respondents, 33 (47.2%), fall under the average category (Grade D), suggesting a moderate understanding of human rights concepts. A smaller proportion of students, 10 (14.3%), demonstrate an above-average level of awareness (Grade C), reflecting comparatively better familiarity. However, a considerable segment of the sample exhibits lower levels of awareness, with 19 (27.1%) classified as below average (Grade E) and 8 (11.4%) falling in the low category (Grade F). This distribution indicates that while a majority of

students possess only a moderate level of Human Rights Awareness, a substantial number require focused academic and curricular interventions to enhance their understanding.

Objective 2: To Study the Perception of Human Rights Awareness among Higher Education Students

Dimension 1: Knowledge about Human Rights documents among the higher education students (as shown in table 2)

Table 2: Response mean for each item of dimension 1

Items	Response Mean
ITEM 1 (P)	1.70
ITEM 2 (N)	1.90
ITEM 3 (P)	1.38
ITEM 4 (N)	1.74
ITEM 5 (P)	1.77
ITEM 6 (N)	0.61
ITEM 7 (N)	1.51
ITEM 8 (P)	0.74

[P=Positive Items; N=Negative items]

The above table reveals that the response means for the items 1 and 5 are 1.70 and 1.77, respectively, indicating that the mean responses are closer to 2, and therefore, the statements were generally perceived as true by the MA students. In contrast, Items 3 and 8 recorded lower Mean values of 0.74, suggesting that the respondents remained undecided regarding these statements. Overall, the item no. 5 “Human Rights have been included in the Indian Constitution in the form of Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy” received the highest level of agreement, reflecting a relatively stronger awareness among students regarding the constitutional basis of human rights. Further, the table indicate that items 2, 4, and 7 obtained response means of 1.90, 1.74, and 1.51, respectively, which are closer to 2 and therefore suggest that these statements were largely considered false by the respondents. However, Item 6 recorded a mean score of 0.61, indicating an undecided response pattern. The findings also show that the item no. 4 “The Preamble of the Indian Constitution does not include Human Rights” was predominantly regarded as false, registering the highest response rate, thereby demonstrating students’ awareness of the inclusive nature of the Preamble.

Dimension 2: Knowledge and understanding about Human Rights concepts among the higher education students (as shown in table 3)

Table 3: Response mean for each item of dimension 2

Items	Response Mean
ITEM 9 (N)	1.67
ITEM 10 (P)	1.74
ITEM 11 (N)	1.67
ITEM 12 (N)	0.74
ITEM 13 (P)	1.54
ITEM 14 (P)	1.80
ITEM 15 (P)	1.16
ITEM 16 (N)	1.41
ITEM 17 (P)	1.77
ITEM 18 (N)	0.38
ITEM 19 (N)	1.35
ITEM 20 (P)	1.54
ITEM 21 (N)	1.03
ITEM 22 (P)	1.70

[P=Positive Items; N=Negative items]

The above table indicates that the response means for items 10, 13, 14, 17, 20, and 22 range between 1.54 and 1.80, which are closer to 2, suggesting that the MA students generally perceived these statements as true. In contrast, Item 15 recorded a comparatively lower mean score of 1.16, indicating an undecided response pattern among the respondents. Overall, the item no. 4 “Human rights are requisite for maintaining the dignity of people” received the highest level of agreement, reflecting strong consensus among students regarding the fundamental role of human rights in upholding human dignity. Furthermore, the table reveals that items 9 and 11 obtained mean scores of 1.67, indicating that these statements were largely considered false by the respondents. Items 12, 16, 19, and 21, with mean values ranging from 0.74 to 1.41, reflect a predominance of undecided responses, suggesting uncertainty or limited clarity among students regarding these aspects of human rights. Additionally, Item 18, with a mean score of 0.38, indicates a stronger tendency towards considering the statement as true. The findings further show that the item no. 9 and 11, “Parents have no right to choose the kind of education for their young children” and “Children born out of illegal or immoral relationships are not entitled to social security under human rights” were predominantly regarded as false, registering the highest response rates. This reflects students’ awareness of parental rights in education and the principle of non-discrimination inherent in human rights frameworks.

Dimension 3: Understanding about situations involving Human Rights violations/non-violations among the higher education students (as shown in table 4)

Table 4: Response mean for each item of dimension 3

Items	Response Mean
ITEM 23 (N)	0.96
ITEM 24 (N)	1.87
ITEM 25 (P)	1.58
ITEM 26 (N)	1.22
ITEM 27 (N)	0.90
ITEM 28 (N)	1
ITEM 29 (N)	1.12
ITEM 30 (N)	1.03
ITEM 31 (P)	0.64
ITEM 32 (P)	1.16
ITEM 33 (P)	0.96
ITEM 34 (P)	1.87
ITEM 35 (P)	1.29
ITEM 36 (P)	1.09
ITEM 37 (P)	1.70
ITEM 38 (N)	0.83
ITEM 39 (P)	1.32
ITEM 40 (N)	1.06
ITEM 41 (P)	1.64
ITEM 42 (P)	1.06
ITEM 43 (N)	1.22
ITEM 44 (P)	1.32
ITEM 45 (N)	1.48
ITEM 46 (N)	0.87
ITEM 47(P)	1.80
ITEM 48 (N)	1.19
ITEM 49 (P)	1.54
ITEM 50 (N)	1.12

[P=Positive Items; N=Negative items]

The above table shows that the response means for Items 25, 34, 37, 41, 47, and 49 range from 1.54 to 1.87, indicating that these statements were generally perceived as true by the MA students. In contrast, Items 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 39, 42, and 44, with mean values ranging between 0.64 and 1.32, reflect a predominantly undecided response pattern, suggesting uncertainty or limited clarity regarding these aspects of human rights. The item no. 34, “A child was not given admission in a school because he is physically handicapped. Is this a violation of the child’s rights?” has received the highest level of agreement, indicating strong awareness among students regarding the violation of child rights in cases of discrimination based on physical disability. Further, the table indicates that Item 24 recorded a high mean score of 1.87, suggesting that the statement was largely considered false by the respondents. The remaining Items 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 38, 40, 43, 45, 46, 48, and 50, with mean scores ranging from 0.83 to 1.48, predominantly reflect undecided responses, pointing towards partial awareness or ambiguity in understanding certain legal and civil rights issues. Notably, the item no. 24 “Police can arrest any person at any time without giving any reason” was overwhelmingly regarded as false, receiving the highest response rate, thereby indicating students’ awareness of legal safeguards and due process in the protection of individual rights.

Major Findings

In the light of the interpretation of the results of the present study, the following are the major findings:

1. The extent of human rights awareness among 10 (14.3%) MA students from Education Department of Tezpur University is above average and interpreted as C Grade on the rating scale.
2. The extent of human rights awareness among 19 (27.1%) MA students from Education Department of Tezpur University is below average and interpreted as E Grade on the rating scale.
3. The extent of human rights awareness among 8 (11.4%) MA students from Education Department of Tezpur University is low and interpreted as F Grade on the rating scale.
4. The extent level of Human Rights Awareness among maximum number, i.e., 33 (47.2%) MA students from Education Department of Tezpur University is average and interpreted as ‘D’ Grade.
5. According to the students, the statement “Human Rights have been included in the Indian Constitution in the form of Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy” is considered true and has highest response rate in, dimension 1 of positive statements.
6. According to the students, the statement “The Preamble of Indian Constitution doesn’t include Human Rights”, is considered false and has the highest response rate, in dimension 1 of negative statements.
7. From the above representations, it can be revealed that according to the students, the statement “Human rights are requisite for maintaining dignity of people”, is considered true and has the highest response rate, in dimension 2 of positive statements.
8. From the above representations, it can be revealed that according to the students, the statements “Parents have no right to choose the kind of education for their young

- children” and “The children who have got birth due to illegal or immoral relations between male and females are not entitled for social security under human rights”, are considered false, and has the highest response rate, in dimension 2 of negative statements.
9. From the above representations, it can be revealed that according to the students, the statement “A child was not a given admission in a school because he is physically handicapped? Is this the violation of the Child's rights?” is considered true and has the highest response rate, in dimension 3 of positive statements.
 10. From the above representations, it can be revealed that according to the students, the statement “Police can arrest any person at any time without giving any reason” is considered false and has the highest response rate, in dimension 3 of negative statements.

Educational Implications

In the light of the above findings of the present study, the following implications were traced out:

1. To ensure that human rights education is integrated throughout the disciplines, curriculum planning should consider bridging the gaps in knowledge about human rights.
2. To support teachers in implementing efficient instructional strategies, it's important to improve human rights education and promote a deeper comprehension of it.
3. It is essential to support institutional measures that can uphold human rights norms and foster a welcoming atmosphere for students.
4. Including human rights consciousness in higher education can help to develop law-abiding, ethical global citizens who understand and support the fundamentals of human rights.
5. Acutely aware students can act as impetuses for community outreach initiatives that advance human rights both on and off campus.
6. To raise understanding that can help students become more sensitive to cultural differences, it is important to create a more welcoming and courteous learning environment.

Conclusion

In summary, the present study offers insightful information about the current state of human rights awareness among higher education students. The results emphasise how crucial it is to include human rights education in higher education curricula in order to close awareness gaps and raise a new generation of students who will have the skills and values necessary to build a society that is inclusive and just. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of fostering a heightened understanding of human rights as we traverse an increasingly linked world. This study lays the groundwork for future initiatives by encouraging academic institutions to adopt a comprehensive strategy that enables students to stand up for human rights and make a positive impact on a more just and caring world community.

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