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UNESCO and Human Rights Education

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The long history of mankind has been marked by efforts to ensure respect for dignity of human beings. The concept of human rights is as old as the evolution of civilization. It has been the subject of intense intellectual and philosophical speculation and debated and developed by thinkers from various cultural, religious, sociological, economical, political and philosophical traditions. The statesmen and the lawyers have developed the norms for extending the sanction of law to protect the fundamental freedoms and basic rights of the individuals within the national and international legal order. The liberal democracies of the west used the concept of natural rights and social contract theory to develop an indigenous system of constitutionally entrenched Bill of Rights. The U.S. Constitution is the best example of this assimilation of natural rights into the framework of positive law.

However, long time had been taken by the international community in establishing the human rights standards in international law. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that a comprehensive international system of human rights promotion and protection was set up, with the adoption of the Charter of the United Nations. Several provisions of the Charter have expressly recognized the recognition of the inherent dignity and of equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family. This has become the touch stone for the development of human rights law. With the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (UDHR), today nearly hundred Conventions are

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there in universal and regional levels. Apart from these conventions, the international organizations have adopted a much greater number of declarations under the auspices of the United Nations.

With the codification of international law of human rights, the international community has achieved indisputable success in the promotion and protection of human rights at all levels. However, regrettably human rights are violated every day in all parts of the world without any exception. This is because of lack of proper knowledge of the relevant standards prescribed by law in the promotion and protection of fundamental freedoms and basic rights. They can be better observed and protected only when they are known.

It is thus that education as an invaluable tool for the promotion of human rights assumes great importance. The UDHR, followed by various other conventions has recognized the importance of human rights education.¹ Taking into consideration the importance of Education for Human Rights, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has initiated several steps. This paper aims to study in brief, the role of the UNESCO and its efforts in adopting the strategies conducive to the promotion of human rights education.

II

Before analyzing the role of UNESCO, it is imperative to highlight the meaning of Human Rights Education and its significance and its relationship to human rights.

In general, very often it is referred to that Human Rights and Human Rights Education are one and the same, though they are separate aspects. Human Rights specify the rights of individuals which they possess as an essential facet to their inherent human dignity and personality. They constitute the limitations on State power which are indispensable

1 Art.26, para 2 of the UDHR states that, "education shall be directed to the full advancement of human personality and to strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms." The other Conventions are UNESCO Conventions Against Discrimination in Education (Arts. 4 & 13), the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Art. 7), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Art. 10), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 20).

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for the protection of rights and freedoms of the human persons in a free democratic society governed by the rule of law. On the other hand, Human Rights Education is required to build up the personality of an individual by assisting his physical, intellectual, moral and emotional development and for the well being of the nation-states².

The basic aim of education, is to transfigure the human personality into a pattern of perfection through a systematic process of the development of the body, the enrichment of mind, and the sublimation of the spirit. This being the true spirit of education, human rights education is the principle instrument in awakening the man to cultural values from the childhood and makes him to learn live normally in his environment. In other words, it prepares a man as a duty minded citizen of the world. Its aim is to teach not only about the rights of man but also transcend them in exercise of their duties. As this is the objective of human rights education, it certainly differs from human rights. However, its main target is mankind and the future development of a one world based on a holistic and integral vision of human race as forming one indivisible family of homo-sapiens, where in no form of arbitrary restrictions shall based on the concept of sovereignty of the state be seen or visible. In other words, the aim of human rights and human rights education is to establish the ancient Indian concept of "*Vasudaivya Kutumbakam*" or Winder Wilkie's dream concept of "One World". Hence the aim of human rights education is to integrate the educational policies at the national as well as at the international levels through appropriate international organizations.

III

Among the various activities of UNESCO, education for human rights is one of its important facets. This obligation arises from its constitution, which imposes an obligation to promote further universal respect for justice, the rule of law and human rights and fundamental freedoms. In the year, 1974, in order to promote human rights education UNESCO adopted a specific instrument containing the rules and norms for the member States.³ The document stresses the need for education

2 For further discussion, see T.S.N. Sastry; "Human Rights Education in the Next Millennium" PRP Journal of Human Rights, Vol. 4, 2000, pp. 6-7.

3 The instrument is titled as Recommendation concerning Education for International understanding, cooperation and Peace and Education Relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms 1974, adopted on November 19, 1974, at the Eighteenth Session of the General Conference of the Organization held at Paris.

about contemporary world problems, such as the maintenance of peace, disarmament, respect for human rights development etc. Further, it recommends to the States parties to adopt their policy and planning aspects for the promotion of human rights education in various sectors and levels of education. Apart from various other pursuits in the following years, it has organized three major international meetings for the promotion of human rights education.

The first one was, the International Congress on Teaching of Human Rights (Vienna, Austria, 1978). The Congress underlined that human rights education and teaching must aim at (i) fostering the attitudes of tolerance, respect and solidarity inherent in human rights; (ii) providing knowledge about human rights, in both their national and international dimensions, and the institutions established for their implementation; (iii) developing the individual's awareness of the ways and means by which human rights, can be translated into social, political reality at the international and national level.⁴

The Second Congress held at Malta in 1987, defined the guidelines for the promotion of human rights education at national, regional and international levels, and stressed the necessity to create a complete system of human rights teaching by popular methods to general public and educating the pupil from the primary school on words with the broad participation of public organizations and the media.⁵

In 1993, March, at Montreal, Canada, the third Congress was held. This conference was significant than the other two. Because, this was the first international gathering after the end of the cold war to stress the intrinsic link between human rights and democracy. In this Congress, a Plan of Action on Education for Human Rights and Democracy was adopted. According to the Plan of Action, education for democracy is an integral part of education for human rights which is not only a pre-requisite for the realization of human rights, democracy, and, social justice but is itself a human right⁶.

4 For the details of the Recommendation "UNESCO and Human Rights" (2nd edn.) UNESCO, 1999, pp. 3433-46.

5 For the details of the Congress, *Ibid* at pp. 351-67.

6 For the Plan of Action, *Ibid* at pp. 390-42.

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The Vienna World Conference on Human Rights held in 1993, has further emphasized the importance of human rights education in its Declaration and adopted a Plan of Action with a unanimous consensus vote.⁷ The conference confirmed that respect for human rights is an indispensable element of a genuine democracy and strongly supported the concept of unity and universality of human rights. It has declared that for the promotion of human rights, human rights education should be promoted by all states to foster mutual understanding, tolerance and peace and to achieve stable and harmonious relations among all communities of the people of the world. The Conference further declared that all states should take steps to develop specific programmes and strategies for ensuring the widest human rights education and the dissemination of public information, in accordance with the world plan of action on human rights and democracy adopted by the UNESCO at the Montreal Conference.⁸

In accordance with the recommendations of the Vienna Conference, the General Assembly has declared the period (1995-2004) as the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education.⁹ Coordination for the implementation of the Decade's Plan of Action has been entrusted to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The plan foresees that UNESCO should play a vital role in the design, implementation and evaluation of projects contained therein for the promotion of Human Rights Education and should extend its cooperation to the High Commissioner of the UN Centre for Human Rights. Accordingly, a Memorandum of Cooperation was signed between the Director-General of UNESCO and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in October 1995, with an aim for close collaboration in implementing activities related to education for human rights and democracy.

The long term objective of UNESCO is the creation of a comprehensive system for human rights, democracy and peace, by embracing all levels of education available to all. This means the system in its educational policies should cover formal and non formal education

7 World Conference on Human Rights, 1993, UN Publication.

8 The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, Paras 78-82, 1993, UN Publication, pp 66-67.

9 GA Resolution 49/184, December 23, 1994.

which includes adult education too.¹⁰

Apart from its regular activities at the international level to promote the human rights education, UNESCO has also directed its efforts to assist the member States in framing their national strategies on the preparation and dissemination of teaching aids and curricula. Accordingly it has conducted various conferences in several regions and adopted declarations targeting the national policies of the member countries in each region to pay particular attention to the enforcement of human rights education and democracy.¹¹

Since its establishment, UNESCO has provided teaching materials on human rights at all levels of education and for the general public, human rights activists and non-governmental organizations working for the promotion of human rights. The first in the series entitled Human Rights: Comments and Interpretation was published in 1949. Since then, nearly 200 publications have been published on various aspects of human rights. Among the various publications, Human Rights: Questions and Answers has become one of the popular publications of UNESCO and it has progressed through three editions in different languages of the world.

The main object of UNESCO is to promote a culture, the very core of which is adherence to the basic values of human rights and democracy and the readiness to defend them every minute in one's daily life. Such a culture of human rights and democracy can only be achieved by the combined efforts of the nation-states, educators, policy makers, families, mass media and inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations. In other words, all states and the civil society as a whole should come forward to extend their support in strengthening the hands of UNESCO in the promotion of human rights education. Let's hope all states will frame their national policies in accordance with the objectives of UNESCO and bring awareness among the people in promoting human rights education and democracy to achieve the concept of "one world". It is the prime object of international law even as it takes its giant strides to step into the new millennium in the United Nations to translate into tangible and concrete action this gripping and gospel of One World, one common humanity.

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- 10 In order to achieve its objective it has adopted various recommendations such as to eradicate Discrimination in Education in 1960. Technical and Vocational Education in 1974; Scientific Researchers in 1974; Development of Adult Education in 1976 etc.
- 11 The Associated Schools project conducted in 1995 where in 3,300 schools from 125 member States had participated. Apart from this the UNESCO established Chairs, at institutions of higher education in all regions of the world.