

Gandhi and Children: From Carriers of Deficits to Agents of Change

Text of a talk given at the Symposium on “Gandhi’s Values in the 21st Century” organized by Global Human Rights Defense (www.ghrd.org) on 2 October 2009, Gandhi’s birthday and International Day of Non-Violence, in The Hague, The Netherlands.

Excellencies, distinguished guests, friends,

I feel privileged to be speaking to you on this special day. My own professional background is in children, youth and development - and I will share some reflections with you on the significance of Gandhi’s legacy from that particular perspective.

Let me start with a scene from Deepa Mehta’s acclaimed film: Water. The year is 1938. The setting is an ashram, or home, for widows in the holy city of Benares in India. Chuhiya – a child who has been widowed at the age of 8 is abandoned by her parents at the ashram. As is the custom, her head is clean shaved, and she is expected to live out the rest of her life invisibly - in simplicity and renunciation, stigmatized and excluded from society, denied all worldly joys and deprived even of contact with her family. But little Chuhiya is a spirited, rebellious, assertive child - she keeps asking uncomfortable and challenging questions and this has a powerful, destabilizing effect on the other widows, one of whom is the older Shakuntala – who herself begins to start questioning the treatment of widows.



The world outside the ashram is in the throes of tumultuous change. The Indian freedom movement, led by Gandhi, is gathering force, calls for reform are in the air, laws are changing, it is a moment of profound historical transformation - and snippets of news and rays of hope are beginning to filter into the widows’ ashram.

I will go straight to the last scene in the film: Chuhiya has been raped by a local landlord. Shakuntala gets wind that this might happen and runs to rescue her, but she is too late. She picks up the traumatized child and is carrying her back when she hears an announcement that Gandhi’s train is going to make a short stop in Benaras. Crowds of people are moving

towards the station. Shakuntala joins the crowds and reaches the platform just as the train is about to pull out – in desperation, she has just enough time to entrust Chuhija to one of the freedom fighters on the train with the simple words of faith: “give her to Gandhiji”. Pain and violence are transformed into hope and peace. We feel that Chuhija is liberated.



This is a very powerful and moving climax to the film. It is a fictional moment, of course, but one that rings true. It brings alive the very palpable and real feelings of hope, of optimism, of change and a brighter future – not just for Chuhija – but for all the children of India.



Celebrating Gandhi’s birthday - more than 70 years on from the time in which the film is set - is an apt moment to pause and reflect on a couple of questions. How much of that

promised future has been realized for India's, and, indeed the world's, children? And, what is the significance of his life and teachings for the children of today?

So, how far have children been delivered from violence? To answer this, we first need to absorb Gandhi's concept of violence. According to Gandhi, violence could take many forms, going beyond the physical. "Poverty is the worst form of violence", he used to say, as is exploitation, oppression and treating another with less dignity. So poverty, lack of education, child labour, malnutrition, exclusion on the basis of caste or race, and trafficking would all constitute forms of violence against children, according to Gandhiji, just as much as bodily violence, physical abuse or corporal punishment.

This broad definition of violence was later elaborated by Johan Galtung – the renowned Norwegian peace researcher - in his seminal paper on "Violence, Peace and Peace Research" where he develops his notions of direct versus structural and cultural violence. Galtung's work, which has been inspired by Gandhian philosophy, has made a powerful contribution to the understanding of violence in the social sciences. Incidentally, Galtung wrote this paper in 1969, sitting on the roof terrace of the Gandhian Institute of Studies in Varanasi!

Adopting this holistic perspective on violence, it is unfortunately all too apparent that violence against children persists in its many forms, sometimes in new and even worse ways than before. There is surely progress on many fronts, but it has all too often been a case of too-little-too-late. Let me give a few examples:

- Nearly one half of children under five in South Asia still suffer from under-nutrition. In India, figures reveal that under-nutrition levels have not come down significantly since the last survey, despite high growth rates and are, in fact, on the increase in several states such as Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh.
- We know that school enrolments are rising, but how many of these children go on to complete 9 years of schooling? The average for South and West Asia is less than 6 out of 10. And if you take the poorest 20% of the population, then only 3 out of 10 children reach class 9.
- 90 per cent of children with disabilities do not attend school; the global literacy rate for all individuals with disability may be as low as 3 per cent and 1 per cent for women.
- Children's vulnerability to certain forms of abuse such as prostitution, trafficking and pornography is on the increase.
- And there is a double exclusion: the children who experience these basic needs and wellbeing deficits belong to families that are also the most excluded on account of their religion, race, caste or ethnicity.
- In fact there is a triple bias. New forms of violence extend to the girl child even before she is born. The skewed statistics on sex ratio at birth confirm the low value placed on girls and the persistence of gender bias.

So: have the aspirations of those early days of hope for a better future for children been fulfilled? Sadly, that train of hope, carrying Chuhiya and the children of India to their destiny, has moved too slowly, too intermittently, often losing direction, often losing steam.

This is both alarming and puzzling, because in the interim, previously subjugated peoples have witnessed the emergence of democratic systems, led proudly by India. And everywhere, there seem to be a myriad policies and programmes, instruments and global conventions, to protect the rights of children. Yet the systemic deficits and injustices persist, and the holistic philosophy of Gandhi has been largely bypassed by mainstream society.

How has this come to pass? Why do children continue to be the carriers of such appalling human deficits? Deepening economic inequalities and widening social fractures clearly stand in the way. It is clear that democracy, as the exercise of periodic voting rights, is not enough. In Gandhi's words: "the spirit of democracy is not a mechanical thing to be adjusted by the abolition of forms. It requires a change of heart."

What is required then are not just legislative Acts and Plans and Schemes that tinker with economic outcomes; what democracy needs is a heart transplant that transforms social values and norms that guide social behaviour and actions.

But how is this transformation to be achieved? We would do well to borrow Gandhi's famous spectacles to look for an answer. We would then see children not just as the objects of development, not just as the carriers of deficits that have to be periodically measured and monitored. Instead, we would see children as the prime carriers of change and as agents of transformation.

Gandhi valued children deeply. He was profoundly concerned about their education and upbringing. His ideas were, of course, a product of his times and they were a part of his vision of a free India made up of self-sufficient village communities. They were developed as a response to colonial education, and the struggle to restore dignity and value to local language and culture. Some of his ideas, say on education, may not be directly transferable into the schools and learning processes of the globalised, technologically driven world of today. But the philosophy and guiding spirit behind them are more relevant than ever. In Gandhi's system of 'nai talim', translated as 'new education', or 'basic education' as it was called, instruction was to be in the mother tongue, the learning of a handicraft was to be at the heart of the teaching programme, and the teacher was to have the freedom to decide what to teach in the classroom. The fundamental purpose of education was to cultivate the hearts of the young and to educate the whole person. "I would develop in the child his hands, his brains, his soul. Now his hands have almost atrophied and the soul has been ignored", he wrote.

Gandhi saw children as agents of change. If values are incorporated in the early years, then there is a real hope that children will be inoculated against the toxins of social violence that they will inevitably breathe outside the school gates. He believed that "If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children." He reasoned that if you involve children in the process of bringing about change, the power of that experience would last them through their lives. Gandhi also believed in listening to children and taking them seriously. He was of the view that: "The greatest lessons in life, if we would but stoop and humble ourselves, we should learn not from the grown-up learned men, but from the so-called ignorant children."



Gandhi's perspectives on the holistic development of children, on children as agents of change and on taking children seriously, were pioneering and ahead of his times. Many of these notions have now been incorporated into the language of child rights and have been absorbed into mainstream professional thinking. Indeed, they have become so commonplace that they are often detached from their true meaning!

Gandhi's ideas on involving children to lay the groundwork for a more tolerant and peaceful future have been enthusiastically adopted by peace education programmes for children in conflict areas. Peace education is now a part of the regular school, and also pre-school curriculum, in many countries. An innovative use of these ideas was made by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone, which was the first to invite children to speak about the atrocities they had experienced and it was the first Truth Commission to publish a child-friendly version of its report.



Gandhi's message has inspired people all over the world, from Martin Luther King, to Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama. In India, and outside, his legacy is alive through the grassroots and civil society movements that it has inspired. The environment movements led by Baba Amte and Medha Patkar, Swami

Agnivesh's efforts for the release of bonded child labour, MV Foundation's campaign against child labour and in favour of education, the efforts of SEWA to organize women workers in the informal sector are just some of the examples that come to mind. There are many more.

How are Gandhi's ideas operationalized by these movements in their struggle for social transformation in the face of intense opposition and vested interests? How is this change of heart to be achieved?

I would like to illustrate this with one powerful example – that of the MV Foundation – an organization whose work I am personally familiar with. MV Foundation is based in Andhra Pradesh, India and it works to universalize education and eliminate child labour. It takes the uncompromising stand that all children should be in school and no child should be at work. Both the ethics and the necessity of child labour are questioned. Taking the Rights of the Child as its starting point, MV Foundation aims to bring all children into formal school. This may be a dream for most, but they assert that it is a reality that they strive to achieve. How do they do it?

First of all, by taking an inclusive approach. All social groups, classes, castes, communities and individuals are involved in the effort to build norms around the issues of children's work and education. The village is taken as the unit and the process of consensus-building targets the entire community. Child labour becomes everybody's problem and getting children to school becomes the shared responsibility of the community.

The MV Foundation adheres strictly to the principle of non-violence on all occasions. The only acceptable counter to violence, or the threat of violence, be it from parents, erstwhile employers of children, or other interested parties is open debate and discussion. These discussions include all stakeholders and continue in an open, non-confrontational manner till all opposition is overcome and a consensus is reached on the norm that children should be in school and not at work. The exact form and sequence that this process takes varies from one village to the next and each community finds its own innovative solutions for overcoming resistance and convincing the unconvinced.

The end result that the organization wishes to achieve is a change of heart, a change in attitudes, an internalization of the new values and a consensus on the issues of child labour and education. The process of consensus building continues till everyone – children, parents, employers of child labour, teachers, the education bureaucracy and policy makers – agree that all children should be in school and no child in the village should be working. And they all become advocates for this change.

The socially inclusive approach followed by the organization ensures that agency rests crucially with the children themselves who act as interlocutors with their non-school going peers and their families. Children inform other children about the programme and encourage them to give up work and join school; children start negotiating with their parents; and girls use a typically Gandhian device that would have brought a smile to his face. They use passive forms of resistance like 'not speaking' or 'going without food' to convince their parents not to marry them off at a young age and to allow them to go to school instead.

Pioneering initiatives like the MV Foundation have shown that mindsets can be transformed and the poor can assert themselves over their lives and bring about permanent change for their children. They have shown that employers can be persuaded to stop hiring child labour; landlords can be persuaded to release children from the bondage of inherited debt; fathers can be encouraged to stop drinking and spend the money saved on their children's education; parents can be convinced that education is important for their daughters; teachers can be persuaded to teach and the education bureaucracy can be coaxed to provide the matching resources. Using these unique strategies, the MV Foundation has succeeded in mobilizing 6,00,000 children out of work and into full time, formal, government schools and making 1500 villages in Andhra Pradesh entirely child labour free. Their approach is now being adopted in other states in India and in other countries of the world. The message travels.

Let me end as I began, with little Chuhiya. My heart would like to believe that she found her way to Sabarmati Ashram – where Gandhi lived. There, she might have met another child – Narayan Desai - who actually spent his childhood there and later wrote a book about growing up in Sabarmati Ashram. He writes that Gandhi's birthday was celebrated as the birthday of the 'charkha' or the 'spinning wheel'. "Bapu considered the day not to be his own birthday but that of the spinning wheel. Thus he could participate in celebrating it with equal enthusiasm as all the others. Neither did he have to run away or serve as the chief attraction of the day. On that day he would take part in sports competing in a race and other events with the older boys. He would go for a swim with us in the river.... He would serve us food in the evening and would be in the audience at the play that would be staged afterwards..."

It is Gandhi's birthday again today. Surely, this should be a day of celebration, but in keeping with the message of his life, we should also make it a moment for re-affirmation and re-dedication.

Rekha Wazir
International Child Development Initiatives (www.icdi.nl)