

NONVIOLENT SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Arun, GANDHI

Arun Gandhi is the only son of the second of M. K. Gandhi's four sons. His father, Manilal, and mother, Sushila, had devoted their lives to living and practicing nonviolence in South Africa. Arun was sent to India at the age of 12 to live with his grandfather, M. K. Gandhi, and hopefully learn some valuable, life-changing lessons. He spent almost 2 years from 1945 to 1947. Arun lived for 24 years in South Africa after birth and moved to India when the South African Government refused to let his wife into the country. In India, Arun worked as a journalist for the national newspaper "The Times of India" from 1956 to 1986. In 1987 Arun came to the US on a one-year scholarship to do a comparative study of race, caste and color prejudices at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi. In 1990, together with his wife, Sunanda, Arun founded the M. K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, at the Christian Brothers University in Memphis, TN. In 1995 both decided to become US citizens. Today the Institute for Nonviolence is based at the University of Rochester, NY, and Arun, after the demise of his wife, Sunanda, on February 21, 2007, branched out to new pastures. In 2008 he started the Gandhi Worldwide Education Institute in Waukonda, IL. The purpose of this Institute is to provide educational facilities to the very poor and depressed classes of the world. The first such institution is under construction in a village in India where children are required to earn a livelihood at the age of 5 and 6 because of dire poverty. Arun Gandhi is President, Gandhi Worldwide Education Institute, USA. www.gandhiforchildren.org.

1. WHAT IS NONVIOLENCE?

It is unfortunate that Mohandas K. Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence is either misunderstood or not understood at all. The philosophy is not simply about conflict resolution nor is it about stopping wars. It is as much about personal transformation as about understanding the causes of conflict and violence.

Among the 100 volumes of material that Gandhi wrote there are what he called the seven social sins which are also now engraved on the walls of his tomb in New Delhi, India. The Seven Social Sins are:

- Wealth without Work;
- Pleasure without Conscience;
- Knowledge without Character;
- Commerce without Morality;
- Science without Humanity;
- Worship without Sacrifice, and,
- Politics without Principles.

Recently, I added the eighth social sin: Rights without Responsibilities

These sins, according to Gandhi, committed by us everyday, consciously and unconsciously, contribute to the growing violence in the world.

It is, therefore, not an exaggeration to say that a useful exercise for all of us would be to study these seven social sins in depth and figure out how do they contribute to violence and, especially, how do they relate to us? It is only when we conduct this introspection that we will understand what can we

do to combat it. This personal psychoanalysis reveals our own weaknesses and also our responsibilities. If we assume that we have no shortcomings then we continue to unconsciously stoke the embers of violence.

To be able to do this analysis of the self it is important to remember that violence is not committed only in the physical form - wars, murders, fighting, killing etc. But that much more violence is committed in the non-physical, or what I chose to call "passive" form - discrimination, oppression, inequities in society of all kinds, denial of resources, over consumption of resources etc.

When I lived with my grandfather as a teenager among the many lessons he taught me the one most pertinent to the subject under discussion was "understanding violence by understanding the self." Grandfather made me build a genealogical tree of violence with two branches: "Physical" and "Passive". Everyday I had to examine and analyze all that I had experienced during the day and place them on this tree in their appropriate places. If it was the kind of violence where physical force is used then it would go under "Physical" violence. To determine physical violence was relatively easy because it was the hurting, bleeding, deadly kind of violence. However, to understand what "passive" violence is I had to ask myself the question: Did this act of mine hurt someone or heal someone? If it was an act that hurt someone, even remotely, then it was passive violence. I did this exercise in self-analysis for several months and very soon the "Passive" branch of the tree grew enormously while the "Physical" branch remained almost static. It was

then that Grandfather explained the connection between the two branches of violence. The passive violence that all of us commit ceaselessly, all the time, everyday, consciously and unconsciously causes anger in the victim and the victim then vents the anger through physical violence. Thus it is passive violence that acts as the fuel that ignites physical violence so, if we wish to work for peace, or create peace, we have to stop fuelling the fire of physical violence. In other words, "We must become the change we wish to see in the world." If we do not change then we directly and indirectly contribute to violence that is destroying humanity. If one cares to analyze the growth of violence over the past 50 years one will find that not only has violence grown in volume, but it has also grown in brutality. We are deliberately, through media exposure and, subtly through acceptance, becoming immune to the brutality of everyday violence. It is like a cancer that is eating away at the goodness in human beings.

2. WHAT HAS VIOLENCE TO DO WITH SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

It has everything to do with sustainable development because sustainable development should not mean giving people the means to make money alone. One of the greatest tragedies of modern times is that we have emphasized "economic development" of an individual, and a community, so much that everything else has been relegated as unimportant. Our education system is developed to provide successive generations with the means to exploit the market place and make money. Greed has become the spiritual creed of every generation. People go to college and universities not to acquire knowledge but to acquire the means to become millionaires.

Every parent through every generation has drummed into their children the need to become successful. We exhort them to "reach the top by any means possible". Success, of course, is universally measured in terms of material possessions. How much do you make? What kind of car do you drive? What kind of house do you possess? We have deliberately made children selfish and self-centered. The idea is to grab as big a piece of the pie as possible and forget about the needs of others. If greed is the watch-word of every individual on earth then it is not surprising that we have an imbalance in growth and distribution of wealth. No one, and no nation, can become rich without exploiting someone. The exploited then either accept their fate and live in misery and buy into the wide-spread condemnation that they are useless and will never amount to anything in life or, they succumb to anger and resort

to destroying what they cannot get -- hence the growth of crime and of violence in the form of terrorism, crime, murders, robberies, etc.

Sustainable development, in the Gandhian sense, means that we must transform ourselves first by eschewing greed and the excessive fondness of material things in life. "We have to live simply, so that others can simply live," Gandhi wrote.

As part of his Philosophy of Nonviolence Gandhi developed the theory of "Trusteeship" and "Constructive Action". Both these concepts need to be understood and accepted, so that we can make a difference in this world.

3. TRUSTEESHIP

Gandhi believed that all of us who are successful in life have acquired a talent either through education or through inheritance or both. We think we own the talent and, therefore, we exploit the talent to attain whatever our ambition may be - most commonly, to become rich and powerful.

Gandhi's contention was that we do not "own" the talent, but are "trustees" of the talent and, therefore, we should be willing to use the talent to help others as much as we do to help ourselves. Most people respond to this "help" in the form of charity. They claim we support many charities and that should be enough. Charity, according to Gandhi, takes two forms. It is either motivated by "pity" or motivated by "compassion". Pity is debilitating while compassion is constructive. When we give to charity because we feel sorry, or pity, for someone's plight we are typically saying here "are some crumbs from my table take them and make something out of your life." If, on the other hand, we were to act out of compassion, then we would stop to find out why is this person (or, these people) incapable of fending for themselves, what are their strengths and weaknesses, what can we do besides giving them financial support to help them realize their potential and create a better standard of living for themselves. It means giving cash as well as time to help rebuild broken lives.

The lives of the poor are broken because living under any form of oppression - economic, social, cultural or any other - saps them of their self-respect and self-confidence. They come to believe they are really "useless" and incapable of taking care of themselves. They need help to change that mind-set and believe in themselves. Until we do this with understanding, sincerity and compassion no amount of financial aid is going to change their status.

4. CONSTRUCTIVE ACTION

Once we have overcome our greed, arrogance and a sense of pity for the weaker sections of society then we will be able to devote greater energy and expertise to develop constructive programs that not only address the economic needs, but all their other needs to break out of the cycle of poverty.

In 1970 six of my friends in India and I decided to experiment with these two concepts - trusteeship and constructive action - to find a solution to the homelessness and poverty that forced Indians to take refuge in cities and live in slums and sub-human conditions. Giving them food and blankets and clothes did not address their long-term needs. It just made them more dependent on the charity of the rich and the Government.

We assembled some 600-odd people living in the slums and sidewalks of Mumbai who had two things in common. They came from the same region, south of the city of Mumbai and, at one time or the other they all had worked in the textile industry. For several months we regularly talked to them to understand their status. We may think we know what it means to live as they did but we really don't. We have never experienced it. One has to have the humility to listen to them and learn about their experiences and problems. When we thought we knew enough we told them: You are part of the problem, so logically you need to be a part of the solution too. They were willing to do whatever we suggested.

We told them they need to create a fund so that we can help them create an economic program to bring them a steady income. Logically, we could have gone to a foundation or a rich businessman and collected donations to help these people but we realized that that would only make them believe they can ask for whatever they needed and we would provide it to them. That was, according to us, a very negative mind-set. Since they had to become a part of the solution they needed to raise the resources themselves to change their status.

They were encouraged to work cooperatively with trust and faith to save a coin every day. It seemed ridiculous to ask people living in poverty to save a coin but we told them to make a sacrifice and save a coin. They worked extra hours, gave up cigarettes and cut down their consumption of tea. They did whatever it took to meet our challenge and surprised us by saving the equivalent of US \$.11,000 within two years. With this money we bought them 10

second-hand power looms to make textile cloth and installed these machines in a little tin shed in the village Vita, 300 miles south of Mumbai. These poor people had little or no education, had no idea of marketing, money management, production or business principles. We had to guide and train them through the process. The few who were sent back to the village to run this modest factory round the clock and make it possible for all those who had contributed to the fund to come and live a decent life at home in their own village. Within the first decade they had expanded their factory to four units with more than 500 machines and almost all were back in their villages with hope and promise for the future.

They continued with the small savings habit and in 1978 they opened their first cooperative bank in Mumbai and today that bank has seven branch offices helping the poor get modest financial loans at affordable interest rates to start their own enterprises. In the 1990s they found there were many women who were widowed, divorced or abandoned and had no one to take care of them so they set up a textile factory for the women and trained them to run it profitably. We not only succeeded in helping these people economically but also prevented them from becoming victims of greed themselves. They learned the importance of compassion and have been helping others while living a modest lives themselves. Through their own resources they were able to send their children to schools and colleges and return as doctors, engineers and qualified business people to transform the neighbourhood. This experience convinced us that Gandhi's trusteeship and constructive action works and, along with the broader philosophy of nonviolence, must become the model to address poverty around the world.

Gandhi said during his lifetime that he was amazed everyday to find new concepts and new avenues of nonviolence revealing themselves. Before condemning a philosophy as being irrelevant today it is important that we understand it fully. If we make this impartial study of the philosophy we will find that it is not only relevant today but it is the only way we can save humanity from losing its soul. When we question the relevance of nonviolence we are actually questioning the relevance of love, respect, understanding and compassion because these are the pillars on which the philosophy rests. If we conclude that love, respect, understanding and compassion are irrelevant today then all I can say is God help humanity and this world.

