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# UNIT 11 GANDHI'S VIEWS ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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## 11.1 INTRODUCTION

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Gandhi's views on children and youth constitute an interesting aspect in the holistic realm of national freedom struggle. His intention was to spell out the aspects of best upbringing, parental care, and development of the intellect and good conduct that would help in evolving into a good human being. For this, the basic foundation in the childhood should be apt. To him, children were the real practitioners of truth and non-violence. Their innocence captivated Gandhi. His letters to the members of his family reveal his absolute affection for children and guidelines regarding their diet, hygiene and health. Similarly, Gandhi had an unflinching faith in the youth of the nation as the whole nation depended on their ability to achieve freedom in all spheres. He encouraged them to adopt truth and non-violence in their struggle for freedom and also advised them not to give in to vices and violence. He recommended the *ekadasha vratas* to the youth so that they could achieve purity of body, mind and soul. To him, they represented hope for the future wherein India would achieve greater heights as an apostle of truth and non-violence.

### Aims and Objectives

This Unit will enable you to understand

- Gandhi's views on children
- Education of children
- Gandhi's views on youth
- The youth's contribution towards the national regeneration

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## 11.2 GANDHI ON CHILDREN

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The child is- infact all children are- unconscious worshippers of truth and hence they go on advancing. We should, therefore, become children, that is to say, we should shed all fear and worship truth. We should do that which our heart believes to be true.

## **Mahatma Gandhi**

(Navajivan, 24-11-1929, CWMG, vol.42, pp.207-8).

Gandhi immensely loved children and viewed them as true followers of truth. Their innocence captivated him and he was often moved by their pure actions and thoughts. As he observed, 'if we could become innocent like children, and derive our meanings from innocent observations like theirs, we could spare ourselves much trouble, many disputes and much waste of time. And our intellect would become increasingly keener'. Gandhi wanted all the adults to follow this aspect of children in order to rid themselves of any problem and solve them in most amicable manner, just as a child does in innocence. He further observes that it is not easy to become like a child for it involves shedding any untruthful element in one's thought and behaviour. He says, "it is not easy for a person advanced in age to become and continue to be, like a child, innocent and simple and a conscious worshipper of truth. But it is our duty to do so. The perfect incarnation of God as conceived by Hinduism is the child Krishna. Jesus said, 'wisdom flows from the mouths of babes and sucklings. He said to those who desired salvation, become like children'" (CWMG, vol.42, pp.207-8).

### **Upbringing of Children**

Gandhi was firm in his opinion that for the upbringing of the children, parents should have a proper of rearing and nursing of babies. Necessary care has to be taken to bring them up and monitor their growth. He said the following in this context: I am convinced that for the proper upbringing of children the parents ought to have a general knowledge of the care and nursing of babies. At every step I have seen the advantages of my careful study of the subject. My children would not have enjoyed the general health that they do today, had I not studied the subject and turned my knowledge to account. We labour under a sort of superstition that the child has nothing to learn during the first five years of its life. On the contrary the fact is that the child never learns in after life what it does in its first five years. The education of the child begins with conception. The physical and mental states of the parents at the moment of conception are reproduced in the baby. After birth the child imitates the parents, and for a considerable number of years entirely depends on them for its growth (CWMG, vol.39, p.165; also see *Autobiography*). Gandhi also observes thus: 'the truth is that most of us are scarcely fit to be parents. Why should those who have not learnt the science of child-care bring children into the world?' Gandhi acknowledges the role of the home environment that plays a great part during the growing up years. Children inherit certain qualities from their parents and in some cases, have successfully surmounted the difficulties of an evil inheritance. He attributes it to the purity of the soul. During his stay in South Africa, Gandhi became teacher to his children as well as to those living at Tolstoy Farm. Gandhi insisted on character building as the proper foundation of children's education; he felt that 'if the foundation was firmly laid, I was sure that the children could learn all the other things themselves or with the assistance of friends' (CWMG, vol.39, p.267; See also *Autobiography*).

### **Diet and Cleanliness**

Gandhi insisted on administering a proper diet to the children and that which does not hurt the delicate system of the child. In a letter to one of his associates, he writes thus: 'a mother should know how to take care of the children's teeth. Their food not be very soft and should not contain too much starch. They should have sugar and jaggery in very

small quantity only. Instead they may be allowed to suck juice from lots of sugarcane in the season. When the season is over, the children may be given fruits containing sugar, like figs, *munakka*, dates, etc. moreover, the mother should stand by the side of the children when they brush their teeth in the morning and teach them to clean the teeth with the babool stick vigorously...they should be taught to gargle properly after every meal and to massage the teeth and gums with their fingers' (CWMG, vol.53, pp.224-5). Substituting sugar for jaggery is harmful and should be avoided. Children should be fed increasing quantities of fresh fruit to keep them in the best of their health, strength and vigour. Gandhi advises against giving caffeinated drinks like tea and coffee to children.

Gandhi deemed it essential for parents to pay special attention to the cleanliness aspects. The following points should be kept in mind in this context:

- (1) Their teeth should be clean. They should be made to rinse them every morning and again before retiring at night.
- (2) Their hair should be clean. It should be cut short and washed and brushed every day. No oil need be used.
- (3) Their nails should be clean, clipped from time to time and always washed clean.
- (4) Their clothes and shoes should be neat and tidy.
- (5) Their satchels and books should be clean; they should handle books with clean hands.

We need hardly add that it will accrue to the benefit of the children if these rules are kept in mind and made to follow them.

Gandhi observed that physical tidiness and cleanliness should be the first lesson as cleanliness will ensure that children do not get infected with contagious diseases.

### **Parental Care**

Gandhi believed that a child's health depends greatly on the condition of the mother. A mother should have a healthy diet in order to ensure the good health of the child. Gandhi advises not to give medication drugs to the child in case of a child's illness as it will be risking its life due to the toxic effect of the medicine. Gandhi also advises against getting panicky in case of a child's illness as it will have a harmful effect on the child's health. Gandhi advocates a higher role for father as the child learns to observe the behaviour of parents in the growing up years. Parents are endowed with a delicate responsibility of bringing up the children; therefore, it is mandatory for the parents to conduct themselves with purity of conduct so that they can teach the children the virtues of purity and honesty. Thus the parents have the responsibility of ensuring their children's physical and mental well-being. It is very important for parents to exercise self-control so that the young minds are not corrupted by indecent thoughts and actions. The ideal way to achieve this is to practise 'Vanaprasthashrama'. Gandhi wants parents to conduct themselves thoughtfully so that children follow them taking them as role models. India's future, Gandhi said, lies in the hands of parents. Gandhi wanted parents to teach children the virtues of truth and non-violence. He gives the example of Prahlada, a virtuous child of the demon king Hiranyakashipu, who resisted his father's cruelty calmly and not violently. Gandhi was also against the separation of young children from their parents.

### **Obedience to Parents**

“It is one’s duty to obey one’s parents. They are one’s teachers. They are God. Shravana achieved his salvation by regarding his parents as God. While obeying his father’s orders, Rama gave up his kingdom”. Gandhi believed in conducting with devotion towards parents; he considered obedience to them as the greatest virtue. The very impression of the mythological figure Shravana made a permanent imprint in his mind during his childhood and he made constant efforts to live up to this ideal all his life. He acknowledged that whatever he achieved in his life was due to his devotion to his parents and the fruit of their blessings. He called for establishing a pure environment where the children would have complete faith in their parents. Children should strictly obey their parents and should consult them regarding their actions and clear doubts whether it is conforming to one’s moral duty. He was strictly against belittling parents and disobeying the parents’ commands. Where there are differences between the parents and their offsprings, they may be endured or both should conduct themselves by tolerating mutual differences. Also, parents should not expect their grown up sons and daughters to always obey them. He strictly forbids the parents to desist from threatening their children either through blackmailing them emotionally or by being obdurate.

### **Child Marriages**

Gandhi thoroughly discouraged child marriages as the age is not ripe for the boys and girls into a matrimonial relation. At a young age the physical and mental capacities of the children do not develop and this renders them incapable of handling the pressures that come with the marriages. Gandhi’s experience of his early marriage at a tender age and the resultant difficulties made him discourage this practice vehemently. Early marriage would also divert the attention of the young children towards physical intimacy, which, in itself, is detrimental to the growth of the children. He called upon the parents not to compel their children to enter into a marriage when they are unprepared for it; young boys and girls should be attending school or constructive workshops and not be saddled with the duties of a household. Where parents insist on not following this, he did not find it unreasonable if the children disregarded parental authority and followed the light of reason and conscience (Young India, 3-1-1929).

### **Preference for Male Child**

Gandhi considered the preference for male child as invidious and wrong and that the birth of a son or a daughter should be welcome alike. He writes in Harijan thus: ‘Hindu Shastras certainly show a marked bias in favour of the male offspring. But this originated at a time when physical warfare was the order of the day and adequate man-power was a sine qua non of success in the struggle for existence....but if we regard marriage as a sacrament, there is room in it only for one offspring, and that is why in our shastras, the first offspring is described as dharmaja, i.e., duty-born, all subsequent issues being referred to as kamaja, i.e., lust-born. I make no distinction between son and daughter’ (Harijan, 5-6-1937). Gandhi further notes that, ‘in this age when men and women are supposed to have and should have equal rights they should be rated equally. Why should there be such jubilation at the birth of a son? And why should there be sorrow when a daughter is born? Both of them have an equal right to live. The world can go on only with the existence of both. But a belief which has taken deep roots from ancient times cannot be suddenly wiped out by one or more individuals writing against it. Only when knowledge that enables us to distinguish between good and bad spreads in Hindu society

and women are truly respected will such incidents be averted' (Harijanbandhu, 26-9-1937; from Gujarati translation).

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### **11.3 EDUCATION OF CHILDREN**

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To Gandhi, good education of children was of utmost importance for it sows in them the seeds of humanity, love and respect that would enable them to become good human beings upon their growth. The basics should start from religious sources as these values are taught to one from the very childhood; a child also observes traditional practices at home and follows up with them throughout his or her life. Gandhi advocated an education that insists on character building and spirit of service.

#### **Religion**

Gandhi remarks that all those who have firm faith in their religion are strong, not weak. He suggested that the boys and girls should be taught that they are not weak. Children have their religion to strengthen them. Following any religion means belonging to God. 'We must inculcate this in our children from the time they start showing some understanding. You must tell your children that the place of religion is in their hearts and it is not in your power to protect it. I have taught my children that they must protect their own religion' (Speech at Prayer Meeting, 30-9-1947, New Delhi). Gandhi felt that children should be conveyed the message of Gita at a very young age as it is the prime time to understand and imbibe such concepts.

#### **Development of Intellect**

Gandhi felt that little children do not need the assistance of the books so much as they need the assistance of teachers. Since there is a shortage of trained teachers, the primers should be designed to assist the teachers rather than children. He wanted that the literature for children should be a universally accepted original contribution to the methods of teaching children of a country so vast and so poor as ours. He did not approve of expensive European models as they serve little purpose in this regard. A gentle and vigilant teacher should gently coax and teach the children habits of discipline 'so that their reason, being freed from the control of their senses, would become from the very childhood their guide'. It is no discipline to tell the children to follow a hero. No habit is cultivated thereby. The children who are taught to slavishly do things become sluggish. And if perchance another schoolmaster displaces from the throne their hearts the hero presented to them by the predecessor, they are likely to become unhinged and useless in after-life. Whereas, if from the very commencement, whatever is placed before them is reasoned out for them, and then examples of great men having done noble deeds placed before them to strengthen their resolve or support their reason, they are likely to develop into strong hardy citizens who, under difficult circumstances, will be able to render a good account of themselves (Young India, 29-7-1926). This is precisely how their intellect would develop. Further children should be educated in a way to inculcate the sense of morality and make them freedom-loving and self-reliant. Teacher should establish a spiritual relationship with the children and give them proper moral instructions. This is the key to education. Children's education should consist of physical, mental and spiritual aspects and this would compensate the existing deficiencies in the education system. Teachers should teach and encourage students to give up the practice of untouchability so that the inherent deficiencies in the social system are wiped out.

### **Corporal Punishment**

Gandhi, in reply to a school teacher's question regarding following the non-violent way of handling the erring students said the following: 'I am quite clear that you must not inflict corporal punishment on your children or pupils. You can punish yourself, if you like and are qualified, in order to melt your children's or pupils' hearts. The non-violent method invariably succeeded. When a bond is established between a teacher and his pupils, the latter will generally yield before their teacher's suffering for their sake. Non-violence does not compel you to keep in your school a student who does not carry out disciplinary rules' (Harijan, 13-7-1940; CWMG, vol.72).

### **Child Labour**

Gandhi suggested imposing prohibition against employment of children of school going age in factories. He opined that childhood be spent in acquiring education and not in working in factories to sustain the family from the effects of poverty. Child labour is now a major factor of menace wherein thousands of children in India are employed in factories to earn livelihood. Trafficking of children has become a common offence that robs children of their innocence and makes them work through hard labour at a tender age.

### **Spinning**

Gandhi recommended spinning for children too. He wanted that women and children up to the age of twelve to spare time for spinning and other processes of khadi production. Even if children devoted four hours to cleaning, carding and spinning, enough khadi could be produced. Gandhi envisaged this task for children with the simple aim of inculcating the spirit of service and sacrifice, which he associated with spinning to be inculcated at a young age. This, in turn, would prepare them for not only the political freedom but also the social and economic freedom through spinning khadi. Spinning and charkha, for Gandhi, symbolised the nationalist spirit.

Similarly he also requested the parents to give their children 'education in the essentials of the dharma (moral duty), teach them non-cooperation with sin and the use of the weapon of non-violence and obtain their blessings in this sacred task (freedom struggle)...the Viceroy's goodwill will not help us to win swaraj but the blessings of the pure-hearted children certainly will' (Navajivan, 11-9-1921).

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## **11.4 GANDHI ON YOUTH**

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In an individual's life, the time of youth constitutes the most crucial phase for it is in this phase that the possibilities of following a disciplined way of life or go towards a wayward behaviour determines the way of life or future course of action. Therefore, Gandhi wanted the youth to engage in constructive work, educate the villagers and imbibe morally superior values. To Gandhi, the youth are the agents of social change. They have the capacity to establish an ideal society based on the immortal principles of truth and non-violence. Gandhi had an important message for the youth which would be studied under various rubrics in the following paragraphs.

### **Violence and vices**

One of the most telling effects of violence, according to Gandhi, reflected in the violent methods they choose to settle scores or conflicts. Reacting to the assassination of Mr.Saunders, a British official killed by the youth and the subsequent violent reaction on

some leaders of Punjab, Lajpat Rai, Gandhi has openly criticised the revengeful tactics that involved violence. He found their intentions misplaced, having no relevance as violence begets violence. He stated emphatically that the freedom of the nation cannot be attained by resorting to violence. He observed that 'the temple of freedom requires the patient, intelligent and constructive effort of tens of thousands of men and women, young and old. Acts such as we are deploring decidedly retard the progress of this quiet building. When it does nothing else, it diverts the attention of the countless builders' (Young India, 27-12-1928). His Hind Swaraj is an account of his message to the Indian Youth whose motives were misplaced while deciding the methods of attaining the independence. He also advised the youth not to give in to the evils habits like drinking as these habits cloud the reasoning and wisdom of the youth. He suggested the path of morality, spirituality, non-violence and self-discipline. According to Gandhi, the seven social sins include:

- Politics without principles
- Wealth without work
- Pleasure without conscience
- Knowledge without character
- Commerce without morality
- Science without humanity
- Worship without sacrifice

He warned the youth not to drift apart and observe the above-mentioned factors as crucial to understand. As has already been mentioned in some of the lessons in the previous courses, Gandhi suggested '*Ekadasha vratas*' to be observed by the youth to lead a disciplined life.

Gandhi was also against the youth adopting the culture that has violence inherently. He rues about the cultural and political degradation of the west and warns the youth not to adopt these as role models. As he said, 'my hope lies in the youth of the country. Such of them as are prey to the vice are not vicious by nature. They are helplessly and thoughtlessly drawn to it. They must realize the harm it has done them and society. They must understand too that nothing but a rigorously disciplined life will save them and the country from utter ruin. Above all, unless they visualize God and seek His aid in keeping them from temptation, no amount of dry discipline will do them much good' (Young India, 9-7-1925). Gandhi had message for the students too that has been dealt with in one of the following Units.

### **Disregard for age**

Gandhi felt it is quite natural that the youth has little patience with the older generation. Due to the gap, the attitudes and thoughts differ between both the generations. At the same time, he was against the belittling of the elders by the youth for no reason or on the reasons of outdated thinking of the older generation. He states that 'it is the fashion in some quarters nowadays for the young to discredit whatever may be said by old people. I am not prepared to say that there is absolutely no justification for this belief. But I warn the youth of the country against always discounting whatever old men or women may say for the mere fact that it is said by such persons. Even as wisdom often

comes from the mouths of babes, so does it often come from the mouths of old people. The golden rule is to test everything in the light of reason and experience, no matter from where it comes' (Harijan, 28-3-1936). Gandhi himself set an example of such devotion to elders much before he became a prominent public figure. His devoted service to his father and his firm resolve not to break the vows administered to him at the behest of his mother before leaving for England for higher studies stand as good examples to emulate.

### **National Militia and Military Training**

Gandhi supported the idea of national militia only under swaraj because people cannot be made to adopt non-violence under compulsion. Therefore, it is necessary that they learn the ways of meeting national crisis by non-violent means. He said that 'it is one thing to adopt non-violence for a specific purpose in a time of crisis, and quite another thing to advocate its adoption by all for all time as a philosophy of life. But I lack the strength for such a mission. I may not therefore resist the formation of a national militia'. Gandhi considered the militia as unnecessary but had doubts about convincing others about it. At the same time, Gandhi disapproved the idea of the youth taking military training from then government as most likely that would have to be used against their own brethren. Since they owe allegiance to the Military, they would be compelled or ordered to train guns at their own countrymen. They would come under the hypnotic spell of the force and conform to it under all circumstances, sometimes even against national interests. The youth, under the oath of allegiance to the corps, would be more loyal to the British (Young India, 10-1-1929). Post-independence, Gandhi preferred to have a minimum armed force for the country.

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## **11.5 CONSTRUCTIVE WORK AND COUNTRY'S SERVICE**

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The Constructive Programme, Gandhi's blueprint for the social regeneration of India, has provided a great opportunity to the youth to take part in the constructive work and do immense service to the nation. Gandhi especially called upon the youth to undertake the task for they are the real torchbearers of the future, in whose hands India had great future. Gandhi wanted the youth to make village life their goal and not the city life. He wanted that the rural life, which has its roots in the ancient civilisation of India, be redeemed by the youth of the nation as he felt that real progress of India lies in its villages. Gandhi felt that it could be possible only if the youth of the country would undertake this onerous task to 'reconstruct their life and pass every day of their vacation in the villages surrounding their colleges or high schools' (Young India, 7-11-1929). He called upon the youth 'who are dissatisfied with their existing surroundings and outlook to study these two great national institutions (All-India Spinners' Association and National Educational Institutions) which are doing silent but most effective constructive work and which present the youth of the country an opportunity both for service and for honourable maintenance...let them penetrate the villages and find an unlimited scope for service, research and true knowledge' (Ibid.). Gandhi aimed at national liberation and development through constructive work. He remarked that 'today the reins of the nation are in the hands of the youth. It is up to them to strive unitedly for the independence of the country' (CWMG, vol.42, p.352).

Gandhi believed that every nation depends a great deal on its youth. Youth organisations



help a great deal in going ahead with good work. He said that 'it is helpful to have good young men coming forward, for it is they alone who can venture to experiment. The members of these youth organizations will be able to achieve many great things, if they work with sincerity and with the sole intention of doing the right thing for their country' (Indian Opinion, 28-4-1906). He observed that 'a nation whose youths discard restraint, courtesy, humility and tolerance courts destruction. Their responsibility is greater than that of old people because the latter have given whatever they could or as much as they wished to give (to the nation). Youths are today shaping the new order and making fresh contributions' (Navajivan, 5-12-1926; CWMG, vol.32, p.388).

He called upon the youth to contribute towards education, prohibition, health and hygiene and teach the villagers the benefits of all these. He also felt that it is their duty to take up such constructive work. To undertake such service, Gandhi suggested to the youth to banish all evil thoughts from their mind and take up service of the country as the motto of their life. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reports that 'he (Gandhi) referred to non-cooperation movement as nothing but a movement for self-purification and advised them (youth) to surrender themselves to God's will (CWMG, vol.27, pp.11-12). He advised them to take up spinning and use the charkha with a spirit of sacrifice and service and spiritually achieve communion with God in the process.

In the course of national freedom struggle, Gandhi assigned greater role to the youth especially in the non-cooperation movement. He said that 'they can supply recruits in large numbers in the civil disobedience campaign. They can, moreover, help to carry the message of independence to every nook and corner of the land. They can usefully picket foreign cloth and liquor shops. Those of its members who are unable to participate actively in the present campaign can render good service in the realm of social reforming, popularizing khaddar and swadeshi articles, in pushing forward prohibition propaganda, etc.' (*The Hindu*, 25-3-1930; CWMG, vol.43, pp.117-8). Gandhi advised the youth to 'shed moral weakness and speak out their thoughts with courage and yet with humility and restraint' (CWMG, vol.38, p.139). In his address to the youth during the Youth week at Ahmedabad, Gandhi advised the students not to 'insult the teachers or utter bitter words. Harsh words do no good. They will only create bitterness. And if there is hard work combined with courtesy, you will do credit to yourselves and your name will be cherished in future history. Be courteous at heart as well. Your struggle is a peaceful one, and whatever the provocation, you may not cross the limits of peacefulness' (*Prajabandhu*, 13-1-1929, translation from Gujarati; CWMG, vol.38, pp.334-335). Most importantly, Gandhi wanted the youth to help the farmer in elevating his miseries. Though he found the youth having enthusiasm to do such service, he cautioned the youth not to carry on just with fervour but serve the farmers with patience, self-confidence, physical strength, capacity to withstand heat, cold, etc., and the willingness to get training (Navajivan, 22-12-1929; CWMG, vol.42, p.303).

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## 11.6 SUMMARY

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Gandhi's fondness for children made him express his views on each and every minute detail regarding their upbringing, education, health, cleanliness and finally their little but valuable contribution towards freedom struggle via simple tasks like assisting in spinning. He wanted that the best of education-physical, mental and spiritual-be provided to them so that they would become good human beings in their life. His views on the youth depict with much clarity as to how he envisioned a greater role for them not only in the political

struggle for independence but also in the social and economic regeneration of India. Apart from that Gandhi envisaged a strict code of conduct for both young men and women thus giving immense importance to the character building. To him, only those who have purity in character can contribute towards the all round development of the self, community and subsequently of the nation.

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## **11.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

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1. 'Children are the true practitioners of truth and non-violence'. Enumerate Gandhi's views on children in this context.
2. What are Gandhi's views on children's education?
3. What role did Gandhi envisage for the youth in the national regeneration of India?

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## **SUGGESTED READINGS**

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Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi (Select Volumes).