

## Achieving Millennium Development Goals: A View from Gandhi's Window

If you cannot change yourself, how can you change the World – Gandhi.

At the turn of the century, with the beginning of the New Millennium, in the year 2000, the U.N. and the world leaders met to discuss the future of the world and its progress, and agreed on a number of global goals that should be achieved in the new Millennium. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) that were identified dealt with poverty and hunger, universal primary education, gender equality and empowering of women, child mortality, maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, ensuring environmental sustainability, and developing global partnerships for development.

In 2002, in Johannesburg, where the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) was held, as a sequel to the Earth Summit meeting which was held in Rio in 1992, the goal of 'drinking water and sanitation' was also included as one of the Millennium Development Goals, with the objective of 'halving the number of people living without safe drinking water or basic sanitation'. It has been suggested that Mrs. Nane Kofi Annan attending the Johannesburg meeting was responsible for pushing the agenda of 'sanitation' in the MDGs. In a speech she gave at the Johannesburg Summit she said "Clean water alone is not enough, it has to be accompanied by sanitation and hygiene... Sanitation is necessary to preserve human dignity and for girls and women to protect themselves against assault. As a woman I know we are much more vulnerable. The lack of latrines even stops young girls from going to school... The simple act of washing hands at key times with soap and water could reduce the death toll from diarrhoeal diseases by more than a third". It was agreed that Sanitation should be included as part of the MDG's to be achieved.

In order to achieve the MDG's, a 'Millennium Project' was organised as an independent advisory body to the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. The purpose of the Millennium Project was to propose the best strategies for meeting the MDGs including frameworks for implementation.

Two years later after the Millennium Development Goals were agreed upon, and the Millennium Project organised, Kofi Annan, the U.N. Secretary General, admitted that the world was falling short in meeting these objectives and that "insufficient progress was being made". In order to put new life in achieving the MDG's Kofi Annan initiated a Millennium Campaign to make the commitments better known through out the world and to ensure that they are the focus of global action. And he said "Our hope is that in this age of democracy annual reporting will force action".

Will annual reporting by the various committees and/or countries force ACTION as the U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan hopes?

The U.N. agencies which are at the head of the global agenda for development, as also of achieving MDG's hope that by 2015 they will achieve

- Halving extreme poverty and hunger
- Halving people living without safe drinking water and sanitation
- Achieving Universal primary education
- Ensuring environmental sustainability

Will these MDGs be achieved by 2015?

The past history of U.N. goals and commitments made in Rio in relation to Agenda 21, regarding sustainable development, or climate change, or regarding hunger and poverty, etc. shows that there has been a wide gap between what was hoped for and what in fact was achieved – that is really not achieved.

In his Environment Report, 1972-92, Dr. Mustafa Tolba said “none of the environmental problems identified by the U.N. Stockholm Conference 20 years ago have really been solved – and some of the key issues addressed in 1972 have gone from bad to worse. Crippling and degrading poverty and environmental degradation had become more in many parts of the world.”

Recently, the U.N. had sponsored another major environmental study in collaboration with the World Bank, UNDP, UNEP and World Resources Institute in Washington to study the five major ecosystems – forests, freshwater systems, coastal marine habitats, grasslands and agricultural lands. Eugene Linden commenting on the study called PAGE for short, wrote in Time (April/May 2000) raising the question: “Will PAGE accomplish anything? The UN has a reputation for studying problems as a substitute for doing something about them. Its agencies churn out papers the way rag seed produces pollen, and most UN studies quickly disappear into file cabinet oblivion in the offices of other paper shufflers. Moreover, after decades of conferences on environment and sustainable development, the natural response to such an assessment is “Hasn’t someone already done this?”

The core of the problem of achieving MDGs, as also of the earlier U.N. studies mentioned above, I believe, is that it requires a paradigm shift. We are slowly realising that reducing poverty or moving towards sustainable development is not just an economic or a technical problem, or of acquiring greater financial inputs – all these are important but achieving these goals also needs an inner awakening, an inner transformation of man – a concern that has been ignored.

Focusing on ‘sanitation’ I will attempt to show how important it is to combine scientific and technical knowledge with a sense of inner awakening, of ‘spirituality’ to achieve results. As Veerabhadra Mishra, a ‘mahant’ of one of the largest temples in Benares, and also a Professor of Engineering in Benares Hindu University, and deeply concerned about the cleaning of the Ganges puts it “the western approach will not work here. You need to use a different language, a different relationship with the Ganges.” And he explains “Life is like a river. One bank is the *vedas* and the other bank is the contemporary world, which includes science and technology. If both banks are not firm the water will scatter. If both banks are firm the river will run its course”.

## **Sanitation**

The MDG on Drinking Water and Sanitation hopes that by 2015 the number of people will be halved who have no access to safe drinking water or sanitation.

As early as 1980, the U.N. had passed a Resolution declaring 1980-1990 as a Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade calling for basic sanitation facilities being made available to all citizens by 1990.

When the 1991 Census was taken it was found that the percentage of house holds having toilet facility was only 23.7% - that is three fourths of the population had no toilet facilities! The percentage of house-holds in rural areas having toilet facilities was only 9.48% !

The UNDP’s Human Development Report of 1998 makes the point that although the world has become richer, civic facilities have declined. The Report mentions that “although consumption expenditures reached \$24 trillion in 1998, six times larger than 1995, civic facilities have

declined relative to population.... The percentage of people mentioned with no access to sanitation was 71%.

According to WASH, a U.N. organisation promoting the idea of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, “In most developing countries only 1 or 2% of government spending goes to low cost water and sanitation. More is spent on services for the rich than low cost for many” . Further, WASH states “2½ billion people live a life without a clean and a private place to defecate and urinate. And at any one time more than half the poor of the developing world are ill from causes relating to sanitation and water.”

The past history of U.N. goals and commitments made in relation to poverty, sanitation, sustainable development shows that there is a wide gap between what is hoped for and what in fact is achieved.

Will the MDG of ‘halving the number of people living without safe drinking water or basic sanitation’ be achieved by 2015?

I believe the core of the problem of achieving the MDG’s is concerned with the inner transformation of man. For without service and compassion we cannot solve the problems of poverty, of water and sanitation, of peace and violence, of inequality and development as past history has shown.

### **Gandhi’s Approach to Sanitation**

Gandhi’s interest in sanitation was largely linked to his concern about the ‘untouchables’ who performed the ‘unclean’ task of handling excreta and cleaning of latrines and were treated with disdain and indignities. Said Gandhi “Assumption of superiority by any person over any other is a sin against God and man”.

In the ‘ashrams’ (communities) that Gandhi established for pursuing his work he cleaned his own latrine, as others living in the ashram also did.

Gandhi often said “I may not be born again, but if it happens I will like to be born in a family of scavengers, so that I may relieve them of the inhuman, unhealthy and hateful practice of carrying night soil”.

In a small town called Sindhi the community seemed indifferent to the attempts of dealing with sanitation and related problems. Gandhi requested Miraben to go and live in Sindhi and set a personal example. Underlying his request Gandhi explained “the connection that people’s indifference cannot be done away with so long as we do not find someone to live amongst the people of every village..... very few people are prepared to do this work. I am of the opinion that this will yield results more quickly... One way of involving the villagers was for a volunteer or a development worker to live there and get their help or commitment through personal example”.

A single individual can demonstrate the potency of action. People cannot follow unless they see it and realise the unmanifest. When spirit becomes flesh then they can see and understand it. If even one man/woman comes forth with his/her experience s/he becomes a liberating force, a beacon light to all. It is this quality of beacon light which Gandhi provided for action, which we also need if we are to achieve the MDG’s.

Here is another example of Gandhi’s advice on sanitation to the Mayavaram Municipality (September 13, 1927). Gandhi had been invited by the Mayavaram Municipality and was presented with an address praising him as a humanitarian and a reformer. Gandhi replying to the address said “I want to speak to you upon the sanitation of this place. Your municipality very

kindly presented me an address in which you have mentioned some of my activities in which I am interested as a humanitarian, as a reformer. I reckon sanitation also as one of the important things which a humanitarian or a reformer must tackle. Within three or four minutes' walk of the place where you have kindly housed me, I endeavoured unsuspectingly to go out for a walk thinking that it was a beautiful grove by the side of a lovely pond. A rustic bamboo foot-bridge drew my attention to walk over it. I crossed it, turned to the right, and walked with my companion but a few paces when you may imagine what I saw. What I saw was a sight too horrible to talk about; and the stench that was coming out of it was suffocating. I saw the water of that pond was being defiled in a disgusting manner, when, at the same time, a woman was filling her pot with that same water..... Surely there is something that is terribly wrong in this state of affairs. The first condition of any municipal life is decent sanitation and an unfailing supply of pure water. Do not for a moment consider that either of these two things require any great outlay of money. Both these things are capable of being secured without your having to spend any money at all, if only you have the will to secure them to the citizens. But it requires a vivid sense of your municipal duties. Membership of a municipal board must not be treated as a place of privilege. No man dare enter a municipality except in the spirit of a scavenger."

On another occasion in 1938 Gandhi speaking to the volunteers who had volunteered to do sanitation work in the Congress camp said "Don't think your work is inferior to that of Rashtrapati Bose (President) or Jawaharlal Nehru. No, not an atom. They serve and you also serve, and in fact, I value your work more. I myself am an experienced Bhangi (scavenger) and a competent Bhangi. Do your work sincerely and earnestly.... you know that you are engaged in a work that I like most. The Bhangi has been the most despised of the Harijans because his work is regarded as most degrading. Many forget the important social service rendered by Bhangis".

Continuing his speech Gandhi said "But we forgot that our mothers did that very work whilst we were babies innocent of all cleanliness. If that work was ignoble the Bhangis would be ignoble, but if it was noble the Bhangis work is also noble. But our mothers cleaned our filth because we were their babies, because they could not do otherwise, because they were wrapped up in us and adored their own selves in us. Their work was thus selfish. The volunteer Bhangi's work is unselfish and so nobler than that of mothers. And if I revere my mother and therefore the whole of womankind, is it not clear that I should adore the volunteer Bhangi even more?"

Gandhi when he went to Delhi or Bombay sometimes stayed with a 'Harijan', in the scavenger's colony, showing solidarity with them. Political leaders, foreign media persons and others who wanted to meet and discuss political and other concerns with him went to the scavenger's colony to meet him.

Gandhi's great success was precisely in igniting the moral and ethical values of the people. As Nehru pointed out "In his own peculiar way he (Gandhi) had a knack of releasing powerful forces which spread out like ripples in the water's surface and affected millions....he has changed the face of India"

It is this kind of releasing of powerful forces for action which the MDG's seem to lack and needs to learn if action is to result. If the face of the new millennium is to change as is the mission of the MDG's then there are lessons to be learnt from Gandhi.

### **Where Shall We Start? With Oneself**

Gandhi practiced what he preached. If he was concerned about the 'poorest of the poor' he adopted a life style which reflected his constituency. When the textile labor in Ahmedabad went on strike under Gandhi's leadership, and complained of hunger and starvation, Gandhi himself went on a fast.

And if he preached 'cleanliness' and the upliftment of Harijans, he himself undertook the 'scavengers' work, and emphasised the importance of inner and outer cleanliness.

To follow Gandhi is difficult and yet millions followed him. He emphasised throughout that we must change ourselves before we can change others, that our real enemies are within.

If we wish to achieve the MDG's, and ignite the people of the world into action we will find ourselves at Gandhi's door.

James Wolfenson, the President of the World Bank, after visiting 60 to 70 countries, and the poor in those countries, said "The World Bank's central mission is to weld economic assistance with spiritual, ethical and moral development". Mr. Wolfensohn has sought the collaboration of the world's religious and spiritual leaders. He has helped establish the World Faith Development Dialogue (WFDD) to work in partnership with the World Bank on poverty and development issues.

Most changes that have altered the course of history have begun by individuals who by their example and acts did what many thought impossible. Underlying each one was a moral conviction, a fearlessness that refused to be subdued. It was Gandhi's ability to reach out to the soul of the poor that helped a demoralised backward broken up people to strengthen their backs and lift their heads.

If we are to make progress in MDG's especially dealing with poverty and hunger, and surviving in slums without safe drinking water or sanitation, we must not repeat past history but make new history. The Rio and the Johannesburg meetings were Summits of the highest order and yet the results achieved in terms of action have been disappointing.

The politicians and the government officials and the negotiators who help take decisions in such forums, because of conflicting pressures, make compromises in order to be practical, whereas, the 'spiritual' leaders or leaders concerned with the ethical dimensions of decisions are uncompromising about the pursuit of Truth.

The politician's way however well meant is based on compromises and one compromise leads to another and each compromise leads you further away from truth and action.

There are spiritual institutions in India, as also in other countries, where with a philosophy of service and salvation they have been able to achieve remarkable results.

In the MDG's it is important that we include institutions and strategies that are consistent with the deeper spiritual traditions of the people. If we can develop such an approach, such an inclusive paradigm of development, we will be able to reach our MDG's. Without such an approach we will flounder and fail as we have done in the last 50 years.

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(AVARD National Seminar at Wardha 22-24, July 2003)