

Gandhi's timeless values inspire young compassionate leaders

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Responsibility will mellow and sober the youth and prepare them for the burden they must discharge," said Mahatma Gandhi. He firmly believed in youth as torchbearers of justice, compassion and progress through value-based 'sewa' (service) as a way of life. It is through the lens of the youth that we can see early indicators of change across generations. As tech-savvy members of Gen-Z become aware of global crises, they are driving a shift in perspectives. Gradually, they are not only becoming an inspiration to their own generation, but also emerging as mentors to their older counterparts.

As we grapple with challenges of climate change, social issues and so on, there are early but promising signs of Gandhian values being adopted and put in practice by the youth today in their efforts to negotiate a rapidly changing world and live meaningful lives that help create a sustainable future.

Climate change, for instance, is impacting human lives like never before. Greta Thunberg, a 20-year-old Swedish activist, is famous around the world for her emphasis on sustainability and unprecedented contribution in creating awareness of the climate crisis. Just as citizens of colonized India kept joining Gandhiji's Dandi March in 1930, day after day, Greta's voice for a green future went on garnering support on social media across the globe and across age groups. Gandhiji and Greta both started alone and spoke a language of humanity that resonated with people and won their hearts.

Another young woman, Malala Yousafzai became an international symbol of the fight for girls' education after she was shot at the age of 15 for opposing Taliban restrictions on female education in her home country of Pakistan. Over 2 million people signed a right-to-education petition, and Pakistan's National Assembly ratified the country's first Right to Free and Compulsory Education Bill. Malala went on to become the youngest Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 2014. She continues to fight for her beliefs, reminding us of yet another message of Gandhiji: "If we want to reach real peace in this world, we should start educating children."

Garvita Gulhati is a Gen Z water activist in India who founded Why Waste? to change people's attitudes towards water by promoting simple solutions. She began working with restaurants to prevent the waste of water left behind in glasses. Her #GlassHalfFull campaign movement reached over 500,000 restaurants and 6 million people, and prevented over 10 million litres of water from being wasted.

While there are such young torchbearers leading change in society, they are few. The world needs many more Gen-Z change-makers driven by a sense of purpose and an aspiration to create a healthier and just environment for all.

It is only through a larger collective that a movement can begin to bring about desired social changes at scale. Young people possess a wide range of skills, are aware of relevant issues that affect them and the world, but wonder how to go about making an impact. Creating platforms for such youth to channel their motivations and drive transformation is therefore critical.

Social fellowship programmes in the country are serving this need, offering transformative experiences for self-awareness, societal change and leadership development. The Teach for India Fellowship, for example, encourages college students, professionals and entrepreneurs with leadership qualities to teach underprivileged children in under-resourced government schools or low-income private schools in cities. The Young India Fellowship by Ashoka University focuses on fellows engaged in a liberal art curriculum, training them to become socially committed agents of change. The Gandhi Fellowship by the Piramal Foundation focuses on awakening the nation builder in every young individual. Inspired by Gandhiji's advice, "Be the change you want to see in the world," the programme helps young people become self-aware, connect with the country's grassroots, understand issues first-hand and implement innovative solutions. Processes and activities such as community immersion, meditation, leadership boot-camps and field interventions help youth acquire an ability to adapt, be agile, collaborate and influence outcomes without authority. In education, fellows partner with school principals as well as high-ranking education officials much older than themselves and with more experience, inspiring them to act. This resonates with Gandhiji's remarkable ability to collaborate and take along people from diverse groups to deliver change. With a humble beginning of just 10 fellows in 2008, this fellowship now has an alumni count of around 3,000 passionate youth, working at social impact in various spheres.

Gandhiji's ideals, it seems, are not confined to the annals of history. They thrive in the hearts and actions of a new generation of young leaders. As the youth chart their path forward, these leaders serve as a reminder that Gandhiji's timeless values remain highly effective as catalysts for change, equipping a generation of informed and empowered citizens to forge a future marked by compassion, equality and progress. It feels as if a Gandhi is taking birth in every youth.