Promoting Media Literacy amongst Students for Intercultural Dialogue and Peace: A Global Entitlement

Vedabhyas Kundu

Programme Officer, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, New Delhi
Corresponding author: vedabhyas@gmail.com

Introduction

“Our newspaper, The Peace Gong promotes diversity and helps in facilitating dialogues amongst young people from different cultures and communities. We extensively use the social media, email communications and mobiles to connect with other student reporters from different background across the country and abroad. Using new forms of available communication, The Peace Gong can be a powerful vehicle to help young people to come together and work for global peace.”- Iflah Javed Qureshi, student of Class XII and former Editor, The Peace Gong, the global children’s newspaper. (www.thepeacegong.org)

Iflah’s perspectives on how with enhancement of communicative skills, students like her can reach out to other young people across the country and abroad and initiate dialogue on issues of common concerns underscores the importance of promoting media literacy education.

Her views are accentuated by Thansila, former President of the Waynad Shishu Panchayat, Kerala and also a Peace Gong reporter. She says, “Through our newspaper, The Peace Gong we are able to exchange stories from friends in different parts of India and abroad. For instance, our friend in Pakistan, Syeda Rumana Mehdi’s poems have been inspiring us to think of conflicts around the world. We discuss some of these issues like how children are getting affected by the Syrian crisis and how we can end conflicts in our own communities. We have been extensively using our The Peace Gong group in the Facebook for connecting with like minded students.” (Kundu, 2013)

Iflah and Thansila’s perspectives on how as being part of a media literacy programme and involved with a global children’s newspaper gives them a platform to initiate dialogue with other young people forms the foundation of this chapter. In the backdrop of the transformative nature of contemporary media, the chapter will delve on how different media can be used by young people to reach out to others and enhance mutual understanding, solidarity and tolerance. This chapter will also try to analyse how media and information literacy education empowers young students like Iflah and Thansila to use their new communicative skills for effecting dialogues. In this context, the changing nature of the media which aids the efforts of these students has been aptly described by Tornero and Varis (2010), who points out, “The new hypertechnological environment, the deepening of communicative globalization, has not only altered the way we perceive and use time and space, it has also changed the chemistry of our everyday life and our culture”.

Media Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue

Underscoring the emergent need for citizens to acquire media and information competencies in the backdrop of technological advancements, the recently initiated Global Alliance for Partnerships in Media and Information Literacy (GAPMIL) stresses the essentiality of media literacy to citizen’s engagement, good governance, intercultural and interfaith dialogue and sustainable development. The Alliance was initiated with the UNESCO taking a lead role in partnership with other international organizations like
the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC).

The UNESCO (2013) sees the UN Declaration on Cultural Diversity as having given the impetus to the celebration of media and information literacy (MIL) as catalytic in intercultural dialogue, particularly by focusing on how citizens, including journalism educators, media professionals, information specialists and other civic actors, can enlist MIL to promote communication practices that are sensitive to cultural and linguistic diversity and intercultural dialogue.

The UNESCO document further notes that MIL empowers citizens, including children and youth, with competencies related to media, information, ICT and other aspects of literacy which are needed for 21st century. These competencies include the ability to: access, find, evaluate, use the information they need in ethical and effective ways; understand the role and functions of media and other information providers; understand the conditions under which media and information providers can fulfil their functions; critically evaluate information and media content; engage with media and information providers for self-expression, life-long learning, democratic participation, and good governance.

Delving on media and information literacy as a tool to reinforce intercultural dialogue, Grizzle and Torrent (2013) stresses that if citizens from all over the world improve their critical and communicative capacity, they will be able to contribute to respecting diversity, freedom of expression and considering others as equals with a voice, so as to promote democracy and peace. They argue that the growth, integration and fragmentation of the world are both a challenge and a new opportunity for peace. In this context, they contend that new ways to prevent conflicts, balance inequalities, promote cooperation and foster mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue must be found.

Arguing further, Grizzle and Torrent points out the position of UNESCO and UNAOC which recognize that media and information literacy and its contribution to global education can improve understanding between different cultures and civilizations. They note that media and information providers have become a communication bridge between communities and groups, especially with the spread of ICT. Therefore, they can contribute to generating conflicts and vilifying differences or, to the contrary, to bringing about dialogue, understanding and respect for differences. If citizens improve their media and information competency, they can contribute to representing a serious demand for the mass media and other information providers to operate in accordance with peace and harmonious international relations,” they add.

Meanwhile delving on the framework of MIL and intercultural dialogue in India, Nagaraj and Kundu (2013) argue on the need to integrate the efforts for emotional bridge building by senior Gandhians like Natwar Thakkar.

They quote Natwar Thakkar (interviewed specially for their chapter) who is of the view that the communication praxis of India should encompass not only deep understanding of each other’s culture and tradition but also do the work of emotional bridge building thereby connecting people of diverse cultures. Mr Thakkar observes that unless pluralism and mutual respect becomes central to one’s communicative abilities, one cannot reach out to diverse communities across the country. These, he opines has to be part of any communication messages, be it person-to-person, the mass media or the social media. (Nagaraj and Kundu, 2013)

Thakkar’s perspective takes him to the nonviolent approaches to communication of Mahatma Gandhi. (Nagaraj and Kundu, 2013). In this context, Kundu (2011) argues on the need to incorporate Gandhian approach to communication in any media education curriculum as it would prepare participants to use media and communication for promoting a culture of peace and nonviolence. Gonsalves (2010) explains the Gandhian communication model as, “From start to finish, the underlying principle of Gandhian engagement with an opponent in a conflict is to keep the channels open, to avoid intimidation and to remove all obstacles to dialogues.”

The Gandhian approach to nonviolent communication and intercultural dialogue for peace is captured by Syeda Rumana Mehdi, a school student from Karachi, Pakistan. In her editorial for the Peace Gong e-newsletter to mark October 2, the International Day of Nonviolence, Rumana underscored what the Peace Gong reporters and all young people should strive for, “Let every dream become Martin Luther King’s dream, let every step towards peace become Mahatma Gandhi’s Salt March and let every obstacle in your path become Nelson Mandela’s painful twenty-seven
years in prison. Promise yourself that you will contribute your best to make the phenomenon of violence outdated, promise yourself that you will try to motivate your friends to walk on the path of nonviolence.”

The essence of intercultural dialogue and peace is also well captured by Class X students of Anandalaya School, Madhupur, Jharkhand. Writing for the Peace Gong to mark the International Day of Nonviolence, 2012, the students point out, “We are here Santhali, Muslim, Dalit, Brahman, Kol in our homes, but simply students in our school and to our teachers. Every week we have Sahitya Sabhas where we learn new things about our culture and about those of our friends, we sing and dance with each other and share our lunch....we appeal to you to not let the demons of division enter your communities or neighbourhoods and follow the principle that we are following here in our school with unity through friendship, understanding and integration.” (The Peace Gong, September 2012)

Initiating discourse on protection of children in South Asia: An analysis of dialogue by young reporters of The Peace Gong

A 2006 UN Study on Violence against Children revealed that in South Asia, between 41 and 88 million children witness violence at home annually- the highest regional total in the world. Moreover, outside home they face wide range of abuses, discrimination and violence. In the backdrop of continuing violence against children in South Asia, the Peace Gong children reporters decided to initiate a dialogue amongst themselves and stakeholders. One of the highlights was the December 2013 issue of the newspaper which asserted that abusing children was abusing humanity.

Initiating the dialogue was Syeda Rumana Mehdi, the Associate Editor of the Peace Gong. Delving on the universality of violence against children, she said in her editorial, “The carpet in your living room could have been woven by a child earning a wage well below the legal minimum wage in his country. The garments that you wear could have been stitched by a ten year girl who gets sexually exploited by her employer. Every child is our own and every time a child is abused, it is humanity that is abused; the humanity that still comprises of few individuals who want to make this world a better place, the humanity that seeks to protect the young saplings of today from turning into wilted flowers of tomorrow.”

Dedicating the initiative of the Peace Gong children to the safety and well-being of all children in the region, the Editor, Dyuthi, a class XI student from Waynad, Kerala, pointed out, “We, the children of ‘Peace Gong,’ are among those who are seeking information, examining what we discover, and sharing information and ideas. Like all children everywhere, we want the attention, care and encouragement of our elders -- parents, elders, teachers, and those in authority. But we also want to contribute to making our country, our region and a world a better place for all of us. This is why we work as volunteers, to find out things and think about them, and to publish our news and views in our very own news journal.”

Bhawana Dahal, a class XI student from Kathmandu, Nepal said, “Different forms of exploitation and discrimination against children – like child labour, child trafficking and child marriage -- have been a major social issue in the rural as well as urban parts of Nepal. Sadly for children, the number of children working as child labourers has increased in recent years.”

An important aspect of this dialogue amongst students not just across India but also other South Asian countries was a joint set of questions for the Director General of the South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC), Dr Rinchel Chopel. The aim was to come together and express solidarity on violence against children and what could the SAARC apex body on this issue, SAIEVEC do in this regard.

While Subharee Ghatak, Class XI, St Joseph School, Matigara, Siliguri (West Bengal) and Suchismita Chakrabarty, Class VIII, Auxillium Girl’s School, Agartala, (Tripura) talked about women and children (girls and boys both) suffering the most in conflict zones, they asked on the reasons of weak child protection measures. Lokendro Chabungbam, Class XII, Comet School, Imphal took up the issue of child trafficking in not only Manipur but the entire South Asia. The activist in her, Asiya Baquar Naqvi, Class XII, Senior Secondary School, Aligarh Muslim University, made her to take up the issue as to how young activists like her can create awareness against child marriage and its ill effects on the girl child. Delving further on this line, Syeda Rumana Mehdi, underscoring on the vulnerability of the girl child in all parts of South Asia asked how all
stakeholders could come together to create a girl-child friendly South Asia.

Students like Kaveri Barman, Samiran Kalita and Pradip Baishya talked about the reality check study they did in Rajabari village in Chandrapur Block of Kamrup Metro District, Assam. They expressed concern at complete lack of facilities for the children of the village and that they were losing their childhood due to neglect. Meanwhile Andleep Fatima Ansari, a class XI student from Jammu talking on the concerns of child trafficking said, “It is important that all citizens become vigilant in their fight against child trafficking. Protecting children from violence, exploitation and abuse is an integral component of protecting their rights to survival, growth and development and children need not only to be nurtured, but an environment where they can grow fearlessly, be provided to them.”

The analysis of the dialogue on the vulnerability of children and concerns on issues of their protection and survival by the young Peace Gong reporters suggest that by developing communicative and information processing and analysing skills, young people can take up critical issues in the public sphere. Platforms like the Peace Gong offer space to children from diverse communities, regions and geographical locations to express themselves and establish dialogue with their peers on common concerns. This underlines the need for promoting media literacy education to further intercultural dialogues.

**Conclusion**

Tornero and Varis (2010) underscore the new objectives of media literacy in the twenty-first century which include: (a) capacity for listening, namely for understanding, for talking; (b) tolerance; (c) respect for diversity; and (d) ethics. This paper tries to capture the significance of promoting media literacy education for facilitating intercultural dialogue amongst young people. By looking at international efforts and then analysing the initiatives of young reporters of the children’s newspaper, The Peace Gong, the chapter tries to argue on how media literacy education can contribute to facilitating dialogues between diverse communities and contribute towards a culture of peace and nonviolence. It also made an attempt to further arguments on the need to integrate the Gandhian model of nonviolent communication and emotional bridge building in media literacy programmes at a global level.

**References**


Grizzle, Alton and Torrent, Jordi (2013). MIL as a Tool to Reinforce Intercultural Dialogue; in Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue; MILID Yearbook 2013; UNESCO, UN Alliance of Civilizations and the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media.

Nagaraj, K V and Kundu, Vedabhyas (2013). The Role of Media and Information Literacy in promoting Mutual Respect and Sustainable Development in Culturally Diverse India; In Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue, ed. Ulla Carlsson and Sherri Hope Culver; MILID Yearbook 2013; the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media; Nordicom, University of Gothenburg.

Kundu, Vedabhyas (2011) Media Literacy Education in the Context of Peace Education; *Science Communicator*; Vol 02, Issue 02, June 2011

Kundu, Vedabhyas (2013). Globalized World: A Boon for Media Literacy; in Globalization and Voices from Indian Practitioners; Shipra Publications; New Delhi.

Promoting Media and Information Literacy as a Means to Cultural Diversity; Concept Note, UNESCO, 2013

The Peace Gong, the global children’s newspaper; Issues- September 2012; October 2013; December 2013; published by the Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore Foundation, New Delhi.

Tornero, J M Perez and Varis, Tapio (2010). Media Literacy and New Humanism; UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education.