

Nonviolent Communication as a 21st Century Skill :Exploring its Significance**Dr Vedabhyas Kundu,****Abstract**

Breakdown in relationships, highly individualistic and materialistic culture, and inherent lack of social cohesion – all reflect the tensions of the modern society. In order to negotiate these complexities and contribute towards a harmonious coexistence, young people, in fact all citizens need to acquire different sets of 21st century skills. As communication is an integral part of all our relationships and social interactions, developing our communicative abilities is critical. It is in this regard; it is significant that individuals develop a healthy communication ecosystem. For evolution of a healthy communication ecosystem, the aim should be to practice nonviolent communication as part of our daily habits. This paper while delving on the importance of nonviolent communication as a 21st century skill will aim to look at perspectives of citizens around the world on how they can use nonviolent communication as part of daily habits. The perspectives will be captured from the reflection of participants doing an online course on nonviolent communication being offered by Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, New Delhi, India.

Key words: nonviolent communication, 21st century skills, healthy communication

Introduction

At a time when the world is facing the rising challenges of hate speech, stereotyping and intolerance, a global effort is needed to counter these and initiate innovative plans to promote healthy communication amongst the citizenry. Speaking at the launch of the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres (2019) said, “Hate speech is in itself an attack on tolerance, inclusion, diversity and the very essence of our human rights norms and principles. More broadly, it undermines social cohesion, erodes shared values, and can lay the foundation for violence, setting back the cause of peace, stability, sustainable development and the fulfillment of human rights for all.”

The dimension of hatred or intolerance in our communication is not limited to just groups and communities trying to promote ill-will in the society, its ill-effects can be observed even in relationships within families, friends, institutions and workplaces. Pressures of modern day society are a fertile ground for unhealthy communication and contribute to breakdown in relationships.

The need for positive and healthy communication is the underlining thrust areas in the numerous workshops that the author has been conducting on nonviolent communication. The concern on how unhealthy communication impacts not only the relationships but even the health of individuals is reiterated by numerous participants in these workshops.

For instance, the following is the reflection of a trainee in a workshop on nonviolent communication that the author conducted :“I had a tip-off with my friend .I thought I was right and stuck to my stand; in fact, I got aggressive .He did the same .The inflexibility in our respective stand triggered further conflict. It destroyed our relationship .It is now close to two years that we haven’t spoken to each other .But on introspection, I don’t think the issue was big enough to lead to the end of a congenial relationship of over five years .I think I was too selfish and never tried to see his position.”

Such reflections are common in contemporary society where relationships become sour on trivial issues .In the backdrop of increasing individualized society where individuals try to outwit the other to race ahead, the principles of tolerance, understanding, ingenuity in handling differences and spirit of mutual co-existence seems to be declining .

In this context, Jardim and Da Silva)2018 (talks on the concern of individualism in modern societies, “Young people live in an individualised society which has erected the individual as the focus of all investments, which has led to the weakening of the social ties and commitments between an “I ”and another “We .”It is a society marked by an individualistic culture that calls individuals to be autonomous, encouraging people to maximize their personal benefitsthe considerations of the common good are less relevant and the mandatory exhortations to live for each other or to devote to an end more than themselves no longer have social resonance”.

Jardim and Da Silva (2018) underline an extremely important issue of the 21st century which is the decline in the age old principles of living together and for each other .Individuals are more adept in looking for every opportunity to maximize their personal benefits .This is leading to breakdown in social ties in many parts of the world and encouraging a sense of disconnection even in families and between friends .In many instances, it leads to a culture of narcissism .It has also led to feelings that sustaining one’s self-ego has to be primary objective .In short there seems to be a deficit of compassion, empathy, mutual respect and expressions of gratitude .One of the major effects of these deficits is the evolution of

unhealthy communication and prevalence of negative energies not only amongst individuals but in the society at large.

Further, Robert Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone :The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) talks about how modern society has suffered from a collapse of community .Putnam presents evidence that increasingly we are connecting with each other less meaningfully more than ever before.In such a scenario, one of the important ways in which people can get over with this problem of the collapse of the community according to Putnam is ‘by coming together in unity for the good of our communities -we can generate trust, reciprocity, information flows and quality social cooperation.’

Also experiences suggest that on many occasions’ psychological insecurity and dysfunctional relationships propels the desire to race towards materialism .In all probability, an individual who rush towards the acquisition of materialistic goods will further find themselves in the whirlpool of insecurities that could lead to its further aggravation .

Further, an individual’s insecurities, the race towards materialistic lifestyle and the climate of narcissism –all determines our social connections and interactions .Our communication ecosystem -whether our intrapersonal communication or our communication with others are all constructed by these factors of insecurities and narcissism .These determine the language and expressions we use -both verbal and nonverbal, our actions and thoughts .More often in such a scenario, individuals find their communication ecosystem to be unhealthy -they lack coherence, clarity and flexibility in their communicative acts .Their communication ecosystem remains cluttered and this affects their relationships with their social connections . In fact, for many establishing healthy communication is a forgotten art .

It is in this context, that developing skills and capabilities to construct a healthy communication ecosystem has become a necessity in every society across the world .Such an ecosystem would comprise the tenets of both individual and society’s well-being; it would help in strengthening relationships and contribute towards social cohesion .Such a communication ecosystem would aid in contributing to expansion of social capital and prosocial behaviour in the society .Hence for the construction of a healthy communication ecosystem it would be pertinent to encourage the practice of nonviolent communication right from a young age .

In this backdrop the chapter argues on the essence of nonviolent communication as a 21st

century skills which not just students but the citizenry as a whole need to acquire, in order to contribute towards a harmonious coexistence. A discursive analysis of responses of participants from different countries on the reflection exercises in the online orientation course on nonviolent communication being offered by Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti will form the basis of the arguments on why nonviolent communication is an important life skill that needs to be practiced in daily lives. About 8000 participants have already done this free online course available in the Gandhi Smriti website. (<https://www.gandhismriti.gov.in/announcement/orientation-course-nonviolent-communication-0>) It is also available through the MyGov platform. (<https://www.mygov.in/task/orientation-course-nonviolent-communication/>)

An insight into 21st Century Skills

Wagner)2008 (underlined seven survival skills for students to be prepared for 21st century life, work and citizenship .These included :

- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Collaboration and leadership
- Agility and adaptability
- Initiative and entrepreneurialism
- Effective oral and written communication
- Accessing and analysing information
- Curiosity and imagination

Meanwhile Delors Report of 1996 produced by the International Commission on Education for 21st Century (UNESCO, 1996) formulated four principles identified as the four pillars of education :

- Learning to Know
- Learning to Do
- Learning to Be
- Learning to Live Together

Similarly, the World Health Organization has articulated the following life skills needed for the 21st Century :

- Decision-making and problem-solving;
- Creative thinking and critical thinking;
- Communication and interpersonal skills;
- Self-Awareness and empathy
- Coping with emotions and coping with stress.

In short, encapsulating the different skills enumerated by different commissions and institutions, it can be said that 21st century skills include learning skills, literacy skills and life skills. All the three skills together are essential for the holistic empowerment of young people and these give them the wherewithal to negotiate the complexities of different issues and concerns related to their daily lives. All of them are intertwined and aids in the process of growth and development of young people. For instance, young people need to develop their life skills like capacities to negotiate, make decisions, think critically, and nurture deep intrapersonal and interpersonal communication in order to handle the challenges of contemporary society. Further they need to develop their social skills in order to engage with others. Besides, enhancement of emotional skills is needed to express their feelings and emotions. Here it is important to note that all the 21st Century skills can be imbibed by individuals by being keen observer, develop in-depth understanding of different issues and phenomenon, commitment to practice the skills and experiencing change. In short, they are in the realm of experiential learning.

Significance of Nonviolent Communication as a 21st Century Skill

Just as the wave cannot exist for itself but must always participate in the swell of the ocean, so we can never experience our lives by ourselves but must always share the experiencing of life that takes place all around us. The ethics of reverence for life requires that all of us somehow and in something shall act as men towards other men. – Albert Schweitzer

Communication is considered as the fulcrum of an individual's social skill. Without adequate communicative capabilities it would be difficult for individuals to maintain and strengthen social ties. It is the key in all the three 21st Century Skills discussed- learning, life and literacy skills. The core point that comes up here is what should be the nature of communication skills that individuals should develop which leads to holistic empowerment of the individual and

helps her/him to contribute to social cohesion and harmonious coexistence. The ill-effects of unhealthy communication ecosystem in the backdrop of contemporary materialistic and individualistic society have already been discussed above. Hence, in the pursuit of evolving a healthy communication ecosystem, the essence of practicing nonviolent communication comes to the fore.

Here it would be apt to understand the expansive explanation of nonviolent communication provided by senior Gandhian, Natwar Thakkar (Kundu, 2018):

“To me nonviolent communication literacy would mean how our communication efforts should be nonviolent; how our ability and capacity to communicate not only with ourselves but with our family and society be nonviolent in all aspects and overall how the entire process of communication whether between individuals, groups, communities and the world at large should be nonviolent in nature. This would entail deep understanding of the art and science of nonviolence and its centrality in all our daily actions. It's not just verbal and nonverbal communication, nonviolent communication literacy would also include whether our thoughts and ideas are nonviolent or not. This would also mean how we can rid of our preconceived notions of individuals or groups with whom we want to communicate and stop evaluating them to suit our own ideas. More than often we are attuned to think in terms of moralistic judgments which may be our own constructions. By developing deep understanding of the art and science of nonviolence and integrating it in our communication practices we could get over with biased and moralistic judgments; this in turn could contribute to emotional bridge building.

Also, in order to establish on why nonviolent communication should be a 21st century skill, it would be pertinent to point out its different elements. These include (Kundu, 2020& 2020):

- Nonviolent Communication means complete lack of violence in the way we communicate with others.
- We should learn to communicate with ourselves and self-introspect.
- Use of appropriate and positive language
- Avoiding stereotypes in our communication efforts
- Avoid moralistic judgements
- Avoid evaluative language

- Role of mutual respect in communication
- The Power of Empathy
- Strong belief in the power of compassion
- Connecting with needs of others
- Importance of flexibility in our communication
- Practicing active listening skills
- Expressing gratitude

Here it would be pertinent to understand how people around the world try to link nonviolent communication to the acquisition of life skills. As this paper uses the perspectives of participants in the online course on nonviolent communication offered by Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, New Delhi, it would apt to capture some of these perspectives. It may be noted that the course highlights the Gandhian approach to nonviolent communication and uses the explanation offered by Thakkar (Kundu, 2018) in the reading material. As many as 8000 responses were received and all these responses were looked for the purpose of issuing certificates for the completion of the course. About 3000 participants were cleared to be given the certificates.

Zawadi Ndasima, Uganda: I have realized as I did the course that nonviolent communication has to be part of my daily routine. It has to be practiced and is practical. Using this will help me in my life and community.

Augustine Behemuka, Kenya: I have picked two practices that I hope can help me to incorporate the elements of nonviolent communication into my daily habits. I now introspect through daily reflection on my habits in the evening before retiring to bed. This will help me identify common patterns in my behavior; especially regarding the way I respond or react to tense situations during the course of the day. In my own life experience, this has been helpful in developing a sense of awareness to the reactions – verbal and non-verbal - made by the people I engage with. I may know if my message has been received positively or otherwise. Two, continue to practice active listening during my conversations with all people that I interact with at work, home and even public space.

Ishani Ghosh, India: This course helped me broaden my vision and taught me a lot of new things about this noble method of communication, which I now hope to make an integral part of my daily practice. It helped me grasp the importance of words and communication. It is really surprising to know how language can help to establish a bridge of connection between individuals, and yet also destroy such a bridge, if not used carefully. I learnt to avoid the use of evaluative language and moralistic judgments. I now understand the importance of spending time speaking to our inner selves, to find creative solutions of our feelings and needs, and also to connect better with others around us.

Toksonbaeva Kanimet Abdisalamovna, Kyrgyzstan: Exposure to the use of nonviolent communication helps us handle issues that may arise and also contributes to the strengthening of relationships.

Maleeka Hussaini, Afghanistan: Through the course I have learnt different elements of nonviolent communication- how we should talk to different people, how we should respect others, how we should promote understanding, how we should appreciate the positive things around us and understand the importance of being compassionate. I have tried to understand on when we are compassionate then how we are able to connect with our friends, people and other living beings. I have tried to understand that compassion is a skill that we all can cultivate. The concern for others is very precious and when we have compassion and love for others, we can build a beautiful and peaceful world.

Girish Karadalli, India: Nonviolent communication means communication with politeness, respectful and without hurting others sentiments. In recent times, I get aggressive many times and talk in foul language out of frustration. But now realize that I can handle it if I listen what is coming from other person and how I can make him / her understand in nonviolent way.

Babli Kumari, India: As a student of nonviolent communication, I can discern between real expression of emotions and statements which are in fact description of what we are thinking not what we are feeling. Our selection of words and the way we communicate decides whether we are able to make / retain / resist our connections and togetherness in the society. Practicing nonviolent communication will help me to make best version of myself in the society, it will help to build bridges with others for the healthy and peaceful environment.

Padma Prasad, India: If we practice nonviolent communication, we will be able to encourage mutual respect and it will contribute towards our overall well-being.

Sohini Jana, India: I intend to make non-violent communication as a part of my daily habits by consciously engaging with the following steps:

- Becoming mindful of judgemental thoughts and responses when listening to someone
- Avoiding evaluative statements
- Focusing more on prioritizing the relationship rather than deciding to prove whether or not someone is right or wrong
- Empathizing with the other's emotions by accepting that they have a different story than ours
- Expressing gratitude and daily maintaining a gratitude journal
- Listening to learn
- Respecting the speaker by attentive body language as well as active learning
- Practicing appreciative enquiry in order to create a safe space for communication and helping the other person feel heard
- Focusing more on connecting with the other person while appreciating differences and disagreements
- Engaging in introspection to keep note of my own prejudices and avoid reactions based on stereotyping
- Becoming mindful of the language which I am using while communicating

An analysis of the reflection exercises reveals the perspectives of the participants on the communication ecosystem that needs to be nurtured. More than 80 per cent of the participants felt that nonviolent communication contributes to their well-being, is an essential life-skill that contributes towards harmonious coexistence, encourages mutual respect, understanding and greater acceptance of each other's position. The analysis also reveals how use of nonviolent communication contributes to the plugging of deficit in compassion, empathy, gratitude and respect. It also points on the significance of constructive intrapersonal communication, self-awareness and how we introspect.

In the backdrop of the explanation of Thakkar (Kundu, 2018) , the basic elements of nonviolent communication and the analysis of the responses to the reflection exercises received by Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, it would be pertinent to delve on its centrality as a 21st century skill:

- An important aspect of nonviolent communication is the understanding of human interdependence. Nonviolent communication is a holistic communication approach involving

human beings, nature and all other living beings. It underlines the importance of cosmocentric approach to human nature. In this context, nonviolent communication helps in guiding individuals to harmonious communication with not just other human beings, but also with nature and other living beings. In the context of the present concerns of climate change and environmental degradation, it is essentially that human beings learn the ‘art and science of communication harmoniously with nature and other living beings’.

- The Buddha had eloquently said, “Words have both the power to destroy and heal. When words are both true and kind, they can change our world.” The words that we use determine our social interactions; if it is not apt or violent it can destroy relationships. It is the foundation of the process of social cohesion. Hence, it is important to delve deeply on the type of words that are we are using in our daily; it is an important skill to be learnt. Similarly, our nonverbal communication is extremely important as aggressive posturing turns-off people with whom we are communicating. Similarly, in the contemporary societies, it is important to control our mind and thoughts. Negative thoughts lead to negative emotions. Our thoughts help us to shape our communication with the outer world.
- Constructive intrapersonal communication- both our self-talk and inner dialogues is an important skill to learnt. This leads us to the essence of understanding the self and increasing self-awareness. When we start communicating with ourselves, we will develop patience and before arguing with others, we will start reflecting. We can practice nonviolent communication by observing our inner self and deeply listening to our self-talk. This will help us to look for creative solutions of our feelings and needs and also on how we connect with others. Also it is important to practice self-empathy and self-compassion to expand the scope of one’s self-awareness.
- The five pillars of Gandhian nonviolence are respect, understanding, acceptance, appreciation and compassion. These pillars form the foundational architecture of nonviolent communication. Learning to respect each other, learning to understanding other’s point of view, developing the attitude and patience to accept different views and ideas and learning to imbibe positive appreciation are all essential life skill education that are critical in the 21st century.
- Nonviolent communication helps us to develop pluralism in our process of communication. On many occasions we get entrapped in different stereotypes that hinders in the process of mutual respect and openness. We tend to get entangled in cobwebs of different labels, identities and narratives. All these leads to problems that many of our societies are facing-

hate speech, intolerance and xenophobia. Practicing nonviolent communication brings plurality in our thinking and communication and helps get over with the stereotypes.

- In the backdrop of the complexities created due to the materialistic and individualistic society, it is generally pointed out that there is empathy deficit in our contemporary societies. This had also been underlined by the former President of USA, Barack Obama who had said in 2008, “I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit, our ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes , to see the world through those who are different from us- the child who’s hungry, the laid-off steelworker, the immigrant cleaning our dorm room..We live in a culture that discourages empathy, a culture that too often tells us that our principal goal in life is to be rich, thin, young, famous, safe and entertained.” Cultivating skills to be empathetic hence is a critical skill to nurture and is part of the overall process of nonviolent communication.
- Similarly, the ability to act compassionately is another important skill that needs to be developed as it helps to recognize our shared humanity. It helps individuals to elevate themselves to a higher plane and can actually help in reducing our own sufferings. Martin Luther King eloquently explains the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence which he says is realized when individuals are able to see the ‘enemy’s’ point of view and are able to assess their own weaknesses from these views. He feels if individuals are mature they will be able to learn and grow from the wisdom of those who hold opposing views.
- Expression of gratitude is another important element of nonviolent communication. The more individuals’ express gratitude the wider their perspectives will become. When we learn the habit of expressing gratitude we will be able to exercise more positive emotions. Several studies point out on how by deliberately practicing gratitude we can overcome the negative effects of materialism.
- Here it needs to be noted that practicing altruistic tendencies like empathy, compassion, kindness and gratitude helps individuals reduce their stress, strengthen their relationships and encourage prosocial behaviour. Promoting prosocial behaviour is an extremely component of contributing towards social cohesion.
- Another important element of nonviolent communication is active and deep listening skills. Listening skills is an important attribute of human growth both at the individual level and the societal level. The more we develop our listening skills the more we will be enhancing our engagement with others and social connections.

- Connecting with needs of one self and others is another important life skill that individuals should try to develop. Much of the conflicts that surfaces dissolve easily when we learn the art of connecting to the genuine needs of others.

Conclusion

From the discussions above especially capturing the views of the participants of the course on nonviolent communication, it is adequately established that acquiring skills in nonviolent communication is important for all to be able to handle the complexities of contemporary societies. It needs to be termed as an essential 21st century skill and hence needs to be introduced right from school level. It is an important attribute for contributing towards individual self-awareness, social cohesion and overall towards a harmonious coexistence.

In fact, keeping its importance in mind, the Central Board of Secondary Education in India has joined hands with the Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti, New Delhi to offer its free online course on nonviolent communication for students, principals, teachers and parents. (<http://cbseacademic.nic.in/NonViolence.html>). About 72000 participants have registered for the course through this platform.

Finally, the essence of nonviolent communication is intertwined in the human ability to forgive and the spirit of reconciliation. In a world when we are not willing to forgive others even for the slightest mistake, it had been profoundly expressed by Nelson Mandela as he was leaving prison after being there for 27 years. “As I stand before the door of my freedom, I realize that if I do not leave my pain, anger, and bitterness behind me, I will still be in prison. Holding grudges does not make you strong. It makes you bitter. Forgiveness does not make you weak, it sets you free. Don’t imprison yourself forever.”

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