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Lia Diskin, the Gandhian

Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary was celebrated on 2 October 2011 for the 30th consecutive year by Lia Diskin and her organization Palas Atena in Sao Paulo. This is a commemoration with a difference. It is not a one-day affair. It is called as Semana de Gandhi (Gandhi Week) and more often the celebrations go on for two weeks and some times a month. It is not a mere ritual or a show of garlanding the statue, paying eloquent homage in a comfortable hall and forgetting it till the next October. For Lia Diskin, Gandhism is a celebration and commitment throughout the year. It has become her mission in life. Gandhi is not history for Lia. She sees his message as relevant for the future. She believes that Gandhi's ideas and practice of non-violence are preventive remedies for the future of the Brazilian society which is facing serious problems of violence and crime. The criminalisation of young minds in the favelas (slums) is brought out vividly in the famous Brazilian film City of God (cidade de deus) which is based on real life stories. Lia Diskin has the firm conviction that sowing the seeds of Gandhian values among the children and youth will help to prevent the infection of their mind. The focus of the Semana de Gandhi is, therefore, children, youth and education. The venues of the events are schools, prisons, streets and public spaces. The events are organised in collaboration with educationists, intellectuals, government authorities, artists, civil society activists as well as with UNESCO.

Here is the list of their activities during the Gandhi week this year from 30 September to 27 October 2011. "The art of life consists in making of life an art" is the Gandhian quote to inspire the 2011 celebrations and so there are more artistic activities this time.

- Drum Ensemble by the youth group Rede Beija Flor
- Words from Gandhi – talk by Hamilton Faria, poet and anthropologist
- Sketch: Gandhi receives Kasturbai's letter in prison – actors Joao Signorelli and Meeta
- Indian Music – by Meeta Ravindra group
- Kathak Dance – by Meeta and Gyaneshree

- Play by actor Joao Signorelli who impersonates Gandhi and leads the audience through his life and ideas.
- Video-dialogue by Luiz Góes who shows Gandhi videos and invites discussion
- Talking about Gandhi with mediator Joao Moris
- Poems of Rabindranath Tagore -reading by Joao Moris
- Instrumental and vocal music –by Krucis
- Culture of Peace in Education - Awareness Raising Walk
- Several sessions for treatment of delinquent youth
- Indian classical dance – Silvana Duarte
- Storytelling: An Indian Tale about Shiva – Tininha Calazans
- Sumi-e painting and crafts workshop
- Talk by Egberto de Almeida Penido, a judge
- Children's Choir
- Floral offering to Gandhi statue. The public was invited to come by cycle and avoid car.

Lia Diskin believes that non-violence is a practice and a constant educational process. She explains this to me, "Within the culture of violence in which we are steeped, we hardly notice the abuses we commit on a daily basis. Violence is not a destiny. It is a choice. This is why it is important to add in the school curriculum itself Education for Non-Violence and Living Together in harmony with others". She is convinced that this education will bring about a change in the mindset of people in the same way as the education on environment has made us conscious of this theme starting especially with the Rio Earth Summit of 1992.

Lia Diskin and her educationist collaborators have devised special courses for the government schools and teachers on development of ethics in their curricula and daily routine. Under this project, named as "Priceless Values and Gandhi and Non-Violence" 40,000 teachers have been trained in the state of São Paulo. They have a programme of monthly seminars called as "Values for Coexistence". Both the projects have institutional support from UNESCO. Palas Athena is also involved in the UN "Human Safety" programme through projects such as "Open Doors" and "Peace Wants Partners". These have been held in favelas and prisons.

Palas Atena has established Culture of Peace Committees to pursue the goals of UNESCO's Culture of Peace Decade. This inspired the creation of the Parliamentary Culture of Peace Advisory Boards, active in the São Paulo

Assembly, and in several other Brazilian cities, such as Curitiba and Londrina. These boards include representatives of the civil society, religious institutions and non-governmental organizations besides the members of the state or municipal assemblies.

Palas Atena has taken initiatives to apply Gandhian ideas in the health sector too. In partnership with the Municipal Health Department, they have trained over 5000 health professionals of hospitals and basic health units.

More information on Palas Atena in their website: <http://www.palasathena.org/>

Lia Diskin with school children, in the picture below:



One of the most memorable projects of Palas Atena in which I had the opportunity (when I was the consul general in Sao Paulo 1996-2000) to collaborate, was with the military police of the state of Sao Paulo. We sent to every one of the 85,000 military police of the state a ten page write-up of Gandhi's message of non-violence in Portuguese. We organised seminars, workshops and essay and poetry competitions for the police personnel. The military police who faced violent criminals and dangerous situations in their daily job found the practice of non-violence by Gandhi as fascinating and inspiring. It provoked them into new ways of thinking and challenged their conventional wisdom. They started looking into the causes of the violence and minds of the criminals going beyond their professional instinct to catch and punish them. They saw possibilities of redemption for the criminal

minds with a new Gandhian approach. They poured out their heart in the essays and talked about the difficult and painful situations they had faced in their work. Some of their poems were intensely emotional and moving. The Brazilian public was excited by the entry of Mahatma Gandhi in the mind space of military police. The police department was very happy with the project and its impact on the mindset of the police.

The second project in which I had the privilege to collaborate was the publication of the autobiography of Gandhi in portuguese. Lia had got the book translated in modern Brazilian portuguese by four eminent Brazilian scholars who divided the work among themselves. The SESC Pompeia auditorium, where the launching event was held, was overflowing with more than 400 people. A delegation of Indian Parliamentarians who were visiting Sao Paulo at that time was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the audience inspired by Lia Diskin. They could not believe that the book of Gandhi would attract so much serious interest in the distant land of Brazil. The book has been reprinted several times since then to meet the increase in demand.

The auditorium of Palas Atena is called as Mahatma Gandhi Auditorium, where I had made my first public speech in Portuguese language on Gandhi. Several Gandhian scholars of India have given talk there. The library of Palas Atena has the largest collection of books on Gandhi. They also have a publishing house, with many titles on Gandhi, non-violence, culture and peace. Palas Atena gives regular courses on philosophy and holds cultural and spiritual events, seminars and workshops. Education, art, human rights, environment, ethics and multicultural and religious exchanges are the principal themes of the activities. Yoga, meditation and Indian classical music and dance are also organized in the auditorium. Lia Diskin took the initiative in the establishment of the Gandhi Square in Sao Paulo city with a garden and statue of Gandhi, seen in the picture.



Lia is the author and co-author of many books on education, peace, ethics and culture. Her book, "Paz, como se faz?" (peace, how to make?) has been adopted by schools in six states of Brazil and has seen sale of 500,000 copies. Another book "Cultura de Paz – de reflexão à ação" (culture of peace- from reflection to action) was published by UNESCO and the Brazilian Ministry of Justice.

Lia Diskin is a true Gandhian in her public and personal life. She practises what she preaches. Her favourite Gandhi quote is "Happiness is when what you think, what you say and what you do are in harmony". She has devoted her life completely and selflessly to social service. Like Gandhi, her mind and heart are anchored in profound philosophy, ethics and morality. With an open mind, she has imbibed both western and eastern wisdom and is an admirer of Dalai Lama. At the same time, she applies her principles pragmatically to find practical solutions to social problems. Her child-like smile, kindness, enthusiasm, energy and optimism bring cheer and inspiration to street children, delinquent youth and prisoners.

Born in Argentina, Lia Diskin and her husband Basilio Pawlowicz moved to Sao Paulo in 1972. They established Palas Atena for social service and study of philosophy. They run an orphanage in Sao Paulo called as Casa de Pandavas (House of Pandavas). The orphans are showered with affection and personal care by Lia and Basilio who do not have their own children. Lia lives a simple and modest life with a strict Gandhian discipline. She is a vegetarian. She is not in the cocktail circuit nor does she use her work for any personal publicity. Her interest in Gandhi started early as a child after she read books on Gandhi. She was inspired by the autobiography of Gandhi and was totally taken by the idea of a person with such commitment to truth. She told me, "I never found a philosopher with such earnest desire and serious sustained effort to translate truth into daily life".

Lia Diskin was an invitee at the Satyagraha centenary celebrations in India in 2006. She was one of the dozen global personalities invited in 2007 by India to address the United Nations in New York which declared 2 October as the International Day of Non- Violence. She was given the Jamnalal Bajaj award in January 2011 for her service to people in the Gandhian way.

Here is Lia Diskin with her Jamnalal Bajaj award at the Consulate of India in Sao Paulo



Mahatma Gandhi developed his method of non-violence during his stay in South Africa. Then he took it to India and practiced it successfully to get independence for the country and uplift the Indian society. Lia Diskin has brought the Gandhian message to Brazil and made it relevant for Brazilian situation. This triangular Gandhian connection adds another dimension to the IBSA (India- Brazil- South Africa) alliance of the three countries which share democratic values and developmental challenges as well as common agenda and aspirations.

Filhos de Gandhi

In Salvador, the capital of Bahia state of Brazil there is a carnival group called as Filhos de Gandhi (children of Gandhi). This was founded in 1949 by port workers who were inspired by the Gandhian ideals of peace and non violence. They deliberately spelled Gandhi's name with a "y" since they were afraid that the military dictators might create problems for the organization alleging that they were promoting subversion using the tactics of a foreign leader. They participate in the annual Carnival parade with simple white clothes (to reflect peace) adorned with strings of blue and white beads and

wearing turbans with a huge plastic sapphire in the centre of the forehead—the location of the third eye. The Group was lead for many years (1976-2006) by a look-alike of Gandhi called as Raimundo Queirósby. With his bald, skinny and brown appearance in wire-rimmed glasses and walking stick and loin cloth, he looked exactly like Gandhi. He died in 2006. The group has about 10,000 followers who participate in the annual carnival parade. One of the notable features of the carnival parade of Filhos de Gandhi is that alcohol is prohibited during the parade participation. This is incredible. Carnival without caipirinha (the typical Brazilian liquor). The music they play in the parade is mild unlike the boisterous samba music of other groups. The head office of Filhos de Gandhi is located in Pelourinho, the historic district of Salvador. The office has portraits of Gandhi along with the symbols of African religions. The group gets invited for various cultural events in the city. The members participate in such events with T-shirts printed with the image of Gandhi.

Gilberto Gil, the famous Brazilian singer who was also the Minister of Culture of Brazil, is one of the notable supporters and active members of Filhos de Gandhi. He took a small group of the Filhos de Gandhi to India with a documentary film crew. They went to a village near Udaipur and went on a walk, singing *Filhos de Gandhi* songs along with Indian musicians. The group visited the Gandhi memorial in Delhi. Gil has developed an interest in Indian spiritualism and began practicing yoga and meditations when he was put in jail by the Brazilian military dictatorship. Many of his song lyrics contain references to Indian philosophy and religion. ■