

# THE RELEVANCE OF DON BOSCO'S PREVENTIVE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE YOUNG AT RISK IN INDIA

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## Introduction

On 25<sup>th</sup> January 2015, Don Bosco Navajeevan (A home for street children/Young at Risk) in Hyderabad received 230 young boys. They were rescued by the police who raided bangle-making units in the Old City in Hyderabad. The children, aged between 8 and 18, had been held as bonded labour.<sup>1</sup> This is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Mr. Satyarthi, the Nobel Prize laureate, says that the Indian cities have a lot more hidden child labourers working under near-slavery conditions. What is worse, the children did not quite appreciate their release from “child labour” and being sent to their home states: Bihar and West Bengal; many of them said that they would return to the same work later. Poverty has become ever more prevalent so as to acquire such a tragic dimension. What is appalling perhaps is society's mindset where “Child labor is not a big crime” or a mindset which does not place children on a priority list. There is also the discrimination that “These are the children of the lower castes who really do not matter.”

India is said to be an emerging global power with its demographic dividend of an eligible work force (the 15-64 age group) comprising 430 million people, mostly youth - India's key to future success. It is in fact a ticking time bomb as the frustration among the youth creates political instability and our generational dividend could turn into a disaster. It is a growing mass of largely undernourished, undereducated, and unemployed young people who aspire to a better life but don't have the means to get there – only 30 million people employed in the organized sector, and the remaining 400 million people are finding themselves in the unorganized sector. Sixty percent of the total workforce is engaged in agriculture, which contributes only to 18% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), indicative of the widespread disguised unemployment and low productivity.<sup>2</sup>

The option for poor youngsters and abandoned at risk, has always been at the heart and life of Don Bosco's Salesian Family from the beginning right down to the present day. It has occasioned responses everywhere in a great variety of structures

<sup>1</sup> NDTV. “Child Workers Rescued from Hyderabad a Week Ago, Still Far Away from Home.” 1 Feb. 2015. Accessed on 14 March 2015, at: <http://www.ndtv.com/cities/child-workers-rescued-from-hyderabad-a-week-ago-still-far-away-from-home-736171>.

<sup>2</sup> LANGER AVALOK, “Has India Lost 21<sup>st</sup> Century? *Tehelka*, vol. 10 Issue 16, 20 April 2013. Accessed on 14 March 2015, at: <http://www.tehelka.com/has-india-lost-the-21st-century>.

and services according to the educative choices inspired by the preventive system. Our vocation as Salesians will not allow us to remain at ease in the face of a situation like this, which we find today not only in the developing world but indeed everywhere. It prompts us to commit ourselves to providing some response to the more urgent situations of youngsters at risk (cf. GC 21:158; GC 22:6, 72; GC 23: 203-214). The situation of today's society challenges us, as defenders of children, to find new responses.

The present discussion focuses on the application of Don Bosco's Preventive System of Education in India, as a representative context of the global scenario, especially the developing nations. Pope Francis's reminder of the Church's mission today perhaps may be a lead to the whole discussion of the significance of the Preventive System:

“Let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. ... I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. ...”<sup>3</sup>

To be “out on the street” in the context of the present discussion on the Preventive System of Don Bosco means to be a *significant adult* identifying certain qualities in a child/young adult at risk and facilitate him/her with unconditional acceptance, to build his/her inherent power of resilience that enables him/her to deal with risks and thrive in spite of them.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. The Sociological Context - Genesis of Don Bosco's Preventive System

The majority of the 125,000 inhabitants in Turin were poor and marginalized when Don Bosco started his oratory for the young at risk. Every street had beggars and the poor took shelter under the church porticos or in public buildings. In winter, more farm workers from the villages flocked in to find work. The children (boys and girls) put to work or abandoned by parents, worked as shoeshine boys, chimney sweeps, pickpockets, or in factories. They all belonged to the army of delinquents. They were packed together in inhuman conditions, the air polluted by the stench of the gutters, and smog from the factories. Only one of every four children was legitimate. The city responded with repressive regulation which resulted in the introduction of identity cards for the workers in 1829, registration of beggars in 1831 and

<sup>3</sup> FRANCIS. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), n. 49.

<sup>4</sup> ENGLE, P.L., CASTLE, S., & MENON, P., “Child development: Vulnerability and resilience”, in *Social Science and Medicine*, 43 (1996) 5: 621-635. Accessed on 13 March 2015, at: <http://ageconsearch.umn.edu/bitstream/97309/2/child%20development.pdf>.

the opening of a beggars' asylum in 1840. Consequently, charitable works for the beggars like the Cottelengo's small house of Divine Providence and Fr. John Cocchi's "oratory" for abandoned boys were started. Moral rigorism was the norm of the day at the Convitto where Don Bosco lived at this time. This element of the repressive system, Don Bosco rejected outright. (Lens John, *Don Bosco in His Times*, 2000).

Fr. Cafasso initiated work in prisons. Don Bosco too, went to the prisons. It was horrifying for Don Bosco to see many youngsters locked up behind bars, tied together like animals and no special care for those condemned to death. Once, Don Bosco accompanied a boy to the scaffold but fainted before he reached the place of execution. Note again, the repressive system awarding capital punishment to the young. Don Bosco was appalled to see number of youngsters aged between 12 and 18 years - healthy, strong and intelligent remain idle, eaten by vermin.

Witnessing such horrifying situations of youngsters, Don Bosco mediated and got several of them released, but unfortunately they were back in prison. He meditated and decided if only a friend would take care of them and teach them catechism, they would be transformed. He believed in the innate goodness of the youngsters (The meeting with Bartholomew Garelli: Can you whistle?). In other words, everyone has the potential to deal with the worst situations and the possibility to overcome tragic and traumatic experiences provided they are supported by appropriate opportunities and platforms. Therefore, he allowed the children freedom of expression and encouraged fun, expression, noise and cheerfulness.

The basis of Don Bosco's Preventive System is Catholic anthropology - a belief in the basic goodness of human nature, coupled with a healthy and realistic acceptance of its woundedness. He believed that original sin had affected but not completely corrupted human nature. Consequently, he believed in both the innate goodness of the child as well as the necessity of grace for his growth. We see here the evolution of the preventive system.

## **2. The Indian Context - A Reality Check**

According to the statement of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation in October 2012, as many as 48% of children in India are malnourished: "a national shame," stated Shantha Sinha, the then chairperson of the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights. Malnutrition is higher among children whose mothers are uneducated or have less than five years of education. As per the report, 40% of children do not complete their vaccination cycle and 8% of children never received any vaccination.<sup>5</sup> 12% of children aged 5 to 14 years are engaged in child labour.<sup>6</sup> Another acute problem is the rapidly-falling child sex ratio.

<sup>5</sup> CENTRAL STATISTICS OFFICE. "Children in India 2012 – A Statistical Appraisal," Social Statistics Division, Central Statistics Office, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation Division, Gov. of India. [http://mospi.nic.in/mospi\\_new/upload/Children\\_in\\_India\\_2012.pdf](http://mospi.nic.in/mospi_new/upload/Children_in_India_2012.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF. UNICEF Data: Monitoring the Situation of Children and Women. Accessed

As per India's Ministry of Health and Family Affairs estimates, the prevalence of mental disorders has been found to be 6-7%, i.e., more than 60 million people. The rate of psychiatric disorders in children, aged between 4 to 16 years, is about 12%, meaning around 50 million less than 18 years of age, including 20 million adolescents with severe mental health disorders, who require specialist services. Around 90% of them currently do not receive any specialist service. 22% of adolescents (14-18 yrs) have a mental or behavioral problem and depression is on the rise (NFHS-3, 2005-06). 53.22% of the children reported to have faced some form of sexual abuse with the state of Andhra Pradesh ranking highest ("Study on Child Abuse – India 2007", Ministry of W&C Development, GoI). 13.1% involved in drug and substance abuse are below 20 years. Suicide rates are highest in the 15-29 age group, peaking in southern Indian states, which are more developed when compared to the northern states.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, India (2013)<sup>7</sup>, an increase of 52.5% in cases of crime against children was reported in 2013 over 2012. In percentage terms, the majority of 'Crimes against Children' during 2013 were reported under kidnapping and abduction (48.4%), rape (21.2%), murder (other than infanticide) (2.8%), procurement of minor girls (2.1%).

The number of Juveniles in conflict with the law under both the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Special Local Laws (SLL) has increased by 13.6% and 2.5% respectively during the year 2013 over 2012. In 2013, the share of IPC crimes committed by juveniles to total IPC crimes was reported as 1.2%. Of the total juveniles (43,506) involved in various crimes, 8,392 (19%) were illiterate and 13,984 (32%) had education up to primary level. A large number of juveniles (50.2%) belonged to the poor families whose annual income was up to Rs.25,000/-. Children living with parents (35,244 persons) have accounted for 81.0% of the total juveniles apprehended for committing various crimes during 2013.<sup>8</sup>

There are many similarities between the situations of the young at risk in India today and that of the young at risk in Don Bosco's times. There are many differences too. Today the Indian Government's response is the Juvenile Justice Act and the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). However, the correction homes of the government are much like the prisons of Don Bosco's days. Most of the juvenile justice homes established to provide care and protection as well as re-integration, rehabilitation and restoration of the juveniles in conflict with law and children in need of care and protection, have become India's hell holes.<sup>9</sup>

on 14 March 2015, at: <http://data.unicef.org/countries/IND#sthash.d353ncxl.dpuf>.

<sup>7</sup> NATIONAL CRIME RECORDS BUREAU. Crime in India 2013: Compendium, Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India. 16 June 2014. Accessed on 13 March 2015, at: <http://ncrb.gov.in/CD-CII2013/compendium%202013.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> YOGESH VAJPEYI. "Juvenile homes are hell-holes India should be ashamed of", *The New Indian Express* (2 May 2013). Accessed on 14 March 2015, at: <http://www.newindianexpress.com/magazine/voices/Juvenile-homes-are-hell-holes-India-should-be-ashamed-of/2013/05/12/article1582627.ece>.

In his days, Don Bosco thought out of the box and came up with fresh thinking (including the Preventive System). The basic question before us is: Have we grown with the times and still have something unique to contribute? How do we spell out the Preventive System today so that we the Salesians of Don Bosco become relevant and significant to the young at risk? How do we get *out on the street* to be a *significant adult*, accepting the child/young adult at risk unconditionally and facilitate him/her to build his/her inherent power of resilience?

### **3. Revisiting Don Bosco's Preventive System of Education<sup>10</sup>**

#### **3.1. *The Expressive Presence – the Visible Structure of the Preventive System***

“Expressive Presence” means to be with the young at risk in a way that is friendly, attentive, lively, caring and creative with an effective presence. This positive and enabling presence is the visible structure of the preventive system, in contrast to the repressive/punitive/manipulative system of dominating the child with firm restraints of punishment – inculcating fear, dishonesty and dependency, and eventually breeding anarchy/delinquency.

The Expressive Presence prevents the need of the punishment but inculcates a homely and non-formal environment, facilitating the young to become aware of, express and bloom to full potential. It is a presence that motivates, encourages, infusing enthusiasm and optimism. It is corrective where the educator is proactive but not repressive and punitive. It is a process of dialogue not monologue. It is holistic and other centered, inculcates team work - not merely utilitarian and result oriented towards socio-economic gains for oneself. It is flexible and non-regimental but inculcates self-accountability.

In sum, taking a cue from the changing attitude of the Church as expressed in *Instrumentum Laboris*, Don Bosco's preventive method is “caring and compassionate and non-judgmental.”<sup>11</sup> It is a journeying with the young at risk. Here the educator becomes a role model. The message, messenger and medium converge. As Pope Francis points out, “educating is not a job; it is an approach, a way of living.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> PETER GONSALVES. *Growing with the Young: Don Bosco's Art of Educating explained in cartoon for the busy Parent, Educator and Youth Leader of all faiths*. Tej-Prasarini, Don Bosco Communications: Mumbai, 1994. Accessed on 13 March 2015, at: <https://sites.google.com/site/dbway2010/resources/-don-bosco-way-in-cartoon>.

<sup>11</sup> The General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. *The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization (Instrumentum Laboris)*. Vatican City. 26 June 2014. Accessed on 14 March 2015, at: <http://cdn.brandonvogt.com/wp-content/uploads/Instrumentum-Laboris-Synod-on-the-Family.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in CNA/EWTN News. Interview with Bishop Enrico dal Covolo, S.D.B., Rector of the Pontifical Lateran University. Vatican City. 11 September 2014. Accessed on 13 March 2015, at: <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/francis-encourages-us-as-did-don-bosco-lateran-rector-says-57290/>

### 3.2. *The Three R's (Rapport/Loving Kindness, Religion and Reason): The Foundation*

The Expressive Presence of the preventive method of education is effective in taking care of the basic needs of the young at risk, as it is firmly founded in three *R's*: Rapport/Loving Kindness, Religion and Reason:

**i. Rapport/Loving Kindness:** The learning begins in an environment of unconditional acceptance of the young at risk – with love and trust that builds his/her self-confidence and esteem. Effective expressive presence means here: empathetic listening, availability and being creative. Archbishop Bergoglio (Pope Francis) once commented on Don Bosco's preventive system of education, "It's important to spend time talking to children, to keep your ears open, even though we often think they're being silly. But among the hundred things they say, there's one thing that is unique, and deep down they're looking for something: for you to pay attention to their particularities, to say to them, 'You're okay.'"<sup>13</sup>

**ii. Religion:** The preventive system facilitates the young at risk to undertake the journey *within* from self-discovery through self-acceptance to self-expression while mainstreaming him/her into society as a self-reliant and responsible citizen, carrying out tasks without fear and external compulsions (principled behavior), respecting others and one's environment. Here learning aims at interior maturity – a harmonious blending of one's thinking, action and words. Here faith in God is expressed through festivity, gratitude and praise, joy and optimism, reverence and respect for all creation.

**iii. Reason:** It safeguards a relationship based on love from degenerating into mere sentimentality. Unlike a repressive system which disciplines through punishment, the preventive system of expressive and effective presence disciplines in an atmosphere of understanding, acceptance and respect. Here both educator (not mere 'teacher' in a class room) and child are comfortable within and to each other. The educator is not a supervisor engaged in maintaining the rules, but a mentor providing proactive assistance for all-round growth.

In sum, the three *R's* of the Preventive System are interlinked very closely. If Reason mediates Religion and Rapport/Loving Kindness, it is itself sublated by both Religion and Loving Kindness. If Religion sublates Reason as well as Loving Kindness, it is itself both reasonable and loving. If Loving Kindness colours the practice of Religion and sublates Reason, it itself flows from Religion and is given a direction by Reason.

<sup>13</sup> PUTNAM G.P. *Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio* (cited in S. Rubin and F. Ambrogetti. *Words of J. M. Bergoglio*). New York: 2013, pp 65-67. Accessed on 13 March 2015, at: <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbmNkYndheTIwMTB8Z3g6NmU3NTdhMjExZTc5YjVIMg>.

#### 4. Don Bosco's Preventive System and the Concept of Resilience

Don Bosco's Preventive System, with its visible structure of Expressive Presence founded on the principles of Rapport/Loving Kindness, Religion, and Reason, invites the Educator to be a significant adult who accepts the child/young adult at risk unconditionally and facilitates him/her to be aware of that *resilient* quality within. *Resilience* here "refers to the concept that even in situations of multiple risks to an individual's development, there are certain qualities within the individual or his/her environment that allows him/her to deal with these risks and thrive in spite of them."<sup>14</sup>

Though resilience may be an inherent quality, an inbuilt mechanism within oneself to thrive in spite of risks, this is to be identified and nurtured by a significant adult – the educator in Don Bosco's Preventive System. The concept of *Resilience* focuses on two strategies: "first, searching for better indicators to identify characteristics of individuals or environments that serve a protective function (a resilience focus); and second, investing in early childhood as a way of preventing risks from having as great an effect (a preventative approach)."<sup>15</sup> A retrospective analysis into Don Bosco's Preventive System, with its three founding principles of Rapport/Loving Kindness, Religion, and Reason, reveals that these strategies form an inherent part.

In Don Bosco's Preventive system or in its modern version of Resilience, inculcating self-esteem and self-respect in the child/young adult at risk by the significant adult with unconditional acceptance and expressive presence, is the key. The significant adult facilitates him/her to be aware of his/her inner self, and identify and build the resilient quality within. It is a facilitation of the discovery of meaning from within by the child/young adult at risk.

As Vanistendael describes, "Unconditional acceptance of the person (not any behaviour) will stimulate self-esteem. So will the discovery of meaning: if my life makes some sense, then it cannot be all that bad. ... Self-esteem can be very important in its own right and there is a lot of simple everyday behaviour that can stimulate or destroy it. For example, harsh discipline, much negative criticism, unattainable standards and sharp irony may be fairly common, but they can be very destructive for self-esteem. Some well-founded encouragement, constructive criticism, standards without perfectionism may also be fairly common, but they will tend to bolster self-esteem." Depicting the process, Vanistendael cites the anecdote of a street educator who dealt with street children habituated to stealing: "He did not simply criticize them for theft. First he let the child explain how he did it. Often the theft was very ingenious! Only then the street educator gradually tried to reorient such cleverness to more constructive goals in life. So he tried to save both the self-esteem and the ingenuity of the child, framing it in a socially acceptable way. This illustrates

<sup>14</sup> ENGLE, P.L., CASTLE, S., & MENON, P. "Child development: Vulnerability and resilience".

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

several issues: a) not accepting the child's behaviour, but accepting the child as a person; b) bringing out some positive qualities which many people may not notice because they are in a sense hidden behind unacceptable behaviour; c) respecting and bolstering the child's self-esteem in that whole process."<sup>16</sup>

## 5. Don Bosco's Preventive System Promotes Child Rights: It's Relevance Today

The essence and fundamentals of the Preventive System in the context of the young at risk can be perceived in terms of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Don Bosco's Preventive System of education, with its effective expressive presence and the 3 R's (Rapport/Loving Kindness, Religion and Reason), is the best tool to promote the practice of Child Rights in a non-formal environment and educational setting. With its unconditional acceptance, care and protection, Don Bosco's Preventive System of education accepts a child as the *agent* of his/her life – capable of participating in a decision making process ("right to be heard") that affects his/her life and brings positive changes (Convention on the Rights of the Child – CRC Art.12).

The emphasis of the Preventive System on holistic education aims at all-round development ("best interest" – CRC Art.3) on an equitable basis ("non-discrimination" CRC Art.2). Here the educator is a proactive *Significant adult* in his/her life and accompanies him/her to "prevent" him/her from "falling", helps him/her to "get up" in case he/she falls, by inculcating a culture of Reason (principle-based behavior), Religion (spiritual/God fearing – irrespective of the creed one follows) through building Rapport/Loving- Kindness where deeper relationships are formed where the helping and healing of hearts takes place. And in that process, it enables the child to become a God-fearing and other-centered, productive, self-reliant, socially-responsible, eco-conscious and responsible citizen.

The system we practise today contains the Preventive System as its core with several add-ons from psychology, sociology, human rights, child rights and religious insights (for instance, the conceptual framework of the Juvenile Justice and the legal bodies/programmes thereof: Child Welfare Committee, Juvenile Justice Board, Integrated Child Protection Scheme, etc.). The preventive system is a response to the repressive systems practiced by the government and other educators then and now.

<sup>16</sup> VANISTENDAEL STEFAN. *Growth in the Muddle of Life Resilience: Building on people's strengths*. International Catholic Child Bureau Geneva, 3rd edition, 1998: p. 24-26. Accessed on 14 March 2015, at: [http://www.bice.org/media/com\\_medialibrary/Document/312/175publication\\_growth\\_in\\_the\\_muddle\\_of\\_life\\_resilience\\_%20building\\_on\\_peoples\\_strengths\\_anglais\\_1998\\_copyright\\_bice.pdf](http://www.bice.org/media/com_medialibrary/Document/312/175publication_growth_in_the_muddle_of_life_resilience_%20building_on_peoples_strengths_anglais_1998_copyright_bice.pdf).

### 5.1. *The Right to Life or Survival*

Not just survive but live with dignity. As mentioned earlier, Don Bosco gives the young at risk a dignified life: basic necessities – food, shelter, clothes, medical care and a career option – formal education or training for a dignified livelihood. Recognition of the fact that they are right holders and therefore what is given to them is not out of charity. This is what Don Bosco did for the beggar children, working children, illegitimate children, to those children released from prison. This action prevents a lot of crime and misuse of youthful energies.

After supplying the necessities of life, Don Bosco never wanted strict, disciplined behavior from them. He used the words used by St. Philip Neri: run, jump, play but do not sin. The world of the Salesian is not a clock work world. Our world is not pure system: it is a mixture of system and non system. So the Preventive System is not so thoroughly a system as to leave no space for non systemic. It is in fact a system of education with a thorough and healthy respect for the non systematic. Don Bosco's houses and most especially the oratory at Valdocco were marked by a pleasant disorder, a happy chaos. Don Bosco had a vivid sense of the unforeseeability of life and knew how to operate in the midst of many unknowns.

This is not to say that planning and preparation have no place in the Preventive System. Carlo Nanni, from whom I have taken the insight about the acknowledgement of the unforeseeable, and acceptance of certain happy disorder in Don Bosco's works, also points out the place for planning and preparation. Foresight, planning and preparation are synonyms with the "preventive". We need to create the necessary structures, supports and conditions, we need to make sure that we are present to what the young are doing, and where they are, we need to create platforms of communication with them; he made an explicit choice for the word "assistance". All these are the preventive elements to which we need to dedicate time, energy and money. In this light must be placed the ban on physical violence, and we must add on verbal and all other forms of violence. Don Bosco would not have discipline at all costs. At the very center of the system is that the young person must be helped to grow.

### 5.2. *The Right to Protection*

The young at risk may have developed "survival skills" in the street for self-protection. Yet, s/he is exposed to every kind of danger: violence, abuse, threats, deprivation, ill health, bad influence, exploitation, inclemency of nature, etc. The intervention made by a "*significant adult*" is with the offer of total protection. Therefore, the child has to choose between the available street/situation of risk and the offer made by the significant adult. The open shelter is the first space in Don Bosco's intervention for the young at risk, offering protection. The enabling presence of a *significant adult*, which Don Bosco called "assistance" comes into play here in a meaningful way. Don Bosco planned and created an environment in which it was

almost impossible for the young to make a mistake -to sin. This is the right to protection as declared by the UNCRC.

### *5.3. The Right to Development*

Physical development is taken care of by the food, clothes and the medical care provided. In India and in many other developing countries, we have to take note of the malnourished status of the children. Next, the care giver is responsible for the mental development of the child. The child who had lived one day at a time without thinking of his/her future has to be involved in planning the course of his/her life. The human being is not merely a moving system, but a moving system that has become intellectually conscious. This means that consciousness is the starting point and the end is somehow built into the process of growth. Human beings in other words, cannot grow without asking themselves, “‘where do I find myself’, and ‘where am I going?’” Don Bosco is clearly conscious of this need, and constantly invites the youngster to take stock of his present situation in order to move towards the end. God has a plan for life that finally leads to that salvation. Don Bosco did not want the youngster to return to prison or begging. He wanted a livelihood for the youngster. The young person has to be prepared to plan his future.

### *5.4. The Right to Be Heard (Respect for the Views of the Child)*

When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account. This Convention encourages adults to listen to the opinions of children and involve them in decision-making, especially in matters that affects their lives.

Every young person has his /her opinion and has the right to express it freely. Children can also have associations and form groups as a forum to express their opinions. Their opinions are to be communicated to the local authority because they have a right to be heard. The local authority is obliged to implement the opinions if it is in the best interests of the young. When the local authority implements their opinions, the children have to be included in the governance of the local community (Art. 12-13 of UNCRC). Respecting the views of the young at risk and making them participate in planning, implementing and reviewing the matters that affect them is inherent in Don Bosco’s Preventive System.

### *5.5. The Community Dimension*

The Preventive System has a very strong community dimension, with its emphasis on building the “spirit of family” in every educative setting. Don Bosco’s Preventive System strives to create a family environment to provide the young person the

necessary milieu for healthy and holistic growth. Similarly, realization of the rights of the child enshrined in the UNCRC is in fulfillment of Don Bosco's educative pedagogy in the context of young at risk. For this reason, the interventions for the young at risk emphasizes on family re-unification wherever possible and in other cases, believes in alternative forms of care, replacing institutionalized care for all the young at risk, viz., group care, individual foster care, kinship care and adoption when possible.

The Preventive System *involves all* – the necessary convergence of all involved in the work – along with the children/young at risk (the primary stakeholders), the lay collaborators, and all the others, such as, local community elders, allied systems such as the Police, health systems, judicial systems, local administration, and Civil Society Organizations.

The Preventive System provides special emphasis to the children of the most vulnerable and marginalized, socially-economically-politically excluded.

Does the Salesian system encourage the young at risk to participate in the “governance” of the community? Respect and esteem for the individual person is the very basis of the Salesian educational system. This implies allowing him/her freedom of expression. Don Bosco also formed groups like sodalities for children to express their opinion. A contemporary incarnation of this spirit of family is the educative –pastoral community so much recommended by the 24<sup>th</sup> General Chapter. The major concepts underlying the CRC were present in the Salesian Educative system then and are present now as well.

We have to deal here with the relationship between the levels of experiencing, understanding, judging, and the operations on the level of deciding. There can be no human doing and acting without prior contribution of the operations that make up human deciding.

### ***5.6. Building Relationships - Rapport/Loving Kindness***

Building Relationship through loving kindness is also part of Reason where the heart overrules the head. The salt of Christianity, the love of God as expressed in Jesus is at the core of this loving kindness. Many of the young at risk are in conflict with the family, not able to taste parental love. The unsupportive attitude of the parents might have forced them to leave home. This is the “wounded” human being, who cannot understand a loving God because he/she has not experienced human love -the love of parents. The young person has to experience this love through the caregiver at our child care facilities who has intervened in his/her life. Here comes Don Bosco's charism of capturing the heart of the young. Boys simply put their whole trust in him and this replaced the lost love of the parents. Once this love was experienced (the young must not only be loved but must feel that they are loved) he could explain the love of God to them. This is the core of the loving kindness of the Salesian Preventive System. “The caregiver builds a relationship which is loving, friendly, trusting and sometimes challenging. It is a relationship that fosters harmo-

nious growth of the young person's inner resources. It is the relationship that helps to bring out the best in the youngster. For the caregiver/educator this means being with the young, not merely in physical sense but more importantly at the level of the mind and heart."<sup>17</sup>

This is a relationship of trust which cannot fail. The youngsters had the temptation to return to the enjoyments of the street. It was this "trust" which they found difficult to betray. Don Bosco was there with his loving kindness in time of crises and encouraged them to trust him. This mutual charismatic love and trust is at the heart of the "Loving Kindness" in the preventive system. Don Bosco's originality lies in his method, but his greatest originality lay in the way he handles the element of loving kindness.

The basis of the Preventive System is a thoroughly Catholic anthropology: belief in the basic goodness of the human nature coupled with a healthy and realistic acceptance of its woundedness. Don Bosco followed neither Jansenist rigorism nor Rousseau's naturalism. He seems to have taken elements from both. Like the Jansenists, Don Bosco stressed individual attention, gentleness and constant vigilance. Unlike them, he believed in the innate goodness of the young in spite of all the wrongs he may have committed in the past. Don Bosco allowed expression, noise, cheerfulness and made place for affection.

The young who manage to thrive, despite the harshness of the environment that surrounds them, have much to teach. They remind us that competence, confidence, and caring can flourish even under adversity. As noted, we call this quality "resilience" in a person. The educator does well if he is able to identify resilience in a young person because this comes out as the "strength in a person" and hence can be used as the foundation on which further strengths could be built. We recall the incident when Don Bosco found a boy who had no abilities to mention and he asked him if he could whistle. This 'appreciative enquiry' approach is a reflection of Don Bosco's deep involvement in the lives of the young. This style of education works as a nursery for the all round growth in the young - spiritual, moral and intellectual. Finally, the young person is prepared to go out into society and live a life as honest, self-reliant and responsible citizen. The positive and enabling presence (*assistance* in traditional language) could be used as the means to help the young at risk to develop secure bonds with caring adults.

"Unless we look at a person and see the beauty there is in this person, we cannot contribute anything to him or her. One does not help a person by discerning what is wrong, what is ugly, what is distorted. Christ looked at everyone He met, at the prostitute, at the thief, and saw the beauty hidden there. Perhaps it was distorted, perhaps damaged, but it was beauty none the less, and what He did was to call out this beauty... This is what we must learn to do with regard to others. But to do so we must first have a purity of heart, a purity of intention, openness which is not always there... so that we can listen, can look,

<sup>17</sup> PALACKAPILLY GEORGE, "The Three R's of Don Bosco's Education System," in *You Touched us: We have grown*, Palathingal Pius (ed.), Kristu Jyothi Publications: Bangalore, 2014: p. 94.

and can see the beauty which is hidden. Every one of us is in the image of God, and every one of us is like a damaged icon. But if we were given an icon damaged by time, damaged by circumstances, or desecrated by human hatred, we would treat it with reverence, with tenderness, with broken-heartedness. We would not pay attention primarily to the fact that it is damaged, but to the tragedy of its being damaged. We would concentrate on what is left of its beauty, and not of what is lost of its beauty. And this is what we must learn to do with regard to each person"<sup>18</sup>.

### *5.7. Religion in Promoting the Positive*

“Indeed God has loved us first, that he continues to love us first, every day and every hour, that even the very desire for God is itself a gift of God to us, that we would not even be seeking God if he had not already found us, that the very first movement towards God itself comes not from us but from God”<sup>19</sup>.

The Salesian educational system is clearly theistic. It presupposes the existence of God. This God is good and provident. The primacy of God's love is the basic Salesian theorem. The great Salesian emphasis is on the preeminent love of God. When the Salesian commits himself to becoming “the sign and bearer” of God's love, he tries to be the one who makes the first move, the one who takes the initiative – his intervention in the life of the young at risk, and hence, the great appreciation of the sacraments especially those of reconciliation and Eucharist.

How did Don Bosco use Religion in promoting the positive? For Don Bosco, all children have basic goodness in them. It is also to be noted that many of the Young at Risk have some kind of background of being in conflict with the law, out of prison status, unhappy situation at home, rejection of/by parents, stealing/petty offences, drug addiction, violent or exploitative actions towards fellow street children, sexual offences, being victim of sexual violence/abuse. This has destroyed the dignity of the child. This has to be regained. Don Bosco extends to the young, his invitation to a life with the dignity of a human being. The young need to get over this background of damage – need healing/forgiveness. Don Bosco used the sacrament of reconciliation to give healing/forgiveness to the children, free them from guilt feelings and restore dignity. In a multi-religious context, prayer, counseling, psychosocial support, trauma care, de-addiction etc., are used to restore dignity.

Don Bosco used the Eucharist, communion to gain acceptance back to the Christian community. The young person needs to be accepted – he is not the same person anymore and therefore no discrimination. Today the young at risk suffer from several discriminations – caste discrimination, discrimination as a result of the various tags that are put on him/her: “street child”, “drug addict”, “petty criminal”,

<sup>18</sup> VANISTENDAEL STEFAN. Growth in the Muddle of Life Resilience, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> COELHO IVO, “The Preventive System as Philosophy and Method”, *Divyadaan: Journal of Philosophy and Education* 17/1 (2006) 67-80. Accessed on 13 March 2015, at: <http://www.don-boscwest.org/sites/g/files/g472322/f/resources/COELHO,ThePreventiveSystem-XVIIA.pdf>.

“disabled”, “runaway”, “anti-social” etc. We often see these children overcoming all discriminations and joining happy company. Society still has discrimination for these children and the care-giver must show added love and kindness to overcome these. They have to be accepted by the community – community of the children, and caregivers, and civil society.

In this context, the teaching of the catechism is mainly meant to teach children about the loving fatherhood of God, loving kindness, forgiveness (preparation for confession), and acceptance of community (preparation for communion). Serve the Lord in gladness, a happiness that feels and understands even in the midst of suffering, that a piece of paradise will adjust everything. Religion for the Salesian is simple - long prayers and liturgies that are incomprehensible to the young and the common people are not part of the preventive system. Religion for the Salesian encompasses the following:

- Informal networks of support that have at their very centre, a relationship of unconditional acceptance of the child by at least one significant adult. This acceptance is probably the base on which all the rest can be built.
- The discovery of meaning, sense and coherence. This is related to spiritual life and to religion.
- Some social and problem solving skills and the sense of having some control over what happens in life.
- Some self esteem, some positive idea about oneself.
- Some sense of humour<sup>20</sup>, or a climate in which humour can grow.

In these areas we may find some possibilities for resilience, but in each situation we have to check carefully in which area we can intervene positively, what we can use and how we can use them, or if there are any other areas for resilience, which are worth discovering and using.

Resilience grows in an interaction between the child and its environment. As resilience is neither absolute nor stable over time, it needs to be fostered, always in a specific local cultural context.

Some young people who have had a terribly deprived childhood may escape adversity and make a living by drug dealing and violent crime. They have found a way to survive, but can we call this doing well in spite of difficulty? Is this resilience? No. Resilience is not the law of the jungle, nor survival at any price. The way in which the potential of resilience is used is not indifferent.

<sup>20</sup> VANISTENDAEL STEFAN. *Growth in the Muddle of Life Resilience*, p. 13: “Humour can be much more than just fun. A friend who is always very happy and joyful but who has suffered immensely in his life pointed out that at the bottom of most humour is some suffering. Humour often means that we recognise the imperfection, the suffering, but we integrate it positively in life, with a smile. Perhaps we cannot get rid of the suffering, *but we are not beaten by it either*. All this implies that real humour can be subtler than a simple escape mechanism: escape is running away from the unpleasant reality, but humour integrates such reality into life and transforms it into something more bearable and more positive.”

It must be survival in socially acceptable ways, as Professor Osborn from Bristol, UK, pointed out in a speech on resilience made at an ICCB conference in New York in 1993. And he specified: "Thus despite the failure of society to meet the social and economic needs of all its members it nevertheless demands that those suffering the worst deprivations may only free themselves from such deprivations through socially legitimate means".<sup>21</sup>

### *5.8. Application of the Preventive System in the Multi-Religious-Cultural Context of India*

As far as God is concerned, all religions speak the same language: God is compassionate and love, which is acceptable to all.

According to Hinduism, "All the gods of the *Trimurti - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva* - are compassionate, but the most compassionate is Vishnu. He is the sustainer of the universe, and Vaishnavites, who form a distinct sect within Hinduism, worship him as the personification of love. Hindus believe compassion and forgiveness motivate him to incarnate at various times to restore the balance of the universe. According to Hindus, Gautama Buddha, the embodiment of compassion, was his most recent incarnation."

According to Islam, "The Loving" is one of Allah's names as He said about Himself: "And He is the Forgiving and Loving" (Qur'an 85:14). Love is just a word which must be translated in action and it becomes obedience in the case of His creation, human beings, and mercy in case of the Creator, Allah. You can see that when love is translated into action it is mercy and His mercy is unconditional. You receive Allah's mercy whether you are an obedient servant of Allah or you are a mushrik (pagan, idolater) and a sinner; they all receive equal treatment in this life.

"Therefore, love must be translated in action, attitude and behavior; otherwise it is just a word without meaning. Similarly Allah's love is translated in His attributes of forgiving, compassion and mercy. Look around and you will find that Allah's mercy is spread all around".

According to Pope Francis, "I believe in God, not in a Catholic God, there is no Catholic God, there is God and I believe in Jesus Christ, his incarnation. Jesus is my teacher and my pastor, but God, the Father, Abba, is the light and the Creator. This is my Being".

Recognizing the multi-religious context of the young at risk, the Don Bosco National Forum for the Young at Risk, organized a national level seminar on 'praying in multi-religious context' and elaborated on the essence of various religions and their contribution to human growth.

<sup>21</sup> OSBORN F. "What is the value of the concept of resilience for policy and intervention?" Paper for the Conference of the International Catholic Child Bureau's International Institute. New York, 31 October - 3 November 1993.

## 6. The Way Forward

Reason, Religion and Rapport/Loving Kindness are the three basic principles on which modern caregivers intervene in the lives of the young at risk today. To make Don Bosco's Preventive System relevant today, we need to introduce concepts of Human Rights, Rights of the Child, elements of child psychology, etc. in a more meaningful and active manner, into the curriculum of budding Salesians.

We have to introduce the concept of Religion within the Preventive System in a pluralistic context. This would mean a deeper understanding of one's own faith as well as being in touch with the teachings of other faiths so that the caregiver is able to help the young to see the loving and merciful aspects of the "God he/she believes in."

A Child Policy embedded in Don Bosco's Preventive System but synchronized with the international conventions, national policies and legislations is to be evolved and actively practised in our childcare facilities, especially those meant to work *with* the young at risk.

This process of synchronizing Don Bosco's Preventive System with the present needs and emerging challenges in working with the young at risk means synergized efforts among our various focus areas/programmes: evangelization/parish, education, social development including the young at risk, formation, health, etc.

Eventually, taking the lead from Pope Francis, it necessitates active witnessing from us Salesians – both as a community and an individual – to be ready to get "bruised, hurting and dirty because [he/she] has been out on the streets, rather than ... remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe ..."<sup>22</sup>

Don Bosco's Preventive system is all about being *out on the street* with the child/young adult at risk and engaging in the process of identifying and building resilience - inculcating self-esteem and self-respect in the child/young adult at risk as a significant adult with unconditional acceptance and expressive presence. As such, it calls for thinking out of the box to facilitate them to identify inherent resilient qualities, individually and in a group environment. Investment in such preventive efforts results in great impact not only for the individual child/young adult at risk, but for the Church and Society as a whole.

<sup>22</sup> FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 49.