

GANDHI'S VISION OF ECOLOGY: RELEVANCE FOR 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

With each passing day, Gandhi's relevance is becoming increasingly clear in protecting the ecology and natural resources. The ecological philosophy of Gandhi that is based on truth and non-violence is applicable in solving the issue of ongoing ecological degradation and unsustainable industrial development. In order to safeguard the future of all species and human race that inhabit the earth, there is a need to adopt and implement the ecological thought of Gandhi.

Key words: Gandhi, Ecology, Unsustainable, Development

The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed.

Mahatma Gandhi

Introduction

One of the lesser-known facets of Gandhian thought was ecological balance and protection of the environment. Gandhi was not an ecologist, he never wrote anything specific about ecology but his sustainable and simple personal lifestyle throughout his life reflects his deep love and concern for nature. Gandhi believed that only an ecological movement designed to prevent violence nature was not enough; the principle of non-violence had to become central to the ethos of human culture.

The interconnection of existence of human on the earth and ecology is clearly reflected. The ecological degradation with the destruction of land, forests and water has been growing day by day and thus our life-support systems are declining. In the so-called name of growth, progress and development, destruction at large scale is going on but there must be something wrong with a notion of development that is survival-threatening.

Mahatma Gandhi knew the problems with the present economic mainstream 80-90 years ago. Once a journalist asked him, Mr. Gandhi, would you like India to have the same standard of living

as that of Great Britain? Gandhi replied, “That tiny country Great Britain had to exploit half the globe to have its standard of living. How many globes will India have to exploit?”

The development, science and technology have significant roles in transforming the destiny of human. Man has been involved in the over-exploitation of natural resources for the aim of development which has led to environmental degradation. We are in the middle of ecological crisis due to over-dependence on natural resources. The notion of development is itself controversial in the current times as in the so-called name of development; we have been plundering natural resources since ages. It is a matter-of-fact that development which does not respect the needs of people and science that does not respect the needs of nature threatens the survival of human on the earth.

In the modern sense, Gandhi was not an ecologist or an environmentalist. He never created any eco-philosophy and never wrote any nature poem, even then he is often considered as an “apostle of applied human ecology.”¹ But his green thoughts give us a new vision to harmonise nature with the needs of people.

In Gandhi’s time, environmental issues were not paid much heed, such concerns were minimal; but renowned environmentalist like Ramachandra Guha claimed him to be an early Environmentalist. In Gandhian writings, his views on nature can easily be traced. The Gandhian notion of Satyagraha based on non-violence and truth, austere and simple living and development reveal how without any harm to ecology and our fellow beings sustainable development is possible. Gandhi’s idea that “nature has enough to satisfy every one’s needs, but not to satisfy anybody’s greed” became one phrase ethic to modern ecology.²

Gandhi always claimed that the earth is a living being. His ideas were reflected in terms of two fundamental laws i.e. The Law of Species and Cosmic law. Regarding the Law of Species Gandhi believed that without the sacrifice and cooperation of both non-human and human beings evolution

¹ Khoshoo, T.N, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Apostle of Applied Human Ecology* (New Delhi: TERI), 1995, p.9

² Guha, Ramachandra, *Mahatma Gandhi and Environmental Movement in india in Arne Kalland and Gerard Persoon (ed), Environmental Movements in Asia* (London: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies & Routledge), 1998, p.67

is impossible. Human beings as superior beings, are the protectors and custodians of rest of the creation and should cherish the diversity and respect their rights. On the other hand cosmic law perceives the whole universe as a single entity. No malfunctioning could take place beyond the threshold limits built into the great system that consists of both non-living and living phenomena.³ Gandhi believed that "the universe was structured and informed by the cosmic spirit, that all men, all life and indeed all creation were one."⁴

Gandhi wrote: "I believe in the advaita (non-duality), I believe in the" essential unity of man and for that matter, of all that lives. Therefore, I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the world gains with him and if one man fails, the whole world fails to that extent."⁵

That is why Gandhi claimed that if an individual takes more resources than what he requires then it is seen as theft. From his deep understandings and readings of religious norms of Jainism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, Gandhi evolved such principles. On the basis of his deep understanding of interdependence of the universe, Gandhi framed his economic, social and political thoughts and ideas.

Non-violence, Truth and Satyagraha

The fundamentals of Gandhian thought are Truth and Non-violence. Ahimsa or Nonviolence means non-injury, but according to Gandhi non-violence was not only the absence of violence but non-injury in thought, deed and word. Satyagraha, Ahimsa and Tapasya were the basic principles that guided his life.⁶

Truth and non-violence are interrelated terms. To Gandhi truth is that "which determines the spirit in which one lives or the religious and ethical criteria which governs the way in which he thinks and acts." He believed that the only way of achieving truth is non-violence. It ensures fullest protection to one's sense of honour and self respect. If truth is the highest law, then non-violence is

³ Mishra , R.P, *Facing Environmental Challenges; The Gandhian Way*. Anasakti Darshan, 5, 2 (July-December 2009), p.9.

⁴ Parekh, Bhikhu, *Political Philosophy; A Critical Examination* (London: Macmillan), 1989, p.72

⁵ Young India, December 4, 1924.

⁶ M. May ton II, Daniel , *Non Violence and Peace Psychology: Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, societal and World peace* (New York: Springer and Science + Business Media LLC), 2009, p.6

the highest duty. Gandhi considered truth as the most correct and crucial term used for God. To practice non-violence is to realize truth and to realize truth is to practice non-violence.⁷ The technique of Satyagraha gave pragmatic expression to the ethical and religious ideals of non-violence and truth. Self sacrifice or Tapasya is important to achieve the truth of the highest order. It involves a willingness to die and freedom from fear. Gandhi believed that Satyagraha is tapasya for truth, nothing else. The pain and suffering that has to be suffered in Satyagraha is tapasya in its fullest level.⁸

The active form of non-violence is Satyagraha. Gandhi considered it as a soul force or truth force. The idea of Satyagraha is based on the notion that the moral appeal to the conscience or heart is much more effective than an appeal based on the violence, threat or bodily pain. The idea of Satyagraha originates from the belief that while violence to persons and property diverts the minds of the parties concerned from the real issues involved, non-violent action invites the parties to a dialogue about the issues themselves.

There is an unlimited ecological scope of non-violence. Gandhi's firm belief and faith in non-violence and vegetarianism made him adherent of conservation of all diversity which includes all forms of life, religions, cultures, societies and traditions.⁹

One of the pioneers of deep ecology, Arne Naess emphasised that the preservation of ecology is non-violent in nature.¹⁰ Thomas Weber systematized and Naess introduced the relationship between self-realization, non-violence and mutual dependence of all living beings in the following points.

1. Self-realization presupposes a search for truth.

⁷ Richards, Glyn, *The Philosophy of Gandhi: A Study of His Basic Ideas* (UK: Curzon), 1991, p.33

⁸ *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)*, (New Delhi: The Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, and Ahmedabad: The Navajivan Trust), 1965, Vol. XVI, p.13

⁹ Khoshoo, T.N, op.cit. p.3.

¹⁰ Naess, Arne, *Self Realization: An Ecological approach to Being in the World" in John Seed, Joanna Macy et.al (ed), Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* (Philadelphia: Society Publishers), 1988, p.26

2. All living beings are one.
3. Self-realization becomes impossible with violence (himsa) against oneself.
4. Himsa against a living being is himsa against oneself.
5. Himsa against a living being makes complete self-realization impossible.

To evolve a broader philosophy of environmentalism i.e. deep ecology Naess used the principles of Gandhi as basic foundation. He believed that the utopia of Gandhi is one of the few that shows ecological balance.¹¹

As Gandhi anticipated, non-violence has the power to resolve all our issues or problems, including the problem of ecological imbalance. Many eminent thinkers claimed the Indian Ecological Movements like Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), Chipko movement etc. as the living example of Environmentalism of Gandhi and they also consider him as a “man with deep ecological view of life, a view much too deep even for deep ecology.”¹²

The main objective of the Chipko movement was to carry forward the "vision of Gandhi's mobilization for a new society, where neither man nor nature is exploited and destroyed, which was the civilizational response to a threat to human survival."¹³ All these together made Gandhi an apostle of Indian environmentalism.

Gandhi's Critique of Modern Civilization

Industrial revolution has had affected the human kind as well as the environment. It resulted in making a small part of the population extremely rich and wealthy at the cost of exploitation of natural resources. Gandhi believed that such a plundering of natural resources by human beings

¹¹ *The Selected Works of Arne Naess (SWAN)*, Edited by Allen Drengson in cooperation With the Author, (Netherlands: Springer), 2005, Vol.2, p. 18

¹² Sharma, R.C, *Gandhian Environmentalism* (New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House), 2003, p.45

¹³ Shiva Vandana and Bandopadhyay Jayantho, *Chipko in India's Civilizational Response to the Forest Crisis" in India's Environment: Myth and Reality* (Dehra Dun: Natraj), 2007, p. 21

promotes nothing other than the greed for more wealth and the uncontrollable pursuit of worldly pleasures.¹⁴

Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* which was published in 1909, condemned the modern civilization as "satanic". He observed that 'machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin. It is machinery that has impoverished India.'¹⁵

The remarkably distinguished feature of modern civilization is an indefinite multiplicity of wants, whereas ancient civilizations were marked by an imperative restriction upon, and a strict regulating of these wants. Gandhi believed that the ancient civilizations were religious in nature which would surely limit worldly ambitions.¹⁶

Gandhi believed that true values of civilization values are not present in modern civilization. In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi argued that what we think as 'civilization' today is an illusion, and that any civilization that ill treated outsiders could hardly avoid ill treating its own people. Gandhi's critique of science and western civilization emerged from his dissatisfaction with the divorce of science and progress from morality.¹⁷

Gandhi was not against the technology, but the technologism which creates a hierarchical relationship among men as well as between nature and men. He believed that the greatest achievements of modern civilization have been weapons of mass destruction, the awful growth of anarchism, the frightful disputes between capital and labour and cruelty inflicted on innocent, dumb, living animals in the name of science and technology. He believed a science to be science only if it afforded the fullest scope for satisfying the hunger of body, mind and soul. Modern civilization involved an egregious amount of violence against nature which was largely

¹⁴ Roy, Ramashray, *Self and Society; A Study in Gandhian Thought* (New Delhi: Sage), 1985, pp. 36-38

¹⁵ Gandhi, M. K, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust), 1938, p.81

¹⁶ Young India, June 2, 1927

¹⁷ Prasad, Shambhu, *Towards an understanding of Gandhi's views on science*, Economic and Political Weekly, 36, 39 (Sept.2001), pp. 3721-3723.

seen as man's property. This undermined man's unity with his environment and fellowmen and destroyed stable and long established communities.¹⁸

In order to satisfy human needs, natural resources were exploited in a ruthless way and their balance and rhythm disturbed while animals were tortured and killed. Gandhi believed that due to rapid urbanisation which is part of modern civilization, villages would soon disappear. He claimed that ecological degradation is also the product of urbanization.

While the western environmentalists spread the message of "going back to the nature" Gandhi spread the message of "going back to the villages". He believed that the "the blood of the village is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built."¹⁹

Gandhian Concept of Ecological Economics

Modern economy is "propelled by a frenzy of greed and indulges in an orgy of envy."²⁰ It makes man more materialistic at the risk of majority and the environment. Gandhi asserted that "true economics stands for social justice; it promotes the good of all equally, including the weakest and is indispensable for decent life".²¹

Dr. J C Kumarappa summed up Gandhian economic ideas as constituting philosophy that sought to create an "economy of permanence". All nature is dovetailed together in a common cause". Kumarappa argued that "when this interconnection works out harmoniously and violence does not break the chain, we have an economy of permanence." He identified different types of economies and realized that the highest form of economy is the economy of service which Gandhi suggests. Gandhian economic concepts like swadeshi, trusteeship, bread labour etc. received acceptance and attention from the whole world.²²

¹⁸ Parekh, Bhikhu, op.cit., p. 23.

¹⁹ *Collective Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol.XCI, p. 57

²⁰ Schumacher,E.F, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Vintage Books), 2011, p.18

²¹ Harijan, Oct. 9, 1937

²² J C Kumarappa,J.C, *Economy of Permanence: A Quest for a Social Order Based on Non-violence* (Wardha, C. P. : All India Village Industries Association), 1946, p. 5

The swadeshi encourages us to consume commodities made from our own villages, thus promoting small scale industries which help common peasants and weavers to live comfortably and happily.

Gandhi also emphasised on the idea of wantlessness. He urged on limitation of wants which became another important aspect of economic thought of Gandhi. He urged people to minimize their wants to minimize the consumption and thus reduce the burden on nature by avoiding hazardous wastes. Our culture, civilization, and swaraj depend on the restriction of wants. Gandhi realized that market economics and modern civilization have a tendency to multiply the needs and wants of ordinary people.

Another significant economic concept of Gandhi is bread labour. He valued bodily labour saying "the rains come not through intellectual feats, but through sheer bodily labour. It is a well established scientific fact that where forests are denuded of trees, rains cease, where trees are planted rains are attracted and the volume of water received increases with the increase of vegetation".²³

The Gandhian concept of bread labour encourages physical and manual work instead of use of machines to produce essential commodities like vegetables, cloth etc. The Gandhian thought of economics resembles with the economics of ecology and quite different from the traditional economics. In the time of Gandhi, concept of sustainable development was not discussed much, but he ensured the protection of rights of the coming generation through his notion of Sarvodaya, which means welfare of all. Thus the Gandhian economic thought contributes to the sustainability of the ecology.

Gandhian Ecology and Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is an evolving area of social science which deals with the methods of resolving conflicts between individuals or between nations. It can also be used to address the ecological issues.

Whenever there is a incompatibility between various interests, the situation of conflicts arise. The Gandhian technique of Satyagraha and non-violence is considered by many as an effective tool of conflict resolution. Gandhi always preferred the usage of terms like mediation and ‘negotiation’

²³ Young India, October 15, 1925

rather than using word like ‘conflict resolution.’ He always considered conflicts as opportunities for the growth of morality and transformation, rather than problems.

The Gandhian philosophy of non-violence and truth is useful to the concept of conflict resolution. Gandhi considered that truth is one and various people perceive it in different ways. Nobody can claim that their perception is right and true. If we are not certain about the ultimate truth then there is no requirement of conflict or violence. One should have to realize God in order to realize truth. Self realization is the path to realize God. It will help in refraining us from violence against other beings.

In order to protect the livelihood control over natural resources, the tribal people or farmers led the Indian ecological movements. So the conflict is often arises between various interest groups or between people. Indian ecological movements adopted the Gandhian technique of Satyagraha as the moral equivalent of war. The Chipko movement is an apt example of forest Satyagraha in order to protest against the ongoing falling of trees. To save nature the Gandhian techniques of padayatras were organised. Many environmental activists like Arundhati Roy, Chandi Prasad bhatt, Sunderlal Bahuguna, Baba Amte, Medha Patker and others used the conflict resolution techniques based on self sacrifice and non-violence.

Conclusion

Although there were no wide-ranging discussions on issues of ecology and development during the lifetime of Mahatma Gandhi, but he was much ahead of his time, as he sensed out the upcoming environmental threats on account of his being deeply conscious of the very ecological concerns. Before any major ecological movement, Gandhi picked up fundamental ecological issues like industrialisation, urbanisation, over-consumption, violence to man and nature and so on, several decades ago. At global level, several ecological movements have taken place to fight against ecological injustice. Use of violence is seen in some of these movements, but in India ecological movements have been followed by Gandhian principles of non-violence and non-cooperation. Gandhi condemned the modern civilization as it leads to over-exploitation of natural resources in order to satisfy the infinite greed and need of people. Gandhian ideas can prove to be extremely beneficial in combating the issue of rapid ecological crisis. The concept of wantlessness as propounded by Gandhi can be a solution to the ever-growing issue of over-consumerism. He

observed that the Indian conditions required a new vision on economics which is based on village industries and agriculture. Thus he formulated a new economic order based on ecological balance. Unlike modern environmentalists who emphasise on “going back to nature” Gandhi always spread the message “going back to villages.” Gandhi’s romance with village is central to his ecological philosophy. With rapid urbanization, villages of our country are vanishing and in such situation Gandhi’s urge to going back to villages can be considered as a way to live a sustainable life style. However, going back to the Gandhian thoughts is essential to establish a green future, without any place for human greed.

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