

## MAHATMA GANDHI'S PERSPECTIVE ON ENVIRONMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*Gandhiji believed people are enslaved by their unlimited desires craving for more and more leading to over-consumption thereby demanding for more production. As countries advance demand for more luxuries growth which puts pressure on production units. Exhausting resources to fulfill people's greed leads to environmental problems. Therefore, Gandhian philosophy calls to lead simple life and limit one's wants. Perceive our actions in holistic terms. Questioning one while performing any action how it will benefit or satisfy oneself but not ignoring its impact on fellow beings, society, country and world. Be a responsible person and think for how individual actions will affect in broader perspective. Spirituality helps us to have compassionate views of nature. Gandhi's idea of self-realization (Svachetna) is an issue of human values that govern the actions of human being, which should make a balanced interconnection between society, economy and environment. If this will be misbalanced, man has to suffer by natural curses. Thus development becomes a moral imperative of deeper education. Gandhi can be said to be real provocateur of education of sustainable development.*

**Keywords:** Gandhi, environment, sustainable development, Spirituality, over-consumption

### INTRODUCTION

The Western model of development has proved to be disastrous for the survival of life on earth by creating the present environmental crisis, looking at everything as a potential resource. Our relation with nature as well as with other human beings has been commercialized. The ideology of materialism has been responsible for the present environmental crisis by promoting over exploitation of natural resources. Material progress should not be an end in itself it should be means to rural development. Unbridled pursuit of material advancement would destroy humanity. The Gandhian philosophy can be an effective solution to all the problems of mankind

whether social, political, economic or environmental. The root cause of these problems is moral problem. Thus Gandhian philosophy aims at strengthening the morals of the individuals. The economics which hurts the moral well being of an individual or a nation is immoral therefore, sinful. Thus adoption of Gandhian philosophy is a way of life, will surely lead towards the achievement of goal of sustainable development. Gandhi showed the humanity that there are workable alternatives which will be creative and sustainable. He warned against a series of social and political turmoil, ecological devastations and other human miseries that might arise unless modern civilization takes care of nature and man tries to live in harmony with nature and tries to reduce his wants.

## GANDHIAN THOUGHT ON ENVIRONMENT

Gandhi is critical about the typical way man relates himself to the world and the environment in the modern age. Nature is here treated as something different from man; to which man eternally turn to satisfy his needs and wants. He is worried about the animal instincts in man which know no limits to their appetite. The Hind Swaraj for Gandhi is thus an attempt to see beauty in voluntary simplicity, (voluntary) poverty and slowness. (Gandhi M.K. Harijan (Oct. 14, 1939) in CWMG 70:242 ) Gandhi viewed in nature God presence, therefore, made efforts to keep himself close and in companionship with nature. Natural Beauty of holy places of Hindus attracted him and he said that he bowed down and revered his ancestors how they connected religious sentiments with nature so that it is protected, nurtured and respected which is sign of their foresightedness. Human life being governed by intact laws of nature made him to believe that in the background lies Godly power. He was of the view that natural disasters are punishment for injustice and unethical acts of people. He said that we are being tortured by slavery of Britishers due to our accumulated sins. He wanted people to spend life according to natural laws so that, they are always happy, prosperous and healthy. If man can internally connect laws to nature with love and rationality he can experience to be in company with God. He considered deep mystery of nature is reflection of God's supernatural powers. His thoughts related to nature can be termed as eco-spirituality which is defined as a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment. In the ecological crisis of present times and concern for its possible threats has made this concept more relevant. The term is understood by some practitioners and scholars as one result of people wanting to free themselves from a consumeristic and material society. Cultural and

spiritual values have come to be recognized as crucial elements in nature conservation. Emphasizing and restoring the linkages between biological and cultural diversity has shown that in many cultures the spiritual relations of local people are a vital source not only for human wellbeing but also for the wellbeing of nature and ecosystem (Verschuren, Bas 2007) Spirituality helps us to have compassionate views of nature. Gandhi's idea of self - realization (Svachetna) is an issue of human values that govern the actions of human being, which should make a balanced interconnection between society, economy and environment. If this will be misbalanced, man has to suffer by natural curses. Thus development becomes a moral imperative of deeper education. Gandhi can be said to be real provocateur of education of sustainable development. Human beings have a responsibility to help sustain the world. We believe that God creation is sacred therefore, human beings have no right to destroy what they cannot create. Gandhi stressed to follow Ashimsa that is not harming any creature or other human being. According to Arne Naess "Gandhi recognized a basic common right to live and blossom to self realization applicable to any being having interests or needs. Gandhi made manifest the internal relation between self realization, non violence and what is sometimes called biospherical egalitarianism.(Arne Naess).

In Hind Swaraj in 1908 he pointed out that unprincipled growth will land humanity on the brink of disaster. Most of the Western thinkers and scientific attitude believe in "conquest of nature" showing superiority and dominance of man over all other creations existing in nature. But the Indian Philosophy highlights the necessity to nourish and protect earth and embrace all aspects of life and their interrelationship. All lives human and non humans are of equal value and all have the same right to existences. Another ecological dimension is the conception of the "unity of

man and nature" Prakriti is the source of life. According to Atharveda "The Earth is the Mother, I am son of Earth". Thus, we can say ecological crisis is basically a religious and philosophical crisis. It gives importance to the survival of not only human beings but all forms of life even the material world. God pervades everywhere and in every particle of matters. (Singh Ramjee 2011) Gandhiji says that "God manifests Himself in innumerable forms in the universe and every such manifestation commands my spontaneous reverence. (Gandhi Young India, 26.3.27) He recommended a development path that incorporated the following principles--(a) Local self-sufficiency, especially in the rural areas, which would give villages a significant measure of autonomy. Rural artisans and agricultural producers would have a synergistic relationship. (b) Rejection of modernization, particularly of labour-saving machinery. Gandhi preferred the provision of employment over pursuit of high economic growth; (c) Simple lifestyle that was not dominated by materialism. He was against the enslavement of people by means of temptation of luxuries that money can buy. (d) Sensitivity to the issue of environmental sustainability. Belief in Sarvodaya and Vasudhev Kutumkam considers "One World", therefore, Gandhi ignored the concept of narrow nationalism and wanted progressive internationalism. There is need to look at the problems, from international view point and thus seek for holistic solutions. He finds that the village handicrafts and labour are the most direct responses to genuine human needs and wants. But he was ready to accept the use of machinery wherever it is inevitable, and opposed an overdependence on it. From an environmental perspective, he observes that this dependence on machinery had destroyed man's inseparable relationship with nature. According to him, such a natural relationship is found in manual labour, where there are no machines coming between them. He says that, "to forget how to dig the earth and tend the soil is to forget ourselves." (Gandhi, M.K. Harijan (Aug. 25,1946) p. 282) Mechanization which does not disturb the environment-which does not

interfere man's direct intimate relationship with the rest of nature-was acceptable to him. Villagers should use those machines and tools which they can manufacture themselves and afford it. He was also equally aware of the dangers of using chemical fertilizers for increased productivity. He warns that, trading in soil fertility for the sake of quick returns would prove to be a disastrous, and is a short-sighted policy. According to Gandhi the primary concern of human being is not how to "take charge of the world" but how to live with nature and take control of ourselves. Bhiku Parekh observes, Gandhi's favorite metaphor is that "the cosmos was not a pyramid of which the so-called nature or material world was the basis and man the apex, but a series of ever-widening circles. He has shown respect for every living creature and was against killing of animal even in the name religious rituals. He announces that any religion which stressed on such practices diminished God's dignity and called such act as a sin. He adds that he is quite convinced that sacrifice of dumb animals to appease a deity cannot have any religious or other merit about it. It is a sinful act. He even goes to the extent of condemning the use of modern drugs, as it involved violence against animals in the research process. (Parekh Bhikhu, Gandhi's Political Philosophy : A Critical Examination ( London: Macmillan Press, 1989) The root cause of environmental degradation lies in the fast industrialisation and obsession for material development though it has given human society material pleasure and prosperity. The factors responsible for environmental degradation due to over exhaustion of resources through artificial means continue to aggravate the situation with much faster pace than the effort to recover and conserve it. The permanent solution lies in suitable alternative life style in tune with nature. In Hind Swaraj Gandhi has cautioned mankind against the ill effects of modern civilization. Perfect and meaningful existence is possible only in harmony and conformity with nature. Gandhi belongs to the school of thought which believes in remedy rather than cure. According to Gandhi Industrialization leads to

centralization of economic power flourishing by exploiting nature and man both and is the greatest source of pollution. He believed that industrialization leads to urbanisation which makes life miserable. Modernity makes life complex by multiplying its day to day need which is inbuilt and such life is devoid of true happiness and peace and making people to run after happiness by acquiring more and more material assets but then also they are in tension and frustration leading to depression and tendency towards suicide. Therefore, he suggested life based on simplicity, slowness and smallness but in today's life if you talk about one is considered a fool and lazy person with no high ambitions which frustrates him and he questions his thinking though he is on right track. Hunger for materialism is letting no one in peace who are chasing to acquire more and to those who are slow, single, contented living in contrast disparity. A simple life is one which requires only bare necessities of life and contentment. Modernity makes life fast. With so many devices invented to save time then also everybody seems to be running short of time. He advocated that good life can be lived in small community as in villages; therefore, he said that soul of India lived in villages with attributes of peace, tranquility, simplicity and life in close proximity with nature thus ethical. The agricultural and forestry are inherently renewable resources which co-operates with nature. But OIL-COAL-METAL-ECONOMICS is based on non-renewable resources as it is purely materialistic. Gandhi was an environmentalist not only in vision but also right understanding of man nature relationship and showed the message through his action. This made him an environmentalist with difference. (Jha ShreeKrishna)

Gandhi followed strict routine with the daily walk of ten kilometers. It is on these walks that Gandhi encountered the poverty of a nation, and so came face to face with the village India that had all but disappeared from nationalist discourse; it is on

these walks that Gandhi was flanked on both sides by his secretaries, who took down his dictation and so enabled him to reply to each and every one of the tens of thousands of letters that he received; and it is on these walks that Gandhi kept pace with the time of India and the rhythms of his own body. Gandhi deplored the idea of waste, and fasting was a sure means of ascertaining the true needs of the body and preserving its ecological equanimity.

People are enslaved by their unlimited desires craving for more and more leading to over-consumption thereby demanding for more production. As countries advance demand for more luxuries growth which puts pressure on production units. Exhausting resources to fulfill people's greed leads to environmental problems. Therefore, Gandhian philosophy calls to lead simple life and limit one's wants. Perceive our actions in holistic terms. Questioning one while performing any action how it will benefit or satisfy oneself but not ignoring its impact on fellow beings, society, country and world. Be a responsible person and think for how individual actions will affect in broader perspective. Gandhi's associates, Jehangir Patel, tells us, to evoke a yet more complex pencil story, that one morning he found him examining the tiny stub of a pencil "which had been put ready for his use". Gandhi commented that whoever had sharpened the pencil was "very angry. See how roughly and irregularly the wood has been scored and cut." At breakfast, Gandhi looked around the table, and as soon as his eyes fell on young Manu, he asked her: "Manu, you sharpened my pencil this morning, didn't you, and you were feeling angry when you did it?" "Yes, I was", she replied. "Well," said Gandhi, "please don't sharpen my pencil while you are angry, it distresses me."

For Gandhi, consumption should be done in moderation. He urged people not to consume more than they need. While the level cannot be defined easily in absolute terms and would also vary over time and space, the principle is clear. It means that self-discipline ought to be exercised in consumption. In this manner, people would be genuinely free

rather than being enslaved by the urge to consume beyond reasonable limits. Such an attitude is also ethical because according to Gandhi—to consume more than one need is tantamount to thieving from another who might need it. Gandhi gave away most of his possessions. He and his wife had few clothes, and Gandhi used scraps of papers to write brief notes and reversed envelopes for reuse to send. His close disciple and associate, Kaka Kalelkar, narrates that he was in the habit of breaking off an entire twig merely for four or five neem leaves he needed to rub on the fibers of the carding-bow to make its strings pliant and supple. When Gandhi saw that, he remarked: "This is violence. We should pluck the required number of leaves after offering an apology to the tree for doing so. But you broke off the whole twig, which is wasteful and wrong."

For developing countries like India, with its pervasive poverty, the burden of economic necessity is the pressing reality. Here, Gandhi's solution for limiting consumption is even more relevant and compelling. Gandhi did not place great value on individualism. He believed that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all. Hence, so long as large sections of the population remain poor and hungry, the task of our collective self-improvement will remain unfinished. Ignoring these problems will only lead to social alienation, even as the numbers of Indian billionaires increase. We will be unable to truly respect ourselves if we attain merely wealth while being surrounded by an ocean of poverty. So by assuming the responsibility of creating economic opportunities for the poor, and by undertaking this task in a spirit of humility, we would be taking the Gandhian way to earn our self-respect. The spinning wheel may not be economically feasible today, but the task for which it was envisaged by Gandhi—namely of finding employment, inclusion and gainful economic engagement for those that need it—still remains to be carried out. The rich must not only restrict their wants but must also treat their wealth as a 'trust' for the poor and use it for the welfare of the poor. This can be done only if people can distinguish between their real needs and artificial wants and control the

later. The real need meant to possess only what is absolutely necessary for the moment. To him this would not only help the unprivileged of today but would help protect the environment for the next generation as to him the earth, the air, the land and the water were not an inheritance from our forefathers but a loan from our children. So we have to hand over to the next generation at least as it was handed over to us. His concerns were not limited to human beings alone as he had a very strong sense of the unity of all life. He believed that all creatures had the right to live as much as human beings and felt a living bond between humans and the rest of the animate world. He believed that humans should live in harmony with their surroundings. Gandhi, who considered the earth a living organism, understood nature and existence in terms of a Cosmic Law that entails that the universe is a single self-coherent all-encompassing entity, organized and animated by a cosmic spirit wherein all life and all existence are one. As a proponent of the monistic (non-dualist) Indian philosophical system of Advaita, he believed in the essential unity of man and nature. He 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 spirituality, the world gains with him, and if one man fails, the whole world fails to that extent." He held evolution to be impossible without the cooperation and sacrifice on the part of all species, human and nonhuman alike. Gandhi was acutely aware of environmental pollution and of its harm to human health. He was especially concerned about the appalling working conditions in industry, with workers forced to inhale contaminated, toxic air. He expressed those concerns in *Indian Opinion* on 5 May 1906: "Nowadays, there is an increasing appreciation among enlightened men of the need for open air. Where large cities have come into being, labourers have to work cooped up in factories the whole day. As the price of urban land is high, factory buildings are not spacious enough, and the tenements of labourers are also very small. This invariably results in a steady deterioration of their health. Gandhi's emphasis on frugality and simple life does not mean that environmental ethics is

contradictory to pleasure. However, it is to be understood that there is no pleasure in wasteful consumption. Pleasures come from living in harmony with each other and with nature. Pleasures should not be based on exploitation of creatures. It should not harm the earth, but it should come from creative work and activity and cooperation. Environmental ethics also teaches us to appreciate the harmony in nature and its bounties. Environmental considerations must form an integral part of all planning for India's growth and development. Almost a century ago in 1909, Gandhi had already envisioned the insatiable and unending pursuit of material pleasure and prosperity in the Western society as a threat to the Planet and its resources. In his writings compiled in the "Hind Swaraj", Gandhi not only warned the western society of the ill-effects their lifestyle may bring, but also appealed to his countrymen not be trapped by the thought of material gains. The real importance of Gandhi as an environmentalist lies not just in his vision and his understanding of the man-nature relationship, but in the fact that he patterned his personal life on these ideals and set a (then) living example. Gandhi pointed that with vast population of India if try to imitate west then the resources of the earth will not be enough and it will eat up the whole world like locusts. He put his teachings in practice example though there was abundant non polluted water in Sabarmati near his Ashram he used only minimum requisite water for bath believing in that river was not his he should use what necessary and rest leave for others, this is the ideology of Aparigraha (non-possession) (Seth Pravin "The Eco Gandhi and Ecological Movements— [www.gandhiashramsevagram.org](http://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org))

The earth is regarded as the Universal mother (Dharti Mata) which harbours very large family of living organisms. Gandhi believed that there is divinity in all life and there is fundamental unity in diversity. His faith in non violence and vegetarianism implied his inclination towards conservation of old diversity including all forms of life, societies, cultures,

religions, traditions etc. Conservation of biodiversity for him simply meant since "human being has no power to create life; he has therefore no right to destroy life". He believed that women were more committed to conservation than men because historically they are gatherers not hunters and killers of life like men. He worshipped women as an embodiment of the spirit of service and sacrifice. He believed "He who is discontented, however much he possesses becomes slave to his desires. He experimented first on himself and then shared his experience with others. He said that education should be aimed at children being integrated with environment and must have "strong pupil teacher relationship and appreciation for Indian Culture". His model of development was that governance should be from bottom up and not top down, goals undecided should be self defined not stranger defined, production should be for basic goods of use values and not non basic luxury goods, production process should involve masses not mass on over production and should adopt holistic approach not sectoral. The focus of development should be villages which are self sustaining. If this model is adopted though we may be slower economy in relation to economic development indicators set by west but will have sustainable growth with environmental concerns and upliftment of everybody and lesser inequalities.

## CONCLUSION

The problems that he identified decades ago still remain the most pressing yet unsolved economic problems of our time—poverty, inequality, unemployment, and environmental degradation. The specter of climate change and associated mega-disasters looms ominously. There is reasonable evidence that even after a century of economic growth, material progress and high levels of consumption do not necessarily imply higher levels of human happiness in the advanced countries. The persistence of these problems over such long

periods of time suggests that Gandhi had identified some fundamental weaknesses at the core of the economic processes underlying commercialization and industrialization. Gandhi therefore leads us to re-examine some of the fundamental characteristics of the economic processes of our own time in order to uncover where they have fallen short. Applying Gandhian notions in day to day activities can make life style of the society more comfortable and happy. It would be able to check environmental degradation and hence would achieve sustainability. Thus, there is a great concern about environment in Gandhian Philosophy and Practices for others to follow. Throughout his life, he continued to give demonstrations on health, hygiene and sanitation.

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