

Mahatma Gandhi on Sustainability and Environmental Challenges

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Abstract

The environmental crisis has become the biggest challenge in the present time. We face repercussions of environmental degradation and climate change in every aspect of life daily. Industrialization and unplanned urbanization have led to various problems like air pollution, water pollution, soil pollution, etc., and threaten the very existence of the Earth and Human race. The world seeks ideas, approaches, and alternatives to solve this menace and ensure sustainable development. That leads us to Gandhian Philosophy and the solutions that lie in the Gandhian way of life to deal with the monster which is man-made. Mahatma Gandhi said, "My life is my message". He lived a simple life which was very close to nature. Mahatma Gandhi was an environmentalist in the true sense; he was such a visionary man who said much before the present-day crisis that "Earth has enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed." His words have come true because today's environment crisis is the result of consumerist culture and maximum exploitation of natural resources for material needs of human being. This paper is an attempt to highlight practical, affordable, sustainable, and feasible solutions that are already present in Gandhian thought and way of life. Sustainable Development is the one way to resolve this challenge and ensure the survival of the Human race and planet Earth. Gandhian Philosophy is embedded in spirituality which is inextricably linked with environmental protection and sustainable development.

Keyword: Environment, Sustainable development, Gandhian Philosophy, Environmental crisis

Introduction

Environment can be defined as a total of all the living and non-living elements and their effects that influence human life. While all living or biotic elements are animals, plants, forests, fisheries, and birds, non-living or abiotic elements include water, land, sunlight, rocks, and air. The environment provides conditions for the existence and development of all kinds of living beings. Survival of any living being from microorganisms to Human beings is not possible without the essential services provided by the environment. Nature has its own pace of doing things and maintaining the balance of the natural system which has been disturbed by Humans.

The environmental crisis is the reality of our times. We have seen it across the countries of the World forex. Uttarakhand Flood in 2013, Forest fire in Australia, Melting of Glaciers, etc. Environmental degradation is happening because of overuse and exploitation of natural resources for the fulfillment of material needs and luxurious life of humans. With the onset of Industrialization, there began a mad race for exploitation of natural resources and profit making. Industrialization led to a new era of mass production and mass consumption. Industrialization has led to urbanization which resulted in problems of slum dwellings, air pollution, water pollution, unplanned use of land, extinction of biodiversity, etc. A UNESCO report elaborates on the environmental crisis in the following words: Imperfect understanding of the natural systems and mechanisms that make possible the maintenance of life on earth; disregard of the unintentional efforts of technology, in particular the various forms of pollution, poor management of the soil, forests and water unbridled consumption of fossil fuels; uncontrolled urbanization; the relegation of rural population to a marginal position; and the crushing of traditional cultures- these are the most obvious and most frequent disadvantages of the changes that is taking place in the relation between man and his environment.

The lifestyle of human beings has not been in sync with nature. Indian Civilization since ancient times has always revered nature and natural forces. People have been worshipping trees, rivers have been treated as Goddesses, animals were part of the family, etc. But with the advent of Industrialization and capitalism, the focus has been on accumulating wealth and living a luxurious life at the cost of natural degradation. Environmental degradation is affecting poor people more than anyone else. They are the most section across

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the globe. Environment degradation and poverty are linked in multiple ways. Nations focus on economic growth to reduce the poverty of the nation, which further requires the consumption of natural resources in a disproportionate manner that leads to an environmental crisis. A crisis like water deficiency, pandemic, earthquake, flood, and drought affects mostly the poor and rural people of the countries who have very little contribution to environmental degradation. So there has to be some kind of sustainable solution to solve these issues of poverty and environmental crisis; and ensure human survival of race and planet earth. There is a realization that given the enormity of the environmental crisis, it is only by radical changes in the political, social, and economic realms that we would be able to address the issue at hand. This warrants a change in values. Gandhism and Gandhian Philosophy can be one to solve this riddle.

Gandhian Philosophy provides a vision for sustainable development. Sustainable development is defined by the Brundtland Commission in its report *Our Common Future* as 'Development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. This is what Gandhiji used to say that 'World has enough for everyone's need but not for the greed.' So basically, nature was already based on the foundation of sustainable development but the intervention of human beings with the invention of new technology has disturbed the natural cycle and made it unsustainable¹

Gandhian ideas on the Environment

Mahatma Gandhi was an early environmentalist in vision and practice. Gandhian Philosophy has its roots in ancient Indian wisdom. Indian philosophy aims not only at the well-being of all humans but also of all beings. The Sanskrit verse: "Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah Sarve Santu Nirmayah" means everyone should prosper and have a healthy life. Ancient Indian wisdom is very close to nature. His Philosophy is the panacea for almost all the problems. He was the man who was ahead of his time. Gandhianism starts with the famous line Simple living and high thinking and its objective is to transform the individual and society. Therefore, in the turbulent times when the world is grappling with so many problems, it is imperative to strive to inculcate Gandhian philosophy in various facets of life and governance. Environmental ethics is that part of philosophy that considers the ethical relationship between human beings and the natural environment. He had environmental ethics in his life like the use of natural therapy for treatment of diseases. Sacrifice and temperance were the foundation stones of his life. The brevity of Gandhiji's enormous writings, his small meals of nuts and fruits, his morning ablutions and everyday bodily practices, his periodic observances of silence, his morning walks, his cultivation of the small as much as of the big, his abhorrence of waste, his resort to fasting — all these point to how he orchestrated the symphony of life. No philosopher of ecology could have done as much.²

Criticism of Modern Civilization

He warned the world about the evils of industrialization and urbanization much before present crisis. Mass production through machines will not only lead to unemployment but it will create environmental issues the opinion of Mahatma Gandhi. In his book, *Hind Swaraj*, written a hundred years ago in 1909 warned of the dangers the world is facing today in the form of environmental destruction and the threat to the planet. Gandhiji described modern civilization as 'Satanic' and 'nine days wonder' because of its unsustainable nature and its 'consumerist culture' and a 'waste-centric society'. The Brundt Report titled 'Common Crisis', The Brundtland Report titled 'Our Common Future', and the Club of Rome Report titled 'Limits to Growth' have given warnings about the present crisis about which Gandhiji cautioned earlier. Gandhiji's ideas had deep roots in spirituality and modern civilization has total disconnect with spirituality. The environment provides all the necessary things for the survival of mankind. The advent of the Industrial Revolution and the invention of technological tools, started a mad race for exploitation of natural resources by the dominant countries of the world. Consumerism and greed of humans have disturbed the balance of nature. Economic growth got top priority without the consideration of detrimental effects generated by the waste of industries and their impact on the environment. In Gandhism, basic needs satisfaction received primacy rather than consumerism, which is held up by many as a hallmark of progress. It is based on a non-materialistic and nonexploitative worldview that underscores interdependence between humans and nature. Modern civilization has led to enslavement and alienation of man in the industrial civilization. He was the early critic of the dehumanizing character of modern industrial civilization.³

Non-violence and Truth

"I need no inspiration other than Nature's. She has never failed me as yet. She mystifies me, bewilders me, sends me to ecstasies." — Mahatma Gandhi

Earth as a living being was considered by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhiji developed his principles from his vast readings and understanding of the religious traditions of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Fundamentals of Gandhian Philosophy are Truth and Nonviolence. Gandhian thought of non-violence is not merely the absence of violence but it has a very wide connotation i.e. non-violence in thought, word, and deed. To Gandhi truth is that "which determines the spirit in which one lives or the religious and ethical criteria which governs how he thinks and. As per Mahatma if we are consuming more than what we need and wasting it then we are doing violence against nature. Human beings should not exploit nature for their greed because that will create disasters in the further Gandhi's principle of non-violence is described as complete freedom from ill will, anger and hate and overwhelming love for all. It is a 'love force' or 'soul force' aimed at achieving all the good human values like love, goodwill, cooperation, fellow feeling, and the like. These are real values of life, which teach us the messages that 'live and let live'. Mahatma Gandhi was an ardent believer of Non-violence; his non-violence has spiritual element in it.⁴

Gandhian Economic Model

The Gandhian ideas become more relevant when sustainable growth and development is to be achieved because he emphasized on production by the masses instead of mass production. His idea of economic development was environmentally more sustainable and employment-oriented based on self-sufficiency and village Swaraj. He was in favor of establishing cottage industries in villages in India because that would enhance the skills of rural people and provide employment opportunities. He wrote, "When the village handicrafts disappear, the villagers working only with their cattle on the field, with idleness for six or four months in the year, must be reduced to the level of the beast and be without proper nourishment either of the mind or the body, and, therefore without joy and hope". (Harijan, 7-9-1934)⁵

Mahatma Gandhi propounded the socio-economic philosophy of Trusteeship. It means wealthy people would be trustees of wealth generated by them which will be used for the welfare of the people in general. Mahatma Gandhi preached against the accumulation of wealth and use of it for selfish purpose. It aims to bring justice in the society. This principle reflects Gandhi's spiritual development, which he owed partly to his deep involvement with the theosophical literature and the study of the Bhagavad Gita. Gandhi holds that labour is superior to capital. Gandhi believed that everyone should do manual labour in order to earn living for life. The exploitation of man by another man for their benefit should not be done at any cost. Gandhi's doctrine of trusteeship is based on a sense of morality and love. This doctrine is nothing but a sincere practice of the doctrine of the Non- possession. The rich also must be made to realize, through a loving process, the merit of non-possession. If this principle of Gandhiji followed by industrialist in spirit then definitely they will work to protect the nature, avoid its exploitation for their personal benefit.

Sarvodaya which means 'welfare of all' or 'upliftment of all' was coined by Gandhiji. Mahatma Gandhi was inspired by John Ruskin's 'Unto This Last'. Her idea of Sarvodaya can help to mitigate the impact on the environment which is being caused by poverty. If poor people are provided with the necessities of life and a decent standard of living then definitely exploitation of natural resources by them for their survival will reduce. Hunting of wildlife animals and attacks on the biodiversity of the world can be prevented. As our former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi once said, 'Poverty is the biggest Polluter' so if the focus is on reducing poverty through the means of Sarvodaya, which is environmentally sustainable, pollution caused by poverty can be prevented. Sarvodaya seeks the happiness of each and all.⁶

Success stories of Gandhian Ideas

There have been many environmental movements in India where people successfully implemented Gandhian techniques. Chipko movement of Uttarakhand was a non-violent and ecological movement where people under the leadership of Sundarlal Bahuguna used the Gandhian method of resistance and hugged the trees to protect them from cutting by the Forest department. Narmada Bachao Andolan was also a Gandhian way of protest led by native tribes, farmers, environmentalists, and human rights activists against the construction of several large dams under the Narmada Dam Project across river Narmada. Appiko Andolan also a successful

example of the Gandhian technique which was similar to the Chipko movement. Environmental movements in India used Satyagraha as the moral equivalent of war. Gandhian techniques like padayatras were conducted to save nature. Conflict resolution techniques based on non-violence and self-sacrifice were used by environmental activists like Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Baba Amte, Sunderlal Bahuguna, Medha Parker and others.

One example is the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico, which, after a violent confrontation with government forces, turned to civilian-based forms of resistance. Its alternative model of organizing society—based on the principles of autonomy, participation, and public office — is seen as a form of service rather than as a source of power, suggesting strong Gandhian overtones. The deep ecologist Arne Naess had studied Gandhi before he developed his ecological principles.⁷

What is remarkable about these movements is that many of them adopted Gandhian methods of action such as civil disobedience, burying themselves in coastal sand, Jal Satyagraha, long walks, hunger strikes, involvement of political and community leaders, petitioning to officials, dialogue with scientists and government officials and convening of all party meetings to build consensus. Many leaders of such movements were inspired by Gandhi and his perspectives on social change.

Conclusion

So, we can say that the Gandhian approach to life is the best remedy for solving environmental problems, but it does not mean that Gandhi has directly referred to the problem of environmental degradation and its solution. As said by Gandhiji 'My life is my message', Gandhian way of life should be promoted which is based on minimum of exploitation of nature⁸. Only his views against the industrialization of the Western model, his call for maintaining harmony with nature, and his rejection of consumerist culture have earned him the fame of an early environmentalist. It is, therefore, essential to look forward for the solution of this problem through Gandhian ways. His ideas of non-violence, Sarvodaya, self-sufficient lifestyles, etc. are much more relevant and necessary in present time than ever. Sustainable development and proper economic growth with environmental balance may only be achieved through the Gandhian way. The Gandhian model provides an alternative direction and motivation in forming new values and attitudes that would build a harmonious relationship between humanity and environment. Gandhi never used the term environment protection yet he was the biggest environmentalist. The challenge of living in harmony with the earth is as old as human society itself. Therefore it can be said that everything in nature and all natural systems have intrinsic value. If mankind has to survive, the environment needs to be protected. Gandhiji's insights into eco-spirituality, sustainable development, simple living, and ecovillages are the only alternatives before humanity in this horrifying situation. There is a quest for a post-materialist society focused on the quality of life rather than the quantity of consumption, which is also in the Gandhian line of thinking, and to some extent, reflects the ancient Indian ecological vision of life.

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