

## GANDHIJI'S VIEWS ON ENVIRONMENT AND ITS PROTECTION

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### ABSTRACT

Gandhi did not recognize separate rules for separate spheres of human life, but saw all spheres in an integrated manner, which exemplifies best the human ecological perspective. It should be noted that *renewable sources of energy, evils of large scale industrialisation and dangers of environmental pollution were recognised* by Gandhiji. Mahatma Gandhi's critique of modernity reveals his concern about *the emergence of a social order that exploits nature for short-term gains*. His ideas on environment are intimately linked with *his ideas relating to the polity, economy, health, and development*. What he preached and practised corresponds to what we today call eco-friendly measures and living in harmony with nature. *The environmental concern as we understand today was not there at the time of Gandhi, but his ideas on development, technology, self sufficiency, village Swaraj etc. disclose his environmental concern. Different streams of environmental philosophy have paid their indebtedness to Gandhi.*

**Key Words: Mahatma Gandhi, Environment, Pollution and Protection**

### INTRODUCTION

*“The Earth has enough resources for our need but not for our greed.”*

– M.K. Gandhi

This most often quoted phrase by Gandhi depicts his concern for nature and environment. All the international conferences such as the Stockholm Conference of 1972 or the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 were convened much later than the concerns raised by Gandhi about the environment and its effects. Even in India the major movements to protect environment such as the Chipko movement led by Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunder Lal Bahuguna and the Narmada Bachao Andolan by Baba Amte and Medha Patkar derived inspiration from Gandhi. The concern of Gandhi about the environment, urbanization and mechanization was evident in his speeches, writings and his messages to the workers. It is apt to note that he was the “World's early environmentalist in vision and practice.”

Gandhi was not an environmentalist in the modern sense. Although he did not create a green philosophy or write nature poems, he is often described as an "apostle of applied human ecology."<sup>1</sup> It is a fact that environmental concerns were minimal in Gandhi's time; but eminent environmental writers like Ramachandra Guha consider him an early Environmentalist.<sup>2</sup> His views on nature are scattered throughout his writings. His ideas relating to Satyagraha based on truth and non-violence, simple life style, and development reveal how sustainable development is possible without doing any harm to nature and our fellow beings. His idea that "nature has enough to satisfy every one's needs, but not to satisfy anybody's greed" became one line ethic to modern environmentalism.

Gandhi considered the earth a living organism. His ideas were expressed in terms of two fundamental laws: Cosmic law and the Law of Species. Cosmic Law views the entire universe as a single entity. Nothing could malfunction outside the threshold limits built into the grand system that includes both living and non-living phenomena.<sup>3</sup> He believed that "the universe was structured and informed by the cosmic spirit, that all men, all life and indeed all creation were one."<sup>4</sup> 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 spiritually, the world gains with him and if one man fails, the whole world fails to that extent."<sup>5</sup> Regarding the law of species Gandhi believed that without the cooperation and sacrifice of both human and non-human beings evolution is not possible. Being rational human beings, we are the custodians of the rest of creation and should respect their rights and cherish the diversity. It is for this reason that taking more than the required resources is seen as theft. Gandhi evolved these principles from his vast readings and understandings of religious traditions of Hinduism, Jainism, Christianity and Islam. His social, economic and political ideas were framed on the understanding of interdependence of the whole universe.

The environmental deterioration that is happening, thanks to our life styles and worship of development and progress, is worsening day by day. Gandhiji has not said anything specific on it as environmental degradation had not become a problem then. But we have it in his writings. Once, when asked for a message to humanity, Gandhiji said, "**my life is my message**". We can find everything we want, provided we go through his writings, his speeches and his life.<sup>6</sup>

## **Mahatma Gandhi and Evils of Urbanisation**

Gandhi had cautioned the world, much before any modern day environmentalist, about the problems of large-scale industrialization, which we are confronting today. Gandhi visualized that mechanization will not only lead to industrialization, to massive urbanization, to unemployment, but will also lead to the destruction of environment. His seminal work, *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. The Gandhian idea becomes still more relevant when sustainable growth and development is to be achieved because he emphasized on production by the masses instead of mass production. According to him this will result in the development of an economic system that can minimize environmental degradation and achieve sustainable development. His idea of Swaraj or self-rule enables a practical sustainable development that can be implemented without compromising the quality of life.

Regarding urbanization, Gandhi expressed his views as follows: “It is a process of double drain from the villages. Urbanisation in India is a slow but sure death for her villages and villagers. It can never support 90 per cent of India's population, which is living in her 7, 00,000 villages” (number of villages in 1934). He was against the concept of removing cottage industries from small villages as he felt that this would remove whatever little opportunity was still there for making skilled use of the hand and head. “And 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 without hope” (*Harijan*, 7-9-1934). Gandhi was acutely aware of environmental pollution and of its consequences 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 May 5, 1906: “Nowadays, there is an increasing appreciation among enlightened men of the need for open air.”<sup>7</sup>

## **Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Cleanliness Program)**

It was Gandhiji who started cleanliness program but was not able to succeed and it's after 70 years of independence, our recent government has started a Swachh Bharat Abhiyan can be called as Clean India Movement to fulfil Gandhiji's dream. It was started on 2 October

2014 and is aimed to be completed on 2 October 2019 on the 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. The main agenda of this movement is to clean India, to focus on proper sanitation, to make India open defecation free, for waste management, use of dustbins, maintaining the cleanliness of the public places, etc. The India government has invested crores of rupees for the construction of toilets in every house, especially in rural areas.

Funds are also provided for solid waste management and liquid waste management. Various awareness programs are organized on a daily basis. Separate toilets for boys and girls have been constructed in their schools. Many famous faces are made ambassadors of this movement and we can see the active participation of common people and school children in this campaigning. It was Gandhiji's dream to see a clean India and everyone is contributing his best to make the movement significant. Now we can see two different dustbins one for liquid waste and the other for dry waste, in public places.

### **Non-violence and Conservation of Resources**

Mahatma Gandhi said "I need no inspiration other than Nature's. She has never failed me as yet. She mystifies me, bewilders me, and sends me to ecstasies." The Gandhian idea of non-violence, if adopted at various levels from international politics to local levels, can be useful to reduce carbon footprints caused due to wars and production of missiles. Gandhi had emphasized the importance of natural resources and its conservation. This has a direct bearing on the man-and-environment relationship. The importance of Gandhian philosophy is well-felt in the present period in which the lifestyle of human beings has been developed in a direction of high consumerism and generation of waste. This has a two-way impact on nature. Firstly, the rate of depletion of resources has increased tremendously, and secondly, the presence of toxicity in air, water and soil has increased.<sup>8</sup>

### **Satya and Ahimsa and conservation of Biodiversity**

Gandhi was influenced by Jainism, which looks at nature as a living entity and exhorts human beings to continually purify themselves by respecting diverse life forms. The Gandhian idea of Satya and ahimsa can be useful to reduce the greed of the individual and society. His concept of non-violence thus encompassed all living beings and embodied the eternal values of life in his thought and actions. He insisted on the eternal sacredness of life that included a tree, plant or a cow. Reportedly, the English historian Edward Thomson once

remarked to Gandhi that wildlife was rapidly declining in India, to which Gandhi replied with sarcasm, "Wildlife is decreasing in the jungles, but increasing in the towns." According to him reckless and limitless pursuit of industrialization by all nations has posed serious problems for the very existence of not only man but also for all living creatures and all kinds of species on our planet.

The concept of Sarvodaya is also similar to that of a sustainable development and forms a part of environmental ethics. Gandhi's vision of Sarvodaya implies a healthy development and environment that can be evolved by man to ensure his harmonious existence with nature and other living beings. Gandhi did not recognize separate rules for separate spheres of human life, but saw all spheres in an integrated manner, which exemplifies best the human ecological perspective. What he preached and practised corresponds to what we today call eco-friendly measures and living in harmony with nature.

### **Environmental Health AND NIREH**

Population explosion, mass poverty, over-utilization of renewable resources, overuse of fertilizers leading to water pollution, rapid industrialization, global warming, desert formation, deforestation, emission of harmful substances causing air pollution, industrial and synthetic wastes, and nuclear hazards that are more man-made in nature are all causing irreparable damages to our planet. Many of these problems are attributed to uncontrolled industrialization. The air pollution has resulted in a wide spectrum of morbid conditions such as acute respiratory and eye-related problems to chronic respiratory, cardiovascular mortalities and cancers. The ICMR-National Institute for Research in Environmental Health, Bhopal is engaged in research on various health effects of air pollution, water pollution and noise pollution. The molecular changes caused by air pollution are being studied to develop the biomarkers for early indication so as to prevent the development of such chronic diseases.

With rapid changes in environmental conditions, land usage pattern and climate change, the incidence pattern of various vector-borne diseases, especially dengue, is changing globally and there has been a steady increase in dengue cases in India along with movement of spatial distribution from urban to rural settings. At NIREH, a study has been initiated to identify dengue hot-spots in an urban setting and to find out the environmental factors resulting in its emergence. With rapid urbanization and industrialization, there is an increase

in noise pollution owing to increase in road traffic load, aircraft movements, construction and industrial sites and recreational activities. Chronic exposure to noise pollution leads to headache, sleep disturbances, epilepsy, cognitive impairment, poor memory, stress disorders and even suicides in individuals. Unregulated urban mining and e-waste recycling open disposal of municipal wastes, and automobiles and industrial exhausts are major anthropogenic activities responsible for water pollution due to heavy metals. Simultaneous environmental exposure to multiple heavy metals (co-exposure) leads to a multiplicatively enhanced response. This indicates that individuals living in the vicinity of industries, mining sites and waste disposal sites are susceptible to co-exposure and may exhibit complex health outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

The world and in particular India is today facing the harmful effects of urbanization that Gandhi envisioned decades back. The application of Gandhian principles can stall the further progress of these effects. In a conversation he stated: *"The human being has no power to create life, he has, therefore no right to destroy life"*. It was his environmental awareness that he uses to decompose kitchen waste and used it as manure and the wastewater was consumed in the gardens. He was aware of the social as well as environmental problems. We can say that Gandhiji was a true environmental lover and contributed a lot to the environment. He played an important role in the versatile development of the nation. He justifies the title of an environmentalist and has strongly condemned deforestation. He was a true hero and we need such heroes to be born in every era so that our earth can be saved from destruction and everyone could become aware of environmental issues. Actually, it's our duty to keep our earth clean and promote plantation. "Be green do green".

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