

Gandhian Environmentalism: Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's Ecological Ethics in the Contemporary World

Sushanta Mandal

State Aided College Teacher, Department of Political Science, Dr. Bhupendra Nath Dutta Smriti Mahavidyalaya, Purba Bardhaman, West Bengal, 713407

Abstract

This research paper analyzes the ecological ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and their relevance in addressing contemporary environmental problems. Although Gandhi was primarily a political leader and social reformer, his philosophy contained strong environmental insights. His famous statement that the Earth has enough resources to satisfy human needs but not human greed reflects his concern about the overexploitation of nature and unsustainable patterns of development. Gandhi strongly criticized modern industrial civilization, excessive mechanization, consumerism, and unregulated urbanization, arguing that these forces would ultimately lead to environmental degradation and social inequality. Gandhi emphasized the importance of simple living, moral restraint, and harmony between human beings and nature. His ideas of non-violence (Ahimsa), village self-reliance, and decentralized production promoted a sustainable lifestyle based on limited consumption and respect for natural resources. He believed that human development should not be measured solely by material progress but by ethical values, spiritual growth, and ecological balance.

The paper also highlights Gandhi's views on the human-nature relationship, in which all living beings are interconnected and deserve equal respect. In the context of today's environmental crises, such as climate change and resource depletion, Gandhian ecological ethics provide a valuable alternative framework for achieving sustainable and responsible development.

Keywords: Gandhian Environmentalism; Ecological Ethics; Sustainable Development; Simple Living; Human-Nature Relationship.

Introduction:

This is the most famous quote by M.K Gandhi, which shows concern for the environment and nature. Gandhi invoked the environment, calling all the international conferences the Stockholm conference of 1972 or the Rio Earth summit of 1992. His speeches, writings, and messages to the peoples of the world reflected his growing concern about the environment, urbanization, and mechanization. An important fact that the padayatra across India reverberated is that Gandhi was not only the world's greatest environmentalist by vision but also in practice. But in a contemporary sense, we know that Gandhi was not an environmentalist. While he never even started the satyagraha for environmental protection. Actually, Gandhi was a politician, a freedom fighter, and a social reformer. However, his ideas on philosophy, like Satyagraha, non-violence, simple village lifestyle, cottage industries, and views about

modern industrial society, are soundly connected with nature and environment. In this regard, the Indian historian Ramachandra Guha views him as an early environmentalist.

Today, Gandhi's perspective on the environment holds great significance. When he stated that "nature gives air to such an extent that we can have it free of cost," he was aware of the impending, horrible scenarios of environmental degradation. But modern civilization has monetized even air. In these times, one has gone on a trip to the other part of the continent to take the air, and this costs money? That is why he resisted and condemned great machines with all his might. (M.K Gandhi, 'Hind Swaraj,' p. 41)." Gandhi's Hind Swaraj was a warning for us against the rising consumption, materialism, and the wrong model of development, which is what the world must worry about even at the present time. (Ramjee Singh, 'Gandhian Vision'. P-129).

Gandhi was an incomparable person of the 20th century, who had a human and global perspective helpful for the welfare of the world group and his ideas about human existence (or intrinsic nature), human perseverance, and survival of humanity as a thought process. He knew that man would surely tread the path of destruction, and unless people lived in close coordination with nature, he would stop the exploitation of nature. The message of Gandhi is very dear not only at a specific time but also for the fate of mankind all the time. Particularly, his principle of non-violence, peaceful co-existence, and Sarvodaya (welfare for all) inspired the world immensely (M.K Gandhi, Story of experience with truth). Gandhi sees the whole exploitation of nature that the western consumeristic lifestyle and globalization have indeed affected the environment with major effects like climate change, earth cracks, and hunger. He thought that in the new era, where the modern world has changed to a more minimalist way of living, doing some kind of collaboration, adjustment, and harmony with nature.

Amis and Objectives:

The present study aims to examine the ecological ideas and environmental ethics of Mahatma Gandhi and to analyse their relevance in the contemporary world. Although Gandhi was primarily known as a political leader and social reformer, his philosophical reflections on nature, simple living, and non-violence provide a significant framework for understanding environmental sustainability. In the present era of climate change, environmental degradation, and unsustainable development, Gandhian thought offers an alternative perspective for establishing harmony between human beings and nature. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the philosophical foundations of Gandhian environmentalism and evaluate its contemporary significance. The major objectives of this research are as follows:

1. Gandhi's perception of the ills of modern civilization.
2. His idea of a life around a simple village.
3. His ideas on the human-nature relationship.

Research Questions

The present study explores the ecological ideas and environmental ethics of Mahatma Gandhi and evaluates their relevance in the contemporary world. Gandhi's philosophical reflections on non-violence, simple living, and harmony with nature offer an alternative perspective to the dominant model of industrial development and consumerism. In the context of increasing environmental degradation, climate change, and unsustainable patterns of development, it becomes important to examine how Gandhian ideas can contribute to ecological sustainability. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the following research questions:

- How did Mahatma Gandhi critique modern industrial civilization, mechanization, and consumerism from an ecological and ethical perspective?
- What are the key principles of Gandhian ecological ethics, particularly in relation to non-violence (Ahimsa), simple living, and the human–nature relationship?
- To what extent are Gandhian environmental ideas relevant in addressing contemporary environmental challenges and promoting sustainable development?

These research questions guide the study in analyzing the philosophical foundations and practical relevance of Gandhian environmentalism in the present global context.

Spiritualism and environment:

Gandhi was a spiritual leader. His environmental views include moral, spiritual, and non-violent means. For him, the secret of the development of humans does not lie simply in materialism or consumption but also in spiritual self-realization, a virtuous high morality, and non-violence. The simple living and high thinking idea showcased this love for every being (living and non-living), which is a part of god’s creation. My ethics not only permit me to stake but demand I lay claim to kinships with not just the ape but the horse and the sheep, the lion and the leopard, the snake, and the scorpion,” he said.” (M.K Gandhi, ‘The Story of My Experiments with Truth’, v. 1, P. 10) He loves all creation in the world, to awaken the Vaishnava truth ‘Vasudevam Sarvamidam’. (Benoy Gopal Roy, ‘Gandhian Ethics,’ Ahmedabad 1950, p.8). Gandhi was deeply inspired by Adolph Just’s book- ‘Return to Nature’ which stated that if a man wants to lead an ideal life, he needs to give company not only to other humans, but also to all living birds and animals, plants, and the whole environment. He would not accept violence against animals or any other living creature. Thus, Gandhi elaborated on his vision of the kinship of all life. All God’s creatures, I do believe to the fullest extent, have a right to live just as much as we do (Harijan, 1937). Men are trying to exploit nature to the optimum so that they can derive maximum wealth from it and consume this wealth as much as they can, was the observation of Gandhi. The next is that he thought, exploitation of the natural habitat, you know, this we will be doing is Himsa. Advising people of non-violence, he says, do not hurt any living being, that is Ahimsa. (M.K Gandhi, ‘In search of the Supreme,’ p. 26)

Gandhi and modern civilization:

Industrial civilization has greatly affected humans and nature. The civilizations have(embarrassingly) enriched a minuscule percentage of the entire populace instead of pillaging the natural resources of this planet. In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi described the modern industrial civilizations as ‘Satanic.’ He was an early critic of modern industrial civilization, arguing its dehumanizing nature. He noted that modern civilization rests on machinery, which represents a great sin. India had lost its inherent culture by dehumanization as it became increasingly industrialized, he said. “The West has all Indian industry at its back,” Gandhi wrote, “and God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. Now, England aimed to hold the world in one hand by economic imperialism. If a whole nation of 300 million (India’s population in 1938) adopted the same economic exploitation, they would scour the world like locusts” (M.K Gandhi, ‘Young India’ 20-12-1928 at p. 422). ‘For India to become like America and the United Kingdom is nothing but finding some other races and geography on the earth for exploitation,’ he said. Modern Western Nations have so far divided all known races to exploit outside of Europe, and it seems that there is no new world to discover. What can be the destiny of India, imitating the Western world?

According to Gandhi, the one and only thing modern civilization spreads is the Greed for money and the avarice for comforts. He renounced the modern European civilization, and his suggestion for its reorganization results from worry about man's fate as distorted by modern society (Ramashray Roy, 'Self and Society; A study in Gandhian Thought,' p. 36).

The answer to this question is that the most important feature of modern Western civilization is the unlimited diffusion of needs, while ancient civilization imposes a duty limitation on these needs and strictly regulates them. Due to the inevitable scarcity of natural resources, greed creates a lot of collective violence and individual violence in the world. Gandhi thought that religions ruled over traditional civilizations, which would certainly curb the whole world's ambitions. He suggested that India was to live in its villages and, for him, destroying the culture of civility of its traditional villages through machinery, technology, and industrialization was a sin. Well, Gandhi also stood against the use of modern heavy machinery, which is intended to uproot people from their source of living. As opposed to the modern, technological-based machinery that displaces the labour of those who might otherwise find employment, he was in favour of using the charkha. As the environmentalists of the West preached 'going back to nature,' Gandhi preached 'going back to the villages. He said, 'the blood of the village is cement with which the edifice of the cities is built.'

Gandhi and Urbanization:

Gandhi was also prescient of what modern mechanization would lead to, the industrialization, massive urbanization, and unemployment; but he wrote passionately about how it led to the destruction of our environment as well. The danger the world is facing today, in terms of environmental destruction and a threat to the planet as we know it, all amounts to the same thing, Gandhi wrote in his book 'Hind Swaraj.' His theory of self-rule provides a resilient, viable approach to development that can be pursued without sacrificing the quality of human life.

On urbanization, Gandhi stated that, "it is a process of double drain from the villages. The death of Indian villages and their villagers is a slow but certain process of urbanization. It can never be extended to support 90 per cent of India's population, which is residing in its 700000 villages". (The number of villages in 1934). Cottage industry and small industries espoused by Gandhi were against the trend where industrialization was removing its small-scale handmade examples from villages on the pretext of the limitation of employment opportunities. "And, when the village handicrafts give place to a mere agricultural existence in which villagers are adding neither mind nor body to their own of six or four months in the year, life must be reduced to the level of the beast and is deprived either of hope or nourishment properly so called, therefore without joy" (Harijan, 7-9-1934). He knew of environmental pollution and its effects on the human world.

Human-Nature Relationship:

Gandhi believed that nature is the mother of mankind, therefore he implored us not make an over-exploitation on natural resources. Today, the question of the relationship between man and nature is very complex at both the global and local levels. Enormous population pressure, widespread poverty, and rampant development have threatened the pristine environment. Since about 70 per cent of the Earth's surface is covered with water, this poses a real challenge. Highly consuming a huge portion of natural wealth, like water, soil, air, etc., for development is causing numerous environmental crises and depleting the ozone layers depleted and several kinds of pollution. Gandhi pleaded passionately with humans to

refrain from exploiting other human beings and causing them violence. He did not want to disrupt the ecological system and nature that gives health and fertility to all of us.” Long before the religion intervened, humans had always regarded nature as a divine existence and worshipped it like their deity. In ancient scripture, literature, and texts, nature was given enormous importance along with trees, animals, and living beings, etc. The first primitive man used to dwell in most intimate association with nature, and with gradual evolution, hunkering down ‘nature’ became a perennial company of ‘man’. Gandhi said no man on this planet has the authority to create new life; therefore, he has no business extinguishing life. Gandhiji fully understood the peaceful relationship of man-nature, and his philosophy regarding life, society, and politics is in harmony with this truth, wrote S. K Jha. This reverence for the salience and senility of nature makes him an environmental par excellence.

It told him that universal coexistence derived from reverence for all lives; if some were denied the franchise, it would no longer be able to exist. His non-violent theory is a universal law of life that reflects love for all. He was a critic of the European vision of man’s conquest over nature. He cautioned against humans transcending their natural origin system in a perilous displacement of nature. Gandhi was also opposed to exploiting nature for limitless mass production and consumption of natural resources. The idea of ‘Sarvodaya’ realized by Gandhi suggests a healthy growth and surroundings to be evolved by man for the purpose of maintaining peace, harmony with nature, and other living beings.

Gandhi and a simple lifestyle:

Gandhi viewed industrialization and modern civilization as a warning to all about the evils of consumerism. Gandhi said, “Our mind is like a restless bird; it has what it wants, but still is not enough. He wanted people to free themselves from the tentacles of machine culture and prefer simple living over materialistic comforts and luxuries. He opposed making nature a victim of man’s greed and limitless indulgence. The modern luxuries of the Western lifestyle, he believed, that it would dehumanize man and finally destroy both man and nature. Gandhi said a simple life should be practiced, and man should not consume excess resources from nature. Gandhi put his noble thoughts working by establishing Ashrams, which were a feature of simple living. His thought of a simple way of life was stated in his ‘Ekadash Vart’ or Eleven Rules, which are non-violence, truth, non-stealing, brahmacharya, non-avarice, physical labor, control of palate, religious harmony, and fearlessness. Swadeshi and untouchability. He remarked that “the restless pursuit for luxury and their increase is such an evil, I dare say so much that the very Europeans must have to recast their viewpoint if they are not to die of the load of luxuries which they are fast becoming miserable slaves.” Gandhi did write that if India emulated the European model of development, it would need more than one planet to secure such fruits as it had harvested.

Gandhi and Rainwater Harvesting:

Rainwater harvesting: Gandhi suggested that people collect rainwater and use it in farms. He advised all the princely states to confederate and take long-term measures for planting trees because this vast tract of land has a water shortage problem. In 1947, he proposed using rainwater harvesting and the use of Irrigation purposes to prevent food storage and famines. In 2006, the M.S. Swaminathan Commission recommended collecting rainwater to address the issue of irrigation facing our farmers.

Gandhi was against the use of too many cars:

Modern communication is based on cars and airplanes to make it easier to enhance mobility. The environ-

mental threat posed by the growing number of cars. 80 per cent of the global warming is caused by hydrocarbons and 20 per cent by deforestation (Joseph Stiglitz, Making Globalization work p-74). Gandhi told the American president in 1938 that if every Indian family possessed a car, there would be a lack of space on the roads to walk. During the Dandi March, when some followers brought oranges in a motorized transport, he disagreed and said, “The rule should be avoiding the car if you can walk.”

Gandhi and the Environmental Movement:

“Mother Nature has enough for our needs but not for our greed”- M.K. Gandhi. Gandhi’s life and work inspired the environmental movement in India. The Gandhian idea of non-violent protest or satyagraha has been applied to heavy industry that can displace and crush the poor and downtrodden. The leaders of the Chipko movement (Chandi Prasad Batt and Sunder Lal Bahuguna) and leaders of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Baba Amte and Medha Patkar) draw inspiration from Gandhi’s thoughts. The Chipko movement is one of the genus type environmental movements in India, in which people of the region embraced the trees with their bodies and put their hands on the trees to stop them from being cut by contractors. They dared the contractors that these trees could be felled over their bodies. But eventually this movement was successful and became the new History of Indian Policies.

Conclusion:

And, for maintaining peaceful and healthy survival in this century, the environmental crisis hanging around everywhere needs an immediate and successful strategy, viz., damage control. When other approaches have not been able to offer an alternative paradigm that guarantees the survival of humanity, especially in such dire times as today, Gandhi’s model may be a way to create new sets of values and attitudes that will create harmony between man and nature. This is a non-violent approach, and the Gandhian model might be an example that may lead towards protecting the environment and achieving sustainable development. Gandhi was a perpetual dissenter against everything that bred inhumanity, ecological disorder, and maladies of economic and social development. A rustic lifestyle, you know, a village life, and a nature-friendly style of living is what is based on His philosophy. The essence of his thought is imbued with simplicity, and a simple lifestyle, and Gandhi strongly advocates for it. He was always opposed, though, to modern technology and the industrial society that brings it into being, because that makes man a slave. Gandhi also said that we should not adopt modern technology and machines of machines as these exploit our natural resources, land, air, and water, and make them polluted, therefore hurting planet earth, which is the only home we have got. His quote, ‘the world has everything for every human to fulfill its needs but not the greed of any human,’ made him a leader of the environment. Gandhi’s political ideals in the world gave birth to his philosophical concept of non-violence, which is known as the science of peace and art for living with nature.

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