

Gandhi's Views on Environment: The Search for an Alternative

AMBARISH MUKHERJI

Introduction

We are passing through very difficult times. Our mother Earth is threatened by formidable environmental problems. The economic gospel of unlimited growth and ever-increasing consumption have caused irreparable damage to the ecosystem by depleting natural resources and drying up energy sources. The present degraded state of the Earth's environment and the predicament of humanity are the direct results of the ruthless application of the materialist world view. Insatiable ever-growing demands of the modern consumerist society, nurtured by unchecked industrialisation and modernisation, is resulting in grave ecological consequences for human civilisation. The 'carrying capacity' of the Earth is being seriously affected. The demands of the neoliberal global economy are pressing against the limits of natural systems. The 'market' does not respect the sustainable yield threshold of nature. Relying exclusively on economic indicators to guide investment decisions, it prepares a recipe for disaster.¹ Development has become an extension of the project of wealth creation based on the exploitation and degradation of nature.

It was during the early 70s of the last century, to be more specific since The Stockholm Conference (1972), that environmental consciousness began to

emerge. By the mid-1980s environmental protection was viewed by many as being of crucial importance to our collective well-being, economic development and prosperity. 'Sustainable Development' emerged as the key concept in environment discourse. Its hold on the global environmental imagination was confirmed with the publication of *Our Common Future* (1987). Subsequently it has gone from strength to strength reaching its peak at The Rio Earth Summit (1992). The quest for a more sustainable habitat for us continued with a renewed vigour since then. A new 'ism' has fast engulfed the world. 'Ecological disaster', 'appropriate technology', 'sustainable development', 'environmental degradation' and the like have become the catch-words of the present era. Environmentalism looms large. Though belated, the increasing concern among the nations to solve the environmental problems is no doubt a silver lining amidst the prospects of a bleak future. From policy-planners and administrators at the governmental level down to the various NGOs and the 'green' movements at different parts of the world—all are in search for an 'alternative' model of development, one, which would be more balanced, eco-friendly and sustainable.

In this search for the 'alternative', the teachings of one of the greatest thinkers of our time—Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi—

can be quite relevant and may be followed as an appropriate guideline. The world knows Gandhi as a political leader, activist, great philosopher and saint. He is also widely known as a humanist and pacifist of international fame. But we have largely failed to recognise Gandhi also as a human ecologist and environmentalist.² The present paper is a modest attempt to focus on the writings and ideas of M.K. Gandhi to find out his concerns about environmental issues.

Revisiting Gandhi

The environmental problems surfaced largely at the post-Gandhian era and as such, the concern for environment has assumed significance only in the recent years. The terms 'environment', 'ecology', 'sustainable development' and the like were not in vogue during Gandhi's time, as they are today, for obvious reasons. Hence, in the volumes Gandhi wrote there is no such entry as 'ecology' or 'environment'. But a careful reading of Gandhi makes it evident that in dealing with many other related subjects, he expressed serious concerns on many occasions about environmental problems and their solutions. Gandhi's interest in environmental issues can be noticed in his writings on such varied subjects as industrialisation, machinery, civilisation, urbanisation, village society and so on. He dealt with these issues mostly in *Hind Swaraj* and also in some other writings. We must remember that Gandhi was not an armchair theorist. Rather, he was an intensely practical man, who realised that practice must suit the local needs and idioms and changing circumstances. In fact, Gandhi was much ahead of his time. He could foresee the future and visualise the dangers inherent in the model of development the nations chose to go in for following the Industrial

Revolution in the West. As early as in 1927—much before any modern environmentalist—Gandhi had cautioned the world about the problems of large-scale industrialisation.³ Throughout his life, Gandhi was a staunch critic of unchecked industrialisation and modern civilisation. He viewed his contemporary Western civilisation as something which dehumanises the individual because it puts a premium on bodily comforts and acquiring of all the luxuries of life that money can buy. Gandhi uttered, 'It is a civilisation only in name. Under it the nations of Europe are becoming degraded and ruined day by day.... It is my deliberate opinion that India is being ground down; not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilisation. It is groaning under the monster's terrible weight. There is yet time to escape it, but every day makes it more and more difficult.'⁴ With these remarks towards modern civilisation Gandhi was actually warning us about consumerism, the rapid spread and related consequences of which we are facing today. His indictment of the modern civilisation in *Hind Swaraj* was intended to caution mankind against this calamity. He made an appeal to his countrymen not to be trapped by the allurements of this civilisation.⁵ Gandhi could foresee the mad rat race for the luxuries of life and the enslavement of the individual by the modern consumerist society. And so he opined, 'the mind is a restless bird; the more it gets the more it wants, and still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passions, the more unbridled they become.'⁶ All through his life Gandhi advocated plain living and himself practised that. Gandhi distinguished between happiness and material comfort and believed that consumerism cannot promote the former and only leads man to a

mad rush for the latter. His critique of modern civilisation not only had a philosophical and moral overtone, it took into serious consideration the resultant environmental problems. Large-scale unchecked industrialisation coupled with revolutions in science and technology increased man's control over nature. Scientific progress and the road to development have led to the deterioration of nature. We, in the quest for fulfilling our material needs, have exploited nature to its maximum. In our ever-growing zeal for conquering nature, we forget that unchecked exploitation of natural resources leads to serious environmental problems. Stocks of non-renewable natural resources are always limited. Therefore, their arbitrary use results in ecological imbalance, environmental degradation, various kinds of pollution and loss of biodiversity. Such a model of development obviously is not ecologically sustainable. Gandhi was apprehensive of the danger emanating from this psyche of the modern man. His foresight led him to conclude long ago that nature was becoming a victim of human greed, and he stated that the earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed.

Sustainable Development and Gandhi

The concept of 'Sustainable Development' (SD) is essentially a value-oriented one which speaks of human attitude towards nature. SD implies integrated human development. It is participatory in nature. Its basic value premises are 'equity' and 'justice'. SD relates to reconciliation and a profound understanding with nature. SD rests on the contention that economic growth and environmental protection can be brought into productive harmony by concerted collective action. Gandhi's views

on development and environment embrace all the major value premises and components of SD. Gandhian model of social development rests essentially on the values of 'truth', 'non-violence' and '*sarvodaya*'. At the centre of Gandhi's views on environment lies concern for human welfare and human development.

Sarvodaya is a Sanskrit word comprising two terms: *sarva* (all) and *udaya* (uplift). Thus, the etymological meaning of *Sarvodaya* is the uplift/well-being of all. Gandhi first coined the term as the title of his 1908 translation of John Ruskin's essay on political economy, *Unto This Last*. *Sarvodaya* represents Gandhi's ideal social order. By bringing about a country-wide decentralisation of both political and economic powers, *Sarvodaya* provides opportunity for the all-round development of the individual and the society.⁷ Gandhi's aim in life was the development and welfare of 'The Last Man'. He wrote in 1908, 'There is no wealth but life. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings'. *Sarvodaya* occupies the central place in Gandhi's worldview. The way of life practised by Gandhi and his co-residents in the *ashramas* founded by him both in South Africa (Phoenix at Natal in 1904, Tolstoy Farm, outside Johannesburg, 1910) and India (Sabarmati in 1915 outside of Ahmedabad, and Sevagram in 1936 at Wardha) focussed primarily on the well-being of all—*Sarvodaya*. Gandhi's vision of a *Sarvodaya* socio-economic order was that of a non-violent, non-exploitative, humanistic, and egalitarian society. 'Man' was at the centre of such a society. Gandhi realised that 'man' was seriously neglected in the model of economic development that was in vogue during his time. He pointed out that the existing model considered the

accumulation of wealth as the only sign of prosperity. It believed that the happiness of nations depends upon wealth alone; the more factories, the merrier.

Gandhi has often been criticised on the grounds that he opposed scientific and technological progress, glorified poverty, and his critique of modern civilisation and industrialisation was a call for going back to the past. However, such comments are over-simplifications of his ideas and visions. A more careful reading of Gandhi reveals that he was not against industrialisation *per se*. He was actually opposed to 'industrialism' and 'dehumanised' machine culture. Gandhi was clearly of the opinion that if development substitutes machine for the man, it would inevitably destroy both man and the environment. He was never against new developments in science and technology. Thus, he clearly stated in *Harijan* (29 August 1936), 'There would be no objection to villagers using even the modern machines and tools that they can make and afford to use.' What Gandhi meant to emphasize was that the individual should try to make himself free from the tentacles of machine culture. Man should realise that a mad rush after earthly luxuries, promoted by consumerism, is harmful not only for himself and his society, but also for the natural environment he lives in. Such view is clearly evident in one of the major components of Gandhian social and political philosophy—*Swaraj*.

Gandhi's concept of *Swaraj*, in addition to its socio-political aspects, emphasized self-control and self-realisation by the individual. *Swa* means 'self' and *Raj* means 'rule'. Thus, *Swaraj* means 'self-rule' and 'self-restraint'. It is well known that Gandhi used the term *swaraj* with a definite meaning and significance which usually refers to his vision of India's independence

from British colonial rule. In fact, he used the term for both the nation and the individual. While applied in the context of the individual, the term *swaraj* meant for Gandhi rule over oneself and control over lust. For he believed that man cannot rule over himself without conquering the lust within him. Rule over all without rule over oneself is deceptive and disappointing.⁸ In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi categorically remarked that such '*swaraj*' has to be experienced by each one for himself. It is only through self-control and self-restraint that the individual can come out of the allurements of consumerism, check his greed for earthly luxuries, and be more judicious in using the natural resources. Such behaviour then can lead to the protection of the environment and a more sustainable living for mankind.

Rapid industrialisation throughout the world has prompted a high rate of urbanisation. The present era has often been termed as the age of 'urban revolution'. The rate of urbanisation has been ever increasing, particularly in the developing countries, since the second half of the last century. Unfortunately, at many places the process of such urbanisation has often been largely unchecked and unplanned leading to serious problems in urban areas. Increasing density of urban population, mushrooming of urban slums, lack of basic civic services and amenities, various types of pollution, increasing loss of urban greenery—all have led to serious urban environmental problems and made our cities less and less sustainable. Gandhi was apprehensive of these ill effects and dreadful consequences of industrialisation and rapid urbanisation. He remarked in *Young India* that there was really not much to admire in big cities with their oppressive hungers and congestion, and the same noises and same faces day in

and day out. Gandhi looked for the alternative in rural development, village reconstruction, economic and political decentralisation, self-sufficient village units and community-oriented system of production. These were the main pillars of the projected Gandhian society. Gandhi was of the opinion that it is best suited to India's need and was also less energy-intensive, less wasteful, and more eco-friendly. The ecosystem of Gandhian model would be based on the harmony between its four major components: i) population, ii) organisation, iii) energy, and iv) technology. The harmony will be established through the processes mentioned above and will promote the values of dignity of labour. It will create opportunities for individuals to be in direct contact with nature and environment. Gandhi fully understood the primordially of man-nature relationship, and his philosophy of life and views on society and politics are in consonance with that.

Gandhi premised that every community was inextricably bound up with a specific natural environment with which it had grown up, which had cradled and nursed it. In the course of interacting with its environment, a community develops its distinct customs, habits, thoughts and ways of life. Gandhi viewed a community's culture as its 'soul' or 'spirit' and its natural habitat as its 'body'; the two formed an indissoluble unity.⁹ His concept of *Swadesh* refers to this unity. *Swa* means one's own and *desh* means the total cultural and natural environment of which one is an inseparable part. Gandhi used the term *Swadesh* to encompass all the elements composing the *desh* and implied a love for not only the traditional way of life, but also the natural environment. He believed that the integrity of a way of life was inextricably bound up

with that of its ecological context and one could not be preserved without preserving the other.

Conclusion

Present day environmentalists argue that the future of humanity depends essentially upon three factors: a) man's behaviour with himself, b) his behaviour with other human beings, and, c) his behaviour with nature. Gandhian philosophy directly addressed these basic issues through the concepts of *Swaraj*, *Non-violence*, and *Swadesh*. For Gandhi, the economic is inseparable from the ethical. Based on moral values, Gandhian model of development emphasises limitation of wants, simplicity, self-sufficiency, need-based production and distribution, and appropriate technology among others. Modern environmentalism farther emphasises the concept of 3Rs—Reduction, Reuse, and Recycle of natural resources. Gandhi, all along his life, preached and himself practised these three. The realisation of the Gandhian model is possible perhaps only with a decisive and clear moral lead. The basic question is that of a change in our mind-set, and a vision for the future. Today when we are in search for an 'alternative' model of development, which will be more eco-friendly and sustainable, Gandhi's ideas and views can be a pathfinder in our quest for a more liveable earth. However, at the same time we should keep in mind that Gandhi's teachings cannot be mechanically and uncritically applied in every context. We have to interpret and reinterpret Gandhi in the context of time and space. Fortunately, such efforts can be noticed at different corners of our country in the contemporary period. The legacy of the *ashramas* Gandhi established is not to be found in their

physical remains now preserved as heritages and tourist attractions. Rather the legacy of Gandhi can be found at work in the network of grassroots non-governmental organizations (NGOs) seeking to improve the lives of people in rural and urban India by applying Gandhian philosophy in a number of ways.¹⁰ Tarun Bharat Sangha, founded by Rajendra Sing, the 'waterman of India', helped the poor village farmers in the arid regions of Alwar, Rajasthan through teaching them the techniques of rain water harvesting. Anuradha Bhosle worked to improve the lives of child labourers in Kolhapur district, Maharashtra, by providing them with basic housing, food, and education. Bunker Roy founded the Barefoot College, a non-degree-giving educational institution with an emphasis on empowerment and sustainability. There are many such stories. Each of such initiatives explicitly followed Gandhian teachings about equality, hands-on education, and local practices geared towards improvement of the community. These were much in consonance with Gandhi's idea of *Swaraj*. The various

environmental movements in our country—Chipko, Silent Valley, Narmada Bachao, Beej Bachao, Jal Swaraj, and many others—directed towards protecting environmental degradation and saving the mother Earth, have also been influenced by Gandhian philosophy and world view to a great extent. The eminent leaders of these movements, as well as their followers, have largely followed the path of *non-violence* and *satyagraha* in the process of their resistance and reconstruction. Such individual efforts ultimately came under a common umbrella in the 1990s when the National Alliance of People's Movement (NAPM) was established in our country. The slogan was raised, 'binash nahi, bikash chahiye' (not destruction, but development and progress). These are definitely rays of hope in the midst of the environmental crisis we are facing in the new millennium. In this context, re-reading and reinterpreting Gandhi time and again can be a useful guideline before us in our search for sustainability. And also, in that way perhaps, we can free the 'Mahatma' from empty adulation and pay him a real tribute. ■

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* The author is a Professor of Political Science at Vidyasagar University, West Bengal.