

RESEARCH PAPER

Gandhian solution to environmental problems

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ABSTRACT

It is true that the environmental problems are more challenging today than ever before. It's also a reality that we have to fight against the menace. In search of different approaches in lacking with environmental challenges, we are naturally attracted towards the Gandhian approach. Now a day Gandhian ideas, approaches and alternatives to social transformation and development are a debate of global concern. If we go through voluminous writings of Mahatma Gandhi there are rare references to his concern for protection and preservation of environment. Only a few writers recognize Gandhi as an early environmentalist. But it is more than appropriate to remember Mahatma Gandhi as one of the hap bingers of environmental issues.

Key Words : Gandhian ideas, Global concern , Environmental issues

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The literal meaning of environment is related to the surroundings of an object in nature. In fact, environment may be regarded as everything else but to me it includes the sky over our heads and the earth beneath our feet. It also comprises all other people and any living organism with which we have any connection. The environment includes not only the natural and man-made things for us but also the circumstances or influences created by physical and cultural conditions and processes. All living organisms, from microorganisms to human beings, have their own environments. In a nut-shell the conditions for existences and development for all kind of living beings postulate the whole perspective of environment. The biological existence of all creatures depends on the harmonious relationship naturally maintained within the eco-system. It is true that the environment pollution is the part and parcel of human activities aiming at more and more exploitation of nature for prosperity and development in life without caring the unfavourable changes imposed upon it. A UNESCO report elaborates the environmental crisis in the following words: Imperfect understanding of the natural systems and mechanism which 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. Sir Edmund Hillary¹ once said that 'environmental problems are really social problems. They begin with people as the same and end with the people as victims'. The creation of friendly atmosphere by human being with nature and natural phenomenon without causing any harm to it has been our cultural heritage since ancient time beginning. But with the advent of industrial revolution in West, the demand and need for the exploitation of nature and natural resources became inevitable causing the disastrous effects on the whole biosphere and its existences. The environmental degradation is so alarming that very existence of humanity is in danger today. In spite of various safeguard measures for environmental protection situation is not healthy. With the growth of industrialization and the demand for more and more consumer goods, the cut throat competition amongst western industrial powers led to over exploitation of minerals, forests, soil and flora and fauna. The cutting down of jungles and

trees resulted not only in the ecological imbalance but it also resulted in erosion of soil and dryness of rivers, lakes and other resources of water. It has deserted the vast area of land at global level. Consequently drought and famine force people for starvation.

The post colonial Indian scenario of economic and industrial development through five year plans have lost its aim of integrated development during the last half a century. We have really become the blind follower of western industrialization process, which has not only generated the sharp division between rich and poor classes but also is cause behind the most serious problem of environmental pollution. Today, environmental pollution is a growing menace in Asian Countries: gradual degradation of water, air and land is taking place due to rapid population growth and unhealthy development strategies, which lack in environment protection devices. In developing countries, the root cause of pollution may be related mainly with the poverty of the people. Our late P.M. Mrs. Indira Gandhi drew world attention at Stockholm in June 1972 with her remarkable comment that "poverty is the greatest polluter". Twenty years later, Indira Gandhi's emphasis on poverty alleviation as the prime concern was reiterated by the Indian delegation to the Rio de Janeiro Conference (1992). It described India's environmental problems as two fold: those rising from the negative effects from the very process of development, and those rising from condition of poverty and underdevelopment. The poverty alleviation programmes, for both urban and rural areas demand rapid industrialization which produces different variety of pollution known as industrial pollution, air pollution, water pollution known as industrial pollution, air pollution, water pollution, solid waste pollution, noise pollution, etc.

There are many cities in India like Bombay, Delhi, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Jamshedpur, Kanpur etc., which have already entered the danger zone of pollution. The wastes of the nuclear power plants now deposited under the sea are not only causing contamination to fish and other marine fauna but in addition to it, there is much greater danger of the contamination of air and water due to modern agricultural technology. The discovery of uranium and its use for obtaining energy produces waste also, which may be in the form of solid or liquid, some of its is called high level waste, which is radioactive for thousands of years. Now it has been scientifically proved that the radioactive particles persist in the soil and contaminate subsequent generation of plants and the animals and people that eat them.

The burning of fossils fuels produces huge quantity of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere causing "Green House Effect". Consequently the global warming of the atmosphere raises the global temperature and also produces new patterns and extremes of draught and rainfall, seriously disrupt food production in certain regions. The problem of air pollution in our country is also not conducive to the health of the common

people. The increasing numbers of industries in cities are contributing to high level of pollution. Only ten major cities in India are producing more than 80 per cent of industrial production. More than 10 per cent people were directly affected by air pollution in the country.

Among all the sources of air pollution, automobiles are the biggest source of environmental pollution. The increase in their number day-by-day causes more pollution to the cities as well as the rural environment. According to the D.S.T. motor vehicles account for 60 per cent of air pollution in Delhi¹ only and have become a serious cause of concern for health, particularly of children. It is estimated that around 27,000 tones of pollutants are emitted every year by about 46 million vehicles in India. The emission of gasses such as hydrocarbons, sulphur dioxide and particulate matter with these vehicles add to the pollution from other industrial sources. An explosive metal lead, which is undeclared enemy of the mankind, is being absorbed either by ingestion or inhalation. It comes mainly from three sources- food, drinking water and ambient air. Lead is present in varying amount in foodstuffs such as shellfish, species, herbs, edible gelatin, pectin, flavourings, and good colourants, baking powder, etc. Inhaled lead is absorbed far more effectively. People are constantly exposed to lead in their environment in the form of air contamination. Experts point out that compared to the high proportion of lead absorbed through, the lungs, the absorption from food is only 5-10 per cent, the lead from liquid food being more easily absorbed than from solids. Clair C. Patterson, a geo-chemist at the California Institute of Technology, said as far back as 1965: "There are definite indications that the residents of the United States today are undergoing serve chronic lead intake. The average American ingests some 400 millionths of a gram of lead per day in food, air and water, a process which has been viewed with complacency for diseases"³.

The Gandhian solution:

It is true that the environmental problems are more challenging today than ever before. It's also a reality that we have to fight against the menace. In search of different approaches to tackle environmental challenges, we are naturally attracted towards the Gandhina approach. Now a day Gandhian ideas, approaches and alternatives to social transformation and development are a debate of global concern. The voluminous writings of Mahatma Gandhi are repellent with references to his concern for protection and preservation of environment. However, only a few writers recognize Gandhi as an early environmentalist. But it would be quite appropriate to call Mahatma Gandhi as one of the champions of environmental protection. To quote Prof. Ram Chander Gupta "The life and work of Gandhi have had a considerable influence on the contemporary environmental movements in India. The movement truly began with the

Chipko Andolan' in April 1973. In one of the first printed accounts of Chipko', a breathless journalist announced that Gandhiji's ghost had saved the Himalayan trees. Ever since then, Mahatma Gandhi has been usually acknowledging patron saint of the environmental movement. From the "Chipko Andolan" to 'Narmada Bachao Andolan', environmental activists have relied heavily on Gandhian techniques of non-violent protest, and have drawn abundantly on Gandhi's polemic against heavy industrialization. Again, some of the movement's better known figures, for example, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, underlined their own debt to Gandhi⁴.

Although we do not find in Gandhi's writings much detailed discussion on the type and scale of environmental problems which we are facing today. But one thing certainly goes to the credit of Gandhi is that he expressed his reservation against the western model of industrial development, which has caused environmental degradation. Perhaps due to this reason he suggested an alternative model of development, which was free from almost of all types of catastrophic effects and exploitation of man by man as well as of nature by man. Gandhi warned long back against the rapid industrialization and urbanization in 1908 in 'Hind Swaraj'. He suggested the educated Indians who lived in the cities, to go back to the villages because the villages of India, which were not polluted by railways or influence of modern living. Preserve all that was best in the ancient Indian society, which did not glorify wealth of power but set a limit to man's indulgences⁵. While criticizing further the modern civilization Gandhi said that "this modern civilization has to be patient, and it will be self-destroyed"⁶. Gandhi's refutation of logic of industrialization gives in fact a clue to the understanding of his entire philosophy. He wrote, "our ancestors dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures. We have managed with the same kind of cottages that we had in former times...It was not that we did know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that if we feel our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fiber. They, therefore, after due deliberation decided that we should only do what we could with our hands and feet. They further reasoned that large cities were a snake and useless encumbrance and that people would not be happy in them, that there would be gangs of thieves and robbers, prostitution and vice flourishing in them and the poor men would be robbed by rich men. They were, therefore, satisfied with small villages⁷ Gandhi was against industrialism and not against industrialization. The industrialism could flourish the dehumanized machine culture, which merely helped a few to ride on the backs of the millions⁸. His main emphasis was on production by any individual⁹. The "balance of terror", ecological decay, intra-national and international tension and violence and ever widening inequalities — all these end products of the age of industrialization and high technology seem to make a return

to a normal of rationally ordered society within the framework of modernity nearly impossible. Gandhi had foreseen this predicament as nearly as in 1908 in his Hindi Swaraj where he had characterized 'modern civilization' as a "disease" and "nine days' wonder"¹⁰. Gandhi's firm and uncompromising stand on the western civilizations as 'Satanic' or 'dark age' was based not on some obscurantist objection to the use of machine but to enslavement and alienation of man in the industrial civilization¹¹. The global environmental problem has two major dimensions, resources depletion and pollution, which are linked with modern industrial and agricultural production and poverty. The population of the world, which was under 80 million at the start of the industrial revolution two centuries ago, has risen to over 5 billion it is further expected to double itself in the 21st century. The growing urbanization attracting the educated villagers towards it has caused the engagement of the people in non-agricultural vocations. It has regulated in the decline of food production. At the same time, the food production has also suffered from reckless destruction of the forests, which in turn, leads to floods, soil erosion, silting up of rivers and desertification of fertile land. The reckless exploitation of nature began during the pre-independence era in almost all the colonized countries, which continued, even with more zeal after their independence. The enthusiasm expressed by the developing countries of the third world to occupy a respectful place in the map of 'development world' also added the fuel to fire¹². The relationship of kind of 'buyers' and 'sellers' between the developed and developing or under-developing countries was based on the exploitation of the natural resources which is under some conditions entirely unethical. One example of it would be sufficient to divulge the ethical bankruptcy of the developed countries. 'Switzerland has its own forests, but for coffins, they import wood from Africa.¹³

Gandhi's way of life was really a message to the mankind whatever he propounded he translated that into reality. His farsightedness indicated towards the problems, which were to be faced by humanity in his present time as well as in future also. Gandhi believed in all those principles of way of life, which had a full respect and harmony with the nature. He considered the natural cure as the best method for riddance from any kind of illness. Gandhi said that man can live without food for a week, he can also live without water for some hours but he cannot sustain life without pure air even for a few minutes. Nature has provided us all those essential things inevitable for sustaining life. It has produced abundant material for all living beings which is enough for a needy but always insufficient for a greedy. Gandhi said, "earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs but not every man's greed"¹⁴. Here the more and more emphasis is given on the idea of 'Swadeshi', the moral law of self-reliance. 'Swadeshi' is spirit in us, which restricts us to the use and service of immediate surroundings to exclusion of the more remote. But it does not

mean any narrow minded self-sufficiency. 'Be Indian and buy Indian' is the basis of Swadeshi and self-reliance. In Gandhian approach there is a solution to all problems *i.e.* economic, social, ecological and so on. The methods for fulfilling these needs of life suggested by him were all eco-friendly. So the Gandhian ideology and method has a deeper aspect concerning the harmony between man and nature. His watchword 'Swaraj' did not mean simply a change in political authority. His ideal of "Swaraj" was not so much termination of foreign rule as self-rule. The ultimate goal of Swaraj may be obtained by the method of non-violent, non-cooperation and for attaining Sarvodaya Gandhi devised his famous constructive programme. In fact, Sarvodaya will not only be helpful for solving environmental problems but it is also related to achieving the highest level of self-realization in which one see one's manifestation in all others¹⁵. Gandhi's principle of non-violence is described as complete freedom from ill will, anger and hate and overwhelming love for all. It is really a 'love force' or 'soul force' aimed at achieving all the good human values like goodwill, cooperation, fellow feeling and the like. These are real values of life, which teaches us the messages that live and let live' their sources, and to suggest corrective as early as in 1909 in a brief tract entitled Hind Swaraj. Gandhi's emphasis on rejuvenation of decentralized rural industry of cottage industry and village arts and crafts may be useful in overcoming many problems of present day humanity. It can provide employment to many empty hands and reduce poverty of the millions. Gandhi called upon the people to cut down their demands and get rid of materialistic approach of life. Here is the actual utility of 'Ahinsha' and 'Charkha'. The real operationalisation of "Satyagraha for conservations" starts here. Maximum manual labour-intensive, employment-oriented and minimum capital-intensive efforts in each and every walk of life can reshape the structural change in the society. By adopting the principle of 'simple living and high thinking' man can avoid the unnecessary and excessive use of machine.

To sum up we can say that Gandhian approach of 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. Only his views against the industrialization of western model, 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. A sustainable development and proper economic growth with environmental balance may only be achieved through Gandhian way. Although it is difficult to follow the right path shown by Mahatma Gandhi. But sooner the better we have to make a beginning with the motto "think globally, and act locally".

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