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# GANDHIAN APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

**PRANAY DEB**

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Tripura University  
(A Central University), Suryamaninagar, Tripura, India.

## ABSTRACT

Environment is what constitutes our existence. In this system land, water, plants, animals, warms and humans are inter-connected and inter-dependent. Man and nature have always lived in harmony through nature. Man tries to modify the environment, according to his requirements. This very requirement is at the heart of the environmental problems humanity faces these days. The blind race of development of the present world causes stress and strain on environment, e.g. the drastic global climate change, unemployment, social injustice, polluted big cities and damaging the environment of the world aware us to find out the solution, best suited to our needs. This work is aimed at finding out a possible solution for the present crisis of environmental havoc, purely from the Gandhian point of view.

We need a sustainable society, which works in partnership with nature and conserve natural resources. In this context Gandhi's thought is relevant for the smooth global development. According to him, the man should be divine in nature, he must be non-violent, and we should use the natural resources, according to our needs. Perfect and meaningful existence lies in peaceful co-existence and universal cooperation with all beings- human and living. Loves, non-violence, satyagraha, truth, etc., are the basic principles of being happy and prosperous in life. All these novel concepts of Gandhi in connection with environment and sustainable development are the subject matter of discussion of this paper, and to find out a future direction to establish a new world order based on Gandhian philosophy and techniques to safeguard the environment and the mother earth, which will not hamper the prospects of future generations.

Keywords: Environmental Crisis, Man-Nature relationship, Holistic approach, Preservation, Sustainable development.

## Introduction

Modern world is marked by environmental crisis, pervading the individual, social, political and cultural lives of man. The present-day world is seen as one in which scientific knowledge is stumbling, a world in which the concept of environment and its preservation are in urgent need of redefinition because they pose a problem not only for the environmentalists



or philosophers but have threatened the very survival of our existence. Today we are in the midst of a great debate over the problem of as how to protect the global environment which is being increasingly threatened by growing pollution, maintenance of ecology and exhaustion of non-renewable resources. Environmental degradation throughout the world is proceeding at an alarming rate- all in the name of more and more development. Development as a process of modernization has proved anti-ethical to our environment. In the words of Albert Schweitzer, "It is clear now that the suicide of civilization is in progress."<sup>1</sup> Looking to the present way of solution of environmental challenges faced by the world, one can hardly have an optimistic view for the better solution. In such a solution only ray of hope lies in the Gandhian Approach.

Though, during Gandhian era, environment was not a matter of serious concern, but being a man of vision, Gandhi envisaged the environmental crisis hunting the coming generation. Gandhi through his various interviews, speeches, and correspondences had warned the humanity against the attitude towards nature. We find that Gandhi was in favour of a holistic approach to development to preserve nature and environment. Gandhiji in his work *Hind Swaraj* (written in 1908) offered an alternative perspective on development while explaining how the current mode of development is exploitative of man by man and of nature by man. Gandhiji cried over the consumerist culture and the multiplicity of wants because of their implications to exploitation of nature and its limited resources.

Here, in this paper, I wish to highlight specifically the Gandhian approach to environmental challenges and this work is aimed at finding out a possible solution for the present crisis of environmental havoc, purely from the Gandhian point of view.

### **Environment as a concept**

Environment is what constitutes our existence. It is the whole system of biosphere consisting of both biotic and a-biotic components interacting with each other and involving in a series of cyclic balances. The term 'environment' etymologically means surroundings. The dictionary meaning of environment as stated is "the region, surroundings or circumstances in which anything exists; everything external to the organism."<sup>1</sup> The surroundings may be natural or man-made and in this surroundings land, water, plants, animals, worms and humans are linked by a complicated cycle of inter-connection and inter-dependence. So, the entire world and all the living system within it can be looked as one 'living organism'. The



environment is thus, a complex of many things that interact not only with the organisms but also among themselves. Hence, it is difficult to isolate or alter any one of them without affecting other components. The growth, behaviour and life of an organism are therefore, influenced by the environment in which they live.

In deeper sense, it is constituted the various physical, mental, social, spiritual, educational, economic and intellectual aspects of whole humanity and when kept healthy and inspiring, it promotes the progress and development that acts as saviour and is a boon to mankind. So, environment can mean the totality of things all that would have appeared in an inventory of the universe. But their indiscriminate degradation poses a serious danger to environmental stability, because there is a particular order in the universe and nature has its own system of manifestation. It is a self-transforming system. The worldly things do not indicate any arbitrary nature. They are bound by certain rules. There is something 'unchangeable' on the background of the changeable.

But the human beings by the scientific temperament have lost any respect for the order of this universe. As man is the only conscious being, environment becomes an object to them. Man tries to change or modify the environment according to his requirements and the environment is being disturbed or exploited to the fullest extent for the benefit of man. Thus, man is the main stimulating factor in the biotic component of the environment and simultaneously he is an important factor of the environmental degradation. Man plays important roles in the natural environmental systems in different capacities, such as 'physical man', 'social man', 'economic man', 'technological man', etc. The role changed from *user* through *modifier* and to *destroyer* of the environment. So, before to proceed our discussion we must know the nature of man and about human's relationship with nature.

### **The nature of man and his relation with nature**

The relation between man and nature is inseparable. Man constitutes the most important and vital part in the environment. It is man who makes his surroundings bright and beautiful. It is man, again, who is responsible for every form of misfortune or any kind of decay which exist in the society. Because man alone can regulate himself and can use nature according to the law of nature. He is the master of his own self. This journey of man is the journey within. Otherwise, man ceases to be man and turns himself into a mere animal. Herein lies the essence of man. According to Gandhi, man is Divine in nature and there is an absolute oneness of humanity, which



encourages him to purify his imperfect soul along with the purification of every living creature, little or great. Let man march ahead to fulfil the global mission of man- *vasudhaivakutumvakam*- the loving relationship between man and the whole universe.

But man today is at the crossroads of survival or extinction. He makes marvels in the name of advancement only to invite the destruction. To heighten the glory of man as man is to heighten the inner potentiality in man. As such, Gandhi warns against destruction of the inner potentiality and glory of man by their evil deeds towards other creatures in the universe. In Gandhi's words, "I value individual freedom but you must not forget that man is essentially a social being.....Unrestricted individualism is the law of the beast of the jungle. We have learnt to strike the mean between individual freedom and social restraint. Willing submission to social restraint for the sake of the well-being of the whole society enriches both the individual and the society of which one is a member."

Man and environment have always been in interaction depending on how mankind used the environment. The first all-important fact is that life apart from environment does not exist, and cannot be convinced. The term 'environment' apart from reference to life is meaningless. The central question in Environmental Philosophy- 'what kind of relationship should be between Man and Nature?'- has been viewed in two different ways. The first view conceives man is a part of nature and should live according to the laws of nature. The second view conceives that nature is an alien order from which man is excluded.

Nature is regarded as the mother of all beings, the foundational base, which tries to keep all beings under its protective wings. We humans, the wisest of all her creatures are expected to involve ourselves in a deep sense of solidarity with environment. A rational and commonsensical understanding of the healthy relationship of our life in union and communion with all creatures of environment is a must. The vital aspect of the enlightenment state is the experience of all-pervading unity. According to Naess, an abiding concern for the environment can emerge from a deepened and expanded sense of self. Self-realization is the process of acquiring that deepened sense of self, which he calls the '*ecological self*'. Self-realization is the process of identifying with the whole eco-system. A person who has so identified with this environment has realized the ecological self.<sup>5</sup>



On the other hand, those who see man as apart from nature, look on nature as a *store-house* of resources to be organised and used by people, as having no other value than the value some humans give it. Man as within nature as an active, functional being. So, he controls nature through transformative activities, through a drive to achieve mastery over the non-human world. They advocate respect for nature, only because of that by destroying the nature we risk our own health and the health of future generations.

Actually, it is the attitude of a human being towards nature- what a person thinks of him in relation to the things surrounding him and decides the attitude. If a person thinks of himself to be a master he will never know the pains of the other things. If he thinks to be a part of nature he will know the pains of the other things and wish their well-being. Man must somehow see himself as the instrument of nature's own purpose, which his science must device and follow. He must realize that by destroying the environment, he destroys himself. This destruction of the environment has led to the environmental problem. Therefore, we need to rethink our relationships with the world at large, by abandoning the mechanistic conception of the environment and by replacing it with a much broader value based one. The relationship between man and nature is one of give and take and what holds good for nature holds also good for man.

Man is a child of nature. He is not a master of nature. He must confirm his action to certain natural laws. The nature sets limits. But man has always tried to cross that limit; man always tries to modify the environment, according to his requirement. This very requirement is at the heart of the problems humanity faces these days. Following the 'modern divide' between man and nature, it made the doors open for further scientific investigation of nature. But we have now come to the awareness of the role that the modern scientific attitude plays in the degradation of the environment. The very concept of preservation entails that something in the natural environment is worth preserving and must be preserve, as environment is the surviving platform of life on earth. In other words, the physical environment has to be preserved because it is on the brink of collapse due to excessive human intervention in the form of industrialization, development and modernisation.

### **Environmental Crisis and Gandhian Solution**

The most of the environmental hazards the world is facing today is the result of the ill-conceived developmental strategies. The developmental models and strategies for growth have focused more on maximising resource



use than on ensuring sustainable use. The main objective of development is to increase production through the unlimited exploitation of natural resources with the help of technology. Acid Rain, Green House effect and depletion of Ozone Layer is the outcome of the unlimited technological development. The present state of environment is the outcome of the application of sophisticated technology. Consequently, ecological changes started which made an adverse effect on global environment. Scientific innovations and technological developments have given unlimited power to man to exploit the nature.

Gandhiji visualised that mechanisation will not only lead to industrialisation and industrialisation to massive urbanisation to unemployment, but will also lead to the destruction of environment. Therefore Gandhi warned his countrymen and said: “if the machinery craze grows in our country, it will become an unhappy land.” Industrialisation has made human beings slaves to machines. The modern industrial society has lost the self-regulating power. Man is getting alienated from nature, society and himself. Though Gandhiji opposed to all modern technologies and machines, but in general Gandhi protested most vigorously modern capitalists’ over-reliance on machines and technologies that puts thousands of Indians out of work and thrust them into ever greater poverty. Gandhi said, “Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour, but greed.”<sup>5</sup> The nature of man has changed. Man following this greedy nature, tries to use natural resources as maximum as he can for his self-interest. It is the root cause of environmental degradation. Wants by its very nature are limitless and resources are limited and reckless use of resources will soon lead our society to the brink of ruin. Thus Gandhiji advice to live with restraint so that the consumption of the earth’s resources is sustainable. Gandhi concludes, “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need, but not every man’s greed.”

Today’s environmentalists echo Gandhian views on environmental ethic when they blame consumerist culture as a root cause of environmental degradation. Our life style is based on high level of consumption and high consumption levels ultimately lead to high environmental damages. Materialism is based on maximum production and maximum consumption. Our insatiable desires to have more and more have accelerated the process of depletion of natural resources. It is a craze against preservation or gradual use of available resources. This in a long-run proves to be hazardous for the human beings residing on this planet. Scientists and other specialists are



warning us against the rapidly diminishing reserves of minerals, decreasing areas of forests, flora and fauna, global warming, increasing temperature of earth and other alarming dangers. But despite their warnings, there is unlimited hazardous utilization of nature and natural resources. It is a great predicament for humanity.

Gandhi also warned us against this situation. He said, “We have to put a curb on our material wants. 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.” He foresaw the mad race for the luxuries of life and the enslavement of the individual by the modern consumerist society. Gandhi advocated solution of this problem in the form of rational approach to our wants. Let us voluntarily reduces our wants to a genuine level. Gandhi had conviction in plain living and high thinking. We have to make remarkable few demands on the earth. Once Gandhi said, “the secret of happy life lies in renunciation. Renunciation is life. Indulgence spells death.”

### **Sustainable Society: Partnership with nature**

We need a sustainable society, which works in partnership with nature and conserves natural resources. The mismanagement of the environment must be stopped at any cost in order to maintain the existence, protection and survival of humanity on the face of the earth. Perfect and meaningful existence lies in peaceful co-existence and universal cooperation with all beings-human and living. Love, non-violence, satyagraha, truth, etc., are the basic principle of being happy and prosperous in life. A sustainable society satisfies its needs without hampering the prospects of future generations and provides a ‘Save Home’ for our next generation. In fact, sustainable society is based on the development within the framework of the ecosystem.

We need a new world order based on Gandhian philosophy and techniques to safeguard the environment and the mother earth. “Mahatma Gandhi was the first prophet to advocate the thesis of ‘Sustainable Development’ which has become the catchword of modern growth.” Gandhiji has clearly stated that, “Nature produces enough for our wants and if everybody took enough for himself and nothing more; there would be no pauperism and starvation in this world.”<sup>11</sup> A Gandhian concept of development will be one that engages environmental issues on a practical level through non-violent means towards all creatures in the universe, as a way to find ultimately peaceful and sustainable solution and also it will seek



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new forms of the simple life to create sustainable futures. And for this, spiritual awakening is must for a man, as the basic ecological challenge for Gandhi is essentially a spiritual one- how we can live in simplicity and at peace with ourselves and with the natural world around us.

Gandhi emphasised the need for living in intimate kinship with nature. He believed that no aspect of life could be considered to be of low or negligible significance. There is a spiritual unity in the animate world. He wanted to realize the identity with all life, even with such beings as crawl on earth. Reverence for all life including birds, beasts, plants and trees characterise the teachings of Gandhi. Gandhi preached compassion for lower animals. He wrote that love demands the promotion and kindness to beasts. Our love consists in our getting off the necks of our dumb fellow-creatures.<sup>12</sup> Mahatma Gandhi realized that not only man must desist from exploiting man, but that he must desist from violence in any form, and therefore the exploitation of nature and natural resources. The resources of the earth should be used as God's gifts to the whole human race and used with due consideration for the needs of present and future generations.

### **Conclusion**

While discussing Mahatma Gandhi's view in respect of environmental challenges we face today, his strong views against modern industrialisation, his call to maintain harmony with nature and his condemnation of consumerist culture, by implication, it is a forewarning against the destruction of natural resources. It is in this light, Gandhiji is considered as an early environmentalist.

The proper attention to today's environmental crisis requires not just remaking the world economy, technology and planning, but also a complete spiritual renewal from within and to find out new sorts of ethics that include all living creatures. In this context, Gandhian concept of *Sarvodaya* will be very helpful for solving environmental problems. The goal is the upliftment of even to the least and the lowest, 'unto this last'. It refers to the awakening of the total human spirit and personality, to achieving the highest level of self-realization in which one sees one's manifestation in all others. The *Swadeshi* principle with emphasis on the local materials and that too renewable raw material is eco-friendly to the highest degree. Adopting such Gandhian techniques as encouraging village industries and rural life are accepted as a principle of progress nowadays.



It is time to rethink our conducts towards environment very seriously. We, who live and breathe, drink and eat, play and enjoy the beautiful gifts of nature today, must consider it our duty to leave this earth a cleaner and safer place to live. We must care for nature and then only nature will care for us. Men's very survival on this earth depends on his harmony with nature. He must always keep this in his mind that his happiness will increase if he respects the nature but if he misuses or overuses or abuses it, then the nature will take the very right to life of human being. Hence, in a new and more significant sense we shall have to revive the ancient eco-friendly relation to live *successfully, satisfactorily* and *virtuously*, according to the law.

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