

Gandhiji and the Environment



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Mahatma Gandhi was no doubt one of the most influential leaders of modern India. His impact on history has been such that his views resonate in every aspect of life. He is often quoted on a variety of subjects ranging from global politics to personal morality. This being the 150th Birth Anniversary Year of the Mahatma, there has been a lot of discussion going on to understand his views on different topics. One of these is the 'Environment'.

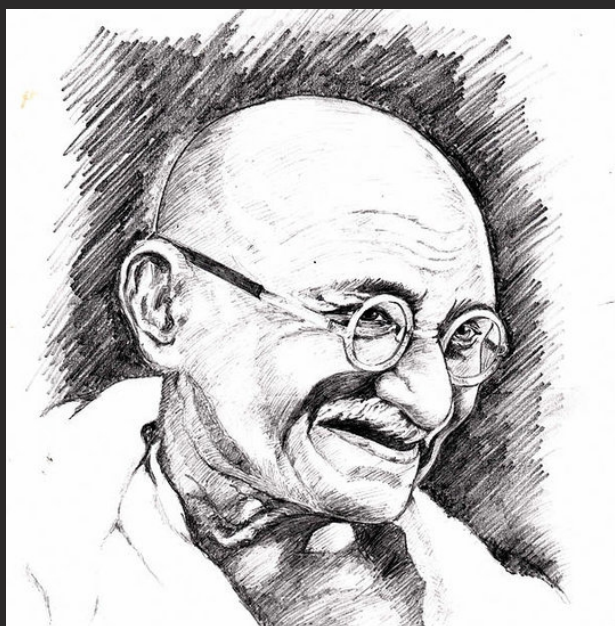
While elucidating on this subject, the first thing we should remember is that, contrary to popular belief, Gandhi was never an 'environmentalist' in the commonly understood sense of the term. In fact, Gandhiji lived at a time when the very idea of environmentalism did not exist even as an idea. Nature and environment were considered as God given entities and not much thought was given to their conservation. On the other hand, science and technology were blooming and widespread industrialization was being touted as the solution to all our problems and the future of humankind. The forest cover was excellent and wildlife was abundant. No one foresaw the doom to follow. Concern for the protection of nature and environment germinated only after ecological disaster inflicted by rampant industrialization and consumerism began to be observed and it became a social movement only in the latter half of the twentieth century.

However that does not mean Gandhiji did not have any views on the subject. Gandhi was not just a political leader, but more fundamentally he was a moral and social philosopher. He did not propound a formal ideology. The sum total of his views - generally called 'Gandhian thinking'- is more a way of life than a philosophy. It is a holistic doctrine rather than a sacrosanct dogma. It is flexible and adaptable to the times, yet rooted in simplicity and an uncommon degree of common sense. Gandhi believed in simple living and high thinking. His ideas were based on human nature and also in tune with the state of nature.

Though Gandhiji had not much to say on the environment itself, his general track of thinking emphasized on not being in conflict with Nature. He communicated his ideas through simple maxims like 'Be the change you want to see in the world' and 'The earth has enough for every man's need but not for every man's greed'. These soulful statements convey much more than their words through their depth of meaning. His famous quote 'My life is my message' highlights the need for being practical and practicing what one preaches.

Moreover the Gandhian way of life is by its very nature ecofriendly. He advocated self reliance as a basic tenet of life. This eschews industrial mass production wherever possible in favour of

individual labour, home industry and cooperative activity, all of which are in themselves environment friendly. Gandhi shuns unnecessary artificiality, avoidable luxury and ostentatious living, thereby reducing the demand for wasteful products, which have no intrinsic value other than boosting one's ego. His economic model called for non-exploitative means of production, distribution and consumption, which honour equality and ensure fair returns to all involved. To Gandhi, all aspects of life like society, political governance, the economy, individual behavior and the environment went hand in hand and contributed to the sum total of existence.



Gandhiji's world view typically relied on the concept of 'Gram Swaraj' or decentralization based on Panchayat Raj system. In contrast to globalization, his vision emphasized on developing self sufficient villages, which would be the basic large social unit, a step beyond the self sufficient individual and the self sufficient family. His well known principle of 'Ahimsa' or non-violence is the foundational virtue, which would ensure peace and respect for all forms of life. 'Satya Graha', yet another concept instills integrity, adherence to truth and non-duality of nature. 'Sarvodaya' or universal well being is based on the concept of trusteeship in the ownership of social resources. Respect for life, love for all and acceptance of equality is the inevitable outcome of a combination of these

deeply interlinked principles, making them tools for protection of environment and animals, women's emancipation and uplift of the downtrodden.

Gandhi also emphasized on developing a sense of contentment in individual life, rather than greed for acquisition and called for non-attachment in worldly life. These are diametrically opposite to the way the world is being run today. If the planet is now suffering from environmental degradation and moral degradation, it is mainly because it is corrupted by greed, worship of wealth, exploitative enrichment and lack of concern for others, which are the anti thesis of Gandhian thinking. Today we are indeed breeding extremely violent waste producing communities, which enjoy no genuine happiness.

After Independence, the country was forced to adopt the Nehruvian model of development, which, though it contained many of the key elements of Gandhi's ideas, was also focused on large scale industrialization. This was perhaps inevitable as the newly formed nation had to contend with the need for providing mass employment and create wealth to build a new future. Gandhian system might have been too Utopian to adopt in the conditions prevailing during Independence. Indeed, the founding leaders of the nation may have feared that Gandhi's ideas would be impractical to adopt without the benefit of the force of his personality as Gandhiji was assassinated only a few months after Interdependence.

However many other national leaders who were influenced by Gandhi, such as Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayan, Baba Amte, Medha Patkar, Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunder Lal Bahuguna have kept the flame of his vision alive through propagating his message of love, compassion, respect for nature and humanity at large.

As the world is trying to come to grips with its own irrationality, let us all imbibe Gandhiji's ideas to the maximum extent possible and help create a more sustainable lifestyle, which celebrates the environment rather than destroys it.