

GANDHIAN ALTERNATIVES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

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Abstract

In the present day, global environmental pollution and degradation are significant issues affecting the world. The causes of these problems can be attributed to industrialization, urbanization, transportation, and modern lifestyles. While the concept of environmental awareness was not prevalent during Gandhi's time, his beliefs on development, technology, self-reliance, simple living, and village self-governance are relevant to the current environmental concerns. Gandhiji's beliefs offer a fresh outlook on preserving the environment without causing harm to any living creature. His principles of Satyagraha, which revolve around truth and nonviolence, as well as his advocacy for simple living and sustainable development, highlight the possibility of achieving sustainable growth without damaging nature or harming others. His famous quote, "nature has enough to satisfy everyone's needs, but not to satisfy anybody's greed," has emerged as a cornerstone principle in contemporary environmentalism. Mahatma Gandhi's analysis of modernity demonstrates his apprehension towards the rise of a societal structure that exploits the environment for immediate benefits. His views on environmental issues are closely interconnected with his beliefs regarding governance, economics, public health, and progress. His teachings and actions align with contemporary concepts of environmentally sustainable practices and promoting a harmonious relationship with nature. He expressed concern that the rapid urbanization associated with modern society would lead to the disappearance of villages, resulting in severe environmental degradation. Western environmentalists promoted the idea of reconnecting with nature, while Gandhi advocated for a return to village life.

Keywords: *gandhiji, environmental degradation, urbanization, non-violence, simplicity.*

Introduction

A large portion of the population understands the root reasons behind environmental pollution and deterioration. These issues stem from industrialization, urbanization, transportation, and contemporary lifestyles. The belief in continuous economic expansion and heightened consumption has led to irreversible environmental harm, such as the depletion of natural resources and the exhaustion of energy sources. The current poor condition of the Earth's environment and humanity's challenges are consequences of prioritizing materialistic perspectives. The unending and increasing desires of today's consumer-driven society, fueled by unregulated industrial growth and modernization, are leading to severe environmental impacts on human civilization. The Earth's ability to sustain life is being significantly compromised. Our world is heavily influenced by science, technology, and progress in shaping the future of humanity. The excessive use of natural resources for development can result in significant environmental risks. It is a well-known fact that disregarding the requirements of nature in scientific endeavors and neglecting the needs of people in

development projects can jeopardize the survival of humanity. Gandhi's ecological principles offer a fresh perspective on balancing nature and human needs. Gandhi did not align with modern environmentalist beliefs. His belief that "nature provides enough to fulfill everyone's needs but not everyone's greed" has become a fundamental principle of contemporary environmentalism. Gandhi's concepts regarding Satyagraha, grounded in truth and non-violence, a simple lifestyle, and progress, demonstrate the feasibility of sustainable development without causing harm to the environment and others. He viewed the Earth as a living entity and believed that evolution depends on the collaboration and sacrifices of humans and non-human entities. As rational individuals, we are responsible for protecting the environment and honoring the rights of all living beings. Gandhi derived these values from his extensive knowledge of various religious teachings, including Hinduism, Jainism, Christianity, and Islam. Overconsumption of resources is considered unethical as it goes against the principles of respecting diversity and the rights of all beings. His ideologies regarding society, economy, and politics were

based on recognizing the interconnectedness of the entire universe. The ongoing environmental degradation, driven by our lifestyles and pursuit of development, is deteriorating at an alarming rate. Gandhi should have addressed this issue, as environmental concerns were not prevalent during his time. However, the essence of his message can be found in his writings. When asked about a message for humanity, Gandhi said, "My life is my message." One can discover all they seek by delving into his writings, speeches, and life.

Gandhi's Views on Environment

Before delving into an in-depth analysis of Gandhi's perspectives, it is important to acknowledge the historical context that is crucial for comprehending his viewpoints. The Industrial Revolution has had a significant impact on society and serves as a backdrop for Gandhi's ideologies. Significantly transformed European civilization with the rapid growth of industry, adoption of capitalist economic practices, exploitation of workers, and unsustainable utilization of natural resources. Natural Language Processing (NLP) has provided significant material comfort and wealth to human society, leading other countries to follow suit. Simultaneously, it has also unknowingly accomplished the relentless and unbridled quest for industrialization by nations worldwide is causing significant challenges that threaten the survival of not just humanity, but all living beings, leading to irreparable harm to mankind. The destruction of forests, the release of harmful pollutants into the atmosphere leading to air pollution, the disposal of industrial and artificial waste, and the risks associated with nuclear activities, all predominantly caused by human activities, are contributing significantly to irreversible harm to our planet. This led to the formation of various environmental policies and agreements aimed at protecting the environment for future generations. The organization emphasized the importance of utilizing resources responsibly to prevent harm to both humanity and the environment. Human activities are on a collision course with the environment, causing severe and sometimes irreversible harm to critical resources. Preserving the planet requires responsible stewardship to prevent additional harm and degradation, as well as advocating for a decrease in over-consumption to alleviate strain on global environmental resources. Gandhi

advocated for the implementation of identical measures in a visionary manner.

Gandhi's Views on Modern Civilization

The impact of modern industrial civilization on humanity and the environment has been significant. It has enriched a small segment of the population by depleting natural resources. Gandhi viewed it as promoting a relentless pursuit of wealth and material pleasures. His 1909 publication, *Hind Swaraj*, condemned modern civilization as 'satanic.' According to Gandhi, machinery is the primary symbol of modern civilization and is seen as a significant detriment, contributing to the impoverishment of India. The defining feature of modern civilization is the endless pursuit of desires, in contrast to ancient civilizations, which placed strict limitations on desires. Gandhi argued that ancient civilizations, rooted in religion, could curb worldly ambitions. He believed that the values of true civilization are lacking in the modern world. In his work, *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi contended that the concept of 'civilization' as perceived today is deceptive, and any society that mistreats outsiders is likely to mistreat its people. Gandhi's criticism of Western civilization and science stems from his dissatisfaction with the separation of science and progress from ethics. He did not oppose technology but rather technologism, which fosters hierarchical relationships among individuals and between humans and nature. Gandhi believed that the primary accomplishments of modern civilization have been the development of weapons of mass destruction, the alarming rise of anarchism, the intense conflicts between capital and labor, and the inhumane treatment of innocent, voiceless animals in the guise of scientific and technological advancement. He believed that true science must cater to the holistic needs of the body, mind, and soul. Modern society exhibited excessive violence towards nature, viewing it merely as man's possession. This attitude eroded the unity between man, his surroundings, and his fellow human beings, leading to the breakdown of established communities. Natural resources were exploited without regard for balance and harmony, while animals suffered harm or death to fulfill human desires. Gandhi believed that villages would eventually vanish due to urbanization, an essential aspect of modern civilization contributing to environmental degradation. While the Western

environmentalists spread the message of "going back to nature," Gandhi spread the message of "going back to the villages". He believed that "the blood of the village is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built."²¹

Man-Nature Relationship

Gandhi believed that nature serves as a source of inspiration rather than a means of exploitation. In one of his letters, he expressed that nature alone is enough to inspire him. Have I not spent countless hours contemplating the extraordinary enigma of the celestial dome, seldom growing weary of its vast display? In addition to the work of God, does the significance of man not diminish? This idea was expressed in a letter to D.K. Roy on 2 February, 1924 and can be found in Desai's Diary, volume IV, page 27. However, in contrast to this perspective, the current understanding of the connection between man and nature is one of intricate complexity. The issue exists both locally and globally, as population growth, poverty, and unchecked development have put the natural environment at risk. The relentless progress has unreasonably exploited the Earth's natural resources such as water, land, forests, resulting in various environmental crises such as ozone layer depletion. Human activities, such as industrialization and urbanization, have led to widespread pollution and environmental degradation. This has resulted in a significant impact on the global environment, reaching a critical level of concern. In accordance with Gandhian beliefs and principles, mankind has resorted to using violent methods to exploit nature for its resources. Gandhi strongly advocated for a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the environment. The message urges men to refrain from exploiting and causing harm to others. This principle applies to all living beings, as well as to nature and its resources. Gandhi opposed any actions that would disrupt the natural environment and ecological balance that sustain the health and productivity of all living beings. Throughout history, traditionalists have revered nature as a sacred expression of divinity. All the religions across the globe have fostered beliefs and principles that are opposed to the exploitation of the environment.

In ancient writings and manuscripts, great significance was placed on nature, which encompassed trees, animals, and other living organisms. The early human beings

maintained a strong connection with the natural world, and over time, nature became an enduring companion of humanity through continuous development. Gandhi advocated for its preservation practice wastefulness and exploitation of natural resources. He believed in the importance of conserving and using resources wisely, following the Indian belief of respecting the Earth as a sacred entity. He frequently emphasized that humans lack the ability to give life, hence they should refrain from wastefulness and depletion of natural resources. The destruction of life should be avoided. As humans possess superior mental abilities such as wisdom and reason, they should show greater compassion towards other beings of lower intellect. Gandhi implemented the principles he advocated by establishing his Ashrams on unused lands near villages, promoting cleanliness in homes and the environment, and prioritizing health and hygiene.

Gandhi advocated for the peaceful coexistence of all individuals and adhered to the value of respect (K. Jha, see URL). His commitment to non-violence is a universal principle that applies to all living beings and is expressed through love for all creatures. Gandhi's vision includes a distinct moral and spiritual aspect in its perspective on nature. It addresses issues concerning ecology, technology, and poverty. Gandhi's concept of Sarvodaya focuses on the holistic progress and well-being of all individuals. It emphasizes the creation of a sustainable environment through human efforts to promote a harmonious coexistence with nature and other living creatures. The teachings and actions of the individual align with modern concepts of environmentally friendly practices and coexisting harmoniously with the natural world.

Spiritual Basis of Environmentalism

Gandhi believed that the environment should be viewed through moral, spiritual, and non-violent lenses. He believed that true human development should not be measured by materialism or consumerism, but rather by other factors. In the process of spiritual self-realization, the individual embodies strong principles of morality and non-violence. The pursuit of material possessions is not in alignment with his beliefs, as it obstructs the journey towards self-discovery. His dedication to a modest lifestyle and profound contemplation reaffirmed his compassion for all creatures, reflecting the essence of God's creation. His

understanding of non-violence extended to all living creatures and reflected the timeless principles of life in both his beliefs and behaviors. He emphasized the enduring sanctity of life, which extended to every living being, whether it is a tree, plant, or cow. As Gandhi said, 'My ethics not only permits me to claim but requires me to own kinship with not merely the ape but the horse and the sheep, the lion and the leopard, the snake and the scorpion...'.²⁶

Gandhi was deeply impacted by Adolph Just's book 'Return to Nature', which reinforced his belief that living a fulfilling life requires sharing it with all living creatures, including humans, birds, animals, and plants. The entire ecosystem must be respected, and humans should give back to nature as much as they take from it. Violence directed towards animals or any living beings is condemned by Gandhi as it reflects his belief in the interconnectedness of all life forms. Gandhi strongly believed in the philosophy of Vedanta, which promotes a harmonious relationship between humans and other living beings through a blend of spiritual faith and scientific principles.

Gandhian Conflict Resolution and Environment

Conflict resolution is a growing field within the social sciences that focuses on methods for resolving disputes between nations or individuals, and can also be utilized to tackle environmental concerns. Conflicts arise when there is a divergence in interests. Gandhian non-violence, also known as Satyagraha, is widely recognized as a successful method for resolving conflicts. Gandhi did not explicitly refer to 'conflict resolution', but instead preferred terms such as mediation and negotiation. He viewed conflicts not as issues to be solved, but rather as chances for individuals to develop morally and undergo transformation. Gandhi's significant contribution to conflict resolution was his belief that achieving non-violent resolution in group conflicts was a feasible objective. His philosophy centered on truth and nonviolence, which are essential elements in conflict resolution theory. Gandhi's perspective was that truth is singular, yet individuals may perceive it differently. He emphasized that no one person can assert their perception as the absolute truth. Uncertainty about the ultimate truth eliminates the necessity for violence or confrontation. In the context of

environmental movements in India, conflicts typically arise between various interest groups, the state, and the people. These movements are frequently spearheaded by peasant groups or tribal communities, and revolve around issues such as safeguarding livelihoods, asserting control over resources, or seeking autonomy. Environmental injustice, and marginalization are considered as instances of structural violence. As Gandhi believed violence and counter violence will never help to resolve conflicts, he considered Satyagraha as the "only force of universal application be that of Ahimsa or love" to fight these kinds of problems.²⁷ It is entirely different from mere passive resistance, where there is no scope for mutual love. In passive resistance, Gandhi believed "there is a scope for hatred" but "Satyagraha may be offered to one's nearest and dearest."²⁸ Environmental movements in India used Satyagraha as the moral equivalent of war. The Forest Satyagraha method was initially employed in the Chipko movement as a means to oppose deforestation. Environmental activists such as Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Baba Amte, Sunderlal Bahuguna, and Medha Patkar utilized Gandhian techniques like padayatras to protect the environment. These activists employed conflict resolution strategies grounded in non-violence and selflessness.

Truth and Non-Violence Reduce the Environment Degradation

Gandhi was inspired by Jainism, a belief system that views nature as a living entity and encourages individuals to constantly purify themselves by showing respect towards various forms of life. The Gandhian principles of Satya (truth) and ahimsa (non-violence) can be beneficial in curbing greed at both the individual and societal levels. His philosophy of non-violence extends to all beings and reflects the timeless principles of life in his beliefs and actions. He emphasized the enduring sanctity of life, encompassing trees, plants, and cows. It is said that the British historian Edward Thomson once mentioned to Gandhi the declining wildlife in India, to which Gandhi sarcastically responded, "Wildlife may be decreasing in the jungles, but it is increasing in the towns." He believed that the irresponsible and unrestrained pursuit of industrialization by countries worldwide has created significant challenges for the survival of not just humans but also all living beings and species on Earth. The idea of

Sarvodaya aligns with that of sustainable development and is a component of environmental ethics. Gandhi's concept of Sarvodaya envisions a sustainable development and environment that can be nurtured by individuals to promote a balanced coexistence with nature and other living organisms. Gandhi advocated for an integrated approach to all aspects of human life, rather than compartmentalizing them, embodying a holistic human ecological viewpoint. His teachings and actions align with contemporary ideals of eco-conscious practices and fostering a symbiotic relationship with the natural world.

Simplicity and Environment

Gandhi's strong criticism of industrialization and modern civilization served as a cautionary message regarding the negative impacts of consumerism. Gandhi predicted the harmful effects of individuals being consumed by the pursuit of material possessions and the resulting enslavement by a consumer-driven society (Ambarish Mukherjee, p.2). Gandhi famously stated that the human mind is insatiable, always desiring more and never finding true satisfaction. As we continue to pursue our passions, they become increasingly unraveled. Similarly, Gandhi advocated for individuals to free themselves from the grasp of modern industrial culture and embrace a life of simplicity over materialistic desires and luxuries. Gandhi cautioned against exploiting nature for personal gain and excessive consumption. He believed that adopting the western lifestyle would strip humanity of its essence and lead to the destruction of both mankind and the environment. He urged people to avoid machinery, which he viewed as a significant symbol of modern civilization and a grave wrongdoing. He strongly opposed India's embrace of Western cultural and developmental ideals. Gandhi cautioned that what may be beneficial for one nation under specific circumstances may not be advantageous for another nation in different circumstances, as the saying goes, 'one man's food is another man's poison'. The key is to develop a mindset that avoids acquiring possessions or privileges that are unavailable to most individuals. He strongly advocated for the importance of restraining material desires. Gandhi was a proponent of living in harmony with nature and believed in using its gifts in a responsible and sustainable manner. He believed in the delicate balance between human

progress and environmental conservation. He lived a life that was fully aligned with his surroundings, his own beliefs, and the people around him. If everyone were to only take what they need and nothing beyond that, there would be no poverty in the world. Gandhi's adherence to his principles was evident in his modest and simple lifestyle. He strongly opposed the idea of pursuing excessive desires, as he believed it hindered personal growth and fulfillment. Gandhi was often referred to as a saint or ascetic for his rejection of material comforts and urban society, opting instead for an austere lifestyle. He effectively implemented his ideas through his actions. Establishing his Ashrams that embodied a simplistic lifestyle, Mahatma Gandhi laid the foundation for selfless communal living inspired by his ideals at The Phoenix Settlement and the Tolstoy Farm in South Africa.

Conclusion

Current environmental crisis affecting the world requires a prompt and efficient plan to minimize harm in order to safeguard our well-being and sustainability. The Gandhian approach provides numerous avenues for addressing crises. Gandhi addressed key environmental issues such as excessive consumption and harm to both humans and nature. Various movements around the world are actively combating environmental injustices, with some resorting to violent tactics. In India, however, environmental movements have been influenced by the Gandhian principles of truth and non-violence. The concept of non-violence according to Gandhi goes beyond simple passive resistance; it is a holistic approach to life that influences everything from dietary choices to one's interaction with the environment. Gandhi often used Satyagraha as a method for resolving conflicts. He extensively discussed the audacity of colonial power and the oppressive fate it has forced upon the nation. He expressed disapproval towards the negative impact of modernization and industrialization on society. He emphasized the need for a new economic perspective in India that prioritizes agriculture and village-based industries. He developed a fresh economic system founded on ecological harmony. Gandhiji exemplary actions make him a true hero, and it is imperative for individuals like him to emerge in every generation to safeguard our planet from devastation and raise awareness about environmental concerns. It is our

responsibility to maintain the cleanliness of our planet and encourage the planting of trees. Embrace a green lifestyle for a sustainable environment. He was a proponent of prioritizing solutions over complete healing. He developed a valuable alternative for achieving a harmonious, meaningful, and joyful life for humanity. Gandhi strongly advocates for a lifestyle characterized by simplicity, gradualness, and modesty, which he effectively put into practice.

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