

## **Mahatma Gandhi: The Pioneer of Ecologism**

**Suchita Renuka Prasad Suragihalli**

Assistant Professor in Political Science Shahaji Law College, Kolhapur, Maharashtra, India

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### **Abstract**

Mahatma Gandhi has been credited with many contributions to human society. His practice of Satyagraha and non-violence against a formidable opponent in the form of the British Empire is considered to be the most significant. But the advent of the second half of the nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century opened the eyes of the world to many other areas of his philosophy. This paper explores Gandhi's decisive contribution in the form of his environmentalism. Environmentalism and Ecologism are mostly accepted as western ideas. But this paper endeavors to establish that the philosophy of ecologism originated in Gandhian views. His holistic views provide a just the right solution to the woes of man's life.

**KEYWORDS:** Gandhi, ecologism, originates, decisive

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### **MAHATMA GANDHI: THE PIONEER OF ECOLOGISM**

With every passing day, the world is getting convinced of the significance of Gandhian philosophy. Mahatma Gandhi must undoubtedly be the most written about and spoken of person on this planet. In the area of politics, everyone seems to agree with the need to solve issues in a non-violent fashion. Leaders, thus, appeal to those who are involved in conflicts to take up the path of non-violence. Regarding social issues, he spoke of a society which practised upliftment of the last person, *Antodaya*. But it is in connection to environmental issues that Gandhi is being discussed the most. The world has realised the significance of his views regarding developmental policies, use of resources, consumerism etc.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of several environmental issues and movements, especially in the western countries which are known to be developed economically. Naturally, it also witnessed the rise of various schools of thought regarding environmentalism. Many give the credit of the origin of environmental thought to these movements and schools. But in this paper the author seeks to establish that Environmentalism is of different origin than what the world believes. To establish this fact, Gandhian views have been elaborated on and the western environmentalism has been compared to Gandhian philosophy. It will lead us to the conviction that it is Mahatma Gandhi who is the real pioneer of Ecologism.

### **GANDHIAN VIEWS REGARDING MODERN CIVILISATION**

To be able to understand Gandhian views on environmentalism, we need to understand his views regarding modern civilisation and its various creations, human

actions in the context and his fears of its effects. It is well known fact that Gandhi was a critique of modern civilisation. His criticism of this civilisation is not without justification. But he was also greatly appreciative of the positive effects of modern civilisation. Gandhi was of the opinion that modern civilisation created in man a sense of rule of law, liberty and equality, civic responsibility, awareness about sanitation etc. He was forthcoming about the need to imbibe these values in people as they affect the quality of life of the individual.

*Critique of Modern Civilisation:* In his most famous work ‘Hind Swaraj’ meaning ‘Rule of Dharma’ (Vijayam 2009: 5), Gandhi puts forth his views regarding modern civilisation of the west and many of its creations, for e.g. railways and machines. According to Gandhi, ‘Civilisation is the mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty (Parel, 1997: xxvii).’ But modern civilisation preaches the ‘khudaro’ culture. It only believes in destroying, exploiting and suppressing. Gandhi opines ‘violence oozes from its every pore’. He, therefore, voiced his concerns regarding the exploitative and destructive modern civilisation.

Gandhi abhors the fact that ‘modern civilisation is a cult of violence and materialism (George 2001: 21). He believed that the practice of colonialism is a result of modern civilisation. It professes the exploitation of the weak, whether it is people or nations. It is predominantly based on two maxims: might is right and survival of the fittest (Parel, 1997: xxvii). The European nations managed to rule over more than half the world due their extreme belief in these principles. They plundered their colonies and oppressed the indigenous populace there. But Gandhi knew that this way would not last for long and, therefore, he referred to modern civilisation as ‘a nine day wonder’. He was sure that this civilisation will die due to its own shortcomings.

*Industrialisation & Technology:* Modern civilisation paved the way for industrialisation which according to Gandhi was its most destructive element. It led to the development of better technology and more sophisticated machines. This led to greater production and search for new markets led to the exploitation of the colonies even more. The colonial rulers destroyed the local culturally rich industrial practices. Thus they augmented political and economic power. But the famous Gandhian J. C. Kumarappa had pointed out, “There can be no industrialisation without predation (Guha, 1997: 159).” Typically, very soon, industrialisation resulted in the violence, exploitation and plundering of the weaker nations. Gandhi opined his fear thus,

“God forbid that India should ever take to industrialisation after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts (Young India, 20-12-1928).”

Industrialisation created more sophisticated technology. It created indispensability that man was not successful in overcoming. In fact, they were so intoxicated by it that they felt, ‘if something was good, more of it is necessarily better’ (Pepper, 1996: 14). In

modern civilisation, technology was sign of progress. But Gandhi feared that such a development for a nation like India, with such a large population, would be disastrous. Gandhi believed that industrialisation resulted in mass production, which was evil. Big machines, obviously, led to production at a rapid rate. It also created lesser and lesser need of human labour leading to unemployment which Gandhi feared the most for a nation like India which had such a huge population. According to Gandhi, the mass production had already resulted in consumerism in the western world. The mass production and over consumption had resulted in exploitation and abuse of nature.

Industrialisation also meant the use of machines. Everyone believes that Gandhi was completely against machines. 'My opposition to machinery is much misunderstood. I am not opposed to machinery as such. I am opposed to machinery which displaces labour and leaves it idle (Harijan 1946: 310)'. The truth is that Gandhi was against the overuse of machines, he was against machines that replaced man. According to Gandhi, machines relieved drudgery and created leisure, increased inefficiency (Parekh, 1989: 22). He further added that machines were being used when they were not needed. The western civilisation did not think of the consequences of over use of machines. It was morally incorrect to make use of machines when human hand was without work. In colonies like India, the colonial rulers introduced machines at the expense of human labour resulting in problems like unemployment, poverty and social inequality. For Gandhi, 'The supreme consideration is man. The machine should not tend to make atrophied the limbs of man (Young India 1924: 378)'.

*Exploitation of Mother Nature:* Modern civilisation and industrialisation have violence and destructiveness as their inherent nature according to Gandhi. He felt in their arrogance the western world was abusing nature in an unbridled manner. Gandhi opines, 'Modern civilisation was involved in egregious amount of violence against nature, which was largely seen as man's propensity to do with it what he liked' (Parekh, 1989: 27). But they are unaware of the effects of this mindless pursuit. Gandhi believed that nature functioned according to her own set of laws. She was benevolent and tolerant. But abusing her to such an extent that she will have no alternative but to retaliate will be nothing short of doom for humans. This has led to environmentalists giving a clarion call to save nature. Gandhi felt that co-existence and harmonious relations with nature would in fact lead to the realization of a life worth living.

*Greed and Want:* According to Gandhi, "Modern civilisation was propelled by two inter-related principles of greed and want (Parekh, 1989: 22)". It is marked by materialism, which in turn leads to insatiable wants. The greed to have 'more' results in irreparable damage to nature. Gandhi, therefore, vehemently advocates the containment of wants. This idea of Gandhi has a moral ground. He makes a difference between needs and wants. He emphasized this as needs have to be fulfilled while wants will be ever growing and eternal. Gandhi warned, "A time is coming when those who are in mad rush today of multiplying their wants, will retrace their steps and say; what have we done? (Quoted in Khoshoo & Moolakkattu, 2009: 51)" Gandhi felt accumulating more than one's need is theft towards fellow beings. He cautioned Indians against imitating the European regarding satisfaction of wants.

When Hind Swaraj was first published, Gandhi had to face criticism from many around him. But Gandhi was convinced of the efficacy of his views. He warned that if mankind did not wake up to the harsh reality of the effects of modern civilisation, then nothing will save them. It is the greatness of Gandhi that he did not stop at just criticising modern civilisation. His greatness lies in the fact that he did not pointing out lacunae, he himself tried different things to remove the shortcomings. He experimented and gave solutions. Similarly, he did not stop at criticising modern civilisation. He made several suggestions for a better life for all, man and his surroundings alike. These views of Gandhi are a part of his philosophy of the Gram Swaraj or what is also known as the Alternative Model of Development.

### **GANDHI'S ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT**

Gandhi feared for the condition of India and the world if all chose to follow the path chosen by the European nations. Hence, he was convinced of the fact that the only way things could be changed was by transforming the way we led our lives. This transformation had to be fundamental, all-encompassing and immediate. Gram Swaraj was actually advocated by Gandhi for the villages of India. He believed that India lived in her villages. If India had to progress and gain back her former glory, her villages had to be transformed. Gram Swaraj incorporated the practice of decentralization, village and cottage industries, khadi and non-violence, swadeshi, sanitation, naturopathy etc.

*Decentralisation:* According to Gandhi, the state in modern civilisation was centralized in character. The political institutions epitomized power of the most intense nature. In such a scenario, the individual had no say in whatever decisions taken. The state could protect interests of the privileged classes, at the expense of collective welfare. In the Gram Swaraj, the villages would be self-reliant republics with efficiently working Panchayati system. The business of the village would be carried out in a cooperative manner. For Gandhi, decentralization was the transformation which would eliminate exploitation of the weak by the rich and powerful. All will be equal and contribute equally to the running of affairs of the village. It would lead to the creation of a nonviolent community.

In the Gandhian model of development, decentralisation was not only to be political but financial as well. He wanted villages to run on small scale and cottage industries. These will also be run in a cooperative manner. He wanted the cooperative practice to be extended to farming as well. The industries in the villages will be based on very simple technology. Their produce will also be of local handicrafts and the needs of local people. This system ensures that decentralisation creates opportunities for everyone without a shade of exploitation and creation of classes.

*Khadi:* The khadi industry, to Gandhi, was a solution to many shortcomings of human society, especially the Indian society. Gandhi opined,

“Khadi touches life of every single individual, makes him feel a glow with the possession of power that had within himself and makes him proud of

his identity with every drop of the ocean of Indian humanity (Tendulkar, 1999: 20).”

The first aim of Gandhi to advocate the khadi industry was to provide employment to those in the rural region so that they would not feel any need to flock to the cities. The second aim was it would create self-respect in them, which was lacking due to the suppression by the colonial rulers. Khadi brought everyone on the same level. It eliminates the differences in the society. It professes the practice of non-violence, as there is no exploitation in this industry and neither does it exploit the resources of nature.

*Swadeshi*: The mass production of industrialisation led to the search of new markets. The need to establish control over new markets leads to exploitation of the poor nations and also results in the death of their domestic industries. Gandhi, therefore, advocates Swadeshi. Gandhi gave a new meaning to it and claimed that Swadeshi meant self-dependent economy (Chousalkar, 2014: 116). Many misunderstand the meaning of Swadeshi, but Gandhi opines that Swadeshi did not mean that we cut off our relations with everyone. He professes that it is, “that spirit in us which restricts us to use of service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of more remote” (Pyarelal, 1966: 187). So swadeshi is a broad concept with social self-sufficiency and self-reliance at its base. In the practice of Swadeshi manufacturing will be made with the help of local products and technology. It supplements the practice of non-violence as well.

*Containment of Wants*: Modern civilisation is based on greed and want. Gandhi professes such a lifestyle for mankind which will be based on simplicity and contentedness. He wants humans to understand the difference between wants and needs. His alternative model totally aims to create this clarity in the life of man. Some criticised Gandhi’s advocacy of a frugal life, terming it as self imposed poverty. But Gandhi was sure that such a life, based on simplicity, slowness and smallness was ideal in nature. The decentralisation, small industries, simple technology, swadeshi, community life put forth by Gandhi will naturally lead to a life based on needs not wants.

Other than this Gandhi also incorporated sanitation, basic education, prohibition, manual labour as a part of his alternative model of development. Each notion had its role to play in the Gandhian scheme of things.

## **ENVIRONMENTALISM OF GANDHI**

The environmentalism of Gandhi is not a distinct philosophy that he put forth. He had a holistic approach towards everything. He never looked at things or issues in isolation. Naturally, his environmentalism lies in his criticism of the modern civilisation and in his alternative model of development. For some it is not easy to correlate the two. But Gandhi was forthcoming in his criticism of the western developmental model as he could foresee its effects. One has to only glance around to realise what he predicted has indeed come true. It is not that the world did not realise that the materialistic development policies will end up like this. They did so too, but much later than Gandhi. Let us understand the western concept of environmentalism that developed in the 1960s.

*Environmentalism and Ecologism:* The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the development of environmental movements and environmental thought in the world. Nature, her bounties like the rivers and forests had been spoiled by man's aggressive and predatory policies. This led to people questioning governmental policies and seeking intervention to save the planet from further damage. Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring' and Murray Bookchin's 'Our Synthetic Environment' led to the creation of base for environmental thought to develop. The picture of Earth from Apollo managed to strike an emotional chord with the people. All in all, the 1960s saw the advent of environmentalism in the world.

In the beginning, the issue was looked at from the point of man and the effects of such (environmental degradation and the like) situations on him. This was just the start and thinkers put forth their views regarding the security of human life on this planet. They wanted to save everything that was of use to man. So nature was important as she was significant to the survival of man. Over the time, a new school of thought developed which encompassed everything on this planet as being significant. Man was a part of this consideration but not at the center. They were interested in saving everything because of their belief that it had a value of its own. The former school was termed as Shallow ecology and the latter as Deep Ecology. According to Michael Nelson,

“The shallow worldview ... is merely an extension of European and North American anthropocentrism—its reasons for conserving wilderness and preserving biodiversity are invariably tied to human welfare, and it prizes nonhuman nature mainly for its use-value (Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy, 2008: 206).”

On the contrary, while defining Deep ecology, Arne Naess says, “Ecologically responsible policies are concerned only in part with pollution and resource depletion. There are deeper concerns which touch upon principles of diversity, complexity, autonomy, decentralization, symbiosis, egalitarianism, and classlessness” (Naess, 2008).

A comparison between Gandhian and western environmentalism is essential here to be able to identify that Gandhi was the pioneer of Ecologism. Since shallow ecology has nothing that can be compared with Gandhian philosophy, as it is too shallow, we have to take up Deep ecology for comparison. Deep ecology bears a 'deep' resemblance to Gandhian ecology as will be clear from the comparison made here.

Firstly, Gandhi was of the opinion that man is a part of nature. He felt it was the arrogance of humans that they thought themselves to be its entirety. He felt that nature functions on the basis of a set of rules. His was a cosmocentric view created by his faith in 'Advaita'. Gandhi said, “I believe in *Advaita*, I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter all that lives” (Young India 04-12-1924). According to Bhikhu Parekh, “Gandhi challenges the anthropocentric view that man enjoys absolute ontological superiority to and the consequent right of unrestrained domination over the non-human world” (Parekh 1989: 196-197).

Tim Hayward, while writing on ecology, opines, 'Nature should not be seen as something out there' apart from us (Hayward 2003). In fact Deep ecologist developed the notion of the 'Gaia'. Named after the Greek Goddess of Earth, Gaia was a hypothesis developed by James Lovelock that all living organisms interact with each other and form a self-regulating system. Dale and Carter carry the thought further when they say, 'Man, whether civilised or savage, is a child of nature, not the master' (Dale & Carter, 1955: 6).

Secondly, the critique of modern civilisation forms the foundation of Gandhi's environmental thought. It has already been discussed above that Gandhi abhorred modern civilisation and considered it Satanic. The ecologists developed a similar viewpoint. They criticised the materialistic and utilitarian practice advocated by modern civilisation. They lament that all this is at the expense of general good. David Pepper lament, 'Our spiritual, emotional, artistic, loving and cooperative sides are neglected.... We lack any deeper moral standards' (Pepper, 1996: 13-14). The ecologists advocate simple living and, therefore, did not approve of the materialistic attitude. They disapproved the tendency of the west to dominate and exploit nature and her resources for the gratification of their materialistic pleasures.

Thirdly, Gandhi had already expressed his severe reservation regarding the over use of machines and technology in the 'Hind Swaraj'. He felt that technology and machines were considered to be a mark of progress. He opined that 'technology has tended to assume the status of a criterion for everything' (Sahasrabudhey, 2010: 179). The Deep ecologists had reservations about machines and technology as well. In fact some westerners even look at technology as possessing the capacity to solve environmental problems. They profess the creation of 'appropriate technology'. Appropriate technology was based on the requirement and suitability of each given society. This is totally in tune with what Gandhi had advocated. His ideas regarding decentralisation, small and cottage industries vouch for it. For a country like India, he wanted minimal use of machines to ensure there is work for every pair of hands. These Gandhian views were presented by E. F. Schumacher in 'Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered'.

Fourthly, Gandhi was of the opinion that modern civilisation was totally based on greed and want. According to him, modern civilisation was a cult of materialism. He urged that people learn to make difference needs and wants which would uproot the problem of insatiable wants. According to the ecologists, we fail to understand that wants are unlimited and the means to satisfy them are limited. Resources are treated as limitless, though clearly, greens maintain, they are finite – a fact never appreciated in the short time perspective of conventional economics (Pepper, 1996: 14). Gandhi was extremely critical of the fact that the colonial rulers had brought this disease to India. He alerts us thus "A time is coming when those who are in mad rush today of multiplying their wants, will retrace their steps and say; what have we done?" (Quoted in Khoshoo & Moolakkattu, 2009: 51)

Fifthly, Gandhi gave us the idea of Gram Swaraj while the ecologists speak of a 'sustainable society' (Dobson, 2003: 374). Gram Swaraj is life of based on simplicity and a frugal life. As though like a mirror reflection,

“The greens are of the opinion that sustainable society that will replace the consumer society would provide for wider and more profound forms of fulfillment than that can be provided by the consumption of material objects (Dobson, 2003: 376).”

The ecologists seek to reestablish their connection with mother earth through this simple life. They also accept the fact that this will be possible only by converting wants into needs.

Sixthly, the views of ecologists regarding decentralisation are very similar to those expressed by Gandhi. They put forth idea of centralised hierarchical political institutions to be replaced by decentralised ones. They insist that participation of the people in the working of such decentralised communities will lead to effective working society. Goodin emphasises, 'If there is anything truly distinctive about green politics, most commentators would concur, it must surely be its emphasis on decentralisation' (Goodin 2003: 398).

Seventhly, just like Gandhi, ecologists advocate the practice of small industries. Gandhi linked decentralisation to small industries, swadeshi, self-reliance and most importantly to non-violence. Ecologists feel, nonviolence is a matter of principle, not merely a useful tactic (Goodin, 2003, 388). In fact their slogan 'Think Globally, Act Locally' is a clear reflection of Gandhi's views which propagate small community based industries and swadeshi.

It is amply clear from the comparison above that ecologists have the same views as Gandhi did. It is important to note that Gandhi had expressed these views when no one else did. He had to face the wrath of many when he did so. The Britishers had banned the Gujarati version of the 'Hind Swaraj' immediately after it was published as they feared the reaction of the people. They, at that time, were drunk high on the material success of modern civilisation. Gandhi had to therefore, face extreme criticism from not only his own countrymen but also from foreigners. They were not able to or rather did not want to understand the truth in the writings of Gandhi. Of course much later with the development of environmentalism in the west, thinkers like Arne Naess and Schumacher, credited their views to Gandhi Today, the world speaks of how much we owe to Gandhi in terms of not only his views but also the many suggestions that he gives. This establishes the fact beyond doubt that Gandhi is the Pioneer of Ecologism.

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