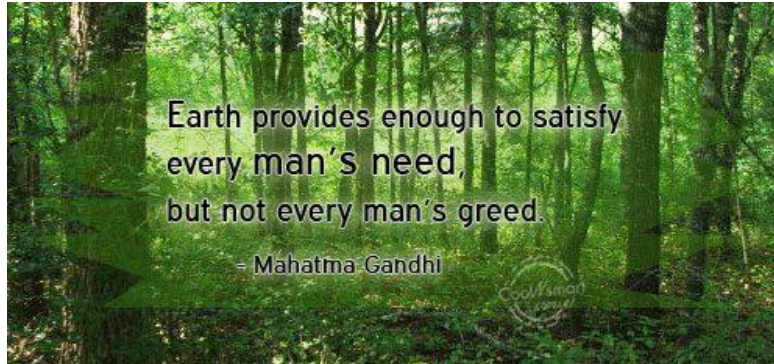


GANDHIAN ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT



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Abstract: *Great sages come and go but their message lives on forever. One such Indian stalwart is none other than Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. He is beyond comparison and fondly referred to as the Father of the Nation for his belief in achieving India's freedom through non-violent movement. Gandhi was a real visionary as he visualized the current environmental problems a century back itself. Among the many accolades that Gandhi has of being a lawyer, a revolutionary political leader and great thinker, saintly figure, humanist and pacifist, he was an environmentalist to the core too. Gandhi gave solutions to root out the problems and did not search for solutions to control it. His fervent appeal to his fellow countrymen was to imbibe plain living with simple consumption pattern. He realized the importance of living as a part of the total ecosystem around us.*

Keywords: Gandhi, Environment, Conservation, Ecology

I. Introduction:

Gandhi was born in the year 1869 at Porbandar, Gujarat, India on 2nd October to his parents Kaba Gandhi and Putlibai. According to Gandhi, his father though short-tempered, was truthful, brave and generous. His mother left an exceptional notion of saintliness on him. Being sincerely religious, she wouldn't take her meals without her daily prayers. She would take the hardest vows and resolutely abide by them. She inculcated the early spiritual values in Gandhi.

The case of degradation of environment according to Gandhian philosophy is in the mind of the individual human being as the root cause for it is human greed, wanting more than needs. Greed leads to more consumerism; more consumerism necessitates production thus leading to industrialization. Industrialization needs uncountable natural resources which all leads to environmental imbalance. Secondly the technology required for industrialization will be more automated, thus fuelling poverty and unemployment which again leads to

environmental degradation. Gandhi advocated Swaraj which helps man to be totally liberated, self-reliant and self-sufficient. A famous saying of Gandhi for the youth was and which is relevant even today is “to go back to villages”.

The offshoot of rapid industrialization which uses vast amounts of natural renewable and non-renewable resources is that it has led to socio-cultural mayhem in the global world. This has escalated to such an extent that the deep-rooted values which were being upheld in India, no longer holds water. Into this scenario Gandhi’s life and philosophy of life acts as the most required panacea for all causes. One can find innumerable solutions to the environmental problems faced by us today in studying, understanding, accepting and following the footpaths of Gandhian life and practices.

II. Religious, Spiritual and Philosophical influence on Gandhi’s life:

Gandhi’s philosophical bent of mind was through his spiritual inclination. He was influenced not only by religions such as Buddhism and Jainism but also scriptures, most particularly Bhagavad Gita. His strength came to him due to his keen interest in spirituality and practice of non-violence and truth. Another aspect of Gandhi was his observance of ‘mauna vrata’; that is being silent and not communicating by words through out a day which was his way of watching his thoughts and thereby clearing negative thoughts through listening to his innermost voice.

For Gandhi, Moksha meant freedom from all ills. One need to follow Nishkama karma and path of righteousness to purify one’s mind and that feeling helps us to be an inseparable part of nature. Jainism urges human beings to respect the various life forms as they look at the entire nature as throbbing with life. Gandhi believed in the Jain principle of Aparigraha or non-possession. Gandhi felt that each one of us has to limit our wants voluntarily. Forcing the limitation might lead to discontentment, but voluntarily limiting one’s wants can only lead to happiness. He was also for Asteya or non-stealing. One should not deprive people’s right of using natural resources.

III. Gandhi’s life and teachings:

Gandhi’s upbringing was both in India and the West, where he took higher education in England. So he could compare the living life styles of both India and the West. His day to day living highlighted his ecological ideals in the most subtle of ways. Gandhi might not have been fascinated about forests and wilderness but he did talk about land, soil, water conservation, nature cure, co-existing with other life forms, keeping once premises clean and his ashram life encompassed all these and much more.

Gandhi’s many utterances feel right when seen from the environment angle. Mahatma’s philosophy has to be understood through his speeches, various articles published in papers and journals, from his own written books and mostly through the values and principles in life which he unfalteringly adhered to. A mere glance through the various quotes of Gandhi made during his lifetime is a great recognition of the environmental concern already having started during his period.

IV. Relevance of Gandhi’s environmental values:

Gandhi was rooted in Indian tradition. He led by example and that showed in his easy lifestyle. He held a strong belief about there being divinity in all life and he felt that in nature

there was fundamental unity in diversity. Recounting some of Gandhi's sayings in his numerous public speeches, articles published in his Hind Swaraj paper and interactions with varied people at different places, one can but get a glimpse of the actual man he was which shows his remarkable capacity in gauging the Indian values in lay man terms. Few highlights include:

1. Importance of understanding our needs:

Many of his quotes are ever meaningful as they lay stress on the importance of living within the means. Gandhi felt that the real needs are only those that were required for living in the moment. Gandhi's most famous words: "There is enough for every man's need and not greed" highlights his environmental concern for exploiting the natural resources for small tenure proceeds instead of utilizing it for need based human sustenance.

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?" Now, this warning has become a global reality. (Quoted in Khoshoo and Moolakkattu, 2009). The magnanimity of earth is such that it gives shelter to all of its creatures and they exist because they live within their means unlike human beings who are driven by wants more than need, hence it is no wonder that the earth might end up being unsustainable for mankind very sooner than later.

2. Importance of Nature:

Gandhi deeply understood the relationship between human being and nature. And all his life resonates with it. He had a reverence for nature and had a deep understanding of the importance of nature for human being's existence. He always propounded a lifestyle that never had environmental problems as he did not believe in cure but remedy. Gandhi valued nature not because it was needed or useful to man but because it was created by God and thus its pristine nature needs to be maintained.

Gandhi on 31-8-1942 underlying the importance of gifts given by nature to man had this to say "Nature has provided us with sufficient reserve of vitality. But for that, man would have long ago disappeared from the face of the earth because of his own mistakes and transgressions of the rules of health." Again he says, "I need no inspiration other than Nature's. She has never failed me as yet. She mystifies me, bewilders me, sends me to ecstasies."

Gandhi believed in "Nature doing things for herself even for suffering humanity, if we could but let Nature take her course", which was mentioned in a speech at Ashtanga Ayurveda Vidyalaya in Calcutta on 6-5-1925. He was of the view that nature's creatures mind their own business, and if only the humans were to do the same, all life on earth could live in a harmonious way.

Much can be written about experiments done by Gandhi in the field of nature cure in his own life and later on which he administered to others with great benefits. In a letter to a foreign naturopath on 28-5-1947, Gandhi re-affirmed his sincere faith in nature cure (that is healing by air, water, earth and light) and its abilities and felt "I try to confine myself to the propagation of such (nature) cure as is derivable from the use of earth, water, light, air and the great void."

While affirming his faith in nature cure, Gandhi confesses that he has not been able to apprehend the true meaning of 'return to nature' fully and attributes his fragmentary

understanding of nature to his ignorance. For Gandhi, each and every step he took was a lesson in learning and experimenting with the truth.

3. Importance of Natural Resources:

Gandhi always advocated judicious usage of natural resources keeping the future generation in mind. His comment "Man's happiness lies in contentment. He who is discontented, however much he possesses, becomes a slave to his desires". He in a way showed his concern in the unequal ways of using resources by different sections of society.

Gandhi's relevant quote: "It took Britain half the resources of the planet to achieve this prosperity. How many planets will a country like India require!" was an apt answer to a question asked to him about whether he wished to have England's standard of living for India's millions. This implied that imitating the West was not the answer to all ills. According to him, modern civilization helped in increasing the physical comforts of people but it would eventually meet its own destruction because of the limitation of non-renewable natural resources.

4. Importance of Air:

"We suffer much because we do not realise the value of pure air" (Indian Opinion, dated 5-5-1906). When Gandhi said that open fresh air is necessary far more than food or water, he was hinting on the danger of inhaling impure air as human beings could live for many days without food and water but he cannot live without air even for a moment. Hence a thing which is so vital for survival if found impure, had disastrous effects for human being's health.

Mention has been made by Gandhi in Indian Opinion dated 1-2-1913, about the human body requiring three kinds of nourishment such as food, water and air; last of which is provided by nature abundantly but urban man by making it impure, has even put a price tag to get fresh pure air. Gandhi quoted "Whether air is free or has to be paid for, we cannot carry on without it for a moment". In the current scenario, the urban pollution that is being faced in all major cities all over the world cannot but mirror Gandhi's dictum.

Gandhi on 1-1-1918 while giving a speech at Ahmedabad mentioned that the impure air is more harmful than impure water. Purity of air is so essential that's why sometimes man 'needs a change of air'. All these sayings of Mahatma Gandhi were in the context of industries and their pollutants, which is ever truer today.

5. Importance of Conservation:

One example to showcase Gandhi's water conservation can be stated here: Gandhi was using even the river water flowing near the ashram (which was available profusely) in moderation and on being questioned he quipped saying that all the flowing water in the river was not his. This shows that he used as much water as he needed without a thought of misusing the abundant water resource that was at his disposal.

Gandhi used to even conserve paper. He used to use scraps of paper for writing brief notes and reverse of envelopes were reused to send letters. In another example, Kaka Kalekar who was his close disciple and associate narrates that he used to use only a few leaves of the neem tree by breaking an entire twig. To which Gandhi had stated: "This is violence. We should pluck the required number of leaves after offering an apology to the tree for doing so. But you broke off the whole twig, which is wasteful and wrong."

6. Importance of having our environment clean:

Gandhi at Uruli Kanchan prayer meeting on 24-3-1946 said "Anyone who fouls the air by spitting about carelessly, throwing refuse and rubbish or otherwise dirtying the ground, sins against man and nature".

At a prayer meeting held on 21-4-1946, Gandhi posed a question whether people wash their linen in gutter water as the water that one normally keeps in water tanks for personal use is equivalent to gutter water (because of pollution in the water). Quoting Gandhi, "Nature is lenient. It often does not punish us for our sins immediately. Thus we can go on breathing impure air and drinking impure water over long periods without any dramatic ill effects."

He criticized people for polluting the rivers and other water bodies. Talking about the pollution being effected on Ganges, Gandhi in Shikshan and Sahitya, 22-9-1929, quotes "In doing this we destroy the dharma of compassion and disregard our duty to society. Such recklessness leads to pollution of air and water." The present situation is that on the river Ganges, innumerable dams are being built. Indiscriminate mining is going on unnoticed; untreated sewages, sewers and waste water canals from industries are being dumped along its river basin and along with body dumping all of which is polluting Ganges day in and day out. But with World Bank aid, the government has set itself a target of having a clear, unpolluted and free flowing Ganges by the year 2020.¹

7. Importance of his adage "All life is One":

Gandhi says, "The rock-bottom foundation of the technique for achieving the power of nonviolence is belief in the essential oneness of all life". Further he continues, "I believe in Advaita (nonduality), I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that lives" (Quoted in Weber 1999).

Gandhi felt that this being the basic principle of life, in no way should one be in conflict with it either individually, socially, culturally or politically. He was for peaceful co-existence of all creatures and gave due reverence for all. Gandhi's words "Man has no power to create life, therefore, he has no right to destroy life" holds a million truths and succinctly proves his immense affection for all life forms. He felt that being bestowed with higher faculties, man has to be compassionate to his fellow living beings and should not cause violence to them; be it animals, plants and inanimate beings.

Gandhi's non-violence was for all creatures and that amounted to love for all beings. According to him, "I believe that all life is one. Thoughts take definite forms. Tigers and snakes have kinship with us. They are a warning to us to avoid harbouring evil, wicked, lustful thoughts." (YI, 14-4-1927, p. 121)

8. Importance of Environmental Ethics:

Gandhi's insistence of non-violence can be seen in the ecological movement also. He said: "We cannot have ecological movement designed to prevent violence against Nature, unless the principle of non-violence becomes central to the ethics of human culture" (Quoted in Khoshoo and Moolakkattu, 2009).

Gandhi's environmentalism was based on various ethical principles such as : non-violence, practicing truth, shunning the use of materials obtained by illegitimate means, celibacy- as a means of population control, neither coveting or amassing materials and wealth beyond one's need, sanitation of body, mind and surroundings, being content with available

resources, austerity, introspection and meditation and even fasting for self purification and any dereliction of duties towards nature including human beings.²

9. Importance of Detachment:

Gandhi's words: "All fears revolve round the body as the centre, and would therefore disappear, as soon as one got rid of attachment for the body. We thus find that all fear is the baseless fabric of our own vision. Fear has no place in our hearts, when we have shaken off the attachment for wealth, for family and for the body. 'Enjoy the things of the earth by renouncing them' is a noble percept. Wealth, family and body will be there, just the same; we have only to change our attitude towards them. That is to say, we must be interested in them, not as proprietors, but as only trustees."³

10. Importance of Ecological Security:

Gandhi was against large scale industrialization as he was deeply aware of the outcome of it. Now after 66yrs of India's independence, there has been rapid growth of industries in India and along with it there has been grave concern of depleting natural resources and non-renewable resources. Awareness about the environmental degradation in the WEST started in the early 1950's, and has been steadily growing encircling the whole earth now.

India's unwarranted usage of non-renewable resources along with technological inputs has led to rapid industrialization. Industrialization was based on the assumption that natural resources are in abundance and unlimited, but that was the case in the beginning stages of production, but when the scenario is different now, why still mass produce?? Gandhi's words can be echoed here – There should be production by the masses and not mass production.

Though there has been progress of urban cities from the pre-independence era including increase in physical comfort and material prosperity of urban population; but the downside is that the villagers are shifting base to cities. There has been reduction in village practices and difference between haves and have-nots is ever on the increase leading to erosion of Indian values. This has caused social and cultural upheaval both in villages and cities. The interrelationship between environment, aesthetic value attached to environment and realization of the aesthetic value needs to be recognized.

Ecological security is gaining more and more prominence than economic security because without ecological balance, how can there be economic happiness? According to T. N. Khoshoo, the present ecological breakdown is due to the greed of the rich people, need of the poor people and haywire application of technology.⁴

V. Conclusion:

To consider Gandhi as an environmentalist is not in his farsighted vision and considerable depth of understanding of man-nature relationship but in his very honest and truthful efforts to follow the same in his personal life. Though he was pained to see the poverty, illiteracy and unhygienic conditions in villages of India, but through out his life he kept conveying and demonstrating the healthy way of living and maintain hygiene and sanitation. Gandhi's mantra was to lead a simple life. Modernization makes life complex. But a simple life is one that needs only bare essentials. Gandhi always used to say that India lived in its villages. Village life was a simple life where one lived with peace and tranquility and felt abundant closeness with nature.

All of Gandhi's words and quotes astonishingly find relevance even today. He spoke after having fully digested and understood the nuances of nature and the plain harmonious living that is possible by human beings. His experiments with truth have helped him to articulate the values learnt in his own life. Gandhi was much too far ahead of his time regarding his futuristic statements made on development and environment as during his time there was not much environmental problems to talk about as we face today. But what he was and what he did for India will remain for ever etched in human history.

A philosophical side to Gandhi's views throws light on how creating awareness helps in environmental realization that human being is part of nature. One can understand what environment meant for Gandhi through his experiment with truth. From the philosophical point of view, it is the realization that counts, because only when realization happens, is the ignorance removed and recognition happens. Gandhi in that sense is taken as a true advocate of environmentalism.

His penchant for following, preaching and practicing what he believed in is truly remarkable for a human being and is aptly proven by his statement, "my life is my message", which was his message to humanity. The future generation will be saved from psychosomatic diseases once they study and understand the philosophy of Gandhi and his life's preaching's and practices.

Gandhi's ideas give immense power to a person. Each one of us can take care of our environment by using only the needed resources and thus leading an uncomplicated life. Similar to how Gandhi single handedly motivated people and unswervingly believed in truth, ahimsa and non-violence to obtain India's freedom; the same qualities are required today in handling the global environmental crises faced worldwide. Initially his wisdom constituted philosophy now it feels more like commonsense.

Gandhi's life and the books he has written give us an idea of what one human being is capable of. Each one of us should take to heart to do at least one of his preaching's and do it sincerely. The only way forward is to rethink of conservation vis-a-vis utilization. Need of the hour is to change tracks and follow Gandhian principles. Science and technology will help in reducing the environmental hazards being faced globally, but a lifestyle change using Gandhian ideas is needed as it is in complete harmony with nature.

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NOTES:

¹ Debarshi Dasgupta, "The Ganga", Outlook Magazine, 4th July 2011, pg 29-43.

² <<http://gandhiphilosophy.blogspot.com/2010/01/gandhi-and-environment.html>> (Accessed on 22nd Nov 2013)

³ <www.mkgandhi.org/swmgandhi/swmgandhi.htm>(Accessed on 22nd Nov 2013)

⁴ <<http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/environment.htm>>(Accessed on 22nd Nov 2013)

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