



## GANDHI AS AN ENVIRONMENTALIST

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“The Earth has enough resources for our need but not for our greed.”

– M.K. Gandhi

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This most often quoted phrase by Gandhi depicts his concern for nature and environment. All the international conferences such as the Stockholm Conference of 1972 or the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 were convened much later than the concerns raised by Gandhi about the environment and its effects. Even in India the major movements to protect environment such as the Chipko movement led by Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunder Lal Bahuguna and the Narmada Bachao Andolan by Baba Amte and Medha Patkar derived inspiration from Gandhi. The concern of Gandhi about the environment, urbanization and mechanization was evident in his speeches, writings and his messages to the workers. It is apt to note that he was the “World’s early environmentalist in vision and practice.”

### GANDHI AND EVILS OF URBANIZATION

Gandhi had cautioned the world, much before any modern day environmentalist, about the problems of large-scale industrialization, which we are confronting today. Gandhi visualized that mechanization will not only lead to industrialization, to massive urbanization,

to unemployment, but will also lead to the destruction of environment. His seminal work, *Hind Swaraj*, written a hundred years ago in 1909 warned of the dangers the world is facing today in the form of environmental destruction and the threat to the planet. The Gandhian idea becomes still more relevant when sustainable growth and development is to be achieved because he emphasized on production by the masses instead of mass production. According to him this will result in the development of an economic system that can minimize environmental degradation and achieve sustainable development. His idea of Swaraj or self-rule enables a practical sustainable development that can be implemented without compromising the quality of life.

Regarding urbanization, Gandhi expressed his views as follows: “It is a process of double drain from the villages. Urbanisation in India is a slow but sure death for her villages and villagers. It can never support 90 per cent of India’s population, which is living in her 7,00,000 villages” (number of villages in 1934). He was against the concept of removing cottage industries from small villages as he felt that this would remove whatever little opportunity was still there for

making skilled use of the hand and head. "And when the village handicrafts disappear, the villagers working only with their cattle on the field, with idleness for six or four months in the year, must be reduced to the level of the beast and be without proper nourishment either of the mind or the body, and, therefore without joy and without hope" (*Harijan*, 7-9-1934).

As a matter of historical record, Gandhi was acutely aware of environmental pollution and of its consequences to human health. He was especially concerned about the appalling working conditions in industry, with workers forced to inhale contaminated, toxic air. He expressed those concerns in *Indian Opinion* on May 5, 1906: "Nowadays, there is an increasing appreciation among enlightened men of the need for open air."

## NON-VIOLENCE AND CONSERVATION OF RESOURCES

*"I need no inspiration other than Nature's. She has never failed me as yet. She mystifies me, bewilders me, sends me to ecstasies."*

– Mahatma Gandhi

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The Gandhian idea of non-violence, if adopted at various levels from international politics to local levels, can be useful to reduce carbon footprints caused due to wars and production of missiles. Gandhi had emphasized the importance of natural resources and its conservation. This has a direct bearing on the man-and-environment relationship. The importance of Gandhian philosophy is well-felt in the present period in which the lifestyle of human beings has been developed in a direction of high consumerism and generation of waste. This has a two-way impact on nature. Firstly, the rate of depletion of resources has increased tremendously, and secondly, the presence of toxicity in air, water and soil has increased.

## SATYA AND AHIMSA AND CONSERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY

Gandhi was influenced by Jainism, which looks at nature as a living entity and exhorts human beings to continually purify themselves by respecting diverse life forms. The Gandhian idea of Satya and ahimsa can be

useful to reduce the greed of the individual and society. His concept of non-violence thus encompassed all living beings and embodied the eternal values of life in his thought and actions. He insisted on the eternal sacredness of life that included a tree, plant or a cow. Reportedly, the English historian Edward Thomson once remarked to Gandhi that wildlife was rapidly declining in India, to which Gandhi replied with sarcasm, "Wildlife is decreasing in the jungles, but increasing in the towns." According to him reckless and limitless pursuit of industrialization by all nations has posed serious problems for the very existence of not only man but also for all living creatures and all kinds of species on our planet.

The concept of Sarvodaya is also similar to that of a sustainable development and forms a part of environmental ethics. Gandhi's vision of Sarvodaya, implies a healthy development and environment that can be evolved by man to ensure his harmonious existence with nature and other living beings. Gandhi did not recognize separate rules for separate spheres of human life, but saw all spheres in an integrated manner, which exemplifies best the human ecological perspective. What he preached and practised corresponds to what we today call eco-friendly measures and living in harmony with nature.

## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND NIREH

Population explosion, mass poverty, over-utilization of renewable resources, overuse of fertilizers leading to water pollution, rapid industrialization, global warming, desert formation, deforestation, emission of harmful substances causing air pollution, industrial and synthetic wastes, and nuclear hazards that are more man-made in nature are all causing irreparable damages to our planet. Many of these problems are attributed to uncontrolled industrialization. The air pollution has resulted in a wide spectrum of morbid conditions such as acute respiratory and eye-related problems to chronic respiratory, cardiovascular mortalities and cancers. The ICMR-National Institute for Research in Environmental Health, Bhopal is engaged in research on various health effects of air pollution, water pollution and noise pollution. The molecular changes caused by air pollution are being studied to develop the biomarkers for early indication so as to prevent the development of such chronic diseases.



ICMR-National Institute for Research in Environmental Health, Bhopal.

With rapid changes in environmental conditions, land usage pattern and climate change, the incidence pattern of various vector-borne diseases, especially dengue, is changing globally and there has been a steady increase in dengue cases in India along with movement of spatial distribution from urban to rural settings. At NIREH, a study has been initiated to identify dengue hot-spots in an urban setting and to find out the environmental factors resulting in its emergence.

With rapid urbanization and industrialization, there is an increase in noise pollution owing to increase in road traffic load, aircraft movements, construction and industrial sites and recreational activities. Chronic exposure to noise pollution leads to headache, sleep disturbances, epilepsy, cognitive impairment, poor memory, stress disorders and even suicides in individuals. A study on understanding the underlying mechanisms of noise pollution in neurological and mental health has also been undertaken at NIREH.

Unregulated urban mining and e-waste recycling, open disposal of municipal wastes, and automobiles and industrial exhausts are major anthropogenic activities responsible for water pollution due to heavy metals. Simultaneous environmental exposure to multiple heavy metals (co-exposure) leads to a multiplicatively enhanced response. This indicates

that individuals living in the vicinity of industries, mining sites and waste disposal sites are susceptible to co-exposure and may exhibit complex health outcomes. The ICMR-NIREH study on effects of water pollution at industrial and waste disposal sites focusses on the same.

Thus, to conclude, the world and in particular India is today facing the harmful effects of urbanization that Gandhi envisioned decades back. The application of Gandhian principles can stall the further progress of these effects. NIREH's role, which is contributing in mitigating these effects, is also crucial to study and suggest newer ways of controlling harmful consequences.

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Mahatma Gandhi interacting with youngsters, 1928.