



ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION: A GANDHIAN VIEW

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi did not use the word environment protection however what he said and did makes him an environmentalist. Although during his time environmental problems were not recognized as such with his amazing foresight and insight he predicted that things are moving in the wrong direction. He cautioned the mankind against unrestricted industrialism when he wrote his book 'Hind Swaraj' in 1909. He was not in the favour that India should follow the west in this direction. He was of the opinion that industrialization and machines have an advance effect on the health of people. Though he did not oppose to machines as such, but opposed the large scale use of machinery. Gandhi criticised people for polluting the rivers and other water bodies. He also criticised mills and factories for polluting the air with smoke and noise.

Key words: Ecology, Environment, Forests, Hind Swaraj, Nature, Pollution, Sustainable Development.

As early as 1908 Gandhi in his Hind Swaraj had questioned the direction in which western civilization was heading, that is, towards greater violence, greater inequities, and an economy based on destruction of natural resources. His arguments were largely based on his concept of what constitute a good life and a good society, his 'concern for truth and nonviolence, and his great concern for the poor. The production and consumption of more and more goods considered as a sign of progress was evil according to Gandhi. Gandhi believed that 'western civilization' if it continued on its present path of 'progress' would in time be self-destroyed. Scientists and ecologists in the West are discovering that Gandhi's predictions are coming true, and that they need to reconsider their vision of progress and development. Paul Ehrlich, the ecologist says, "something of seriously wrong but if we wait for the full scale catastrophe, we may or may not survive it. Its now crystal clear that we cannot solve the problems of keeping the planet inhabitable with our old ways of being racist, sexist, xenophobic, with great economic inequality and so on. We've got to bring the world together so that everybody wants to work for survival". Wolfgang Sachs also writing on development says, "The time is ripe to write its (development) obituary – delusion, disappointment, failure and

crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story it did not work". Further He adds "the advanced societies are not model: rather they are most likely to be seen in the end as an aberration in the course of history" Edward Goldsmith of the Ecologist too identifies western industrialisation as the root cause of today's social and ecological problems and is asking for a fundamental reappraisal of western development thinking.

Like Gandhiji, Goldsmith sees the solution of ecological security in de-industrializing society, "We face the unacceptable conclusion that our problems can only be solved by reversing these development – an enterprise that few would be willing to contemplate, yet for which there is no alternative". The Worldwatch Institute too gives the same message, that we have "fewer than ten years to turn things around or civilization as we know it will cease to exist". Looking back in history, it is clear that the great progress in the West has its roots in colonialism, in the philosophy of the 'survival of the fittest', in the arrogant and violent use of power, and in the piracy of wealth and resources. With unlimited control over nature the western man began to play God-and playing God had its own cruel consequences.

When the British came in India, we had a for-

est cover of over 75 million hectares. The forest cover now is less than 20 million hectares!

A study by the World Resources Institute showed that 76 countries have cut all their ancient forests while 11 other countries have less than 5% of their forests left. In USA, more than 90% of their forests have been logged at least once, driving many plants, insects and animal species to extinction. The indigenous culture, as also the Hindu and Buddhist culture, had a belief system and a spirituality that meant an intimate and a sacred relationship with nature. In 1854, when Washington was pressurizing Chief Seattle to sell the Tribes land, he replied in anguish, "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. How do you own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Even part of this Earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people..."

The land, water, air and sea have been transformed from life giving systems into repositories of waste – and if we may add death. The sacred relationship with nature that indigenous societies had has been replaced with a new violence, a new colonialism, and a new barbaric control of nature.

In scientific experiments for the so called benefit of human 65 million animals are killed in US laboratories and 5 million in Britain alone! The scientists claim that the end justifies the means! But Gandhi was not in the favour of violence.

Here is an example of economic benefit, and also of brutality and playing God from Japan. Japan has developed a drift-net technology to catch squid in the high seas. A single net stretches out under water, 50 km wide and 10 km deep. The technology is an indiscriminate killer of every form of life that gets entangled in it. Other countries are following suit, killing millions of sea birds, dolphins, sea turtles and vari-

eties of deep sea fish. The idea of the drift net and the resulting carnage has spread widely. The death toll is astronomical. The UN tried to stop this carnage by passing resolution banning the use of the drift nets- but the resolution has largely been ignored.

The adoption of the western economic and development model globally had meant a certain death of the ecosystems and of the Earth itself. It is imperative that we transform our ways of life so that the earth is saved from man's greed and his murderous ways.

As early as 1971, MIT scientists had examined what was happening to the biosphere, and showed conclusively that the kind of economic growth that was taking place must be halted. Their publication *Limit to Growth* was read and discussed widely. But no meaningful action emerged from this important scientific study. Twenty years later, MIT scientists did another study which showed how things had become worse. They concluded "if the future is to be viable at all it must be one of drawing back, easing down, healing". Unfortunately, the warning signals of the MIT studies as well as other scientific studies that followed have largely been ignored.

Another major scientific study is underway involving the United Nations, UNDP, UNEP, World Resources Institute and the World Bank to study the major eco-systems with the objective of "scoring them in terms of their capacity to continue to deliver the goods and services that support life and human economics". The first phase of this study cost \$4 million and another \$20 million are being invested for further studies as also to answer the question "What is happening to Earth's capacity to support nature and civilization."

In the hope of moving the world towards some agreed action, the United Nation did organize two major World Summits ten years apart, to discuss and to move towards and agenda of ACTION which would lead us to sustainable development. In 1992, Maurice

Strong, organized the first Earth Summit in Rio. It was a great event with leaders from 170 countries or so, as also leaders of multinationals and multilateral agencies, as also NGOs and civil society participated. At the end of the consultations, a global plan of ACTION was agreed upon called Agenda 21. The hope was that with Agenda 21 the world would move closer to ecological security and sustainable development, as also to each other. Unfortunately these hopes remained largely unfulfilled.

Ten years later, the UN organized another World Summit to push the agenda of survival and sustainable development towards action. This World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), also known as Rio+10, attended by 191 governments, inter-government organizations and NGO's, was held in Johannesburg in 2002. It too, unfortunately, had little impact on governments and business for moving towards action for sustainable development. The question those needs to be asked: 'Are more scientific studies more world conferences, the road to ecological security and sustainable' development? What are the prerequisites for desired action? It we are at the cross roads of survival as the scientists have pointed out which road is likely to lead us to action for building a global sustainable world?'

At the beginning of the new millennium when ecological security and the development crisis, as also violence and terrorism have deepened, it is important to listen to the voice of Gandhi. Almost a century ago Gandhi had questioned the very foundations of western civilization, namely, the modern industrial growth centered materialistic and self-centered view of life. He emphasized the ethical and spiritual aspects at the individual as well as the global level. If we wish to protect the Earth and its eco-systems, we will have to change our world view, its paradigm of domination and perpetual growth and focus more on sustainability and spirituality in life. Progress must include, as Gandhi pointed out, social justice, as sense of community, of restrained consumption, a concern

for the poor and a sense of the sacredness and spirituality in life.

The path of Western Civilization was not followed by Gandhi. "The incessant search for material comforts and their multiplication is such an evil that the Europeans themselves will have to remodel their outlook if they are not to perish under the weight of the comforts to which they are becoming slaves. Gandhiji were always in the favour of poor class because he wanted to see no higher and no lower in the country.

If the development paradigm is to change, and it must, and if the world is to survive, we will have to rediscover spirituality within ourselves and in God's creation. This will lead to a renaissance, a rebirth of a new civilization, which will include spirituality and sacredness, and therefore sustainability. Arnold Toynbee, the great historian, had suggested that "most civilization die 200 years before they know they died". The industrial civilization which has dominated our Earth in the last 300 years or so also shows signs of withering, of dying, because of its deep roots in violence over nature as also other nations. Gandhi tried to bring truth, non-violence, and spirituality center stage. 'We have enough for our needs, but not enough for our greed' was his advice about ecology and sustainable development.

I believe Gandhi's answer would have been a concern for the poorest of the poor; in moving towards a simple life style, a life style which ultimately can be shared with everyone; an emphasis on truth and non-violence; and a fearlessness to fight for issues of ecological security and sustainability. Gandhi practiced what he preached. If he was concerned about the 'poorest of the poor' he adopted a lite style which reflected his constituency: "If I appear in my loin cloth it is because I come as the sole representative of those half starved half naked dumb millions." If Gandhi insisted on 'spinning' it was to share the labor of the rural poor, especially of women. If the textile labor

which went on strike under Gandhi's leadership complained of hunger and starvation, Gandhi, himself went on a fast. As per Gandhiji "sit down to eat with an untouchable; give up something start work with the peasants; live in a village; learn to spin and plant a tree".

For moving towards ecological security and sustainable development, it is important to follow Gandhi's advice of learning to change oneself before changing the world, also the importance of 'suffering' oneself to change the heart of one's opponents. The scientists have conclusively shown that is happening to the world and the need to take urgent corrective action.

If we wish to achieve sustainability we must learn to win our opponents as Gandhi did not by reason but by suffering and by reaching the heart of the opponent. As Gandhi explained, "Upto 1906 simply relief on appeal to reason I was a very industrious reformer. I was a good draftsman as I always had a good grasp of facts which in turn was the necessary result of my meticulous regard for truth. But I found that reason failed to produce an impression when the critical moment arrived in South Africa.

Gandhi was a saint-politician. He showed by his simple life style that the road to ecological security and to peace lies in simplicity and in spirituality. And as the Bible also said, "What shall it avail a man if he gains the whole world and lose his soul?" The modern industrial world may have gained power and wealth but seems to have lost its soul in the process.

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