

# **Mahatma Gandhi on Environment and Sustainable Development**

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Much before the idea of Common Future was outlined in the Brundtland Commission Report in 1987 it was Mahatma Gandhi who underlined the critical necessity of sustainability by interrogating modern civilization based on multiplication of wants and desires. Through his book "The Hind Swaraj" he outlined the threat to common future of humanity caused by relentless quest for more material goods and services. He described the civilization driven by endless multiplication of wants as Satanic and defined civilization in terms of performance of duties, adherence to morality and exercise of restraint. Any approach which puts limitations on passion and greed and which aims at fulfilling the fundamental needs remain central to the concept and practice of sustainable development. In this sense his book Hind Swaraj became a manifesto of sustainable development. It prophetically stated that modern urban industrial civilization contained in itself its own seeds of destruction.

## **Gandhi on Air Pollution**

Tackling air pollution by adopting suitable remedial measures is one of the essential aspects of sustainability and sustainable development. It is educative to note that Mahatma Gandhi while spearheading the first Satyagraha in South Africa in 1913 observed that in modern civilisation access to clean air involved some cost and expenses. In his illuminating write up "Key to Health" which had a separate chapter on Air he observed that the structure of the body needed three kinds of nourishment: air, water and food and of these air constituted the most essential aspect. Stating that "Nature has provided it to such extent that we can have it at no cost" he noted with anguish "But modern civilization has put a price even on air. In these times, one has to go off to distant places to take the air, and this costs money ". On 1st January 1918, hundred years back, he while addressing a meeting in Ahmedabad defined independence of India in terms of three elements- Air, Water and Grain. What he did in 1918 is being done by law courts to explain right to life in terms of right to clean air and water and adequate food. Yet again in late 1930s he defined democracy in terms of access of all citizens to pure air and water. All such understanding of Gandhi on air more than hundred years back and his contextualisation of clean air by referring to modern civilisation, independence of India and democracy make his ideas so contemporary for twenty first century world grappling to uphold sustainability wholly, substantially and in full measure.

## **Remodeling the outlook for leading a sustainable life**

There are many statements of Mahatma Gandhi which can be quoted to substantiate his worldview on sustainable development. One particular statement he made in the context of Europeans is of abiding relevance for the whole mankind. He wrote in 1931:

"The incessant search for material comfort and their multiplication is such an evil and I make bold to say 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."

In fact the Europeans are gradually listening to the ringing words of Mahatma Gandhi. It is evident from the approach of some British citizens who have taken measures to simplify life so as to reduce their dependence on energy and resources. They have established a zero-energy (fossil) development system which enables them to run a housing society in London. At the entrance of the Society there is a line written which reads as follows:

“If everyone on the planet consumed as much as the average person in the U.K. we would need three planets to support us.”

These words recapture thoughts of Gandhiji who eight decades back wrote that if India followed the western model of development she would require more than one planet to achieve the progress they had attained.

The residents of the Housing Society in no way belong to the movements launched to protect climate and environment. They pursue diverse professions and services and are a part of the vibrant middle class. What distinguishes them is their remodeled outlook which eschew excessive consumption and production and follow in practice the methods of simple living. They have resolved not to eat food which come from distant places. They are convinced that when items are transported from long distances a lot of energy is used for transporting, preserving and packing them. The growing consciousness that dependence on food from far off places would lead to excessive use of energy which in turn would lead to emission of more carbon dioxide and green house gases persuades them to use resources available within a few kilometers.

The Nicolas Stern Committee Report from the U.K. on Economics of Climate Change stressed on reduction of green house gas emissions by remodeling life style and by transiting from a carbon economy to a non-carbon economy.

He wrote on numerous occasions that failure on the part of human beings to satisfy their material needs by using resources available within fifteen or twenty kilometers would disturb the economy of nature. His usage of the phrase Swadeshi and coining the phrase “economy of nature” in 1911 brings out his sensitivity and deeper understanding of human action vis-à-vis ecology.

### **Danger of Industrialism**

In 1928 he cautioned that pursuit of industrialism in the pattern of western countries would spell danger to the humanity and planet earth. His ringing words, “God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the west. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom, England is keeping today the world in chains. If the entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world like bare locusts” sound so contemporary.

### **Right of common people over resources**

We are familiar with his historic Dandi March of 1930. It asserted the right of common people over natural resources of which salt is the most basic and primary one. The British empire thrived in monopolizing resources and depriving their legitimate owners access to them. Denial of access of common people to the basic resources is part of a strategy for unsustainable development. Mahatma Gandhi by breaking the salt law and asserting the

rights of ordinary people to make salt was empowering the common people which is central to the issue of sustainable development.

After Dandi March was over, he outlined its larger goal by stating that the aim of the March went beyond the independence of India and encompassed in its scope the much broader objective of freeing the world from the monstrous greed of materialism. It was a powerful statement which in combination with his criticism of the greed based modern civilization made Mahatma Gandhi one of the greatest exponents and practitioners of sustainable development.

Creatively interpreting non-violence and non-violent mass action in its broadest sense he stressed, among other things, on communal harmony, economic equality, eradication of untouchability, progressive amelioration of the toiling people, social enfranchisement of women, free and compulsory primary education and overhauling of the system of higher education so as to meet the requirements of the ordinary people instead of the middle class. It is striking to note that most of these issues form integral part of Agenda-21 of the Rio Summit and the Sustainable Development Goals which gave a blue print for sustainable development.

### **Gandhi cautioned against too many cars**

One of the defining features of modern civilisation is proliferation of cars and air planes to make communication easier for enhancing mobility. Joseph Stiglitz in his book 'Making Globalisation Work' has written that while 80% of the global warming is caused by hydrocarbons and 20% is caused by deforestation. The threat posed by growing number of cars to environment is well known.

When in 1938 he was told that the then President of America wanted each citizen of his country to possess two cars and two radio sets Mahatma Gandhi reacted by saying that if every Indian family would possess a car there would be lack of space on road to walk. Adding further he stated that in his vision of Indian society possession of a car would not be considered a meritorious thing.

Again during the Dandi March when some people brought oranges in a motorized transport he disapproved of it and said, "The rule should be avoid the car if you can walk." There are many European countries where congestion tax is imposed for cars to enter certain key areas to keep them free from vehicular pollution. There are several other countries in Europe which are adopting a car less day. The adoption of odd even formula to reduce the number of cars on roads testify to the realization of the problems caused by too many cars to our environment. The demerit of possessing too many cars spoken by Mahatma Gandhi are now being realized with added poignancy.

### **Gandhi on Rain water Harvesting and Afforestation for water Security**

In the context of water scarcity and water famines in the world it is important to recall Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on water.

During our struggle for independence he referred to the water famine occurring in the Kathiawar region of Gujarat ruled by many princes. To address the issue of acute shortage of water he advised all the princely States to form a confederation and take long term

measures for planting trees in vast tracts of land. He opined that afforestation on a large scale constituted the most effective step to face the water crisis. The twenty-first century world need to follow his words with utmost seriousness. The British rulers who treated forests as a source of revenue hardly understood their relevance from the point of view of ecology and sustainable development.

Gandhiji also stressed on rain water harvesting. While speaking in a prayer meeting in Delhi in 1947 he advocated for harvesting rain water and using it for irrigational purposes to avoid famines and food shortages. The M.S. Swaminathan Commission for Farmers in its report submitted in 2006 recommended to harvest rain water for addressing the problem of irrigation affecting our farmers.

### **Green Party in Germany owes its origin to Gandhi's ideas**

Establishment of Green Party in Germany owes to the vision of Mahatma Gandhi. One of the founders of Green Party Ms. Petra Kelly admirably summed up the impact of Mahatma Gandhi in forming the party when she wrote the following:

In particular area of our work we have been greatly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. That is in our belief that a life style and method of production which rely on endless supply of raw materials and which use those raw materials lavishly, also provide motive force for violent appropriation of raw materials from other countries. In contrast a responsible use of raw materials as part of an ecologically oriented life style and economy reduces the risk that policies of violence will pursue.

### **Non-violence and simple life style can save the planet**

A book "Surviving the Century: Facing Climate Chaos" edited by Professor Herbert Girardet and brought out by the World Future Council talks about four normative principles - non-violence, sustainability, respect and justice- to survive the century and save planet earth. All those aspects remained central to Mahatma Gandhi's life and work. There is slow but sure realization that by following Gandhiji's ideals we can survive the century.

The Time Magazine in its 9th April 2007 issue came out with 51 Global Warming Survival Guides. The 51st Guide earnestly suggests to share more, consume less and simplify life. In other words the Time Magazine, one of the mouth pieces of the western world, is turning to Mahatma Gandhi to save the world from the danger of extinction caused by global warming. It is a measure of Mahatma Gandhi's enduring and deeper significance in the context of attempts to protect the planet earth. It is therefore indispensable to rediscover his writings and comprehend them to further the cause of sustainable development.