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Civic engagement, environmental concerns and Gandhi

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Abstract

The vision and thought of Gandhi has been drawing the attention of philosophers of the entire world not only because of its inherent values but because he himself was a preacher, practitioner and a live example of simplicity. Gandhi has always been a critique of modern civilization which is sine-quo-none with the western civilization. Materialism and consumerism of today are the gifts of industrialization and capitalism. The pace of industrialization have given birth to many associated problems of urbanization, pollution and many more. Environmentalism is the idea to strengthen the relationship between human beings and entire eco-system. Modern environmentalism as we know it today is also a realization of the west. Gandhi has put forward the vision of an alternative society in Hind Swaraj written in 1909. The need of the hour is to practice 'civic environmentalism'. It means training the citizens to respect nature, minimizing needs and promoting green culture. Indian customs and traditions have had enough scope for environmental concerns and in fact they are part and parcel of it. Gandhism holds the key not only for environmental concerns but for all the problems of the world.

Keywords: Environment, civic engagement, modernization, development, industrialization, swaraj, self-rule, khadi etc.

Introductions

The vision and thought of Gandhi has been drawing the attention of philosophers of the entire world not only because of its inherent values but because he himself was a preacher, practice nor and a live example of simplicity. His thoughts have become more relevant today, in fact, in all walks of life because of growing concerns for environment. He has deducted the best from all the major religious beliefs and set a live example for the modern civilization. Gandhi has always been a critique of modern civilization which is sine-quo-none with the western civilization. The paradigms of development are flowing from west to rest. The issues and challenges being faced by the modern civilization or society of today are largely because of rapid industrialization and capitalist model of growth. The bye product of these can be seen as an irreparable damage to our mother earth. The concern about environment has drawn our attention in the light of modernization and globalization. Some damages which was limited to the western world, has become a matter of concern for the entire civilization now. Gandhi has lived his life like an environmentalist because he has always advocated for optimum use of resources, minimizing the needs and recycling the used products as far as possible. "During the last five decades, after Gandhiji's assassination in 1948, there has been an ever-widening circle of environmental concerns and strategies, starting with conservation of the big cats and ending with ethics of resource use and everything in between. The earth is regarded as the Universal Mother (Dharti Mata or Greek Gaia) which harbours her "brood" of a very large family of living organisms (Vasudhaiva-kutumbakam). Humankind is only one out of millions of species described so far. Being a thinking species, it is no doubt different from others" [1]. The environmentalist draw clues from his thought system although environmental issues were not a matter of concern in the contemporary period of Gandhi. The generations of tomorrow must prepare themselves for the worst if they do not follow the ideals set by the tallest man of his time on earth - Mahatma Gandhi. Environmentalism does not begin with him but flows from him. His ideals in this regard is valid not only for India but for the entire civilization. This article seeks to explore the possibilities to get rid of environmental problems through civic engagement on the line suggested by Gandhi.

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Industrialization, Capitalism and Co-lateral Damage

Materialism and consumerism of today are the gifts of industrialization and capitalism. On the one hand they have modernized the societies but at the same time co-lateral damage to environment is also done. The major environmental concerns of today are caused by rapid industrialization. Gandhi is not opposed to it rather he is against heavy industries. Gandhi's views on mechanization and industrialization need to be understood in the context of his views on ways of life. The pace of industrialization have given birth to many associated problems of urbanization, pollution and many more. More and more people are heading towards urban centers looking for a better economic prosperity. Job market is available only in large urban centers. Villages have lost the capacity to feed generations and make their life easy and happy. Owning land even in good amount has become meaningless in the capitalist world. Agriculture can yield food grains but cannot generate enough cash which is needed for pursuing a life of luxury. The life of a villager is the life of simplicity. Gandhi always practiced that simple life and asked the present and coming generations to follow the same. His thought already issued a warning long back. "Industrialism is, I am afraid, going to be a curse for mankind. Exploitation of one nation by another cannot go on for all time. Industrialism depends entirely on your capacity to exploit, on foreign markets being open to you, and on the absence of competitors" [2]. The capitalist growth associated with industrialization has an inherent tendency of exploitation. It starts looking for market beyond the boundary of the practicing nation. It has facilitated colonization and exploitation. "The revival of the village is possible only when it is no more exploited. Industrialization on a mass scale will necessarily lead to passive or active exploitation of the villagers as the problems of competition and marketing come in. Therefore we have to concentrate on the village being self-contained, manufacturing mainly for use. Provided this character of the village industry is maintained, there would be no objection to villagers using even the modern machines and tools that they can make and can afford to use. Only, they should not be used as a means of exploitations of others" [3]. The urban centers have the potential of employment generation and it has led to massive urbanization. The high rate of population growth has also contributed in it.

Liberalization, Globalization and Privatization started from the western world and reached to India also in early 1990s. The world celebrates these ideas in the name of global village, better connectivity and near equal partner in the sphere of development but in reality it is the major cause of concern today. Development cannot be stopped or curtailed but the damaging after effects may be curtailed. Gandhi's vision stands for this only. "He was opposed to following Western industrialism blindly because of the associated environmental, social and economic problems. The principal reason was that such industrialism is based on an assumption that resources are unlimited which is actually not the case. The biosphere does not have unlimited capacity to bear the eco-degradation resulting from unsustainable development. While our planet's resources do not grow, population and wants grow exponentially. This means that there cannot be unlimited and infinite growth and development with limited and finite resources. He was not averse to industrialism per se as long as it was not

resource- and energy-intensive and did not displace small cottage industry and labour" [4].

The capitalist society of west have given rise to consumerism. Goods are produced first and then the marketing strategies are designed to make people use and become addictive of these products. The scientific innovations declare one product useful today and speaks about the negative repercussions on our life on the other day. It is done not keeping in view human welfare but as a part of marketing strategy to get the next product in line consumed. It is because of unplanned scientific research, innovations and profit making instincts. Gandhi does not speak about environment or its protection but it is inherent in his belief system. "But one should also see that Gandhi's criticism of industrialization and modernity was not predominantly from an environmentalist perspective. He profusely takes insights from many 18th and 19th century Western thinkers like, Tolstoy, Thoreau and Ruskin, in order to develop his position. They too have criticized industrialization and some of the basic assumptions of modern society. But their oppositions were not necessarily confined to the perspective of an environmentalist. Instead, many of them raised strong concerns which were rooted in their ethical, moral, religious and spiritual positions" [5]. Development and revival of ethic norms and high moral standards are necessary to limit the damages done to environment.

Western Environmentalism

Environmentalism is the idea to strengthen the relationship between human beings and entire eco-system. Nature has provided enough for all the living species of earth. The care for environment has always been there in every culture and tradition devised by human beings. The ancient communities lived a simple life and natural balance was least disturbed. Gradually with the pace of 'development' human activities started damaging the natural balance and ecology. The historical practices which always respected nature kept on changing with the change in human habits and civilized life style. The devastating effects of western civilization on environment once started, reached to the entire globe. Since the damage started because of the western outlook and capitalism, the concerns for environment were also realized by them first in modern period. In case of India, it was very much there in all the customs and traditions practiced since ages. Eco-friendly products were used by communities and it was very easy to recycle them. Western technology and modernization paved the way for their gradual replacement.

Modern environmentalism as we know it today is also a realization of the west. "What we know of environmentalism today is "western environmentalism," which started out as a response to reduce or fix human actions that exploited the Earth's resources. We must acknowledge the fact that colonization of Native lands all over the planet introduced destruction and exploitation of the environment. Colonization rejected the balanced practices of the people who knew the land and who respected everything it had to offer" [6]. The life of Gandhi is an example of living with nature. When the society learns to live with nature, there is no need to worry about environmentalism. The damage to environment is already minimum in the life style of village people because they live with nature and do the least harm to nature.

Alternative Society

Gandhi has put forward the vision of an alternative society in *Hind Swaraj* written in 1909. There is no replacement of human beings but their life style and behaviour may be changed. "Hind Swaraj is the most seminal work of Mahatma Gandhi and the most original contribution to political theory after Kautilya's Arthashastra. It is an alternative to feudalism, Marxism and western style democracy based on majority-ism. It is key to understanding Gandhi's life and philosophy; and to get over the present dilemma-growth without development" [7]. The new definition of Swaraj is about transforming the inner-self of human beings. The change of external cover does not affect the inner soul. Change means changing the soul. "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" [8]. Capitalism appears as an only viable alternative today if any nation wants to compete with other nations. It is also necessary for them to borrow technology from the so called advanced or developed nations because they cannot develop them due to the fact that they neither have resources nor infrastructure nor institutions. The situation is almost same for all the developing countries of third world. The key for survival is being seen in materialistic growth and industrialization but in the long run it has produced end number of worries. "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" [9]. It is for this reason that Gandhi, as a visionary, advocated about revival of village industries and cottage industry. The modern society may have an answer in Gandhi as he strongly supports for an alternative society.

Live with Nature

We live in nature and we should learn to respect nature. The gifts of nature must be available to everybody in the entire eco-system. The human beings, plants, other living animals and species all have a share in nature's property. Even a single encroachment over the rights of other is a violation of natural principle of justice. The raw materials for industrial growth and human consumption is available to us only because of mother earth. The resources are lying beneath the earth and above the earth also. The respect for them is necessary. Unplanned and overuse of resources have caused environmental issues for us. 'Care and Share' is the only mantra to save the natural resources as well as the natural environment. The human society have to minimize their needs as practiced by Gandhi. Natural resources and environment do not have a language like human beings or animals. They cannot voice their concerns but they are for our consumption only. The human civilization have to learn to listen to their silent voice and cry. 'Preserve or perish' have become the central theme for the preservation of human civilization. "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" [10]. The emphasis on self-reliance by Gandhi can be seen as an attempt to draw minimum from nature and live with least. Gandhi has shown to the world that it is possible to live with minimum and live happily. Our fore fathers had limited resources and they were happier in the sense that the points of disturbances were less for them. They always practiced to live with nature.

Civic Environmentalism

The human civilization has reached to a stage that it is very difficult to go back to nature for the entire civilization. The need of the hour is to practice 'civic environmentalism'. It means training the citizens to respect nature, minimizing needs and promoting green culture. The emphasis is already being given on 'Green Technology' for every industrial product. Stringent rules cannot enforce or inculcate respect and love for nature. It can only be realized through imparting training and self-love. Civic environmentalism demands that the along with self-love and sympathy human beings must learn and develop civic virtues that may create love for nature. The elements of selfishness has to be replaced with love for nature. Everything cannot be achieved by rule books only but as the constitution provides rights and duties, it must pave way for natural living. If military training can be compulsory (not in India) in states then why not it may be mandatory to live with nature for few weeks in every year. It may solve the issue of missing love for nature.

The state attempts to inculcate civic virtues among citizens. The family attempts to inculcate love and respect for family values and traditions. The nation must attempt to generate respect for civic environmentalism. People's participation at mass level is a must to achieve the goal of save environment. Civic engagement of communities is a must to achieve the stated targets. The research and scientific developments must be re-oriented to make the techniques nature friendly. The idea and concept of sustainable development eyes towards it only. When non-availability of those products who may damage the mother earth is ensured, half of the work is already done and rest can be achieved through civic engagement. The Gandhi an philosophy becomes more important in the context of sustainable growth and development which is the only way out in the present scenario. He focused on production by the masses instead of mass production.

Gandhi's philosophy of voluntary simplicity, non-violence, innate circle, trusteeship, need and greed, respect for entire eco-system, natural resources etc. stand for environmental concerns. He always wanted the revival of Khadi and in turn strengthening the rural economy. He was opposed to the kind of western industrialization and opposed British industries in India. The alternative provided by him was revival of cottage industry and handicrafts of India. He lost connect with nature and always lived with it. If the temptation of the then national leaders towards foreign goods and clothes could be restrained then it is very much

possible for the generation of today. Technique and technology should be there to help us and we must not become a helpless victim in front of them. We must not surrender our liberty and independence to them. It is possible with Self-rule and Swaraj in the language of Gandhi.

The misdeeds of capitalism is in front of us and we are bound to bear the impact. The growing environmental concerns are conforming the view that the generations have to struggle to save the mother earth. The damage is already done but still if we become aware and conscious about protection of environment, the future is not dismal. Nature has its own language and corrective methods. If we do not awake on time, we are bound to face the consequences. The one and only way to achieve the goal of sustainable development and protection of environment is to love and respect nature. The Supreme Court of India has stated in a landmark judgment that if trees would have voting rights, they could have secured their future. The court wanted to point out that we were not concerned about nature but for votes. The need of the hour is that the political parties of the country must prioritized the issue of environment. There is no need of a movement or compelling ideas for it. The love for nature must come from within. Indian customs and traditions have had enough scope for environmental concerns and in fact they are part and parcel of it. We are deviating from them because we are adopting western life style more and more. Gandhism holds the key not only for environmental concerns but for all the problems of the world. Change in behavioral pattern is must rather than creating infrastructure only. Building houses, roads, modern transport facilities are necessary but at the same time it is also important to learn to live with nature as Gandhi did once he learnt them.

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