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## **GANDHI THE ENVIRONMENTALIST: AN ECOCRITICAL REVIEW**

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**ABSTRACT:** Mahatma Gandhi is known internationally for his doctrine of non violence. He is famous for his simplicity and deep concerns for environment besides leading people of India to achieve political freedom through peaceful means. He proposed a model of non-exploitive economic system which would ensure sustainable development in true sense and protection of environment. Gandhi's environmental concerns are embedded in his criticism of modern civilization. He presents holistic notion of human beings to emphasize the spiritual aspect. He tries to set optimal limits to the use of machines. He examines the place of nature in culture. He considers the centralized structures of governance by a few people and industrialization as threat to environment. He puts rationality of human beings on test on ethical criteria. He prefers village ideology over cities. He is a practical idealist who presents philosophical analysis of politico-economic structure at macro level and practical solutions to save environment at micro level. He stresses more on minimizing waste generation than waste management later. He wants to inculcate a sense of responsibility in young ones through education system for protection and replenishment of the environment.

**KEYWORDS:** Environment, Ideology, localization, degradation.

### **I. INTRODUCTION:**

Mahatma Gandhi is one of the most internationally acclaimed personalities of 20<sup>th</sup> century. He put forward the doctrine of nonviolence as an alternative to the war's huge pestilence. He made the Indians realise their worth as human beings. He led people of India to achieve political freedom through peaceful means. He was social reformist who hardly left any aspect of society untouched. He strived for eradication of untouchability, women emancipation, health, sanitation etc. He visualized a egalitarian society which is pillared on morality and justice. He was advocate of universal brotherhood transcending religion, race or colour. Gandhi's thoughts and methods are relevant in present era of weapon proliferated world for conflict resolution. He proposed a model of non-exploitive economic system which would ensure sustainable development in true sense and protection of environment. We live in era of suffocating pollution and contamination. There is electromagnetic intrusion in environment whose invisible dangers are not seen with naked eyes but prolonged ill effects include diseases like cancer and other health hazards. We become concerned with environment when its degradation starts affecting us directly. Gandhi's environmental concerns are embedded in his criticism of modern civilization. He is a practical idealist who presents philosophical analysis of politico-economic structure at macro level on one hand and practical solutions to save environment at micro level.

Gandhi's conception of human being is holistic. He takes into count the spiritual aspect of human beings besides a physical entity and a rational being. Gandhi does not agree with the notion of development of human beings based on material progress. The material progress is meaningless if it leads to spiritual degradation. Gandhi connects this degradation further to the modern civilization. Gandhi gives importance to the welfare of all people than comfort and luxury. He says that materialistic culture is arch enemy of human soul. The proliferation of technology in most of the spheres of life has rendered many people jobless. The condition of workers in the factories is pathetic. They and their families live in ghettos in unhygienic conditions. This not only spoils their health but also defiles their souls. Gandhi's criticism of technology is also on this basis. He says that the technology that helps in development of soul can be accommodated in life. The technology is to be discarded which degrades inner core of our soul or spirituality. Gandhi's philosophy of life provisions for survival of human race in the long run although he appears retrogressive to some people. He makes us to ponder over ethical questions. He evolves new criteria to evaluate the different civilizations. He visualizes ill effects of unethical material progress in long term. Gandhi challenges the western notion of community development, which gives importance to comfort and luxury. He puts stress on holistic development. The spiritual development takes priority over material progress. He is proponent of making the native culture and social setup as basis of community development rather than blindly following the western model.

Gandhi presents alternative view point about modern civilization. He describes that the modern civilization is really identified with the technological inventions which provide us with physical comforts. Their significance is in providing us the facilities and luxuries. He takes example of Europe. These people live in better houses than they used to live hundred years before. Their clothes are better. Now they use modern personal weapons. These modern would consider the people who even have not started to wear shoes as backwards even if the later are spiritually advanced.

Earlier people used to cultivate a small land with basic tools. Now with the steam engine a single person can cultivate a large chunk of land and he can accumulate a lot of money. This is considered as the symbol of civilization. Earlier only few people used to write books. Now with the proliferation of printing technology now any person can write whatever he wants. Anyone can now delude others through his writings. The development of mode of transports like railways now enables us to travel more than ten times faster than that of bullock cart. We can even travel to any part of world by air in few hours. This habitual use of technology renders us not to use our body limbs. There would not be any labour and our limbs would become limp which would invite many life style disease. Gandhi here raises two fundamental questions. How technology affects the masses? The other question is what it does to our health. Today thousands of people can be killed by an explosive bomb. Earlier people used to work in healthy air. Now thousands of workers work in huge factories in small space. Their life and health is put on risk. Many of them are treated even worse than animals. These working conditions have been increasing patients. Earlier people were made slave by brute force, now people are made slave through temptation of money and bodily comfort. New diseases are coming up exponentially. Doctors and scientists are trying to search the medical remedy for these diseases. This has resulted in increase of hospitals. Earlier people used to eat only two or three times a day. Now people eat something every two hours. Now people don't have proper break between eating. Consuming things is considered as the symbol of civilization. New eatables are invented and eating habits are changing to increase life style disease. Doctors take up new researches to find ways to these diseases which is considered as progress.

The modern civilization is not good for humanity in the long run. Some western thinkers also criticize this kind of civilization. They prove by relevant examples that this world has been smitten by civilization. The people who are struck in infatuation of this civilization would not be able to write against it. They would instead advance logics to defend this civilization. Many of them do this in good faith. Whatever they write they think that it is right. It is like a dream which one considers a reality. When they realize that it was only a mirage, it is too late. Some of them are not even consciously aware that they are stuck in the illusive attachment of this civilization. We read what the people who advocate the modern civilization write. These people are gentle and intelligent. Their writings mesmerize us to look for drawbacks of this civilization. So a person after person is stuck in the labyrinth of civilization.

#### **System of Governance and Environment**

Gandhi criticizes the parliamentary system of governance in England which nourishes industrialization and capitalism. This in turn leads to exploitation of men and nature for profit. He calls parliament as a toy for public and puppet in the hand of council of ministers. It does not act on its own for the welfare of general public. It does only limited things for people reluctantly due to pressure. The public bears a lot of expenditure to maintain this figurative toy. Prime minister rarely cares for parliament but remains intoxicated by power. He is concerned mainly for his party's win in forthcoming elections. The voters are swayed by the opinions presented through newspapers. Their thoughts keep dwindling. They are not able to sit and contemplate peacefully. The person who can entice these people with his dominating personality and influential speech can get their votes. So the English parliamentary system is not worth to be followed. Gandhi warns India would be ruined if its people copy the English model of governance. The system of governance has indirect bearing on environment. In 20<sup>th</sup> century the world has seen devastation caused by two world wars and huge industrial disasters which took lives of millions of people. In present times we experience low air quality in most parts of Northern India. In the name of progress we are compromising with our health.

#### **Criticism of Technology and Machines**

Gandhi's criticism of technology is sometimes called lope sided and unwarranted. This criticism is bitter and incisive but it surely brings forward the darker side of technology along with its benefits for humanity. Technology helps a special class of people to accumulate wealth and exploit other people. The machines are helping this class to dominate the majority. The machines and inventions should not be used as means to feed the greed for money. The role of machines should be to save workers from over exertion. It is sometimes wrongly propagated that Gandhi was anachronistic about industrialization. He was not against the mechanisation of industries. He was against schizophrenia for the machines. He endorses refinement and invention of small equipments and tools which make life of millions of craftsmen and general people easy. He supports the inventions which save time and efforts. He contravenes the use of machines for mass production which would render millions of people unemployed. Gandhi was in favour of saving labour and time for the

Gandhi analyses the place of nature in the culture especially in religious literature and philosophy. He concludes that rationality has done more harm to the nature than old superstitions. The western thought recognizes man as the master of other animals and nature. The land is to be used for production. In Indian culture land is considered equal to mother and not to be defiled. Gandhi includes the concept of community cleanliness to the existing individual cleanliness. He considers all the living creatures are made by God. He brings the principle of non-violence to the fore to save nature. He criticized present Indian thought which is greatly influenced by western ideas. He accepts that superstition may not suit the rational beings but he condemns misuse of rationality for selfish motives. These rational people defile nature for petty selfish objectives by giving shallow logics. He thinks it is sin to kill thousands of animals for clinical trials. He staunchly supports vegetarianism to stop killing of animals for food. There is no harm in taking produce of ripe plants at the end of crop season.

Gandhi draws similarity in nature and human body. He critically examines the role of present day doctors as they defile the body by unnecessary medicinal interventions. The aim should be to prevent illness than giving medicine. The doctor's primary objective must be to diagnosis the illness and to communicate its causes to the patient. He should suggest methods by which a patient can change his diet and cure himself. He should not make a person dependent on medicines. The doctor should prepare medicine for those type of illness which otherwise could not be cured. The doctor should find the ways so that illness does not occur. He should not give medicine for lifestyle diseases or to which human body can cure itself in due course of time. Similarly we should give time to nature to let it recuperate itself. He criticizes the modern civilization which wrongly inspires people to enjoy comforts and luxury. No knowledge is imparted about the harm is done to nature in producing these.

#### **Need for Right Education and Role Models**

The next generation is prepared for future through the education system and social environment. What we teach in schools and a child observes in environment is reflected in our daily life. Children barely understand the value of cleanliness if we do not practice. Every teaching becomes a ritual when there is difference between preaching and practice. Children follow the adults. Individual cleanliness gains more importance than community cleanliness. Gandhi stresses on holistic development of child. He gives importance to physical development along with cognitive development. He focuses on social development with cultural development. He considers schools as places to build moral values and character. Life skills and practice of manual labour are essence of life. Spiritual development must be integral part of education. True education not only teaches a person how to make livelihood but also prepare to take on social responsibilities.

#### **Localization against Globalization**

Gandhi puts forward localization in place of globalization. He criticizes capitalist economic system. He provides with alternative economic system by reviving cottage industry. He chooses to popularize spinning wheel as a multi faceted tool of self sufficiency. This gives work to people who are idle for about four months in a year. This reduces need for migration. The spinning wheel also increases income also. He says that spinning wheel can also be used to control ones senses which eventually help in spiritual development. The local production would meet the needs of people. The cost of transportation would be minimized. It would also minimize the pollution which is produced due to transportation. The local produce would be exchanged mostly within village hence there would not be need for unnecessary packaging. In present era a packaging material forms a major part of garbage. Simple things cannot attract people now a days, it does not matter how better they are. People are infatuated with big brands. It has become trend to grandiose things. Environment is no exception. When we have a big problem in front of us we think of big solutions. There is also need to think about the micro causes of the problem and then micro solutions can also be applied. Instead of waste management the focus could be to minimize waste generation.

#### **Micro Approach of Waste Management**

Gandhi provides us with practical methods of disposal of waste. The simple methods can keep our house hold, streets and village clean. Gandhi is precursor in evaluating a society on the basis of per capita waste generation. He gives scientific methods to convert rubbish and excreta into manure. Gandhi gives importance to proper hygiene. Gandhi gives suggestions to work at small scale. He suggests methods of prevention of spread of disease, stop depletion of environment with increasing income. He warns against the use of heavy machinery like tractor and chemical fertilizers for farming. Chemical fertilizers kill various micro organisms which help to maintain organic health of the soil. In long run these fertilizers reduce fertility of soil also they can even make a piece of land barren. These fertilizers are not only harmful for nature but also for health of human beings. Today we are again demanding organic food.

Gandhi gives importance to community hygiene and cleanliness along with personal hygiene. Most of people think that they do not have responsibility towards common things of community or government. They

whole of humanity instead of a class of people to accumulate the capital. The motive behind this is not to save labour but greed for money. This industrialization leads to the exploitation of millions by few people. He wanted to decentralize this accumulation of capital to the masses. Gandhi was not opposed to technology but its misuse against humanity. The invention and science should not be aimed for wealth generation but for the service of humanity. Then a labourer would not have to work more than his physical capacity. The machines then would assist workers rather than becoming an impediment. The aim of his criticism was not to leave or destroy the machines but to set the limitation so that no harm is done to humanity as a whole. Welfare of humanity must be the central to all material progress.

Gandhi proscribes the machines which make limbs of human body inactive and useless. He advocates one hour manual labour for every person to keep body fit and control senses. Overuse of machines is evident in present day life style diseases. Gandhi gives criteria to categorize the machines into useful and unwanted. He welcomes the sewing machine invented by Singer as it helped her wife to relieve from weariness of back stitching. The motivation of this invention was Singer's love for his wife and to save her from unnecessary toil. This invention helped not only her wife but all the women who needed and could afford it. There is requirement of heavy industries to manufacture sewing machine on large scale. These heavy industries must be nationalized and have control of public over them. Gandhi supports the innovations which improve conditions of workers. The mad race for more money must stop. The workers should not only get good employment but there should be regularity and job security. The profit should be divided equally between the government and the workers. Gandhi takes these types of industries as exception. There must essentially empathy and love behind innovation which would make life easier there should not be motive of profit making. Gandhi says that any innovation should be helpful in development of soul. Its application must be limited to the extent it helps in this aim.

Gandhi blames transport system for ecological imbalance. He gives argument that railway is the cause for spreading of many contagious diseases. In absence of railway these can't be spread to other places. The main cause of famine is also railway. People sell most of their agrarian produce for higher prices in because the produce can be transported by the railway and resold at better prices. Railway spread vice and immorality. Bad people can easily go and defile our sacred places. Gandhi here criticises the speed. Doctor also gives medicine for speedily recovery from the ailments which our body can recover in course of time. This type of medical intervention by the doctor weakens our soul.

#### **Choosing Village Ideology over Cities**

Gandhi tells us that the cities are the centre of vice and live on blood of villagers. Today these cities are mega centers of pollution affecting even peripheral areas. Gandhi focuses on village self rule. He wanted to decentralize the facilities like health and education. His vision for village was that it should be self dependent entity. This localizing of producing things can greatly reduce need for transportation of things. He was against big industries because a lot of pollutants are released into air, water and soil. These pollutants contaminate the environment and residual effects may be there for years or even for centuries. Gandhi teaches us lesson of conservation. Today we are worried about depleting non renewable resources. Gandhi wants the ideology of village to prosper if the nature is to be restored in its healthy condition. Gandhi says that the real India lies in the hearts of villages. He differentiates between ideology of village and city. He prefers village ideology. He opposes centralization of power. He presents model of village self rule. He wants to develop village as organic units which are not dependent on the central structure. These villages would be self dependent in their survival. All though these villages may become cohesive units but their self rule would be supreme. Gandhi here borrows from Thoreau that good government is that which governs the least. The western notion of development and modern civilization to Gandhi is like a flute player taking all the rats to be drowned in sea. The models of development for villages would be indigenous and not blindly following western culture. The villages would be self sufficient to look after the environment.

#### **Mass Production and Marketing**

He warns us industrial system and its probable spread in future. This system looks for new markets for sale of merchandize and also for sources raw material. Profit making is the main motto of this system. In present day also we see that needs are created through advertisement and marketing. Gandhi says that if things which are needed daily produced at local level then there would not be any resource wastage. There would not be any pollution from cottage industry like big factories. Today we see that middle class people are annoyed with excess of things. Gandhi forces us to think that everything produced in factory has produced some pollution. We are forced to throw excess items which we have purchased in fit of desire. The garbage produced in cleaning at Deewali and other festivals testifies this. Today's concept of minimalism has its roots in Gandhian thoughts. If we have control over our senses and buy what is needed we are helping in saving environment.

#### **Representation of Nature in Culture**

*for*

use governmental things as if they belong to someone else or to an enemy. This attitude further is applied to nature. Gandhi advocates involvement of maximum people in governance at local level. This develops a sense of belongingness to the resources of community and ultimately to their environment and nature. Gandhi preferred small projects over big projects. For example big dams displace a large population. Big dams also render a large portion of land unnecessarily engaged. The cost of building them is also high. These big projects create ecological imbalance. Their overflowing and damage can affect large population.

## II. CONCLUSION

Environmental degradation today has become a potential threat which may challenge survival of human beings on this earth. There are big announcement of funds chunked out of budget for improving environment. The plans are charted out for awareness of people about environment. The crux of problem lies in that we have dearth of role models who first practice and teach us conserving the environment. Every one focuses on spreading awareness but only a few want to act. People are not ready to do even the small things which can be easily done. Gandhi considers it paramount to inculcate good habits which would go in long way in saving environment. Gandhi points out the shortcomings of modern civilization which cause harm to nature and human soul. Some critics call Gandhi's critique of machines is unreasonable and unwarranted. The other charge is sometimes Gandhi's language is offensive and derogatory. His thoughts appears primitive and backward to some people. Gandhi proves to be farsighted to visualize the problems the mankind is facing or would face in future. The recent spread of Covid-19 worldwide and collapse of economies exposes the weaknesses of modern civilization. Gandhi reaches up to the root cause of the problem then puts forward practical solutions. The Gandhian model may look anachronistic but ensures long term survival of human being. Human beings must cohabitate with other species on this earth without being the master of the nature.

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