

Gandhi as a Human Ecologist

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ABSTRACT This paper looks at the claim that Gandhi is a human ecologist. After briefly stating the main elements of human ecology, the paper delineates the major influences, both Eastern and Western, on Gandhi's environmental thought. The paper argues that Gandhi's ideas on the environment emerged from his vision of an alternative economy and polity that he envisaged for the country. It also examines the influence Gandhi had on the various environmental movements in India and thinkers like Arne Naess and discusses the main elements of Gandhian ecological vision.

INTRODUCTION

Is Gandhi a human ecologist? If we go by the ideas generated by the environmental movement in India, which is strongly influenced by Gandhi, the answer is a definite 'yes'. But Gandhi's place in the ecological movement is yet to be established on a secure footing internationally. Even the recent *Encyclopaedia of Human Ecology* edited by Julia R Miller et al. (2003) omitted Gandhi as one of its entries in its otherwise impressive list. Ecological consciousness, understandably, is a phenomenon that gained momentum only in the last four decades or so. But the roots of it can be traced to worldviews, traditions, culture, religion and folklore. Ecology is the science that focuses on the relationships between living organisms and their environment. Human ecology is about relationships between people and their environment. Human activities impact on ecosystems. Conversely, ecosystems are strongly influenced by the social system in which people live. Our worldview both as individuals and as society shape the way we formulate our strategies for action (Marten 2001).

The strength of human ecology lies in its ability to see human beings and their environment as mutually interlinked, as part of an integrated whole. This suggests that the Western tendency to compartmentalise everything into different categories is anti-ecological. Different facets of human life reflected in politics, economics, sociology, culture etc., need to be seen in an integrated way. Also, the disciplinary barriers that

we have created should gradually disappear, making social sciences and other sciences intimately interlinked, or enabling each social science discipline to develop an ecological perspective as well, perhaps as a transition strategy to evolving an integrated social science in future. Social sciences should focus on finding answers to problems not from the vantage point of individual disciplines, but focus on the problems at hand, and allow integrative scholarship to emerge. This is precisely what Gandhi did. In his writings we find elements of economics without appearing to be an economist in the strict sense of the word, politics without being a political scientist and social theorizing without the pretensions of a social theorist. This is the strength of the new interdisciplinarity that Gandhian studies seem to be advocating. JC Kumarappa, reflecting this attitude, said: "In the traditional archives of knowledge, religion, sociology and economy have all been reserved their separate and exclusive spheres. Man has been divided into various watertight compartments. The left hand is not to know what the right hand does. Nature does not recognise such divisions. She deals with all life as a whole" (1997: 4). Some even say that the concept of interrelatedness that human ecology upholds is the most subversive of all ideas (eg. Devall and Sessions 1985).

HUMAN ECOLOGY

Human ecology is concerned with the ecological implications of all what human beings do. We are also interested in the generation of

resources, their sustainable use, adaptive growth and development of human beings. All these take place in an environment in which the crucial interlinkages between human beings and nature are recognised and reinforced. This implies not doing anything that can harm our fellow beings, nature and future generation.

In human ecology, the focus is normally on the significance and functions of ecosystems and how humans have affected these systems over time. It is an explicitly value-laden subject. At its core is a profound sense of responsibility for other human beings and the environment and love for all life forms. A human ecology perspective is holistic. 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. It is for these reasons that Gandhi is acknowledged the world over as an ecologist, including by the well-known Green movement and its variants.

Some may not agree to the idea of presenting Gandhi as an environmentalist. They certainly have a point. The issues currently discussed under the label of environment were not prominent during his lifetime. However, his description of the modern (industrial) civilisation as a “seven-day wonder” contains a prognosis and a warning. His ideas about human connectedness with nature is not so explicit unlike most of his other ideas, and they have to be gauged from a careful reading of his voluminous writings (Weber 1999). The few direct comments that he made on the environment show how Gandhi had anticipated most of the environmental problems that we face today. He envisaged an ecological or basic needs model centred around limitation of wants in which the focus would be on achieving some kind of harmony among different elements of the social and natural order, in contrast to the modern civilisation that promoted a one-dimensional trajectory for enhancing material welfare and profit. Gandhi said: “A certain degree of physical harmony and comfort is necessary, but above a certain level it becomes hindrance instead of help. Therefore the ideal of creating an unlimited number of wants and satisfying them seems to be a delusion and a snare.” In fact, Parel (2006) has recently epitomised Gandhi’s philosophy in terms of a ‘harmony model’, which has a strong ecological tenor about it. There is now a new index called ‘happiness index’ that is being developed. One of the features of this index is that high levels

of material development need not produce equally high levels of happiness. Gandhi placed emphasis on the theme of contentment and would have found the ‘happiness index’ a particularly useful one. Gandhi said that a man who multiplies his daily wants cannot achieve the goal of plain living and high thinking. As Devall and Sessions (1985, 48) say, most of the so-called progress that human beings have made is actually ecological regress.

ROOTS OF GANDHIAN ECOLOGISM

Gandhi was influenced by Jainism and Buddhism. Jainism looks at nature as a living entity and exhorts human beings to continually purify themselves by respecting the diverse life forms. In contemporary times, Jainism has been interpreted in such a way as to strengthen the relation between man and earth, a clear case of deployment of religion for ecology. Hinduism also looks at nature and all life forms with equal reverence. Gandhi’s voice of environmentalism was not the lone voice at the turn of the twentieth century. Rabindranath Tagore represented nature in his poems and works. Shantiniketan, the institution that he founded, was another example of nature-friendly study and living. Gandhi drew on a number of Western thinkers, who, although were not against the modernist project, romantically cherished the pre-industrial order. John Ruskin, for example, was critical of industrialisation in that it had sapped human sensibility and destroyed the harmonious relationship humans had with nature. Henry David Thoreau, whose essay on civil disobedience had influenced Gandhi, believed that nature could exist without humans, a prospect that fascinated and frightened him, which eventually prompted him to focus on the relation between human beings and the environment. Edward Carpenter, who was influenced by John Ruskin and Hindu mysticism also wanted to lead a life that was simple and close to nature. His critique of civilisation was a major influence on Gandhi’s (1997) first book *Hind Swaraj*, which is now in its centenary year. Carpenter, a socialist, was also an early animal rights activist and also a strong proponent of gay rights. What is special about all these thinkers is a kind of romanticism about nature and a general distaste of industrial civilisation and urbanisation. We also have statements of Gandhi expressing similar romanticism. He said: “I need no inspiration other than Nature’s. She

has never failed me as yet. She mystifies me, bewilders me, sends me to ecstasies.”

Anthropocentrism

In an article published in the late sixties Lynn White (1967) urged the Christian scholars to look closely at a theology of ecology that was at variance with orthodox Christianity known for its arrogance towards nature, seeing human beings as separate from and superior to nature. He said Christianity cannot absolve itself of blame for adopting an anthropocentric worldview that desacralised nature. At the same time the tradition of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of nature and animals, who emphasised equal consideration for all creation, was projected as a starting point for constructing a Christian ecology.

According to Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi “challenges the anthropocentric view that man enjoys absolute ontological superiority to and the consequent right of unrestrained domination over the non-human world.” This renders human beings “rootless” and become prey to “anthropomorphic narcissism and species imperialism”. In contrast, “Gandhi’s cosmocentric anthropology restores his (man’s) ontological roots, establishes a more balanced and respectful relationship between him and the natural world, assigns the animals their due place and provides the basis of a more satisfactory and ecologically conscious philosophical anthropology” (1989, p. 196-7). Gandhi said : “I believe in advaita (non-duality), I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that lives” (Quoted in Weber 1999).

FROM SURVIVAL TO ECOLOGY

Gandhi did not come to develop his integrated vision from original insights into nature and its working. Instead he was exploring how social change could be brought about through least harm to other human beings as well as to nature. Gandhian environmental activists like Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna of the Chipko movement or even Medha Patkar and Baba Amte of the Narmada movement began their activism over questions relating to the livelihood issues of the marginalised sections of society. Their struggle for protecting the livelihood resources eventually led to a form of environ-

mentalism that made it possible for them to see the interconnections among environment, development, survival, sustainability and peace. Gandhi was not an environmentalist who, while acknowledging the interconnection among all forms of life, was unconcerned about the survival of the human species. In fact, ecological concerns emerged from his focus on a basic needs model of social order that would not exploit nature for short-term gains, but take only from it what is absolutely necessary for human sustenance. Gandhi had to concede that life involves a certain amount of violence to nature even if it is unintended. What we can do is to minimise it to the maximum extent.

Ecological Implications of Gandhi’s Critique of Modernity

For Gandhi, industrialisation and profit-generation were at odds with moral progress. He said: “The incessant search for material comforts and their multiplication is an evil. I make bold to say that the Europeans will have to remodel their outlook, if they are not to perish under the weight of the comforts to which they are becoming slaves.” Further, with a prophetic vision, Gandhi warned: “A time is coming when those who are in mad rush today of multiplying their wants, will retrace their steps and say; what have we done?” (Quoted in Khoshoo and Moolakkattu 2009). If we look at the current debate on climate change, the manner in which the West is frantically trying to persuade the emerging countries to reduce their carbon emissions and the billions of dollars being spent by developed countries to slow the pace of climate change, it seems Gandhi’s prediction has come true. Although from the early seventies we were made aware of the environmental perils through books like *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher 1973) and *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972), it took more than a decade for the world to understand the gravity of the situation.

Like many thinkers who influenced him, when Gandhi spoke and wrote, he represented a counter-thinking of that time. It was a wholesale condemnation of modern civilisation and all its derivatives. That is why Gandhi’s book *Hind Swaraj* was banned within a year of its publication. Gandhi was asked if he would like to have the same standard of living for India’s teeming millions as the British had. He quipped: “It took Britain half the resources of the planet to achieve

this prosperity. How many planets will a country like India require!". This shows that human beings should exercise restraint in the use of natural resources. It also emerges from a generational vision. As human beings we have the responsibility to assume the stewardship of the earth and its resources and not engage in run off exploitation. This counter-thinking is now increasingly becoming mainstream with greater knowledge and awareness of the environmental problems.

Gandhi had been a major influence on a number of writers like E F Schumacher and Arne Naess. He has been, and continues to be, the major influence on the environmental movement in India. This includes not only those widely known ones, but also movements against unscrupulous exploitation of natural resources by multinational companies, nuclear power plants, use of agricultural land cultivated by small and subsistence farmers for commercial purposes, large scale commercial fishing, destruction of seed varieties and so on. Chipko movement, the largest environment movement in Asia as well as a good number of Indian environmentalists and environmental historians such as Vandana Shiva, Anil Agarwal, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha have acknowledged their debt to Gandhi's ideas. Guha has described him as the "single most important influence on the environmental movement" (2006). But he says that it was left to J. C. Kumarappa and Mira Behn to build an ecological programme along Gandhian lines. But what is special about all those influenced by a Gandhian brand of environmentalism is their exclusive focus on environmental problems of the rural areas.

Kumarappa: Gandhian Ecologist Par Excellence

J.C. Kumarappa has been considered one of the pioneers of Indian environmentalism. Gandhi's association with Kumarappa with whom he had a personal resonance, was particularly crucial in the crystallisation of Gandhi's economic ideas, with attendant implications for the environment. Everything Kumarappa said had the Gandhian imprimatur. Kumarappa would not say anything that in his wisdom did not fit in with the Gandhian position. His brand of environmentalism was linked up with life itself, how one could lead a sustainable life with very little adverse effect on the environment. He worked with Gandhi on village reconstruction and conducted impor-

tant surveys of the agrarian economy. Kumarappa did not write for an academic audience. But his *Economy of Permanence* has been often cited as an example of 'green thought' within the Gandhian discourse. The very title of the book is ecologically rooted. He was advocating an economy based on the natural order. He said: "[i]n studying human institutions we should never lose sight of that great teacher, mother Nature. Anything that we may devise if it is contrary to her ways, she will ruthlessly annihilate sooner or later. Everything in nature seems to follow a cyclic movement. Water from the sea rises as vapour and falls on land in refreshing showers and returns back to the sea again ... A nation that forgets or ignores this *fundamental process* in forming its institutions will disintegrate." (Kumarappa 1997).

In recent years, the advent of modern biotechnologies has attempted to transform Indian agriculture, which has led to the loss of control over the seeds by Indian farmers. The terminator seed represents a world-view of death as opposed to the life world-view of the seed keepers of traditional India. Often ecological and livelihood movements lead to demand for greater decentralisation and new forms of social organisation, new perspectives on sustainable living and development – all of which reflect a very strong Gandhian orientation.

Arne Naess and Deep Ecology

Gandhian influence on ecological thinking has been acknowledged by none other than Arne Naess, often seen as the father of the deep ecology movement. Naess identified a shallow ecology movement that fought against pollution and resource depletion for anthropocentric (human-centric) reasons. Pollution and resource depletion were wrong because they threatened human health and affluence. The deep ecology movement, in contrast, favors some form of biocentric egalitarianism as a guideline for environmental action. This distinction between anthropocentric and biocentric environmentalism is at the heart of deep ecology. Deep ecology therefore is a critique of a commonly held doctrine that the natural world has value only insofar as it is useful to humans. Besides using Gandhi, Naess also used the *Gita* which conveys the idea of interconnectedness of all beings. It means that the wellbeing of any living being is equally a part of our own well-being.

Self-realisation was a term that Naess borrowed from Gandhi. He conceives the ecological Self as the culmination of a process of personal maturation (Naess 1987). This begins with a recognition of the personal self during childhood. It then proceeds to the realization of the social self, in terms of being a member of the human society, and finally to an ecological Self, where 'self' locates itself as just a small peck within the entirety of the living world.

There is an argument that the concerns of deep ecology are not suitable for poor countries where the people live in miserable conditions where some degree of anthropocentrism is necessary. Weber (1999) believes that deep ecologists like Naess actually defend a weak form of anthropocentrism. For Naess identifying oneself with nature should become a pathway to self-realisation. Naess notes that 'nature conservation is non-violent at its very core'. Naess called his own brand of environmentalism 'biospherical egalitarianism', and points out that he was 'inevitably' influenced by the Mahatma's metaphysics (Naess 1987).

Gandhi said, "the great Nature has intended us to earn our bread by the sweat of our brow". He also added: "I venture to suggest that it is the fundamental law of Nature, without exception, that Nature produces enough for our wants from day to day, and if only everybody took enough for himself and nothing more, there would be no pauperism in this world, there would be no man dying of starvation in this world" (CWMG, 45: 225). He also looked at acquisitiveness as not only wasteful, but also immoral. It is when the rich decide to keep for themselves more than what they need that inequalities and starvation arise. According to him, "The rich have a superfluous store of things which they do not need and which are, therefore, neglected and wasted; while millions starve and are frozen to death for want of them. If each retained possessions only of what he needed, none would be in want and all would live in contentment." Gandhi was emphatic that an ecological movement has to be non-violent. He said: "We cannot have ecological movement designed to prevent violence against Nature, unless the principle of non-violence becomes central to the ethics of human culture" (Quoted in Khoshoo and Moolakkattu 2009).

As an ardent advocate of indigenous system of medicine with a strong slant towards nature cure, Gandhi tried to prod most of the practitioners of his age to undertake research and come up

with systems of treatment that could cure the diseases of the day without being excessively adherent to what has been received from the texts. Nature cure to Gandhi was a way of life that tried to tap on the patient's self-curing abilities without being invasive. Gandhi felt that although the medical profession had embraced some nature cure methods, they were dismissive of the system of treatment. Shiv Visvanathan (2006) calls Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* "an intensely naturopathic document" that seeks to achieve harmony – both of the body and its constituent parts and the body and the elements of environment such as air, water, light and soil.

Gandhi was more interested in that form of science which was more attuned to serving life in the villages. Gandhi also faulted the Indian system of education in which the occupational training was not serving an educational purpose. He found the remedy in imparting the whole art and science of a craft through practical training and such training as the basis of education.

During visits to Uttarkhand in 1929 Gandhi made a number of statements reinforcing the connections between the Himalayas and the survival of the entire country. He said, "if there were no Himalayas, the entire plain land of India would have been a desert like Sahara". In other words, he understood how the survival of the entire northern India was dependent on the Himalayas (Joshi 2001).

For Gandhi the diet, the practice of celibacy and the exercise of the body through breathing and simple yoga and the self-control needed in satyagraha were intimately related. Gandhi gave considerable attention to food and diet. He undertook many experiments to identify the cheapest combination of food that would provide a poor Indian enough nutrition as well as the most economical way of preparing it, thereby removing the drudgery of women in the kitchen. His commitment to vegetarianism also represented an attitude to life that could be interpreted as non-violent (Khoshoo and Moolakkattu 2009).

Self-Reliance

Gandhian self-reliance (SR) reflected in his concept of swadeshi has also lot of implications for the creation of a non-exploitative society. Johan Galtung, the father of modern peace research argues that self-reliance is intimately linked up with ecological balance:

“Through SR ecological balance will be more easily attained. When ecological cycles contract the consequences of production and consumption, in terms of depletion and pollution, will be not only more visible, but also more direct. The farmer who by and large produces what he consumes and consumes what he produces has the gut knowledge that pollution and depletion will be detrimental to him and his off-spring, and this very knowledge initiates the type of negative feedback that may prevent ecological problems from surfacing at all. Depletion cannot be relegated to some far-off corner of the world, because in that corner they are also practising self-reliance and do not let raw materials out except to neighbours at the same level” (Galtung 1976).

Self-reliance enables communities to maintain networks of sociality that are intimate rather than remote, which is another aspect of Gandhian ecologism. A well known environmentalist elaborates:

“Gandhi’s ecologism (if we can call it that) was about rural peasants eking out their subsistence and necessities from a piece of land. In short, he might not have theorized the mathematics of sustainability but he showed us how to pursue sustainable livelihoods....Gandhi did not talk much about the abstract notion of earth but he talked a lot about land and soil. To support that economy, he also emphasized artisan economy (spinning of clothes with charkha, repairing of agricultural tools, arts and crafts) that made these rural peasant communities free from depending on machine-made and mass-produced industrial goods and tools. As is happening in India today, he did not want the village cobbler to be replaced by the Bata Shoe factory or the village blacksmith to be rendered obsolete by the Tata Iron and Steel Company” (Parajuli 2002: 61).

His opposition to religious conversion emerged from a Hindu perception that each person should find his communion with God in his own religion. Proselytisation is not to be welcomed because it works against the principle of harmony and diversity found in nature and imposes new hierarchies in the world of religion hitherto based on mutual tolerance and respect. This applied also to Hinduism, which tried to convert back the already converted. He advised his own disciple Madeline Slade who wanted to become a Hindu to remain in her own Christian faith and aspire to become a true Christian. In other words, he did not want that one should be persuaded to break with the traditions in which

one was brought up. This however did not mean that if a person felt a genuine urge to become a member of another religion, he had no freedom to embrace it.

Gandhi was not fascinated with wilderness and rain forests. Yet he believed that nature should be allowed to take its own course. Gandhi even prohibited people to stock medicines against poisonous bites and talked about the possibility of co-existence with the non-human world. In fact ecological life was a part and parcel of Gandhian ashram life. Since Gandhi’s cottage in Sevagram was not reptile-proof, snakes sometimes sneaked in, and he used to pick them up with the help of a pair of long tongs that he always kept, and release them in places far away from the people (Weber 1999). He looked at all life as sacred and all human beings as part of the divine, living in harmony with other beings. Suffering of all living beings was of concern to him. Even when he discussed the ways and means of preventing malaria, he was thinking in terms of how mosquitoes could be chased away with the help of repellents rather than kill them outright. Gandhi realized that there is some kind of continuity between lording over nature and lording over other ‘inferior’ people as in colonialism. For him, it is an “arrogant assumption to say that human beings are lords and masters of the lower creatures. On the contrary, being endowed with greater things in life, they are the trustees of the lower animal kingdom” (Quoted in Khoshoo and Moolakkattu 2009). This notion of stewardship of the earth, and all living beings on it in a nurturing spirit, is the hallmark of Gandhian ecology.

Conservation was a part of Gandhi’s day to day life. He would use water most sparingly. Same could be said of money and other personal resources. He also found the need to conserve his sexual energy for larger goals. One could dismiss them as austere practices associated with him in a personal capacity. Since Gandhi did not try to distinguish between his personal and public life at any point in time, he conveyed the value of conserving resources for the future generation. In all these he personified a true ecologist whose practices were examples of ecological living worthy of emulation. His antipathy towards urbanisation also reflected an attitude full of implications for the environment. In some ways, his bania thriftiness came in handy as an environmental principle worthy of adoption.

Gandhi had a special love for the cow. It

epitomized the sub-human world, and he saw cow protection as one of the duties of human beings that enables them to relate themselves best with the non-human world. This is because the cow not only provides nourishing milk and milk products for the family, but also helps us in agriculture, both for tilling the land as well as for supplying the necessary manure. He said: "It takes the human being beyond his species. The cow to me means the entire sub-human world. Man, through the cow, is enjoined to realise his identity with all that lives" (Quoted in Weber 1999).

Gandhi's ethical and religious approach to all fellow creatures was founded on an identification with all that lives where it merges with the concerns of the modern deep ecology movement. Ahimsa, for him, envisaged or subsumed an awareness of the interdependency of all life. Ahimsa can emerge only in a disciplined environment in which a person renounces pleasures of the body in pursuit of a higher spiritual pursuit. Vandana Shiva, an ecofeminist and environmental activist who acknowledges Gandhian influence on her thinking and work has embarked on programmes like seed satyagraha to protect biodiversity and seed, and prevent it from becoming the monopoly of a handful of corporations. She also sees a need for resisting the monopoly regimes of intellectual property rights and patents. Through her *Navadanya* movement she seeks to achieve seed, food, water and land sovereignty, and sees this as the new direction satyagraha should take in the new millennium.

Gandhi is also often called the father of appropriate technology. He advocated small, local and village-based technology that allowed its users to relate themselves with what they produce. For him technological progress was not a sign of progress. The Charkha represented the ideal technological equipment for Gandhi. A technology that would not replace human labour was what was in his mind. EF Schumacher was strongly influenced by this idea of Gandhi who popularized it through his concept of 'intermediate technology' (1973). In India, we have the world's largest urban population and we will continue to denude the forests for meeting our construction needs. Many Gandhi-inspired technologists advocate the use of mud technology and use of locally available materials as a way forward in addressing the housing problem in this country. Laurie Becker, who is known for the construction and popularisation

of nature-friendly and cheap houses using locally available resources, was deeply inspired by Gandhi. In recent years, the use of energy-efficient smokeless chullahs in the rural areas that need less firewood has become quite common in some parts of South India. In all this the impact of Gandhi and his followers is considerable.

CONCLUSION

From a Gandhian perspective, the present environmental mess, ranging from deforestation, soil and biodiversity loss, to pollution and climate change, is not a disease but only a symptom. A good doctor treats the disease and not the symptom. The disease is the very concept and patterns of growth and development that are being followed everywhere.

In conclusion, we can say that Gandhi's environmentalism fitted in with his overall vision for India and the world that sought to extract from nature what is absolutely necessary for human sustenance. His ideas on environment are intimately linked with all his ideas relating to the polity, economy, health and development. His asceticism and simple living, a rural-centred civilisation based on village autonomy and self-reliance, handicrafts and craft-centred education, emphasis on manual labour and absence of exploitative relationships are infused with elements of an ecological vision (Jones 2000). Even his approach to gender did not attempt to break the connection with nature, but to maneuver within it and provide some space for women to uplift themselves. It is therefore no wonder that Gandhi is a major inspiration for many environmental movements worldwide, particularly for those who link their movement with larger concerns for human sustenance and development. He would not be an inspiration for environmental radicals whose approach to environment allow little space for human sustenance and livelihood issues. Although he was not anthropocentric in his approach, he was not prepared to allow the question of human survival to be sidelined in discussions on environment. Instead he showed how a total sustainable way of organising human affairs could be evolved that left a lighter human footprint on this earth, and showed how man could live in harmony with nature. Small wonder, his famous statement "the Earth has enough for everyone's need, but not for anyone's greed," has become a slogan for contemporary environmental movements.

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