
Relevance of Gandhian Perspective on Ecology & Sustainable Development in 21st Century

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Abstract

Background: - 21st century population is struggling with the problems of ecological crisis, environmental degradation, widening income inequality and depleting natural resources. This has resulted into food insecurity, water crisis, extinction of species, poverty and much more problems. The idea of Sustainable development is a hope for present day crisis and future preservation. Gandhian idea of living with nature is an excellent example of Sustainability.

Objectives: - This study intends to analyse the issues generated out of existing models of development. It tries to evaluate the idea of Sustainable development in light of Gandhian thoughts and to provide solutions for 21st century environmental and developmental problems.

Methodology: - Based upon the available writing of MK Gandhi and literatures of Gandhian scholars, the article seeks to analyse the relevance of Gandhian idea of sustainability with present notion of Sustainable development. With the help of Conceptual and Analytical methods, this article focuses on factors behind conflict, problems of present developmental model and solution for creating harmony between man and nature.

Conclusions: - Gandhian concept of Sustainable development is in harmony with man and nature. It provides an alternative solution to the existing problems of Capitalist model of development.

Keywords- Developmental Crisis, Gandhi, Sustainability, Nature, Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

The 21st century world is struggling with multidimensional issues arising out of ecological crisis and environmental degradation with widening income inequality and depleting natural resources. This has resulted into food insecurity, poverty, water crisis, soil desertification, extinction of species, and much more bigger problems like- Global warming and Climate change. The present

crisis is a result of unsustainable growth and developmental practices that we are witnessing after industrial revolution. This has forced us to rethink about the idea of 'Sustainability' and Sustainable practices which will promote growth and development at one hand and conserve nature, at another hand.

Also, the history of 20th century has seen the deaths of hundred million people in two world wars. It had witnessed conflicts and violences in form of Arab-Israel war, India-Pakistan war, Iran-Iraq war, Korean-Vietnamese war and Afghan wars etc. In words of Samuel Huntington "9/11 terrorist attack on 'World Trade Centre' was clear example of Clash of Civilization". The world of 21st century is also struggling with the issues like Air Pollution, Water & Soil Pollution, Ozone layer depletion, Soil desertification and Global warming. This has resulted in loss of biodiversity in form of flora and fauna, melting of ice caps, rising global temperature by 2.0°C at the end of century (Paris Peace Agreement, 2015). All these pertaining issues guide us to proceed with two-fold analysis- (1) to look upon the relevance of Gandhian ideas and thought in general & (2) relevance of his ideas and thought w.r.t ecology and sustainable development.

Hanumanthappa.N in his article 'Relevance of Gandhian Philosophy in Contemporary world' states that Gandhian philosophy is relevant from different angles- (1). Relevance of Religion: we have seen so many wars and killings in the name of religious supremacy. For Gandhi, each religion has different roads coming to the same point. He believed in "Sarva Dharma Sambhava" (equal approach to all religions). Gandhian idea of religion makes a man spiritual as well as scientific, that can be described in the words of Vinoba Bhave "spirituality plus science means Sarvodaya (total upliftment) but spirituality minus science means Sarvanas (total destruction). (2) Relevance Over Democracy and Politics- now a days, politics is linked with power, defection and disloyalty. Whereas, for Gandhi, Politics opens the door of service which is essential for human welfare. Politics is a moral problem of values and it should be based on religion, where it will show the direction for utilization of power for mass. Gandhian conception of Swaraj (self-rule) focuses on people's empowerment where each one can realize his/her potential and is the real master of one's self. (3) Economic relevance and the Concept of Trusteeship: Gandhi was against the technology of mass production and practice of consumerism as this leads to exploitation of resources and ecology. Basic argument of Gandhi over technology was "it should be design to serve the human person, rather than making him the servant of machines". Gandhi believed in Sarvodaya means the rise of all human beings. His idea of Trusteeship has been adopted by many Indians like J.R.D Tata,

Jamnalal Bajaj, Narayan Murthy of Infosys and Azim Premji of Wipro. The idea is to serve the humanity by serving the masses by surplus money (Hanumanthappa.N., 2018).

Gandhian philosophy of non-violence has been examined and executed by various leaders all across the world, that includes Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther Lord Jr., and Aung San Suu Kyi. Mary E King has remarkably explained ‘why Gandhi is relevant today’. King argues that Gandhi was against many practices like- racism, colonialism and caste system that directly undermine the dignity of human beings. Not only that, Gandhi was against economic exploitation, against degradation of women, against religious and ethnic supremacy. He advocates for popular democratic participation and empowerment of each and every individual in the society. King further argues that Gandhi will be relevant as far as we are witnessing strife, religious unrest, hostilities, ethnic cleansing, internal conflicts and threats of military occupation. Gandhi focuses on empowerment of people through education and self-reliance, that is the agenda of 21st century world. Also, his attention to human rights, freedoms and civil rights has inspired many developments like the Dalits and environmental movements in India and the People of Black lives development in the US.

Gandhi had rightly pointed out that “Mother Earth has enough resources to fulfil everyone’s need, but not everyone’s greed”. The practice of consumerism and greed-based economy are excellent examples of unsustainable practices that have huge bearing on natural resources. Gandhi believed that instead of exploiting society and nature by man, we all can live in a symbiotic way of life which is in harmony with each other. The idea of Sustainable development is a hope for present day crisis and future preservation. The idea of sustainability and sustainable development find close association with the idea of MK Gandhi. This paper intends to analyse the issues that are generated out of existing models of development. Later on, it tries to evaluate the idea of Sustainable development in light of Gandhian thoughts to find the similarities and differences between the two. At the end, it outlines the solutions for 21st century environmental and developmental problems with emphasis on Gandhian thoughts and SDGs.

The Crisis Out of Development and its Alternative

The globe is facing multiple challenges ranging from terrorism to poverty, hunger to malnutrition, environmental to ecological problems, that has threatened the existence of human being on earth. As per the report of UNDP-MPI, the global multidimensional poverty estimates to 1.3 billion people. This means that one person out of every six people is multidimensionally poor. They are

‘multidimensionally poor’ not simply because of income, but also because of lack of basic indicators like poor health, poor quality of work and threat to violence (UNDP, 2019). The reports of Global Hunger Index 2018 reveals that 822 million people are suffering from hunger while 785 million people are affected with hunger.

The reckless exploitation of resources along with globalization have provided profitable monopoly to a small group of elites. The benefit of development is not being transferred to poor section of society and the inequality is deepening day by day. To quote Pierre Lehmann- “Some 20% of world’s population consumes 85% of world’s good & services; against the backdrop of a divided world where out of 6 to 7 billion population, some 1.1 billion have no access to drinking water, 2 billion have no electricity, 2.4 billion live without proper sanitation and 4 billion live without waste water disposal system” (Lehmann et al., 2009).

The major problem with the present Capitalist developmental model is that it defines development only in terms of economics, i.e., growth of GDP, GNP or per capita income. The factors like environmental degradation and resource exploitations are never taken into considerations. As it lacks multi-dimensional indicators like inequality reduction and poverty eradications. The ultimate aim of development should not be to provide economic growth only, but to provide a change in socio-economic structure that provides opportunities to reduce inequality and absolute poverty (Dab & Bose, 2022).

The industrial-technological development in terms of economic growth has not provided sustainable base for survival of humankind. In the last 100 years, it has created socio-economic- imbalance among individuals and nations (Dab & Bose, 2022). The deepening inequalities demands a model that must be sustainable in nature. That must stand for sustainability and overall human development. The notion of Sustainable development fits into this criterion as it addresses fundamental problem of securing balance between development and environment. It tries to address human concerns of poverty alleviation, socio-economic justice, environmental protection, systematic use of natural resources. The idea extends to protect life and ecosystem of flora and fauna existing on land as well as in water.

The Idea of Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The concept of Sustainable Development has evolved over the time and its root can be traced back to 1960s and 1970s- socio-environmental movements. One of the earliest definitions of Sustainable development was provided by “Brundtland Report” in 1987. It defines SD as “development that

meets the needs of present without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs”. It emphasized on the fact that economic growth should must be balanced with environmental protection and social equity. So, the concept of Sustainable development is a broader term to describe policies that provide benefits without sacrificing environment. It offers a Win-Win strategies for mitigation of climate risks and environmental protection (WHO, Sustainable Development).

The UN Rio Earth Summit 1992 led to adoption of ‘Agenda 21’. It was a comprehensive plan of action for 21st century which has to be taken globally and nationally. It resulted into adoption of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by UN in 2000. It focuses on reducing poverty and improving health, education and other social indicators. The total of 8 goals has to be achieved by 2015. Later these MDGs were integrated into the broader sustainable development agenda with the adoption of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The SDGs are also known as Global Goals and this is a universal call to action to end poverty & hunger along with protection of the planet by 2030. They are 17 in number and are integrated to each other (UNDP, SDG).

These 17 SDGs covers a wide range of issues, ranging from poverty reduction to good health and education, clean water and sanitation to renewable energy, sustainable cities to climate actions. These goals are designed to provide framework for action by various stakeholders of development. It includes list of 17 items, which are aims to-

- The end of poverty and hunger with food security and improved nutrition for all
- Better standard of education and healthcare with better sanitation and water facilities
- To achieve gender equality and empowerment of all girls and women
- Reduce inequalities among people and among countries
- Sustainable economic growth while focusing on employment and job creation
- Sustainability of Land, Air and Water with protection of animals and ecosystem
- To take urgent actions for combating global warming and climate change and to mitigate its effect
- Achieve peaceful and harmonious society based on inclusive development, effective and capable institutions

Sustainable Development Goals and Gandhian thoughts

The idea of sustainable development goals is a universal call to work for ending poverty & hunger, protecting people’s planet, and ensuring peace and prosperity for all by 2030. MK Gandhi had

visioned the same through his ideas of Swaraj and Sarvodaya. For him, development can only be achieved when an individual is in a position to realise its optimum potential in peace and harmony with self and others. Nature is an integral part of that peace and harmony, with localised efforts, in day-to-day life. Gandhi through his “Hind Swaraj” criticised the exploitation of men and nature by modern industrial civilization (Gandhi & Parel, 2009b). He argues ‘the modern industrial civilization is based on force and violence and we can reconstruct it with love, truth and soul force’ (Iyengar, 2022).

The first eight SDGs are related to poverty, hunger, education, health, gender, water and sanitation, clean energy and work. These goals have direct implications to people in their everyday life. Gandhi’s idea of Gram Swaraj- village swaraj- was instrumental in outlining the vision of self-reliant village. This would result in zero poverty and zero hunger for last man. To ensure food security we need better agricultural productivity with environmental protection. While writing on Gram Swaraj, Gandhi had advised several methods of preparing farm year manure (Gandhi, 1962). As we all are aware of this fact that Organic Farming is the need of the hour and Gandhi’s idea of use of local manure is of great use in contemporary time.

Under SDG-3, there are 9 specific targets and 4 supportive targets to be achieved for ‘good health and well-being’. One of the targets is to strengthen the prevention of drugs, narcotics and alcohol abuse among population. Gandhi was one step ahead and he strongly condemn the liquor shops and liquor sell during Indian freedom movement. SDG 4 talks about inclusive, equitable and quality education for lifelong learning opportunities for all. Education for Gandhi, is an instrument to reconstruct a new world with values, skill and knowledge. Human values and values for sustainable survival are the basic elements of his education (Iyengar, 2022). On gender equality and empowerment of women (SDG-6), Gandhi argues “A woman is the companion of a man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in every minute detail in the activities of man, she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him”. For Gandhi, women participation in economy is much needed as it comprises of half of the labour force and non-violent in nature (Gandhi, 1947).

Gandhi was opposed to open defecation and in his Ashrams, sanitation and hygiene was a high priority. This idea is in sync with SDG-6 which talks about clean water and sanitation. He emphasized on change in habits to do away with open defecation. Similarly, there are many goals which are in sync with Gandhain idea like Inclusive growth, sustainable production and consumption and above all peace and justice for all.

The idea of sustainable development is very much similar with ideas and thoughts of MK Gandhi. But apart from many similarities between the two, there exist 4 folded differences between them.

1. Approach to Development: Present notion of Sustainable development is directly linked with economic growth as well as substantiable exploitation of resources. The idea of globalization and economic interdependence are deeply rooted in its structure. While, Gandhi was more focused towards self-reliance and community development with localised efforts and localised production. In Gandhi's idea of development and empowerment, it is the individual and village which comes first, rest of the development would proceed in oceanic manner.
2. Bottom-Up Approach vs Top-Down Approach: Gandhi emphasized on the concept of Swadeshi and Swaraj. His idea of development is driven by individual empowerment and village is the focal point of every developmental activity.
3. People Centric vs Institutionalised Approach: In Gandhian ideas, responsivity of things lies with individual not with the state and its institutions. For example- under SDG-3, State and institutions will take necessary actions to prevent the spread of narcotics, drug and alcohol abuse. But, for Gandhi, if you are in a well-ordered society, the citizens know and observe the laws of health and hygiene (Gandhi, 2000). Present Goals of sustainable development are decided by national institutions which lacks people's participation. It is the institutions which decides what is good for them and this is the reason why mass participation is missing.
4. Role of Technology: Gandhi has given more emphasis on manual work rather than mechanised work. According to his idea a machine or technology should facilitate man in their work and progress, rather it should not replace or subjugate human. The present SD model emphasized the role of technology in achieving a goal. The technological advancement needs responsible use, which is lacking in present generation. So, with the help of technology, we are consuming more rather than consuming sustainable.

Conclusion

A Sustainable society is one where man and nature are in harmony with each other. The level of consumption is in equilibrium with the available resources in nature. This can only achieve through responsible production as well as consumption for goods and services by every member of society. Sustainable society can be created through sustainable lifestyle and it is the lifestyle which matters a lot w.r.t resource consumption. Rate of resource consumption has direct relationship with

environmental degradation and ecological crisis. So, in order to protect ecology and environment, we need to change our lifestyle on sustainable pattern.

The lifestyle which Gandhi had followed throughout his life is an excellent example of sustainable lifestyle. His practices were in harmony with nature and society. The ultimate aim of Gandhian egalitarian society is the development of man and society on the idea of 'Sarvodaya' i.e., development of all in all facets of life. The goals of Sustainable development are in sync with Gandhian ideas but the major difference lies in the method of achieving them. The responsibility of 'WHAT' by 'WHOM' and 'WHEN' is missing in SDGs. The major problem with SDGs is that they focus more on governments, institutions and technologies for their fulfilment. This results into ignorance of individual and lack of participation by community.

This is the point where Gandhi goes one step ahead and talks about the concept of 'Dharma' in order to build sustainable society. Gandhi wanted to guide human-beings for a 'new society' which would be based on the concept of Dharma. Dharma simply means 'performing the right duty of an individual'. Gandhian emphasis over dharma is two folded- one, rights and duties are correlated, second, between rights and duties, it is the duties that comes first. This is something which can be seen in Indian tradition also. It is the responsibilities and duties which come first and the rights comes later. Gandhian perspective is deeply concerned with people, planet, prosperity and peace. Gandhian ideas and thoughts are not only relevant today but even more admissible than even in the past. Gandhian philosophy is a product of Indian values, traditions, cultures and history. As Gandhian development starts with the individual and combines the nature with sustainable practices and lifestyle, it has immense potential to solve the existing problems of ecology and development.

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