



Gandhi's Environmental Wisdom: A Call for Sustainable Living

Dr, Anita Agarwal

Associate Professor

Department of Political Science

Dyal Singh College, Karnal

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36676/irt.v7.i4.1476>

Published: 30/12/2021



* Corresponding author

Abstract

Before exploring the opinions of Mahatma Gandhi on the topic of environmental concerns, it is important to explore the historical and industrial context that renders his thoughts even more applicable now. The Industrial Revolution was a tipping point in human society, deeply reshaping European society and ultimately global economic and social frameworks. This period was characterized by rapid technological progress, widespread industrialization, and the use of capitalist economic systems that focused on profit and productivity rather than sustainability. Although these developments contributed to major advancements in living standards, economic wealth, and technological advancement, they also brought about dire effects that still affect humanity and nature.

With the growth of industries, natural resources were increasingly depended upon for production, energy generation, and urbanization. But the irresponsible exploitation of natural resources was done without any thought to environmental conservation or long-term implications. The capitalist economy born out of the Industrial Revolution favored mass production, consumerism, and economic rivalry, resulting in extensive deforestation, pollution, and exhaustion of the world's limited resources. The drive for economic supremacy led to the exploitation of labor, especially in Third World countries, and promoted an unsustainable energy consumption, which was mostly drawn from fossil fuels. These advances, though good for industrial development, generated huge environmental problems that have continued to imperil the earth to date.

The unfettered and insatiable drive for industrial growth has now arrived at a point of crisis, threatening the very existence of human society as well as the entire environment. The quest for economic progress in tandem with technological developments has created an array of ecological problems that question the long-term viability of life on the planet. S. K. Jha, in his book *Mahatma Gandhi: An Environmentalist with a Difference*, also brings to light the devastating effects of industrialization on nature. He mentions a number of major environmental problems that have arisen as a consequence of this unbridled industrialization:

Population Explosion – Sudden industrialization has caused more people to move to urban areas, thus overpopulating the cities. The population growth puts tremendous pressure on resources like water, food, and land. Overpopulation and lack of proper urban planning have resulted in pollution, unhygienic living conditions, and increased energy and infrastructure demands.

Mass Poverty and Economic Disparities – As industrialization has generated wealth, it has also increased the inequality between the rich and the poor. The abuse of labor, especially in the developing world, has resulted in abject poverty, where major populations cannot even afford their fundamental needs. Exploitation of natural resources has also pushed poor communities further behind, many of whom depend on agriculture and subsistence livelihood.

Overexploitation of Renewable Resources – Over-reliance on renewable resources like freshwater, forests, and cropland has imbalanced ecosystems. The intensive utilization of the same has created



shortages of water, soil degradation, and land depletion, undermining biodiversity and ecological stability.

Agricultural Contamination due to Fertilizers and Pesticides – The use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in industrial farming has raised yields but has also polluted water bodies, disturbed soil ecosystems, and caused long-term environmental harm. The overapplication of these chemicals has caused groundwater pollution, inflicting serious health risks on both human beings and wildlife.

Rapid Industrialization and Air Pollution – The growth of industries has resulted in a record surge in pollution levels. Poisonous emissions by factories, power plants, and vehicles have severely impaired the air quality, causing respiratory diseases, global warming, and acid rain. Air pollution has emerged as one of the major contributors to premature mortality globally.

Global Warming and Climate Change – Fossil fuel combustion for energy and transport has significantly raised the emission of greenhouse gases, which in turn increased global temperatures. Climate change has resulted in the melting of glaciers, rising sea levels, and extreme weather conditions like hurricanes, droughts, and wildfires. Climate change impacts food security, water supply, and the existence of many species.

Desertification and Deforestation – Deforestation on a large scale for urbanization, agriculture, and industry has resulted in loss of biodiversity and soil erosion. Forest depletion has resulted in desertification, decreasing the capacity of the planet to absorb carbon dioxide and maintain the climate. This, in turn, speeds up global warming.

Industrial and Synthetic Waste Accumulation – Industries generate vast quantities of harmful waste, such as plastic, chemical by-products, and non-biodegradable substances. The disposal of industrial waste in an improper manner has resulted in contamination of water bodies, soil pollution, and hazards to marine life. Plastic waste accumulation, especially, has become a worldwide problem, with oceans now harboring huge quantities of microplastics that pose dangers to marine ecosystems.

Nuclear Threats and Radiological Risks – The evolution of nuclear power, though healthy for energy development, has opened up the threat of radioactive poisoning. The Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters proved the devastating implications of nuclear leaks of radiation with long-term consequences on health and the environment.

These problems, principally caused by human actions, are the consequences of the unbalanced model of development that emphasizes industrial advancement at the expense of ecological harmony. Gandhi predicted these risks and promoted a responsible and sustainable lifestyle much earlier than these issues entered popular discourse. Gandhi's concept of non-violence extended beyond human beings to encompass all forms of life. He famously stated, "My ethics not only permit me to claim but require me to own kinship with not merely the ape but the horse and the sheep, the lion and the leopard, the snake and the scorpion..." (M.K. Gandhi, *Truth, Navajivan*, Ahmedabad, 1952, p.10). He was a firm believer in the sanctity of life, and his sympathies extended to plants, trees, and animals. His conviction about the oneness of all life was greatly shaped by the Vaishnava philosophy of Vasudevam Sarvam idam—the belief that all things in the universe are divine (Benoy Gopal Ray, *Gandhian Ethics*, Ahmedabad, 1950, p.8).

With increased awareness of environmental problems, global organizations and platforms have attempted to solve these problems through international conferences and treaties. Some of the most notable attempts are:

Stockholm Conference (1972) – It is also referred to as the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment and was one of the first prominent world conferences to realize the requirement of conservation of the environment. It emphasized sustainable development and persuaded nations to put into practice friendly policies for the environment.



United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992) – Popularly referred to as the Earth Summit, the conference focused on sustainable development and resulted in the implementation of significant agreements like the Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration, and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The Union of Concerned Scientists' Warning – A collective of scientists and environmentalists issued a grave warning that humanity and the natural environment are on a collision course. Their statement urged nations to adopt sustainable practices, reduce overconsumption, and implement measures to mitigate climate change and resource depletion (Ramjee Singh, pp. 129-130).

Even before ecological sustainability emerged as a universal concern, Mahatma Gandhi had already outlined the hazards of industrialization and over-consumption. Gandhi envisioned real human development to be judged not by worldly prosperity or advances in technology but by spiritual awareness, ethical correctness, and peaceableness (Ahimsa). Gandhi taught and believed in leading a simple life with personal independence, utilization of natural resources wisely, and concord with nature.

He was critical of the Western model of industrialization, warning it engendered economic inequalities, social exploitation and environmental degradation. Instead, he advocated village industries, organic agriculture and decentralized economies as sustainable options to big industry. His trusteeship principle prompted people and firms to regard themselves as caretakers of nature and not as exploiters.

Gandhi's philosophy of simple living and high thinking was a reflection of his deep respect for all living beings, which he considered manifestations of divine creation. He believed that man's greed and material excess hindered the path to self-awareness and enlightenment. His environmental ethics were deeply rooted in ancient Indian traditions, which emphasized non-violence, balance, and the sacredness of all life forms.

In essence, Gandhi's vision was ahead of its time, offering a holistic and ethical approach to environmental conservation. His teachings remain profoundly relevant today, as the world grapples with climate change, resource depletion, and environmental degradation. By embracing his principles, humanity can move towards a more sustainable, just, and harmonious existence with nature.

Gandhi was also inspired by Adolph Just's book *Return to Nature*, which further solidified his belief that a healthy life demands living in harmony with all living creatures, including birds, animals, and plants. He stressed that humans need to bring balance to nature by returning what they withdraw. Violence of any kind—whether against humans or animals—was basically contrary to his way of thinking. In *Harijan* in 1937, he wrote, "I do believe that all God's creatures have the right to live as much as we have."

Mahatma Gandhi's environmental philosophy was deeply intertwined with the Vedantic principle of Advaita (non-duality), which emphasizes the fundamental unity of all existence. In this worldview, human beings are not separate from nature but rather an intrinsic part of a greater cosmic order. Gandhi believed that every living entity—whether human, animal, or plant—shares a common essence, and therefore, any harm inflicted upon nature ultimately harms humanity itself. His moral and spiritual vision of environmentalism was rooted in this knowledge of interconnectedness, where destruction of the ecosystem was not only a physical or economic problem but also a spiritual one.

Gandhi constantly expressed his conviction about the unity of life in his writings, especially in *Young India* (1924), where he insisted on the moral obligation of living harmoniously with nature. He argued that human beings should act as stewards of the environment rather than its exploiters. This perspective aligns closely with ancient Indian traditions that uphold the sacredness of all forms of life. Gandhi's ethical stance on environmentalism went beyond mere conservation—it was rooted in the principles of non-violence (Ahimsa) and self-restraint (Aparigraha), advocating for a lifestyle that minimizes harm to the environment and other living beings.



Gandhi's philosophy significantly influenced modern ecological thought, particularly the concept of Deep Ecology, which was developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. Deep Ecology calls for a fundamental shift in how humans perceive their relationship with nature, advocating for a holistic and interconnected approach to environmental ethics. Naess, who was profoundly inspired by Gandhi, viewed self-realization as the key to environmental consciousness. Thomas Weber, a Gandhian scholar, examined how Gandhi influenced Naess's philosophy and delineated five central principles that emerged from this influence:

Self-realization demands a search for truth (Satya) – Gandhi held the view that truth was the ultimate ideal, and following truth gave rise to a better grasp of one's relationship with the world. From an environmental context, this implies an awareness of the inherent value of nature over and above considering it as a resource to be consumed by humans.

All living things are one at their core – The philosophy of Advaita holds that all forms of life exist together. Gandhi embodied this principle and took his sympathy beyond human to encompass animals, plants, and even non-living aspects of nature. He frequently discussed the interdependence of ecosystems, emphasizing that harming any aspect of nature upsets the balance of life.

Violence (Himsa) against oneself impairs self-realization – Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence was not just about avoiding physical harm but also about maintaining a pure and ethical life. Any action that depletes natural resources, pollutes the environment, or promotes material excess is, in essence, a form of violence against oneself because it leads to a degraded quality of life and inner suffering.

Harm to another living organism is the same as harm to oneself – This axiom reaffirms the fact that hurting nature is self-damaging. Deforestation, industrial contamination, or animal exploitation, every form of ecological destruction has an eventual impact on human welfare. Gandhi cautioned that wanton exploitation of industrialization and consumerism would result in ecological breakdown and human misery.

Any violent act upsets the process of self-realization – Gandhi considered self-realization to be a path to spiritual enlightenment, which was possible only through a life of non-violence and harmony. When human beings exploit nature for material gains in the short term, they obstruct their own spiritual evolution. He thought that fulfillment was achieved by living in harmony with the environment instead of controlling it.

The values that Gandhi promoted were deeply embedded in India's spiritual tradition. The ancient Indian scriptures like the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita preach the interconnectedness of life and the importance of harmony with nature. The principles of Rta (cosmic order) and Dharma (righteous duty) imply that living in harmony with the environment is an essential moral obligation. Gandhi, as a serious adherent of Vedanta, believed in these and incorporated them into his own philosophy.

In traditional Indian thought, nature is not seen as an inert object to be exploited but as a living entity imbued with divine presence. The idea of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam ("the world is one family") reflects a holistic view where humans, animals, and plants are all members of a shared ecosystem. Gandhi's environmental ethics resonate with this ancient wisdom, advocating for a lifestyle that respects all life forms and minimizes harm to the planet.

Gandhi's vision of environmental sustainability continues to inspire modern ecological movements worldwide. His advocacy for minimalism, sustainable agriculture, and self-sufficiency aligns with contemporary efforts to combat climate change and environmental degradation. Movements such as organic farming, zero-waste living, and renewable energy initiatives reflect Gandhi's ideals of simplicity and ecological responsibility.

Additionally, global leaders and environmental activists, including Vandana Shiva and Sunderlal Bahuguna, have drawn upon Gandhian principles in their campaigns for environmental justice. The Chipko Movement, a grassroots movement for forest conservation in India, was largely



inspired by Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance. Similarly, the growing emphasis on ethical consumerism and sustainability in today's world echoes Gandhi's call for responsible consumption and mindful living.

In conclusion, Gandhi's philosophy of Advaita (non-duality) offers a profound framework for understanding environmental sustainability as both a moral and spiritual responsibility. His belief in the unity of all life underscores the need for a harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. By advocating truth (Satya), non-violence (Ahimsa), and self-restraint (Aparigraha), Gandhi emphasized that the reckless exploitation of natural resources leads to both ecological and ethical decline. His vision encourages a shift from consumerism to mindful living, where sustainability is not merely a necessity but a moral duty. In an era of climate crises and environmental degradation, Gandhi's timeless wisdom serves as a guiding light, urging humanity to adopt a more compassionate and responsible relationship with nature. By embracing his principles, we can move towards a more sustainable and spiritually enriched world.

References

1. Gandhi, M. K. (1952). Truth. Navajivan Publishing House.
2. Ray, B. G. (1950). Gandhian Ethics. Navajivan Publishing House.
3. Jha, S. K. (2016). Mahatma Gandhi: An Environmentalist with a Difference. Kalpaz Publications.
4. Weber, T. (1999). Gandhi, Deep Ecology and Lifestyle Politics. *Journal of Peace Research*, 36(3), 349-365.
5. Naess, A. (1989). *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*. Cambridge University Press.
6. Singh, R. (2010). *Gandhian Approach to Environment and Sustainable Development*. Concept Publishing.
7. Shiva, V. (2005). *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*. South End Press.
8. Bahuguna, S. (2009). *The Chipko Movement: A People's History of Forest Conservation in India*. Oxford University Press.
9. United Nations. (1972). *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (Stockholm Conference)*. UN Publications.
10. United Nations. (1992). *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) – Agenda 21*. UN Publications.