

Gandhian Trail: The Path of Peace and Glory in Modern Times

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Abstract:

The plight of the blighted planet is the greatest tragedy woven by man, but he is horrified by its impact. He made a hell of this heaven. Nothing even science and technology could save him. The pandemic called COVID is an eye-opener. The genetic variant of a minute virus could frighten even the mightiest of empires. The world stands still here. No doubt it is a tragedy created by man. We are reaping the harvest of our own evil deeds. ‘The half-naked fakir’ is called Mahatma Gandhi and his words reverberate in the Indian firmament like that of a prophet. “My life is my message”, he uttered proving his life as an experiment with truth. He believed in reforming himself like Henry David Thoreau. The ideal of Sarvodaya sprang up from his deep thought. It is an attitude that aims at the welfare of all. John Ruskin and his work *Unto This Last* inspired him and he practiced the ideas in it. Fasting was used as a means to purify the mind. It turned out to be even a weapon to fight injustice. Observation of silence (Mauna Vrat) was also used by him to strengthen himself. His love towards villages arose out of his consideration towards the poor rustics. Even though he didn’t utter the word ‘ecology’, he was an advocate of it in essence. Over-dependence on machines, he feared would drain human feelings. The present predicament is the result of the over-exploitation of nature and reckless life. Vegetarianism is also promoted by Gandhi. Man must lead a life sanctified by a deep concern towards others including the environment which is a spiritual way of life also. An attitude immersed in human love and consideration towards nature can usher in peace and prosperity.

Keywords: Ecology, Exploitation, Fasting, Mauna Vrat, Vegetarianism

INTRODUCTION

It has been about 1.9 million years since humans first walked on Earth. The initial loyalty and bonding with nature have diminished as humans' potential developed in science and technology, improvising the quality of their living at the cost of the “resources” in nature. The lush green planet gradually became a victim of degradation, remorselessly, at the hands of its own best creation, ‘humans’. The Earth lost nearly 45% of its forest cover. Hazardous waste and gases are throttling all living organisms. Paradoxically tons of food is wasted when massive numbers are starving. To make matters worse masses have plunged into unhealthy food habits inviting innumerable, incurable diseases. Now, the world has been facing a tryst with destiny created out of natural disasters and incurable diseases. And now, the Earth has begun its natural weeding through appalling diseases and calamities. Climate worsened into a terrific incarnation that simmers, freezes, or leaps up wreaking havoc. All these are the result of a catastrophe arising out of a consumerist attitude toward nature. What is needed is a return to the glories of the good old days when people lived in perfect harmony with nature. This is exactly the path of progress preached and practiced by Mahatma Gandhi. The world should go back and take a walk through the lanes that Gandhi walked while driving millions into the path of freedom.

Freedom is the license of an individual to live by his own will, provided, it never loses its path into the whirlpool of selfishness. The word ‘Environment’ or ‘environmental science’ could never be seen in any of Gandhi’s speeches or works. Ecology is really a recent coinage. Gandhian ideals smell a rare sense of environment even though there is no explicit reference. The impact of Gandhian thought is clearly visible in the later years when environmental movements sprang up. He has not only influenced the Chipko or Narmada Bachao Andolan in India but also movements all over the world. It is a well-known fact that his ideas and thoughts have travelled so far as to even enlighten the works of the Roman Greens Party in Europe.

A BOOK AND ITS IMPACTS

Gandhi’s environmental outlook evolved out of the works he read and their impact on him. One such book that had a predominant influence on Gandhi was John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*, a work that made a tremendous change in his outlook on life. Gandhi himself describes his experience of reading the work as ‘The magic spell of a book’. His first experiment into simple living, the Phoenix settlement, has its roots in this book. A book that unabashedly critiques capitalism gave Gandhi sleepless nights. Gandhi’s opinions on fiscal science which sums up his idea of *Sarvodaya* (Universal uplift) were made possible through Ruskin’s book. He derived three striking ideas from Ruskin.

1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all.
2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's, in as much as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work.

3. That life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, washer man is the life worth living. (Gandhi, *An Autobiography*336)

The Phoenix settlement in Durban and the Tolstoy farm outside Johannesburg set up by Gandhi aimed at community living in natural surroundings with minimum material requirements. The ideals that later glittered the life and endeavours of Gandhi such as self-help, simplicity, non-possession, non-violence, and dignity of labour were the hallmarks of these austere settlements. Both children and adults were to help themselves in agriculture, scavenging, handicraft, carpentry, cooking, and whichever arena man can lay his hand on. The main vision of Gandhi was to create a productive community that realizes the need for social service and values citizenship. The virtues of a simple life made him sceptical of the traps of modern civilization. Experimenting with natural remedies was something Gandhi strongly advocated. These farm grounds became experimental grounds for The Earth and Water treatment by Kunhe Adolf Just. Cold mud poultices, fruit juices, and hydropathy were used as a cure for severe fevers and even typhoid. One of the experiments was with his son. Gandhi never held himself or his followers back from taking up even what was considered the stingiest job such as scavenging. From laundry to spinning clothes spanned his self-serving business.

The great perks that Gandhi meant through such acts are to elevate the mindset of man from the boundaries of segregation to the realization of the unity that embraces all humans. He took great care in this idea of realization to spread its hoods to other creatures of the Earth as well. He knew that the Earth is a blessed planet, not a blighted planet. Resources in it are abundant and self-sufficient but overexploitation will play spoiled sport. The present predicament is the result of senseless and careless overexploitation of nature. The pristine planet is defiled by man's greed and selfishness. In his scrupulous want to make everything his own, he has written destruction on the world's horoscope.

The great Norwegian philosopher who coined the term 'deep ecology' Arne Naess was an ardent follower of Gandhi. His books and talks brim with the essentiality of finding one's own self in nature. He explains that 'Gandhi made manifest the internal relation between self-realization, non-violence and what sometimes has been called 'biospheric egalitarianism' and that he was moved by Gandhi's metaphysics 'which contributed to keeping him (the Mahatma) going until his death' (Weber 196). He mentioned that "his work on the philosophy of ecology developed out of his work on Spinoza and Gandhi and his relationship with the mountains of Norway" (Weber 195).

Leo Tolstoy, the finest author of all time, had a huge impact on Gandhi. Tolstoy was someone who even sewed his own slippers. It was in 1909 that Gandhi wrote his first letter to him, a practice which continued till Tolstoy's death.

FOOD, FASTING, AND MIND

Gandhi was a staunch vegetarian. He would have been so happy by the reports of modern research. The research on livestock has revealed:

Cows must consume 16 pounds of vegetation in order to convert them into one pound of flesh. Raising animals for food consumes more than half of all water used in the US. It takes 2,500 gallons of water to produce a pound of meat but only 25 gallons to produce a pound of wheat. (How does eating meat harm the environment?)

The 2006 report *Livestock Long Shadow*, released by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, states that “the livestock sector is a major stressor on many ecosystems and on the planet as a whole. Globally it is one of the largest sources of greenhouse gases and one of the leading casual factors in the loss of biodiversity, and in developed and emerging countries it is perhaps the leading source of water pollution.” (Steinfeld et al. 267)

The reports that a shift to vegetarianism can not only reduce the consumption of resources but can even mitigate climate change are striking. A shift to meat-free diets is the only solution to prevent appalling scenarios.

“Food should be taken as a matter of duty even as a medicine to sustain the body, never for the satisfaction of the palate”. (Gandhi, *The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism* 7).

Gandhi’s food experiments starting with the denial of meat to even giving up salts and pulses and sustaining on fruits or fasting are not only aimed at the welfare of animals or physical health but also hold significant effects on man’s mental functions. Fasting helps man to analyze with clarity and higher cognition the true purpose and priorities of his life. In a world where man is succumbing to terrorism out of fanaticism, war out of greed, and addictions out of passion, prayer, and fasting are the sole outlets, for their powers are immense. Man has lost peace and calmness of mind in his race after shimmering and glittering trivialities. But fastness holds the key to restraining temptations and having the *viveka* (wisdom) to realize between need and want. The nonchalance of children is what Gandhi found from Henry David Thoreau and the karma yoga that he extracted from Bhagavat Gita helped him to escape an addiction to the world. This is a powerful philosophy with a spiritual background to escape from the clutches of greed and prying hunger. Jesus says, “when you fast” not “if you fast”, “If we do not have dominion over our passions, especially those for food and sex, we cannot possess ourselves and put the interests of others in front of our own” (Hrkach). Gandhi’s statement on fasting which appeared in *Young India*, on March 24, 1920, and stated in *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi* is as follows, “A genuine fast cleanses the body, mind, and soul. It crucifies the flesh and to that extent sets the soul free”. Fasting remained Gandhi’s weapon and armor in the stride throughout his life, whether it was his Fasting for an entire week for the moral fall of two people which included his own son at the Phoenix Farm, or using the same in battling Britishers.

MAUN VRAT OF MAHATMA AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL REACH

Gandhi's *maun vrat* (silence) spanning twenty-four hours has significant meanings in Hindu philosophy. Gandhi's silence allowed him to raise his mind into a contemplative state where he becomes amenable to the profound voice within.

When one comes to think of it one cannot help feeling that nearly half the misery of the world would disappear if we, fretting mortals, knew the virtue of silence. Modern civilization has taught us to convert night into day and golden silence into brazen din and noise (Gandhi, *Truth Is God*)

Talking about the political bend of this practice, Gandhi was making the British come down to a level of consultation. In the ecological eyes, it is a way of energy conservation and arraignment of industrial civilization marked by overconsumption and noise. In an era that emphasizes the need to speak out every tith and bit of life, man forgets himself to introspect. Silence is the best medicine for cases ranging from bodily illnesses to domestic quarrels. The silence was a striking thunder to add to Gandhi's non-violent resistance. For him, the silence was illuminating and enlightening in a way that it put one's own conscience into scrutiny, allowing him to be a better self. The COVID pandemic situation has enlightened the world into more grave challenges a man faces despite the disease or its effects i.e. the endurance of man to sit idly, to cut away from the bustle of activities that usually keep him engaged, or the abject condition of being alone. Around the globe, there has been unrest slowly taking its form through suicides and psychological troubles. The idea of silence or introspection has been long lost in this modern world. Man cannot brook anything that goes against his will. COVID is a warning call to the dwellers of this world to question the power and pride they gained through owning the Earth for so long as well as an uproarious effort to tell that the Earth is beyond man. The actions and havoc man cause to the environment are the result of his unstable and wavering mind. Once the abnormality is cured, the whole planet can escape the trauma. The silence and its truth would compel him to trace his roots, step into the soil, feel the soul of plants and beings around and finally embrace the potentiality of the Universe.

DAMAGE IS DONE: POVERTY AND NEGLECTED NATURE

Gandhi's statements given in the book 'The *Mind of Mahatma*':

GOD FORBID that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts. Unless the capitalists of India help to avert that tragedy by becoming

trustees of the welfare of the masses in an altruistic spirit, they will end either by destroying the masses or being destroyed by them.

Mahatma had a profound understanding and knowledge of the pros and cons of Industrialization. Though it is widely believed that Gandhi was against modern civilization and its shift to industrialization, it is noteworthy to recognize that he was not so. He says:

If we could have electricity in every village home, I should not mind villagers plying their implements and tools, with the help of electricity. But then the village communities or the State would own powerhouses just as they have their grazing pastures (Kalland and Persoon⁷⁰)

What he opposed was the centralization of power among the very few who tend to pull the charades of industrialization. Once it is localized the tendency of “unnatural accumulation of hoards in the pockets of the few” (Gandhi, *Village Industries*) could be avoided. Power and wealth accumulation among the capitalists, bureaucrats, managers, etc. could cripple the poor and deprive them further. Instead, if the villages are made self-sufficient with the aid of modern civilization, India could progress in a sustainable manner without splitting human navel chord with soil. Gandhi didn't envision Indians being in the rack of machines. He wanted to progress with self-awareness. Giant pieces of machinery should not blind man in such a way that he takes for granted anything and everything in nature. It could be strongly stated that the current scenario of nature hitting back at man, is the by-product of plunging deep into the pits of modernity.

Modernity and industrialization might have improved living conditions tremendously. Better living and wealth have become the sole purpose of mankind. But the backlash has begun to happen. On one side massive pollution, water shortages, extreme climatic conditions, and depletion of soil and water are resulting in the degradation of the Earth, inviting calamities. On the other side, it's the attitude and philosophy of man that have changed over the years. Nature has become for him only a playground to be hollowed out and logged. Changing human lifestyle has made man greedy, insensitive, possessive, and murderous in his pursuit of plenty. They have forgotten that there is a self-waiting to be tapped into.

The famous Indian historian and economist Ramachandra Guha apart from citing Gandhi's affinity to villages and the environment in his article 'Mahatma Gandhi and the Environmental Movement', also mentions how Gandhi turned his back on the environmental crisis in cities. According to him, those with a focus on urban environmental problems will find little help from Gandhi. But as a contradiction to this, one can take a look at Gandhi's philosophies. Gandhi stated, “India lives in the villages”. He stated the probable danger in bonding with the machine world long before the Green Revolution hit India in the 1960s. Long before had Gandhi given the solution to the current crisis to which the metropolitan cities had fallen now. In all his ideas regarding village development and plain living, he had foreseen the black smoke that may fume

up from nature, mercilessly wounded by man's pride. And he knew once the damage is done, it's irrevocable.

The quest for plain living was deeply ingrained in Gandhi. The episode where Gandhi forces his wife Kasturba Gandhi to give up the expensive ornaments gifted by the African settlers is noticeable. The passion for a simple life and elevated thought shaped his life from tip to toe. Unfortunately, modern civilization has brought us into a state where the concept of plain living has long been forgotten. It is very strange, how a man leaves the shreds of villages to urbanize in cities, monopolize the riches and power, and later retreats to villages, the same place they started from, in search of wood, limestone, coal, bauxite, and various sources of energy. But this results in the displacement of the dwellers of these lands rendering them homeless. All these are done for the very small group that enjoys tremendous wealth with their fortune booming. The glitter and glamour of the life they reveal have the sweat and blood of common people. Over 150 million children work in exploitive and dangerous conditions, 40 million people in conditions of slavery and these are the ones who produce our everyday products. "Almost half the world — over three billion people — live on less than \$2.50 a day. According to UNICEF, 22,000 children die each day due to poverty" (Shah). According to UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), an estimated 1.3 billion tons of food is wasted each year. The wasted food costs 2.6 trillion USD annually which is four times plenty to feed all the 815 million hungry people in the world (Depta).

Here comes the quintessence of Gandhi's critique on Industrialization, warning on centralization and the ethos in plain living. Gandhi's statements from *Harijan*, 1 September 1946 as recorded in *Mind of Mahatma*

I do not believe that industrialization is necessary in any case for any country. It is much less so for India. Indeed, I believe that Independent India can only discharge her duty towards a groaning world by adopting a simple but ennobled life by developing her thousands of cottages and living at peace with the world. High thinking is inconsistent with complicated material life based on high speed imposed on us by Mammon worship. All the graces of life are possible only when we learn the art of living nobly. Whether such plain living is possible for an isolated nation, however large geographically and numerically, in the face of a world armed to the teeth and in the midst of pomp and circumstance is a question open to the doubt of a sceptic. The answer is straight and simple. If plain life is worth living, then the attempt is worth making, even though only an individual or group makes the effort.

SUSTAINABLE LIVING

Once when Kaka Kalelkar, Gandhi's disciple and social activist, made a toothbrush using Neem leaves, Gandhi asked him to cut off the used part and save the latter to brush again the next day. Neem trees being plenty in the area Kalelkar questioned the need to do so. Gandhi's reply is of

universal significance, “I know we can, but that does not mean we should. We do not have the right. We must not fling away a datum until it becomes too dry to be used.” (Singh and Nainy). So gracefully concluded is the essence of sustainable living in his lines. That was a time when the concepts of reuse or recycling had not come to light. Gandhi’s realization of oneness was not only with humans but with every element of creation. An incident at Phoenix settlement testifies to this. Once when he accidentally came across two mambas risking his own life, he stood still without killing them, retaining the principle *ahimsa (non-violence)*, reflecting on the statement “Love overcometh all things, and man should fear nothing that God has created.” (Potpourri). This harmonious relationship he exhibited came from Gandhi’s attitude of eyeing everything with love and dignity.

CONCLUSION

The consequences of the erroneous acts seem to have come to fruition with unprecedented disasters happening around the world. When the world dawned on a new era of 2020, people witnessed through their television the jaw-dropping sight of the burning Earth. The fierce dance of fire in New South Wales and Victoria province of Australia, burning at a height of two thirty feet, is estimated to have engulfed 18.6 million hectares, with a huge loss in thickets and animal life. The smoke appeared as a frightening mist in the New Zealand sky which is two thousand kilometres away from Australia. This ‘black summer’ was the aftermath of high atmospheric temperatures. Similar is the news of the increased bleaching of coral reefs or the gradual rise in sea levels due to the melting of glaciers. Humanity’s present challenges could not be wholly wiped out. Yet through a coherent and willing analysis, outlook and action, changes could be slowed down. Of course, Gandhi does not have the medicines to heal the bruises once made. Yet, there is no doubt that the ideals he highly held, thought, taught, and practiced in his daily life, can act as lubricants for a smooth sail. Gandhi might not have done any study on the environment. But his life has everything one needs to learn on living. The morning walks, diets that consisted of fruits, intermittent periods of *maun vrat* (silence) and fasting, auspices for small things, moderation in consumption, and love for *ahimsa* show his basal approach to life. His thoughts, actions, and works were in congruence with the flow of life source. No great philosopher can demand more than this regarding environmental science. Gandhi’s practices though shadowed in the light of physical wellness have paramount psychological gravity. A change cannot be expected until the mindset improves. The refined thoughts make man righteous. When the whole of humanity steps out, attuning to a higher purpose, no hurdle can stop them. What still remains on Earth could only be saved by a heart polished with these ideals.

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