

Echoes of Ecological Consciousness in *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*

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Abstract: During the past few years, there has been an alarming increase in the human's non-sustainable attitude towards nature. Changing lifestyle of mankind has strained the natural resource which has prompted towards the urgency to protect the ecology. Life of Mahatma Gandhi is the best example of sustainable development for the world, and it can plausibly be inferred from his famous statement that "the earth has enough to satisfy everyone's needs but not everyone's greed." The ideology of man's insatiable materialistic greed intensifies the need for Gandhian eco-philosophical thoughts. Gandhi's writings contribute to the eco-philosophical notions of nature and vociferously criticize the man's exploitation of nature through excessive materialism and industrial civilization. The present paper intends to showcase Mahatma Gandhi as an eco-philosopher; the nature and applicability of his thoughts pertaining to ecology imbued in his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth*.

Keywords: Ecology, Philosophy, Nature, Autobiography, Waste

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi was a revolutionary man who had an extensive vision that proved to be beneficial for the community on a global level, who believed in the human existence and their survival in its true spirit. T. N. Khoshoo describes Gandhi as "a practicing ecological yogi", as he continues to guide us to observe simplicity, self-introspection, tranquillity, renunciation of extra wants, and learn self-reliance. He continues to inspire everyone to be mindful of the interests of the feeblest and the underprivileged; and it is from these very principles that Mahatma Gandhi developed his notions of "sustainable development". Gandhi saw that unless human dwelled in peace with nature and ceased exploiting it, he would undoubtedly move towards the road of destruction. In the words of Gandhi "man has no power to create life, therefore, he has no right to destroy life." His insights regarding the environment provide a practical means to improve one's quality of life. His vision, knowledge, and experiences are vital not only for the future of mankind, but for all time. Prof. Shreekrishna Jha, Director of the Gandhian Institute of Studies, Rajghat, Varanasi observes, "Gandhi is the propounder of a kind of life, culture and society which will never lead to environmental problems. ... Gandhi tried to carry his message to the masses through the life he himself led. This is what made him an environmentalist with a difference."

Gandhi can be considered as an environmentalist not merely because of his vision and his philosophy, but also because of the exemplary eco-friendly lifestyle he led, for which he is frequently referred to as an "apostle of applied human ecology" (Khoshoo 1996). He has a distinctive resonance with all those who were concerned for the

environment, followed naturopathy, vegetarianism, practiced the ideologies of non-violence, resisted the plunders of capitalists, or bestowed animals with dignity like fellow humans. Ramachandra Guha calls him, “an early Environmentalist and the single most important influence on the environmental movement.” His ecological vision is a response to destruction of ecology that directly affects people’s way of life and promise for survival. Gandhi believed that changing lifestyles and globalization had a significant influence on the environment, resulting in serious repercussions such as climate change, pollution, and deforestation, lack of drinkable water, starvation, soil erosion, and overall exploitation of environment. Gandhi thought that there's still hope for transforming the superficial way of life into a appropriate manner of living that is, in harmony with nature, which might be adjusted for the welfare of the entire globe.

The Story of My Experiments with Truth (1958) spans Mahatma Gandhi’s life experiences from childhood till 1921. His life story was, although published in weekly sections in his periodical *Navjivan*, was then compiled in the shape of this book. In the text, Gandhi has provided recollections of his early life, child marriage, relationship with his parents and wife, school life experiences, his study tour to London, endeavours in becoming a English gentleman, experiments in dietetics, his South Africa visit, his experiences of racial discrimination, his pursuit for dharma, social work in Africa, come back to India, and his steady efforts in bringing a political revolution and community engagements. The autobiography ends with the episode on discussion of Nagpur session of the Congress in the year, 1915. Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography *My Experiments with Truth* is the depiction of his pursuit of truth, true knowledge, and his struggle to put religious and moral ideas into effect in all the dimensions of his life. His principles propelled him toward a series of dietary, educational, medical, political, and social experiments, which he narrates with utmost honesty. His autobiography thus positions Gandhi as a social scientist, who tried to analyse the ills of society and to find a solution for them. He acquired a great sense of self-awareness, which led to the development of a broader social consciousness. Gandhi’s autobiography has got a universal appeal on account of its truthful representation of life.

Following this introduction, the paper briefly highlights the various concepts which will help to ascertain the various elements of the ecological consciousness present in Gandhi’s autobiography.

Dietetics

My Experiments with Truth brings forth Gandhi’s experiments with dietetics, his practice of vegetarianism and fasting. Being born into a Vaishnav family, which forbade eating meat and eggs, he became ‘a vegetarian due to custom and tradition’. Although, as a child, he did consume non vegetarian food a few times during a rebellious stint but later, as a young student while living in England, he read Henry Salt's pamphlet "A Plea for Vegetarianism," which entirely convinced him to become a vegetarian. He says,

My faith in vegetarianism grew on me from day to day. Salt's book whetted my appetite for dietetic studies. I went in for all books available on vegetarianism and read them. One of these, Howard Williams' *The Ethics of*

Diet, was 'biographical history of the literature of humane dietetics from the earliest period to the present day'. It tried to make out, that all philosophers and prophets from Pythagoras and Jesus down to those of the present age were vegetarians. Dr. Anna Kingsford's *The Perfect Way in Diet* was also an attractive book. Dr. Allinson's writings on health and hygiene were likewise very helpful. He advocated a curative system based on regulation of the dietary of patients. Himself a vegetarian, he prescribed for his patients also a strictly vegetarian diet. The result of reading all this literature was that dietetic experiments came to take an important place in my life. Health was the principal consideration of these experiments to begin with. (Gandhi 71)

“From that day forward,” Gandhi states in his autobiography, “I may claim to have become a vegetarian by choice” — and the proliferation of vegetarianism “henceforward became my mission.” Gandhi also warned against abrasive relationships with non-vegetarians and suggested that vegetarians need to be tolerant of others. Gandhi was also a believer in fasting and saw fasting as a means of ascertaining the true needs of the body and preserving its ecological equanimity. He remarks,

I therefore came to attach greater importance to fasting or having only one meal a day on holidays. And if there was some occasion for penance or the like, I gladly utilized it too for the purpose of fasting. But I also saw that, the body now being drained more effectively, the food yielded greater relish and the appetite grew keener. It dawned upon me that fasting could be made as powerful a weapon of indulgence as of restraint. Many similar later experiences of mine as well as of others can be adduced as evidence of this startling fact. (Gandhi 361)

While fasting developed self- restraint of the mind, Gandhiji emphasised that restraint of the body too that is, of the sensual urges. He advises, “Fasting and similar discipline is, therefore, one of the means to the end of self-restraint, but it is not all, and if physical fasting is not accompanied by mental fasting, it is bound to end in hypocrisy and disaster.” (Gandhi 374)

Animal protection

Mahatma Gandhi had a straightforward concern for animals. He believed that annihilation of any living being's natural habitat is *himsa* which also includes violence done towards animals — the devotee of ahimsa (or non-violence) “shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature.” (395). He believed that “the more helpless a creature, the more entitled it is to protection by man from the cruelty of man” (267). The cry of the voiceless animals who are considered as the lower orders of creation is all the more forcible because they cannot speak for themselves. Non- violence towards animals in general may be viewed as an obligation for those who practise ahimsa. The need to refrain from killing animals in general, and hence to protect them, must be acknowledged as an unassailable fact.

He also protested against the animal sacrifices in the name of devotion to God, he says “To my mind the life of a lamb is no less precious than that of a human being. I should be unwilling to take the life of a lamb for the sake of the human body.” Gandhi abstained from killing even the life-threatening animals like snake and scorpion. As he writes in his autobiography “I do not want to live at the cost of the life even of a snake.” Gandhi believed in universal coexistence and upheld the idea of respect for all life. In this way, his principle of non-violence is a universal law of life, manifesting itself in love for all animals.

Excessive Materialism and Industrial Civilization

Gandhi disapproved the arrangements of urbanisation and industrialization, he asserted that, “the distinguishing characteristic of modern civilization is an indefinite multiplication of wants”. Gandhi was critical of the way people relates themselves to the environment in the contemporary age. He strongly endorsed the idea of harmonious coexistence in which industrialisation coexists with local handicrafts and human labour. He believed that village handicrafts and labour are the most direct solutions to true human needs and desires; and although he easily accepted the use of machines when it is unavoidable, he opposes its overuse. From an environmental standpoint, he notes that man's harmonious connection with nature has become unbalanced due to his overdependence on machines. According to him, a balanced connection can be discovered in manual human labour, where machines are not needed, as he declares that, “to forget how to dig the earth and tend the soil is to forget ourselves.”

Environmental Equality

Human life, according to Gandhi, is dependent on ecological balance and environmental equality. Nature belongs to everyone; neither corporations nor governments can claim it as their private property. He thought that when nature is acknowledged as a blessing given on all, the cause of humanity will be properly served. This type of principle would allow for the implementation of human rights principles within an environmental scope, such as anti-discrimination rules, the need for social participation, and the protection of vulnerable groups, within an environmental context. As a result, Gandhi believed that environmental justice must symbolise a growing knowledge of environmental concerns and their relationship to social justice in underprivileged communities.

Conclusion

In the present times, the kind of development taking place is at the cost of sacrificing our mother nature which is not ecologically sustainable. In the quest for fulfilling his limitless needs, human has misused nature to a great extent. The ideology of man's insatiable materialistic greed intensifies the need for Gandhian eco-philosophical thoughts. Outlining the interconnection between environment, development, and sustainability, Gandhi conceded

that life always involves certain amount of violence to nature but the important aspect is to minimize it to the maximum extent possible. In the cue of preceding analysis, he aptly suggested, “The earth, the air, the land and the water are not an inheritance from our fore fathers but on loan from our children. So, we have to handover to them at least as it was handed over to us”.

Thus, his thought and philosophy which is related to development, anti-modernity, sustainability and humanity, makes Gandhian eco-philosophy relevant and applicable in the present time and the times to come.

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