

## Expounding Gandhian Philosophy of Non-violence in Deep Ecological Perspective

Dr. Banajit Sharma

Asst Professor

Dept. of Philosophy

Bongaigaon College, Assam, India

---

**ABSTRACT:** Gandhi's entire thought is based on his ethical idea of non-violence. Non-violence as means of living a beautiful-life is the central thesis of his philosophy of activism. Nonviolence implies the positive note of love to fellow-beings. This idea of fellow-being is not confined to just fellow human beings but to all life forms of the planet. Gandhi believes that any human conflict can be justifiably resolved through nonviolence. A human conflict is not just a human versus human conflict. In the present day environmental crisis, a human conflict is seen in a broader perspective. Thereby, Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence has an appeal from all quarters, be it man to man or man to non-human life forms. Although Gandhi is widely acclaimed as a statesman of world-class for his social and economic activisms, a careful scrutiny of his biography and diverse works shows his non-violent approach towards all life forms, human as well as nonhuman beings. Gandhian approach of non-violence, as such, is an ecocentric approach in the context of environmental philosophy of the twentieth century. This paper is an attempt to give an exposition of Gandhian view of non-violence in the context of deep ecology of Arne Naess. This paper also seeks to make an exposition of Gandhi's Vegetarian movement in England and South Africa as well as his view of Brahmacharya which are essentially connected to non-violence and have some important bearings upon the present day environmentalism.

**KEY WORDS:** Non-violence, environmentalism, deep-ecology, vegetarianism, Self-realization

---

Date of Submission: 18-10-2020

Date of Acceptance: 02-11-2020

---

### I. INTRODUCTION:

Gandhism, propounded by M K Gandhi (1869-1948), is a basically a spiritual philosophy based on the beliefs and the life Gandhi used to live in his individual and social life. Gandhi's entire thought is based on his ethical ideas of truth and non-violence. The term "non-violence" is not an exact equivalent for the Sanskrit word "Ahimsa". Ahimsa connotes the positive value of love rather than the negative value of abstinence from harming other life forms. In its negative form, Gandhi takes Ahimsa as not injuring any living being, whether by body or mind. In its positive form, Gandhian ahimsa means the largest love, the greatest charity. Thus Ahimsa or Nonviolence has negative and positive aspects in dialectical relationship. Both aspects are necessary for maintaining the health of nature. Negative nonviolence instructs us not to harm nature. Positive nonviolence fosters an inclination to treat all beings and nature as a whole with love, compassion, respect, and service. It calls for a lifestyle based on simplicity and the search for relative truth. Though Gandhi was a devout Hindu, he was very much influenced by Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity. The principle of nonviolence is not based on a particular religious worldview. In the case of ahimsa he converts this ancient moral principle into a principle of action that can be used as a force in the world to create social change.

Although Gandhism is not widely discussed under the light of environmental related philosophy, one can find a number of elements of present environmentalism in his life and works. Gandhi's writings from diverse sources and day-to-day lifestyle show that his moral principles offered in diverse phases of life have an extension to non-human world. Particularly, in some select writings, one can find certain day to day prescriptions of what should be the human-nature relations. In other words, the Gandhian philosophy found in his approach of non-violence is an ecocentric approach in the context of environmental philosophy. This paper is an attempt to give an exposition of Gandhian view of non-violence in the context of deep ecology, an alternative catchphrase for *eco-centrism* or *biocentrism*.

Deep ecology is considered as the most radical form of environmentalism. It is basically a trend in the field of environmental protection movement propounded by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009). As an environmental movement it argues for the right of not just animals but also inanimate elements like an ecosystem. Deep ecology holds the view that one has to recognise the value in all species of organisms and of the ecosystems. It makes the claim that everything is connected to everything else.

Naess, the father of deep ecology, acknowledges that his philosophy is indebted in a large extent to the Gandhian vision of the treatment of the natural world. Naess' book on Gandhi, *Gandhi and Group Conflict* published in 1974 explores the norms and hypotheses employed by Gandhi in his nonviolent campaigns. According to Naess, Gandhi's philosophy has two ultimate norms: "Seek complete self-realization" and "Seek truth." This paper is an attempt to see that in Gandhism there is a variant of ecocentrism of contemporary radical environmentalism. This attempt has been made here under the light of Naess' acknowledgement of his indebtedness to Gandhi in formulating deep ecology as a worldwide grass root ecological movement. This paper also seeks to make an exposition of Gandhi's Vegetarian movement in England and South Africa as well as his view of Brahmacharya which are essentially connected to non-violence and have some important bearings upon the present day environmentalism.

## **II. GANDHIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM:**

The term "environmentalism" is normally used in the sense of environmental awareness or environmental consciousness. The consciousness for the non-human life form is inbuilt in Gandhian philosophy. The different sketches of his practical life in South Africa and India exhibit his concern for the natural environment although western environmentalism have appeared to take a formal shape from *A Sand County Almanac*, a book written by American environmentalist Aldo Leopold in 1949, that is exactly one year later from the demise of Gandhi.

Gandhian environmentalism is inbuilt in his philosophy and exclusively linked up with the concept of nonviolence. Ideas like unity, interconnectedness, interdependence, service, sacrifice, cooperation, truth, and self-realization are intimately related in Gandhian concept of nonviolence. These are the frequently used vocabularies in Gandhism that contribute to an evolving environmental ethic. The continuity of reciprocal interaction or, in Gandhian terms, service, within ecosystems contributes to the well-being of each individual, as well as to the well-being of the ecosystem as a whole, giving it stability and harmony. Violence often indirectly harms many other organisms that are connected to and dependent on the organisms that were directly harmed.

Gandhi believes that an industrial society is selfish, competitive and grossly destructive of nature. On the other hand, the preindustrial civilizations, Gandhi believes, were marked by an imperative restriction upon, and a strict regulating of man's indefinite wants. He advocates a voluntary simplicity that can minimize wants. Gandhi says, "The world has enough for everybody's need, but not enough for one person's greed." Therefore, his focus was on the simplicity of life based on minimum human needs. Gandhi practised everything that he believed. As he suggested for recycling to minimize one's wants, his own letters were written on the back of used paper. Guha writes, "When he died in January 1948 this man, whose followers were reckoned in the tens of millions, and who helped bring down one of the most powerful empires in history, had possessions that could fit in a small box: two or three changes of clothes, a clock, a pair of spectacles, and a few other odds and ends" (*Environmentalism* 30).

Gandhi's strong criticism of industrialization provides a beginning for arguments against ecological destruction. Gandhi emphatically objected to large-scale mechanized industrialization because it compels human beings to dominate and exploit the earth for their own purposes without considering the possible repercussions. He argues that mass industrialization inevitably violates moral standards (Gandhi 1916, CW 13, pp. 310-317). As an alternative to industrialization, Gandhi proposes local industry based on the decentralized model of village life where people live close to nature.

Gandhi's discovery of the Vegetarian movement in England was important to him as a growing experience. The vow given to his mother determined his vegetarian diet when he arrived in England. He even excluded eggs from his diet because of what he believed would be her definition of vegetarianism. When in South Africa he came to lay increasing stress on the moral and ethical aspects of vegetarianism, this was an addition to the economic and hygienic aspects. According to Gandhi, Brahmacharya is more than 'chastity', involving the conservation of energy for service, for it covers the mastery of all the senses. There should be a reduction in consumption, a simplification and reduction in needs (Lannoy 431). According to Gandhi, meat-eating also involved "unnecessary pain to and cruelty towards harmless animals." Again, while in Calcutta he made a visit to the temple of Kali. There the scenes of animal sacrifice upset him greatly. "To my mind the life of a lamb is no less precious than that of a human being. ... I hold that, the more helpless a creature, the more entitled it is to protection by man from the cruelty of man" (Autobiography, Pt. III. 18). In an article published in the *Natal Mercury* for the 4th February 1896, Gandhi stressed on the economic argument for vegetarianism:

"Vegetarian foods are the cheapest diet, and their general adoption will go a long way towards mitigating, if not altogether suppressing, the rapidly, growing pauperism side by side with the rapid march of the materialistic civilization and the accumulation of immense riches in the hands of a few." (CWMG, I, 294)

It is pertinent to mention that as a child Gandhi spent much of his time outdoors, away from the small, dark, airless rooms of home. He played with other children on the beach or in the streets nearby, took long walks, made friends with animals he met or indulged in his passion for gardening. Throughout his life he was

affected by the beauty of natural scenery and awed by the stars. There was no aesthetic snobbishness in his appreciation; he saw beauty not only in the rainbow but also in ordinary vegetables (CWMG, LXXXIII, 265). Gandhi offers a world-affirming non-dualistic philosophy. He speaks about self which is not of narrow egocentric interest. The self which is to be realised is the supreme or universal Self, the Atman. Self-realization is not an "ego-trip". Gandhi believes in Advaita (non-duality). He believes in the essential unity of man and all that lives. From his own faith, Gandhi says that there is no essential difference between one creature and another. He held life "not only in man and animal but in plant and flower, as sacred." He believes that the whole world as kith and kin (CWMG, LX, 45; LXII, 285). Though the world may appear transitory and impermanent there was something that persisted, "changeless and endless", even when a tree fell or a leaf withered. (CWMG, XIV, 116) The Self-realization of humanity was to be attained through the service of God through His creation, as the servant of the created order. According to him, the liberation of each was tied up with the liberation of all.

### **III. GANDHISM AND DEEP ECOLOGY:**

Arne Naess is a recognised world authority on Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence and has incorporated Gandhi into his personal ecological philosophy (Sessions 134). Naess was influenced by Gandhi's vision of non-duality (*Advaita*). Naess directly applies the Gandhian vision of unity among all forms of life to his deep ecology movement, arguing that by identifying oneself with nature, one is naturally prompted to protect the environment.

Like Gandhism, Deep Ecology encourages an egalitarian attitude not only towards all members of the ecosphere but also to all identifiable entities in the ecosphere. It is the claim that all living things have equal moral worth. They are of equal intrinsic value. At a fundamental level, all organisms are intrinsically related in a bio-spherical net or field. Just like in the ancient religious traditions that generated ahimsa, Gandhi's views rest on an understanding of all life as interrelated. In this view the well-being or suffering of one affects all others.

Naess advocates the universal right of all life-forms. According to him right to live is one and same for all individuals, all species. Naess thereby rejects any view that attributes one more right to live and blossom than that of another of a particular species. "Plants and animals also have a right to unfolding and self-realization. They have the right to live" (*Ecology* 165). Naess says that the right of living beings to live is a universal right. This right cannot be quantified. The biospherical egalitarian principle contradicts any quantification status. Naess writes, "living beings have a right (or intrinsic or inherent value, or value in themselves) to live and blossom that is the same for all. If we speak of differences in rights or value we do not speak of the rights or value I have in mind. It is not meaningful to speak of degrees of intrinsic or inherent value when speaking of the right of individuals to live and blossom" ("Equality..." 223).

The concept of self-realization in Gandhi's philosophy has become the central spiritual principle of deep ecology. Gandhi speaks about the self-realization of nonhuman living beings. He believes in the success and failure of the spirituality of the whole world with the spirituality of just one man. The central thesis of his philosophy is nonviolence. It is a philosophy of activism. It recommends choosing select personal actions or attitude only which reduces the tendency of violence. One of his principles suggests fighting antagonisms, not antagonists. These principles may suggest an environmental activist work on the root cause of environmental degradation by changing the attitudes towards the nonhuman environment.

According to George Sessions, "Arne Naess is a recognised world authority on Gandhi's philosophy and has incorporated Gandhi into his personal ecological philosophy" ("Wildness... 134). In his article titled 'Self-realization', Naess writes that his idea of 'ecological self' is metaphysically influenced by Gandhi. Specifically, Naess was influenced by Gandhi's vision of non-duality (*Advaita*). Naess directly applies the Gandhian vision of unity among all forms of life to his deep ecology movement, arguing that by identifying oneself with nature, one is naturally prompted to protect the environment. Naess writes,

As a student and admirer since 1930 of Gandhi's non-violent direct actions in bloody conflict, I am inevitably influenced by his metaphysics which to him personally furnished tremendously powerful motivation and which contributed to keeping him going until his death. ("Self-Realization..." 38)

Self-realization for Naess, as for Gandhi, constitutes a realization of the broader Self and an ever-widening identification with the interests, and often with the sufferings, of another. Self-realization is active and involves the maximal realization of potential, joy being part of the process. In Gandhi's view of the self, human beings contain divine spirit and are essentially all one. The individual self is interconnected with all other beings. According to Gandhi, "For we are all tarred with the same brush and are children of one and same Creator, and as such the divine powers within us are infinite. To slight a single human being is to slight those divine powers, and thus to harm not only that being, but with him, the whole world." (*The essential Gandhi* 83)

The Gandhian vision of unity among all living beings inspires in formulating deep ecology principles. Naess particularly praises Gandhi's view of identification of oneself with the rest of nature. He cites some examples of Gandhian non-violent thought that support his concept of realisation of ecological or greater Self. Gandhi in his ashrams allowed the unhindered movement of snakes, scorpions, spiders etc. for which the

European companions who lived with him were taken aback. What Naess wants to justify is that Self-realization in a wide sense can be practised. Naess further maintains, "Thus, Gandhi recognised a basic common right to live and blossom, to self-realization in a wide sense applicable to any being that can be said to have interests or needs. Gandhi made manifest the internal relation between self-realization, non-violence, and what has sometimes been called biospherical egalitarianism" ("Self-Realization..." 39).

Deep ecology conceives that any natural entity does not belong to a particular state or a particular community or humanity alone. Humans use natural resources to meet their vital needs only. Though the term "vital needs" is used to considerable differences in its meaning, in a very plain language it means minimum essentials for the sustenance of all. According to Naess, vital needs are seen as the needs of the ecosystem. At the same time, it is meant considering the needs of other species as the needs of humankind. In this process of comprehending the needs of nonhuman nature, there is no conflict of interest. It is long-ranged and a deep approach Naess's formulation of deep ecology is a personal system and shares with Gandhi Self-realization, the "priority rule of nearness", vigorous nonviolence which recognizes that to live necessitates some killing and exploitation, and a move away from a stress on consumption to one that would satisfy vital needs (Dasgupta 10-11).

Naess' book on Gandhi, *Gandhi and Group Conflict* published in 1974 explores the norms and hypotheses employed by Gandhi in his nonviolent campaigns. According to Naess, Gandhi's philosophy has two ultimate norms: "Seek complete self-realization" and "Seek truth." Gandhi offers a world-affirming non-dualistic philosophy. He believes in the essential unity of man and all that lives. From his own faith, Gandhi says that there is no essential difference between one creature and another. He held life "not only in man and animal but in plant and flower, as sacred." Non-violence is a means to realize this essential identity among all life forms. Genuine self-interest includes the interest of all. Identification with others and nature as a whole allows one to realize one's genuine self-interest.

According to Gandhi, man's biological needs make it impossible to accept complete non-killing as an ideal. Unavoidable violence, or violence which is necessary for fulfilling vital needs, is not morally wrong, whereas unnecessary violence towards any part of nature is morally wrong. Unnecessary acts which undermine the balance or health of ecosystems are wrong. Like Arne Naess, Gandhi also advocates a realistic egalitarianism. Gandhi observes that "It is impossible to sustain one's body without the destruction of other bodies to some extent" (Young India, November 4, 1926). Man cannot sustain his body without killing some form of life for his food and such destruction of life is justified. Not only for biological necessity, but also for other practical necessity one needs to kill some life forms. For example, killing some life forms for the protection of someone as the shield for another life may also be considered as justified.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION:**

Gandhi's social ethics that revolves round the idea of nonviolence is the basis of the Naessian interpretation of man-environment interaction. Nonviolence, in the Gandhian sense of term, is the most basic condition for the fellow-feeling to all the components of human and non-human nature. As such, the ultimate aim of nonviolence used in the context of natural environment is to maintain the integrity and stability of nature. Here lies the root where the living beings can maximize their potentials. This depends on maximal diversity and complexity within ecosystems. Gandhi's practical life, like the deep ecology of Naess, reflects that he believes in ethical extensionism of nonhuman entities. To

In the conclusion it can be said that nonviolence and truth in Gandhism are mutually reinforcing. Nonviolence is essentially a quest to understand the deepest truth about reality, and to find ways to live in accordance with that truth. Gandhi is right in holding that there is an Ultimate Truth. A human being strives to realize this truth. Nonviolence is a method to understand the truth, and truthfulness enables the practice of nonviolence. Here one can find an optimistic note for it believes that protection of the natural environment lies in understanding the ultimate truth. This truth consists in understanding one's place in nature. If this perspective is seen under the light of Naessian deep ecology, non-violence is a method to understand the ecological truth of our interconnected and interdependent relationship with nature. The truth is that we are inter connected. One is just a part in the greater realm of the things. In turn, with the realization of this truth that in the web of things, living and non-living, one is just a part like the rest of the things, one is encouraged to practice the nonviolence towards nature, because all are felt as the fellow beings. In this process one feels an internal urge to live a simple life which is the basis of an ecocentric perspective. This process necessarily urges one to the practice of nonviolence because they compel humans to minimize their impacts on nature. And, minimizing the impact on nature is the first step of a much-needed realistic environmentalism.

#### **REFERENCES:**

- [1]. Bandyopadhyaya, J. (2000) Social and Political Thought of Gandhi. Howrah: Manuscript India.
- [2]. Clark, John P. (2014) "What is Living in Deep Ecology?" *The Trumpeter*, Volume 30, Number 157-183.
- [3]. Dasgupta, Sugata. (1982) 'Towards a No-Poverty Society', *Social Development Issues*, VI. 29 4-14.

- [4]. Gandhi, M K. (1951) *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Boston: Boston Press.
- [5]. Gandhi, M K. (1969) *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volumes I to XC*. New Delhi: The Publications Division of the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India.
- [6]. Gandhi, M K. (2002). *The essential Gandhi: An Anthology of his Writings on his Life, Work, and Ideas*. In L. Fischer (Ed.). New York: Vintage Books.
- [7]. Guha, Ramachandra. (2000) *Environmentalism: A Global History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- [8]. Kinsley, D. (1995). *Ecology and religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-cultural Perspective*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- [9]. Lannoy, Richard. (1974) *"The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society"*, London: Oxford University Press.
- [10]. Naess, Arne. (1973) "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement: A Summary." *Inquiry*, 16:1, 95 - 100.
- [11]. Naess, Arne. (1987) "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World." *The Trumpeter* 4(3): 35-42.
- [12]. Naess, Arne. (1989) *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*. Trans. David Rothenberg, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- [13]. Sessions, G. (2006) "Wildness, Cyborgs, and Our Ecological Future: Reassessing the Deep Ecology Movement." *Trumpeter*. Volume 22, Number 2. 121-182.

Dr. Banajit Sharma. "Expounding Gandhian Philosophy of Non-violence in Deep Ecological Perspective." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 09(10), 2020, pp 63-67. Journal DOI- 10.35629/7722