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Echoes of the Earth: Re-examining Gandhi's Ecological Ethos in the Era of Climate Crisis

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Abstract:

In a time of escalating environmental crisis due to climate change, loss of biodiversity, and rampant natural resource consumption, Mahatma Gandhi's 'Eco-conscious Philosophy' offers a compelling alternative to contemporary forms of industrial discourse. This paper will build on Eric Hobsbawm's position that eco-sustainable practices are the imperative for human life, and not a choice, by citing Gandhi's critique of modernity in terms of contemporary debates within environmental ethics. Contrary to the portrayal of Gandhi as an anti-modernist romantic, truth lies in the fact that the Mahatma offered a norprofound ethical and political critique of industrial civilization as violence against humankind and against Nature. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi rejected the equation of progress as a synonym for technological progress, espousing a model based on non-violence (Ahimsa) against the Earth as well as all forms of life. His Sevagram ashram served as a refuge for both spiritual seekers and those in need of political asylum. It was also a remarkable example of ecological living—a hands-on experiment in sustainability that embraced simple technologies, organic farming, local craftsmanship, and an education system rooted in cooperation and a deep sense of environmental responsibility. Likewise, Gandhi's endorsement of Swadeshi and Khadi, generally interpreted as demonstrative of nationalist ideology had important ecological implications, including a critique of consumerism related to economies based on the production of want and excess. His theory of Gram Swaraj (village self-rule) presents a radical alternative development theory - one that is local, participatory, and ecologically sensitive. This paper claims that Gandhi's vision not only subverts the anthropocentric and exploitative quality of modern patterns of development, but also envisages a manner of perceiving sustainability in ethical and practical terms. Furthermore, this paper traces the points of convergence between Gandhian philosophy and American Transcendentalism as practiced by Thoreau, and presented in *Walden*. Although Gandhi never used the term ecology in his writing, in the light of today's ecological crisis, it is quite timely to include The Mahatma's life and thoughts into an eco-conscious education curriculum, as they are quite relevant to the postcolonial environmental concerns of the present era.

Keywords: self-discipline, ecological harmony, Ethical Consumption, local self-governance, Sustainable Development

In the present milieu of escalating environmental degradation—evidenced by increasing crises such as anthropogenic climate change, significant biodiversity loss, and the unsustainable exploitation of limited natural resources—it is imperative to recognise the necessity of reevaluating existing development paradigms in favour of innovative strategies that promote human welfare while preserving the ecological foundations vital for future generations. The industrial civilization, celebrated as humanity's greatest achievement, now proves to be a major source of environmental degradation. In this context, Gandhi's environmental philosophy is not an anachronism. Rather it is a necessary and transformative framework. Far from being an anti-modern idealist, Gandhi thoughtfully challenged the violence and harm he saw in industrial society, focusing on ethics and fairness. His vision championed the environmental cause with compassion and understanding. Following Eric Hobsbawm's argument that, 'Sustainable ecological behaviour is not merely an impulsive indulgence, but an essential condition for the survival of humanity,' [1] Gandhi's environmental thought, merits renewed scholarly attention in the present era more than ever (Hobsbawm 1994, 576). This paper aims to peruse intellectual history and normative ethics concerning Gandhi's ideology. It further highlights the connection between Gandhian philosophy and American Transcendentalism. Revisiting the moral and conceptual underpinnings of Gandhi's ideas- such as Ahimsa, Swadeshi, and Gram Swaraj- the paper stresses how his thought questions anthropocentric perspectives and consumerism, and invites an eco-sensitive view of development. The teaching, value and relevance of introducing Gandhian thought in education today is emphasized in the discussion. The paper demonstrates Gandhi's enduring relevance as a moral and intellectual resource for reconsidering our relation to nature in the present era of climate crisis. Therefore, it can be unequivocally acknowledged that Gandhi's philosophy is inherently historical and yet ethically prescient.

In all aspects of his life, Gandhi embodied ecological consciousness. The brevity of his voluminous writings, rigorous bodily disciplines, devotion to silence, disgust with waste of resources, and equal reverence for the trivial and the serious demonstrate a profound and somatic ecological awareness. His habitual practice of silence operated not merely to save energy and encourage self-reflection but as a symbolic act of resistance to colonial power, enabling him to speak on his own moral and spiritual terms. His fasts, usually perceived in narrow political terms, were also deeply ecological acts—meant to cleanse the body, align his desire with that of the poor, and understand the fundamental necessities for human life. Gandhi's fasting, walking, and asceticism were forms of identification with the people and the land. In fact, no Indian in recent history travelled the subcontinent more than him while never wanting to hold political power. Thus, for Gandhi, the natural environment was organically connected to moral and spiritual aspects. He strongly felt that human beings are custodians of the planet Earth and are accountable to generations yet to come and are also responsible for maintaining a moral

order, which is beyond personal need and greed. When speaking of wildlife, Gandhi's comment, 'Wildlife is decreasing in the jungles, but it is increasing in the towns'— is both a criticism of urbanity and a commentary on the ecological disbalance of his time (Khoshoo 1995, 18).

Gandhi's ecological awareness was practical and rooted in his actions rather than just theory. His famous saying, 'My life is my message,' (Fischer 1950, 177) shows how his principles were part of his everyday behaviour. Stories from his colleagues, like his decision to keep a small pencil he had received as a gift or his willingness to spend limited money on a telegram to support a sick child, highlight a disciplined approach to valuing relationships, resources, and responsibility (Kalelkar 1960, 26–27, 165–66). These examples do not just add personal details, but challenge the idea of disposability and emphasize that paying attention to even the smallest aspects of life can hold moral weight. Gandhi's compassion went beyond human beings to include animals and even reptiles, not out of pity or mere curiosity, but based on a deep belief in the solidarity of all living things. He wanted to identify with all animals, asserting,

> I want to realise identity with even the crawling things upon Earth, because we claim descent from the same God that being so, all life in whatever form it appears must essentially be so (Gandhi 1959, 50).

His reverence for life was however well-balanced and not fanatical. He added milk and dairy to his diet, balancing his ethical ideals with his health needs, and never allowed nonviolence to take the form of a new hostility. Under the most abysmal conditions—wading through human filth in war-torn regions or walking bare feet over hot pavements—Gandhi never lost his poise and calm. He spoke not from a mountaintop, but from ground zero, literally. In this way, Gandhi offered not only an ecological framework for thinking but also a holistic approach to life. Contextually it is important to note that, while Gandhi based his ecological vision on personal virtue and universal spirituality, climate justice today focuses on systemic inequalities, responsibilities to future generations, and accountability for past harms. At a cursory glance, these approaches might seem different, as one emphasizes individual restraint, while the other calls for structural change. Yet they do not have to be in conflict. Gandhi's practice of mindful living can be seen as the ethical foundation that supports collective responsibility, while climate justice offers a framework to ensure that these ethics tackle real power imbalances. Together, they imply that sustainability needs both the development of inner restraint and the creation of fairer systems, i.e. personal behaviour and political change support each other.

The report of Brundtland Commission published in 1987 was crucial in introducing as well as shaping the now globally recognized idea of Sustainable Development. It provided framework to strike a balance between environmental, economic, and social priorities. The report stressed the immediacy of living within our means by examining how modern societies often gets caught up in an

endless pursuit of wants and needs. Also known as *Our Common Future*, the report was presented by the World Commission on Environment and Development, led by Gro Harlem Brundtland. The commission sought to develop worldwide strategies that reconcile economic growth with the protection of environment. It put forward the widely accepted idea of 'Sustainable Development,' meaning development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland 1987, 5). The report was a reminder of how interconnected our environmental, economic, and social systems are, and upheld the need for a holistic policy making approach. It castigated the inequality and overconsumption of the Global North, and highlighted the environmental problems and poverty of the Global South. Moreover, it stressed the importance of international collaboration and the need for reforms in our institutions to effectively address these shared environmental challenges. Sustainability was not only set out as an environmental issue but as an overarching paradigm for a Common Future and international governance. Well before the Commission, Gandhi, in his work The *Hind Swaraj*, cautioned of the threats to mankind's common future presented by the endless drive for material goods and services. He described the civilization driven by an endless expansion of wants as diabolical, and defined true civilization as being based on responsibility, adherence to moral values, and the exercise of self-control. As any strategy that places limitations on desire and greed, and prioritizes fulfilling basic needs, is central to the concept and practice of Sustainable Development, Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* can definitely be read as a manifesto of Sustainable Development, anticipating that modern urban industrial civilization contains within itself the very seeds of its own destruction.

In 1928 Gandhi warned that mankind and the earth would be in danger if the countries of the world should adopt the same level an industrialism like that of the West. His unequivocal statement,

> God forbid that India should ever take to industrialisation after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom, England, is keeping today the world in chains. If the whole country of 300 million embraced such economic exploitation, it would strip the world like bare locusts,' (Gandhi 1967, 243)

rings as true even today. As such, one of the most central tenets of Gandhi's ecological vision was that of Swadeshi, which is too narrowly understood as his nationalist response to British imperialism. The idea however should be understood as a profound commitment to local self-sufficiency and moral consumption. Swadeshi aimed at providing freedom for the nation from dependence upon foreign markets, which was the cause of the drain of wealth, unemployment, restriction of the home market, increase in prices, and a comparative scarcity of articles of common consumption in India amongst other consequences.

> Gandhi's advocacy of Khadi was therefore not a political stand, but it was potentially an ecological one, which he envisaged as a means of simplifying life, downsizing carbon emissions and also as a means of boosting the Indian economy (Trivedi 2007, 151).

Gandhi's theorizing of ethical consumption in this way, is exceedingly critical of world economic systems, and proposes more sustainable, community-oriented alternatives.

In this regard, it is necessary to mention the historic Dandi March of 1930, which asserted the rights of common people over natural resources, with salt being the most basic. British Empire burgeoned on monopolizing resources and withholding rightful access to them. The denial of common people's access to basic resources is part of a strategy that generates unsustainable development. By violating the salt law, Mahatma Gandhi gave power to the masses, which is central to the notion of Sustainable Development. Following the end of the Dandi March, he explained its wider objective, stating that the aims of the March went beyond Indian independence to the emancipation of the world from excessive greed of materialism. Significantly, during the Dandi March, when some people brought oranges in a motorized transport Gandhi disapproved of it and said, 'The rule should be to avoid the car if you can walk' (Dalal 1971, 65). Gandhi emphasized on self-restraint, the welfare of all (*sarvodaya*), and nonviolence in social organization. In *Hind Swaraj* he warned that unbridled consumption and reliance on machines would harm both humans and nature (Gandhi 1909, 73–75).

Numerous European countries, have presently adopted congestion taxes for cars entering certain regions to reduce car pollution. Congestion-pricing schemes in cities like London, Stockholm, and Milan reflect this ethic by reducing excessive car use and promoting shared transportation. This approach aligns with what Gandhi might refer to as practicing aparigraha, or non-possession. The London Congestion Charge decreased traffic entering the central zone by about 30 percent in its first year and cut nitrogen oxides by 12 percent. This follows Gandhi's idea of minimizing harm to others through careful actions (Transport for London 2008, 26–27). In Stockholm, the congestion tax resulted in a 20 percent drop in traffic and a 14 percent reduction in CO_2 emissions in the inner city (Eliasson 2014, 4–5). This reflects Gandhi's principle of trusteeship, where individuals are responsible for using shared resources in a way that benefits the whole community (Gandhi 1947, 15). Milan's Area C charge, which took the place of the earlier Ecopass scheme, cut vehicle entries into the city center by 30 percent and helped lower black carbon levels (AMAT 2012, 12–13). By discouraging polluting vehicles and encouraging public transport, Milan's policy highlights the practicality of Gandhi's idea of promoting community welfare through collective discipline (Gandhi 1941, 7–8). These policies

connect with Gandhi's belief that true freedom, or swaraj, is not about unlimited choices but self-governance in harmony with others. Congestion pricing, by fostering cleaner air, safer streets, and fairer access to urban spaces, serves as a tangible example of Gandhian ethics in urban governance.

Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj, or village self-rule, also illuminates his alternative vision of development in a sustainable manner. He thought that true independence (Swaraj) meant not only removing the yoke of colonial occupation, but creating self-reliant, autonomous communities that could properly manage their own lives in harmony with nature. Economic endeavours must be organized on the basis of cooperation, ecological stewardship, and sufficiency, and not competition, exploitation, and continuous expansion. Gandhi viewed villages as the basic economic and political units, 'where local resources were used in a sustainable manner and decisions were reached through participatory processes' (Parekh 1991, 118). In most ways, Gram Swaraj foreshadows modern frameworks of bioregionalism, permaculture, and community-supported agriculture, which focus on localized, ecologically interlinked modes of production and governance.

Sevagram Ashram, an ashram Gandhi founded in Maharashtra, India, is an example for sustainable living and can also be seen as a natural manifestation of the Mahatma's ecological beliefs. His environmental balance and simplicity doctrine were visible in the ashram. Working towards minimizing the ecological footprint and being self-reliant were the norms in this small village. Citizens practiced natural farming to produce their own fruits and vegetables using the natural resources of the area, instilling a deep respect for nature. Gandhi believed in living a way of life that was in harmony with nature's rhythms. Two of the most appreciable principles of this vision were the encouragement of local products (which meant avoidance of industrial consumer culture) and the charkha, or spinning wheel. Besides being an instrument for economic self-reliance Gandhi also popularized the charkha as an environment friendly means of work. The ashram members also utilized low-impact, non-exploitative means of production such as knitting and spinning, with the intent of ascribing to the criticism made by Gandhi regarding the industrialization and its degrading effect on the environment. The reason he favoured such simple technology was that he believed machines need not distance man from nature, they could in fact, be used to enhance man's dignity. Management of resources in Sevagram was thoughtful and measured, with residents enjoying the available resource, recycling materials whenever possible, and reducing waste. Farming at the ashram emphasized organic practice, using composting and traditional methods that enriched the soil instead of depleting it. In this way, Gandhi's environmental vision at Sevagram was simultaneously holistic and pragmatic. It challenged the development paradigm of the time and presented an alternative based on simplicity, co-operation

and respect for the environment. The ashram was a 'manifestation of M.K Gandhi's philosophy of ecology. It offered a practical demonstration that a sustainable lifestyle was not only necessary but also entirely feasible in practice' (Brown 1989, 124).

It is noteworthy that Mahatma Gandhi's environmental philosophy resonates with the American Transcendentalism, particularly as articulated in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. At the bottom of both the thinkers' philosophies is profound allegiance to simplicity, self-sufficiency, and a reverential relationship to the natural world. Thoreau did more than simply live in a hut near the Walden Pond. His was an attempt to put into practice a philosophical experiment in living with only what is necessary, showing that real human content does not come from material wealth or industrial development but from purposeful, moral life in harmony with nature. Gandhi also promoted simplicity as a means of societal change and personal cleansing. Thoreau's observation that all possession tarnishes the soul and breaks human connection to natural processes might be understood in tandem with Gandhi's concept of aparigraha, or the philosophy of non-possessiveness [3]. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), he stated that modern civilization is a 'disease' and that true progress includes moral values rather than mechanical advances (Gandhi 1938, 36). Thoreau too in a similar vein viewed industrial progress as an ethical decline which separated people from nature and self-consciousness. Gandhi was further connected intellectually and morally with Thoreau through his direct reference to the essay 'Civil Disobedience'. Gandhi acknowledged the influence of Thoreau on his philosophy of Satyagraha which preaches nonviolent resistance. He said, 'I was already familiar with Thoreau's concepts before I discovered their ownership' (Gandhi 1967, 78). The recognition demonstrates how deeply Gandhi related to Thoreau's ideas about individual's psychological independence as well as the authority of conscience over political power. Gandhian scholars and researchers have tended to emphasize this philosophical connection. Raghavan Iyer, a prominent Gandhi interpreter, said that 'Gandhi, like Thoreau, believed that voluntary simplicity is not a sacrifice but a liberation—a way to transcend the trappings of modern civilization and reawaken a spiritual consciousness' (Iyer 1973, 375). In a similar vein, Vandana Shiva contended that Gandhi's environmental ethics, which are founded on principles of restraint and ecological sustainability, offer 'a radical alternative to the modern myth of limitless growth' (Shiva 1989, 286). Both Gandhi and Thoreau therefore unanimously express a vision of happy and contented life that is not dependent on material wealth or technological supremacy, but rather on a deep respect for moral and ecological principles. In their writings, nature is a teacher, a sanctuary, and a moral compass.

In recent years, researchers such as Prashant Khattri, Shruti Sharma, Sundara Narayana Patro, and Asmi Raza have been working to shed light on Gandhian ecological ideas. Prashant Khattri's article, *Rethinking Sustainability from a Gandhian Perspective: A Discourse on Cognitive Justice*, offers a thoughtful critique of popular views on sustainability. He argues that these views are often shaped by a kind of power that comes from a narrow focus on science and mainstream knowledge, which can do more harm than good to the environment. Khattri highlights that many current discussions about sustainability stem from the same beliefs that have contributed to environmental damage, leaning heavily on technical and practical ways of thinking while dismissing local and alternative approaches as lacking scientific rigor. To address this issue, Khattri looks to Gandhi's legacy, which supports a variety of perspectives and challenges the idea that knowledge should be controlled by a select few. Gandhi's ideas, centered on the importance of relationships and self-governance, present a different take from the views commonly held today. He believed in the power of individuals and communities to shape their own futures in sustainable ways. One important part of Gandhi's approach is the idea of cognitive justice, which recognizes and values different ways of knowing and living in harmony with our surroundings. Khattri argues that Gandhi saw a need for a balance between what the government is responsible for and empowering local communities. His scholarly writeups call for a new way of thinking about sustainability inspired by Gandhian perspectives, where various viewpoints can exist together, leading to more fair, inclusive, and environmentally friendly development. To quote Khattri: "Gandhi's ecological ethics are not about rejecting technology per se but about subordinating it to human and environmental well-being" (Khattri 58, 2020).

Sundara Narayana Patro, another contemporary Gandhian scholar, points out that although the environment wasn't in the dire state it is today during Gandhi's time, his worries went beyond just the struggle for independence. He tackled poverty and the damage caused by human actions to our environment. Gandhi's guiding principle was to only take what we truly need from nature-he believed in not taking anything when it wasn't necessary.This way of thinking encouraged a focus on conservation instead of consumption. His ideas promoted a way of living that aims to work in harmony with nature, showing that we can satisfy human needs without harming others or the planet. Patro describes Gandhi's blend of economic, ecological, and spiritual ideas as an "economy of environment" (Patro 2021). He links Gandhi's timeless vision to today's global aims, especially the UN's New Urban Agenda (2016), which seeks to create cities that are inclusive, resilient, and sustainable-a vision that Gandhi anticipated long before.

Again, Shruti Sharma draws connections between Gandhi's idea of 'Swaraj' and the discussions around decolonization and degrowth, presenting them as ways to resist the harmful effects of neoliberal globalization. In her paper, *Convergence of Mahatma Gandhi's Ecological Wisdom and the Principles of Deep Ecology for Sustainable Development*, Dr. Shruti Sharma explores the intriguing parallels between Gandhi's ecological ideas and Arne Naess's deep ecology. This combination offers a strong basis for living sustainably. She points out that Gandhi's foundational beliefs-like simplicity, nonviolence, and self-rule-hint at important elements of deep ecology, particularly the transition from focusing solely on humans to considering the whole ecosystem. Both viewpoints remind us that all life forms are valuable and highlight how everything is connected and reliant on one another. Gandhi's view of nature is grounded in simple living, strong village communities, and a sense of ethical restraint. This perspective aligns well with the ideas of deep ecology, which emphasizes the importance of self-discovery, equality among all living beings, and reducing our impact on the environment. In particular, Gandhi's concept of swaraj reflects deep ecology's belief that we should think of ourselves as part of the entire biosphere. This suggests that understanding ourselves truly is linked to being aware of our ecological responsibilities. Sharma highlights that combining Gandhian ethics with deep ecology could help us address climate change, biodiversity loss, and other pressing environmental issues by fostering a more ecocentric view of the world and proposes that 'Gandhi's idea of 'Swaraj' can be seen as a way of living that fights against consumerism and is based on self-restraint and the strength of community' (Sharma 89, 2021).

Asmi Raza's article, *Gandhi's Wisdom in Tackling Climate Crisis: Lessons for the Contemporary World*, points out the practical elements of Gandhi's ideas, particularly how they align with the principles of a circular economy. This economic approach focuses on avoiding waste and being resourceful by ensuring that products and materials remain in use for as long as possible, promoting practices like reuse, repair, refurbishment, and recycling that are more sustainable. Raza's scholarly studies also situate Gandhi in the landscape of industrial modernity, arguing that his critiques of greed, consumerism, and centralized economies are relevant to today's conversations about environmental ethics. Expanding upon Gandhi's notion of Trusteeship, he introduces the idea of 'Earth Trusteeship,' (Raza 155, 2022) framing Gandhi's vision as a compelling call for our responsibility to protect the Earth for future generations. It emphasizes how Gandhi intertwined moral values with practical action, illustrating that true sustainability requires both personal transformation and collective efforts. Additionally, Raza explores Gandhi's influence on global environmental movements, concluding that his insights remain crucial today, serving as a critique of contemporary development practices and offering guidance for achieving climate justice. Taken together, such extensive academic research carried out in our times show Gandhi's enduring relevance for re-imagining sustainability ethics and practice in the 21st century.

Intersections: A Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies Volume 5 2025

It is however significant to acknowledge and address the major criticisms of Gandhian eco-conscious philosophy. First is the accusation of pastoral nostalgia, that Gandhi's affirmation of the village and local economy represents a romantic reminiscence of a pre-industrial world, indifferent to the emancipatory possibilities of modern technology and global connectedness. To quote Indian historian and educator, Bipan Chandra,

> Gandhi's dream of self-sufficient villages and his rejection of large-scale industrialization appear today as a romantic and nostalgic idealization of a pre-industrial past, blind to the emancipatory potentials of science, technology and modern economic growth (Chandra 1989, 480).

Such a critique argues that Gandhi's scepticism about industrialization misses the opportunities that modern science, medicine, infrastructure, and communication can offer. These tools have improved lives and brought together communities that were once left out. Looking at it this way, Gandhi's thoughts seem less like a practical approach to modern life and more like a dismissal of it. Secondly, there is the fear that the experiment of small, local, participatory self-governance, is simply not scalable in a densely populated, tech-networked world. Sashi Tharoor for instance asserted,

> Mahatma Gandhi's concept of a village-centric development model is an unrealistic goal in the current age of globalization and communication… The idea of the autonomous village does not hold any realistic view in our lifetime (Tharoor, 2013).

This concern highlights the difference between Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj and the complex social and economic realities we face today. With more than a billion people in India, linked to global supply chains and information networks, there are doubts about whether small, self-sufficient villages can truly meet the needs for goods, services, and opportunities that modern life demands. Some voices have cautioned against fully embracing Gandhi's ideas about rural living when discussing ecological matters. Vinay Lal for instance points out that Gandhi's belief in the village as the heart of moral life might create an image that ignores the ongoing problems of rural poverty and caste discrimination. He suggests that 'while Gandhi's idea of small, self-sustaining communities critiques modern industrial systems, it may fall short when we consider the interconnectedness of the global economy and the systems that millions depend on' (Lal 2000, 129). It is important to appreciate, but we also need to see where it falls short in terms of scale and inclusion. Ajay Skaria brings up an important point here. Gandhi believed in self-restraint and living simply, which implies that people choose this lifestyle as a way of moral living. Skaria suggests that this view overlooks the reality for many poor individuals, for whom 'deprivation is not chosen but enforced by structural inequities' (Skaria 2016, 214). If we idealize living simply, we might mistakenly turn what is a necessity into something virtuous, ignoring those for whom the simplicity of Gandhi is more of a difficult reality than a personal choice. This critique highlights the difference between

choosing restraint as a moral decision and facing deprivation due to social injustice. Akeel Bilgrami offers another thoughtful perspective on Gandhi, recognizing both the importance and the limitations of Gram Swaraj in today's connected world. According to him Gandhi's opposition to industrial modernity should not be viewed as 'a wholesale denunciation of technology but a critique of its enthronement as an autonomous good' (Bilgrami 2011, 54). Bilgrami further acknowledges that Gandhi's demand requires a 'reintegration of moral reasoning into development' (55), but this may remain a hope unless paired with clear methods that can manage large-scale technological and economic systems. Therefore, it may be safely assumed that, criticism of the Gandhi's ideas does not negate the normative nature of his critique of industrial modernity. Instead, Gandhi's utopia can best be understood as a series of political and ethical precepts – decentralization, self-sufficiency, ecological responsibility – that ought to be retained as regulative ideals. And if they are applied correctly, they would definitely be able to feed the contemporary discussion on sustainability without falling prey to luddite or unworkable romanticism.

Factually speaking in the present era, Gandhian philosophy in unison with Thoreau's Transcendentalism has moved beyond their respective historical and cultural contexts to become powerful ethical model for a great number of ecological and social movements around the globe. One prominent example is the 'Transition Town' movement, initiated in Totnes, England, by Rob Hopkins in 2006. This movement aims at building local resilience to climate change through promoting sustainable lifestyles, community cohesion, and localised economies. Transition Towns aim at reducing dependence on fossil fuels and centralized systems through promoting local food, renewable energy supplies, and skill-swapping programs. Hopkins offers this strategy in his book, *The Transition Handbook*, as a practical and positive solution to the global environmental crisis, highlighting community power and collective response. Again, the Eco-villages such as Auroville in India's Tamil Nadu, and Findhorn in Scotland are physical manifestation of Gandhian thoughts. These intentional communities promote self-sustaining living and environmental stewardship with organic farming, green building, and citizen participation in local government. Founded in 1968, Auroville is 'an experiment in human unity and sustainable living,' which promotes 'Gandhian values of manual labour, ecological renewal, and spiritual transformation' (Kumar 2000, 253). Findhorn is also in harmony with nature, mirroring Gandhian idea of ethical living. All these community efforts aside, various activists and organizations have applied Gandhian ethics in resisting industrial agriculture and ecological destruction. Dr. Vandana Shiva, a leading Indian ecofeminist and physicist, carries on the work of Gandhi by fighting for seed sovereignty and indigenous agricultural practices. Her organization, Navdanya, advocates 'indigenous knowledge systems, biodiversity conservation and farmer-led agroecology as an alternative to monoculture and corporate control in global food systems' (Shiva 2005:183). Together these examples prove beyond all shadow of a doubt that

Gandhi's environmental philosophy is much more than abstract idealism. It has immense practical relevance and has the potential of being an achievable reality.

Curiously however, India's celebrated historian Ramachandra Guha pointed out in an article published in 1993 that Gandhi never used the word 'ecology,' nor is there any occurrence of this term in his extensive corpus of writings. Again, while taking up numerous journeys through Indian villages and countryside, and despite the fact that not many people like him had such deep affinity with the earth and its spirit, Gandhi rarely specifically mentioned trees, creatures, or scenery in ecological contexts (Guha 1993, 2). Now, this exclusion should not be read as indifference. Nevertheless, Gandhi's life was suffused with principles that later came to be defined as environmental consciousness. He was a vegetarian, an advocate of natural medicine and alternative health practices well in advance of the Western recognition of these, a recycler before recycling entered the general vocabulary, and a critic of modernity whose efforts prefigured the intellectual work of the Frankfurt School and postmodern theorists such as Lyotard. His commitment to nonviolent resistance also foreshadowed its global influence, shaping movements ranging from the American civil rights movement to the struggles in South Africa. Thus, while he did not state an environmental philosophy in conventional language, Gandhi's legacy is deeply embedded in the story of Indian environmentalism. Guha further points out that the followers of Gandhi, Mirabehn and Saralabehn, made an impact on figures like Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna who were key in the Chipko movement—a local movement to protect Himalayan forests and provide for the continued existence of 'soil, water, and clean air' for generations to come. Similarly, the spirit of Gandhi's philosophy can be seen in the work of Baba Amte and Medha Patkar, whose struggle in the 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' tried to avert large-scale displacement of rural and tribal folk through large dam projects. So, although Gandhi never spoke of 'ecology' in classical terms, his life and legacy offer an inspiring and enduring ecological paradigm. Contextually, Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher most closely associated with the concept of 'Deep Ecology'[4], was also a devoted student of Gandhi's thought long before he turned his attention to environmental issues. In Gandhi, Naess found not only a spiritual guide but also a political philosopher who offered an unparalleled framework for resolving group conflicts. The core of Deep Ecology is the understanding that humans are not separate from or dominant over the natural world, but rather an integral part of it. Such a belief deeply resonates with Gandhi's worldview. The Mahatma's ethos of responsibility, and reverence for all forms of life offers a powerful antecedent to the ecological principle of biological egalitarianism, in which all species are regarded with intrinsic value.

Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts on ecology further connect well with current ideas, such as carbon budgeting, degrowth, and the circular economy. His well-known saying, "the earth provides enough to

satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed," (Fischer 1950, 272) Gandhi highlights the idea of carbon budgeting, according to which 'the atmosphere can take limited greenhouse gas, so we have to establish reasonable limits on how much we consume' (Patro 2021). Gandhi's belief in simple living and self-restraint fits perfectly with the degrowth movement, which 'challenges the endless pursuit of economic growth and emphasizes well-being within the planet's limits' (Kallis 2019). Similarly, his idea of swaraj, which means self-reliance and local production, mirrors the principles of today's circular economy that 'seek to minimize waste, reuse materials, and strengthen community resilience' (Sharma 2025, 32). Degrowth and circular economy ideas move away from a one-sided, harmful approach to development. They support systems that balance human needs and the health of the planet, reflecting the essence of Gandhian philosophy. Gandhi's focus on the moral duty of consumption anticipates today's conversations about climate justice, emphasizing that richer countries must reduce their high levels of emissions to allow space for others. Looking at Gandhi's thoughts through these modern lenses not only shows that his ideas are still important but also deepens global conversations about building sustainable and fair futures.

Fascinating it is that, Gandhi presents a productive challenge to those who try to place him comfortably within the context of environmentalism. Gandhi was an animal lover who did not want pets, a staunch fighter who disdained weapons, and had a democratic temperament and yet wielded immense personal power. He cherished sacred scripture such as the Ramayana but forthrightly dismissed its dogmatic aspects, held on to *sanatan dharma* [5] while blessing inter-caste marriages, and was still a traditionalist who called on individuals to obey no authority beyond their own conscience. While he believed in the 'natural' segregation of work between men and women, his ashrams were founded upon principles of radical equality. All, regardless of sex, were to share the work equally and were also to follow the same moral standards. He spun his own thread every day, just like village women, and although he expected the women to be chaste, he required men to hold themselves to an even higher standard, viewing them as largely responsible for women's sexual objectification. These nuanced, sometimes contradictory positions do not detract from Gandhi's 'Green Legacy'—they deepen it. They uncover a man whose worldview was rooted in an intense sense of interdependence, accountability, and moral self-control. His pantry, the village toilet, the colonial jail, and the corridors of authority were all arenas where truth could be tested and ecological values quietly enacted. The Gandhian ecology therefore can be understood, not as a scientific theory or in political movement, but as the personal, lived experience of the Mahatma. His life challenges us to extend our definition of environmentalism to spiritual, social, and quotidian realities.

Modern Indian politics is characterized by a conflict between rapid industrialization and ecological sustainability. 'Policies like the Forest Rights Act (2006) and campaigns against big mining and dam projects resonate Gandhian values concerning local people's rights and care for the environment' (Baviskar 2004, 56). Still, India's growing convergence with international capitalist models, as exemplified by its emphasis on infrastructure-driven growth, weakening of environmental laws, and involvement in extractive global trade, threatens to undo the very tenets of Sarvodaya (benefit to all) Gandhi had envisioned. Internationally, India presents itself as both a developing country with historic vulnerabilities and an important stakeholder in climate talks. 'While India advocates for climate equity and common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) in forums like the UNFCCC, its domestic environmental performance remains contested' (Dubash 2019, 23)[6]. Gandhi's philosophy, if reinterpreted, offers a moral framework, which has the potential of enabling India to lead the globe with integrity – balancing its developmental imperatives with ecological justice and sustainability.

So, to conclude, Gandhi's thinking offers a politically and ethically rooted alternative to the environmental breakdown and inequality that characterise the contemporary global situation with its nexus of ecological crisis and social injustice. Indeed, the Gandhian model of individual, local as well as global development comes across as not extractive but regenerative, not centralized but democratic, and not anthropocentric but ecocentric. If India choses to champion such a model of holistic development, and projects it as a parameter to define progress in its true sense, then the largest democracy in the world can project itself as the global environmental leader. Gandhi's philosophy in this manner allows us to envision paths of development not tied to GDP metrics, and also offers hope for a future premised on dignity, sufficiency, and ecological equilibrium.

Notes

[1] In his *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, Hobsbawm suggests there is nothing fad or luxurious about sustainable ecological behaviour if we want to survive as a species. He situates this in a century of unprecedented industrialisation, warfare and environmental degradation stressing that unchecked exploitation of nature, spurred on by technological and capitalist imperatives, has extended ecological systems to their limits. Rational group planning taking priority over material profit, from an ecological standpoint, are what Hobsbawm identifies as necessary to the continuing existence of the human race. He considers this to be the only pragmatic course to avoid catastrophic consequences and ensure a viable future for the future generations.

[2] With the intent of capturing the deep emotional and nurturing relationship that she shared with Mahatma Gandhi, Manuben Gandhi, her devoted niece and his assistant, penned the memoir *Bapu, My Mother*. Gandhi was not only Manuben's mentor and uncle, but also showered motherly care and affection on her. He never let her feel the absence of her deceased mother in her formative years. Bound up with this was an intense concern for her spiritual and moral development, which he sought to discipline by overseeing her education, diet, health, and self-discipline. The title expresses the depth of their personal and ideological relationship and symbolizes Gandhi's all-enveloping-maternal role in Manuben's existence.

[3] Mahatma Gandhi wrote about his understanding of the idea of *aparigraha*, (or non-possessiveness), in his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. He emphasized the value of *aparigraha* for spiritual progress and self-realization, and did mention about his search for simplicity in life and renouncement wealth along with other material pursuits. He explained how social equality and inner peace can be achieved by reducing needs and giving up ownership. The concept of *aparigraha* according to Gandhi expands beyond materialism into realms of self-discipline and emotional control, which in turn aligns with his broader principles of ahimsa and satyagraha.

[4] *The Selected Works of Arne Naess* presents Naess' deep ecological framework which values all living beings for their own sake rather than their usefulness to humans. Deep ecology represents a fundamental change in environmental awareness that prioritizes biodiversity and ecological balance along with sustainability rather than focusing on resource preservation exclusively for human advantages. Following Naess, an individual's self-realization is possible through his/ her identification with nature. As a proponent of Deep-ecology, he further states that only deep spiritual and philosophical connection with earth can foster actions ascertaining environmental protection and preservation.

[5] Gandhi's interpretation of *Sanatan Dharma* is explained within his work *Hind Swaraj* or Indian Home Rule. In this work the author depicts *Sanatan Dharma* as an eternal ethical system built on honesty and non-violence (ahimsa) together with obligation. Gandhi interpreted *Sanatan Dharma* as an ethical way of life that promotes compassion and spiritual unity instead of demanding strict ritual observance. He believed everyone should uphold its significance since he viewed it as a basic guiding principle for all humanity. The philosophy of *Sanatan Dharma* represents the basic foundation for Gandhi's vision of a fair society.

[6] Following the book, *India in a Warming World: Integrating Climate Change and Development* India faces criticism for its environmental performance, and domestic issues such as air pollution and deforestation alongside inadequate enforcement of environmental regulations, weaken its

international position. The need to achieve a balance between development and sustainability in indeed very difficult, yet indispensable.

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