

Deep Ecology and Gandhi : Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract

The reflections of Gandhian ideas and philosophy have generally been seen in the context of the contemporary colonial struggle, but have remained a relevant touchstone to the human ethical values despite changing socio, economic and political norms. These thoughts, as enunciated in his writings, quietly derived the precepts of righteousness from the scriptures which transcended generational mores, and remained pertinent to not only the imminent national freedom struggle but also to the social engineering and economic development. The more significant question remains, whether a vast stream of thoughts aimed at the amelioration of a dystopian society can also be valued as a practical environmental doctrine, especially when the modern environment thoughts could assume a secular and independent place much later in time and consensus on sustainability and climate change could be a contentious issue between north and south. This paper is an attempt to study the core of Gandhian philosophy and see if it had any modern environmental ethical rumination. Mahatma may not have given the exact prescription of the sustainable mechanical process of a modern factory but has undoubtedly given a prescript for a developing society where sustainability remains germane to all walks of life. Gandhian thoughts are not removed from the modern environmental principles but are native to the truth made stark due to the ravaging ghost of development.

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This paper tends to analyze the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, his philosophy and its relevance for the environment. The first section of the paper will study and analyze the aspects of Truth, Ahimsa and self-realization the core elements of his philosophy, the basis of all his moral groundings. The second section discusses the idea of self-realization of Gandhi and its impact on Arne Naess the ecologist, and his philosophy of deep ecology. The last section tries to study if these philosophies are practicable in dealing with the environment. It tries to see if there is a semblance between Gandhi's philosophy and deep ecology a much-discussed and successful model for the environment. It will explore if this new suggested doctrine can provide a solution to the present environmental crises. It will analyze whether his techniques can be a new guiding principle for environmentalism in the present world with the precept of acceptable universal theory.

The present world is on the precipice of an environmental crisis, and it becomes very important for human beings to arm themselves and fight this disaster, before it's too late. The humans will have to move beyond his greed, his desire, his selfish interest, to save the world from another cataclysmic event. The change or the paradigm shift for the betterment of the planet, should start from the change in the way we treat nature, and not view it just instrumentally. Our practices so far have been concentrated on profit and plunder, market and material culture rather than.

The fundamentals on which our paradigm and policy need to find inspiration is Gandhian philosophy. It is in Gandhian life and practice that our perspective on development is relevant today. Gandhi's idea that "nature has enough to satisfy everyone's needs, but not to satisfy everyone's greed" became one line ethic to modern environmentalism. Gandhian ideology/ thoughts emerge from his actions as well as deep insights. His lifestyle serves us to understand our own perspectives and response towards the environment, Vandana Shiva, Madhav Gadgil, Anil Agarwal, Ramchandra Guha all acknowledge his pertinent contribution to the ecological ideas. Though Gandhi has himself never explicitly talked about ecology but there are scattered references to nature throughout his published work of 50,000 pages, highlighting the value and importance of it. He is often referred to as the "apostle of applied human ecology".

The first section of the paper will elucidate on the philosophical foundations of Gandhi, it will analyze the religious basis of ahimsa, self-realization and truth. This will help in determining whether the characteristic feature of these elements lay out a plausible way to develop a theory of nature.

Ahimsa: *Mokca* is the ultimate goal of spiritual life and *Ahimsa* is the spiritual tool to attain *mokca*. Gandhi says *ahimsa* is not within the reach of an average human being and one cannot jump the gun but has to move slowly towards the final destination i.e. *mokca* or self-realization.

For him, *ahimsa* is a universal duty and people should follow it. *Ahimsa* plays a major role in overpowering weaknesses like greed, fear and possessiveness with certain values like love, truthfulness and fearlessness. *Ahimsa* is seen as a way of life that assures social wellbeing, equality and equal respect for all religions (*Sarva-dharma sama bhava*).¹ *Mokca* or self-realization is the ultimate spiritual goal and *ahimsa* is the path by which we can attain *mokca*. *Ahimsa* is presented by Gandhi in an instrumentalist way. The actions done by us determine our death, rebirth and suffering in our present life and future life. Actions that are influenced by attachment, selfish desires prevent the self from attaining release from the cycle of rebirth and death. The doctrine of *ahimsa* motivates to do action with non-attachment, actions that are influenced by attachment lead to conflict and war. *BhagvadgĒtā* states he who is satisfied with whatever comes by chance, who has passed beyond, the dualities of (pain, pleasure), who is free from jealousy, who remains the same in success and failure, even when he acts, he is not bound.²

For him, in order to keep mind and senses under control, one must follow the path of *ahimsa*. The transmigration of the human soul is because the soul is imprisoned in the body which always looks for material and worldly pleasures. But the soul or self has the potentiality to release itself from the bondage of the body and attain *mokca* or self-realization as the ultimate goal of human existence. In order to attain *param purusartha*, one has to follow the principle of *ahimsa* with the full sense of practice (*abayas*) and detachment (*vairagya*) towards the end. He stressed on the purity of means and was against those who believed as long as the end is good, the means to achieve this end hardly matters.

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Self-realization

Self-realization or *mokca* transformed the life and thought process of Gandhi. The concept of self-realization was not a discovery by Gandhi it covers the entire religious and philosophical tradition of India. The concept of self-realization provides a meaning and direction to the life of humans. Gandhi in his autobiography uses the same concept in eight different ways.

Self-realization is the highest value and the ultimate goal of human existence. *Mokca, Mukti* or self-realization symbolizes the release from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Gandhi follows the *Advaitic* vision which holds that *atman* is one and is present in all. The *Atman* is unborn and traverses in the series of life, death and re-birth and is imperishable, infinite, continuous.

Gandhi draws a distinction between the Self and the self. The Self with an upper case is the higher Self and it is the perfect Self and the lower self is the one that is tied to the body and is stuck in the cycle of rebirth and death. For Gandhi lower self must go beyond the duality of body and self in order to achieve unity with the higher Self. Gandhi has given the path of self-realization in order to fight the battle and to engage the lower self with the higher Self. He conceives of the relationship between the higher Self and the lower self as:

The slave can never conceive of his existence without the master. A person who has the name of another on his lips for twenty-four hours will forget himself in the latter. The *atman* (individual self) becomes the *parmatman* (brahman or universal self) in the same manner. The *atman* may be a ray of the *parmatman* but the ray of the sun is the sun itself. Apart from God, we have no existence at all. He who makes himself God's slave becomes one with God.³

In order to travel from the lower self to the higher Self-body is essential but the body should not get engaged in worldly pleasures. Gandhi says the body must engage itself in *Shriram karma* to satisfy its basic needs in order to stay alive. Self-realization is the release of the soul from the state of attachment (*Sasaki*) and from its involvement with the world. He realizes that body is tempted by the desires and leads to bondage.

He says greed, fraud, lust, anger, domination, hatred are all forms of ego and in order to attain *mokca* one has to make an inner struggle in order to overcome the tendencies of the ego. He compares ego with violence and is an obstacle to attaining self-realization. When the ego becomes essential in the life of an individual then selfish interest dominates. Such a person dominates the need of others and engages

himself in satisfying his own desires. He is avoiding the welfare of the community and is becoming self-centered in satisfying his own wants through endless consumption.

The self-interest of individuals has led to violence, conflicts, war because individual today only aims at fulfilling their own desires. The environment is facing a lot of problems because the vision of man is becoming narrower and narrower. Humans think they have authority over things because of the abilities they possess, they are unique and rational but this does not justify them in exploiting nature. Gandhi says the duty of the human being is clearly not only to himself and to his fellow beings, but also to control his desire to acquire more and more.⁴

Thus Gandhi compares body with violence and self with non-violence. The body brings destruction because man is both good and evil. If he is able to control his urge for all the worldly pleasures, he can become good and can be considered as a *yogi* but if a man cannot control his passion for luxuries, it will lead to the destruction of nature

Truth

Truth and non-violence are the cardinal virtues of Gandhian philosophy. Gandhi's note concluding his autobiography "My Experiments with Truth" reads.

My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth. And if every page of these chapters does not proclaim to the reader then the only means for the realization of Truth is Ahimsa. I shall deem all my labor in writing these chapters to have been in vain.... I can say with assurance as a result of all my experiments, that a perfect vision of Truth can only follow a complete realization of Ahimsa (CWMG, 39:401).

Gandhi believed that, truth and non-violence are two sides of the same coin. Truth is unfolded through the practice of non-violence. He believes the truth is reality and reality is non-violent (truth=reality=non-violent). Gandhi's principle of Dharma is centered around the truth. To him, God is truth and truth is God. The life he admitted was an uncompromising search for truth. He divides Truth both as Absolute and Relative. Absolute Truth is eternal truth and relative truth is in contrast, it is a concrete truth. Through Bhakti and faith in Absolute Truth, one can link itself with the divine according to Gandhi's theory.

It would be so beautiful if all of us devote ourselves to Truth. Truth does not only mean abstention from lies or not just honesty is the best policy. It means we must rule our life by the law of Truth. Devotion to truth must be the sole aim of humans. Gandhi says

the path of ahimsa can lead one to the truth. Though Gandhi makes a distinction between the two but he implies Absolute Truth is the end and relative truth is the means.

Arne Naess on Deep Ecology

This section discusses Arne Naess's ideas of self-realization and ecology on the one hand and identifies similarities with Gandhi's notion of self-realization on the other hand.

Naess is famous for "deep ecology" which is also known as "transpersonal ecology" because he believed in enlarging human identity towards nature. There are a lot of common things between Naess and Gandhi as they both believe in identifying and improving self.

One cannot begin to talk about self-realization and identification unless one understands Deep ecology first. So I will explain Deep ecology first and following this, in my next subsection I will deal with Naess's ideas of self-realization and identification in relation to Gandhi.

Arne Naess the Norwegian philosopher of the twentieth century found the tradition "Deep Ecology". It maintains more of a psychological way of human beings towards nature. Deep ecology seeks for moral consideration as being a member of the nature and thus everyone in the nature should be considered in the same position. It means all the members whether humans or non-humans are equal and neither humans nor non-humans hold a superior or inferior value within the nature as all are placed equally.

Warwick fox describes deep ecology as a "total-field conception"⁵ according to fox, a Deep ecology is a form of non-anthropocentric view that place humans as just a constituent members of the community. He gives intrinsic value to all living beings, where all the members of the community are on the same platform and thus deserve the same moral status. It means humans should not treat nature as a means in order to satisfy the non-vital needs. So according to deep ecology human value = Animal value = vegetation value = rocks have same values. It extends the idea of nature from human beings to other species. Having the same value brings the notion of equality that all beings both human and non-humans are considered morally.

The idea that a human being is such an individual possessing a separate essence, Naess argues radically separates the human self from the rest of the world. Making such a separation not only leads to selfishness towards nature. As a counter to egoism at both the individual and species level, Naess proposes the adoption of an alternative relational "total-field image" of the world. According to this relationalism, organisms

(human or otherwise) are best understood as “knots” in the bio-spherical net. The identity of a living thing is essentially constituted by its relations to other things in the world, especially its ecological relations to other living things. If people conceptualize themselves and the world in relational terms, the deep ecologists argue, then people will take better care of nature and the world in general.⁶

To clarify the concept, deep ecology considers every member of the nature as an aspect of a larger encompassing reality. The differentiation between entities dissolves when it comes to the possession of values. Deep ecology does not regard any individual or individual species as the center of value. Rather, it regards to value to all the members of the community. Deep ecologist claims that it is of no use to consider some aspects of the same reality as possessing moral value and others not. Neither does it make sense when an entity is being given more importance while not imparting the same attention to another entity when the value on the basis of which attention is being awarded is shared by all equally. The central point in deep ecology is that they consider non-human members to be in equal positions as the human members.

Arne Naess on Self-realization and Non-violence

It is clear from the above definition of deep ecology that Naess has endowed value to all entities in nature. He assigned intrinsic value to all the human and non-human members of the environment. His main concern is on the lifestyle which has been adopted by humans; it is destructive and humiliating because it affects the environment, he says one should work on high quality in life not high standards.

The aim of deep ecology is to change the destructive lifestyle as it is impacting the environment by transforming the individual self. Deep ecology is also known as Transpersonal Ecology. As fox states:

Since [Naess’s deep ecological] approach is one that involves the realization of a sense of self that extends beyond (or that is trans-) one’s egoic, biographical, or personal sense of self, the clearest, most accurate, and most transformative term for this sense of deep ecology is, in my view, transpersonal ecology.⁷

Transpersonal ecology says, human beings are part of nature as other entities are but humans need to change their attitude towards nature and should not use nature as an object or as a means to make a profit. Nature should be identified as very self. The moment we identify that we are part of nature then it becomes a part of our identity. In other words, it can be explained as:

It is claimed that by subtracting your own self-centered and self-serving thoughts from the world you come to realize that “the other is none other than yourself: that the fundamental delusion of humanity is to suppose I am here and you are out there.”⁸

Naess states that change in our attitude cannot be achieved by following rules and regulations alone because with administration comes elements such as force, manipulation, violence which makes humans aggravated and they feel restrictive and pressurized. This would not come with a positive outcome as people are being compelled through moral demands to assign equal value to nature. The actual care for nature comes with values.

The assigning of moral rules and conduct cannot change the perception of humans towards nature. Naess proposes an alternative and claims that we need to respect and care for nature through a process of identification. He says “from the identification process stems unity, and since the unity is of gestalt character, the wholeness is attained.”⁹ Identifying oneself with others involves enlarging of self. This process of identification leads to self-development. Though, people today are identified by material possessions and property but modern societies have promoted alienation. Naess insists on developing values among humans instead of a moral code of rules and laws. Values like care, trust, friendship, love, etc play a central role in determining relationships. It adds appropriate reciprocity to the list of values that are so significant in understanding human relationships with others.

The enlarged self which has been developed from a narrow self is now inclined towards generous acts of caring towards non-human members of the community. “We own nature together with our fellows.”¹⁰ Realizing the relationship with others leads to the growth from self-interest to selflessness. Naess states identifying the self with others is a replicative and an expansive process. As it takes a long time to teach a child that what is right and wrong for his self-development in a similar way identifying the self with others takes time. He states:

From identifying with “one’s nearest,” higher unities are created: through circles of friends, local communities, tribes, compatriots, races, humanity, life and, ultimately, as articulated by religious and philosophic leaders, unity with the supreme whole, the “world” in a broader and deeper sense than usual.¹¹

Naess makes a parallel statement that if one cannot identify self with the nature, then people can follow the moral rules and regulations. Like, we take the precept of Naess “not to harm living beings unnecessarily”. If some people cannot

assign moral value and do not have an inclination then Naess asserts it is better if these people follow moral rules. As, rules can be a manifestation of cooperation, peace, and harmony.

Naess in “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement” makes the distinction between shallow and deep ecology as:

“the ‘shallow’ ecological movement as one that fights pollution and resource depletion in order to preserve human health and affluence while the ‘deep’ ecological movement operates out of a deep-seated respect and even veneration for ways and forms of life, and accords them an equal right to live and blossom.”¹²

He distinguishes between two moments shallow and deep ecology. Shallow ecology is “to purify the air and water and spread pollution more evenly”¹³ as it is affecting the health of people. Whereas deep ecology concentrates on what is going on in the total ecosystem and calls for a high priority fight against the economic conditions and the technology responsible for producing the acid rain.¹⁴ Shallow ecology deals with the problem of pollution without concentrating on how the pollution and environmental disaster came in the first place. Whereas deep ecology asks the questions like why and how did pollution affects the entire ecosystem, it concentrates on a new way that can change the lifestyle of humans so that nature can be protected.

Naess gave the basis of deep ecology but his eight principles were reformulated by him and his colleague George Sessions:¹⁵

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent worth). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantially smaller human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires a smaller human population.
5. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.

7. The ideological change will be mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between bigness and greatness.

8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.

Beyond these eight principles of deep ecology, Naess has outlined his own form of deep ecology that he calls “Ecosophy T”; it allows the other versions of deep ecology and can be explained as:

I call my philosophy “Ecosophy T”, using the character T just to emphasize the other people in the movement would, if motivated to formulate their world view and general value priorities, arrive at different ecosophies; Ecosophy ‘A’, ‘B’,...’ Z’¹⁶

It includes the eight principles and gives two other elements which are self-realization and identification. These elements are connected to Gandhi’s theory of Self-realization and identification. Like Gandhi, Naess accepts the fundamental principle “you shall never use any living being only as a means.”¹⁷ Like Gandhi, Naess forms his theory as “the person is not above or outside of nature... (But) is a part of creation going on.”¹⁸ The fact given is, naess ideas do not revolve around the humans. He treats humans as a part of the environment and not separate from other beings.

His ideas extend by bringing out the relation between human beings and animals. He states, the lifestyle humans have adopted led to the suffering of animals. The sense of desire, luxurious living directs humans to consume more resources which is a direct way is an exploitation. Perhaps, overconsumption will result in scarcity of resources and destruction of the habitat of other species. Naess states: “human beings have no right to reduce the richness or diversity except where it is necessary to satisfy vital needs”.¹⁹ The general feature of deep ecology is, it grants value to all beings. The interference of humans with nature has increased, they have been killing and exploiting resources for non-vital needs. The overconsumption has led to the extinction of species. In other words, Naess claims that the policies which emphasize on the standard of living rather than improving quality of life need to be improved. This argument of Naess is similar to Gandhi’s adoption of simple life and opposition to luxurious living.

The stability of nature depends upon certain biological factors. The overconsumption and luxurious lifestyle have deteriorated the health of ecosystem. An unstable ecosystem can break easily. The rejection of material abundance and adopting a lifestyle that is simple is closer to Gandhi’s form of ecology.

Self-realization and identification are the two elements of deep ecology. Though, Deep ecology may have many versions but self-realization and identification are the essences of deep ecology. The pioneer of ecosophy states, in order to prevent the environment from the entire crisis, all we need is self-realization. There are a certain environmentalists and ethicists who believed in changing principles and rules in order to protect nature but Naess, claimed all we need is self-realization and identification. Gandhi also used the same concept in order to protect living beings.

He states humans have evolved the unique personality to realize the self with non-humans. Once the self identifies itself with others, it changes the perception of humans and with love and care, they preserve the nature. In Naess's system of philosophy, the goal of self-realization and identification is to remove the ego and to develop a wider and deeper sense of self. He states: "when the egotism vanishes, something else grows, that ingredient of the person that tends to identify itself with God, with humanity, all that lives."²⁰

In order to realize the self one needs to reduce the hedonistic approach and should follow the integrity principle which states everything is interconnected. If you harm anything, then you harm yourself. David Rothenberg has identified three features of self-realization:²¹ firstly, self-realization does not mean self-centeredness because the individual self cannot be isolated from, as well as dissolved into the greater self. Secondly, Self-realization is a process of expanding oneself to realize that she is a part of nature and others' interests should be her own interest. Thirdly, since self-realization is an active condition, or a process, or a way of life, nobody can ever reach self-realization. Like *Nirvana* in Buddhism, Self-realization is unreachable, self-realization provides us a direction to move towards the self.

The process of identifying the self with others can only be practiced by interacting with others. For example: if we want to develop the self of a child, then we cannot do it in isolation, or parents of a child are not enough for the development of self. Instead, it requires the interaction of children with plants, animals, neighbors, fishes, seasons, and scenery. Though, it is a gradual and a slow process but the multiple sought of interaction develops cooperation, love and care in child.

Though one may question how does Naess defines self-realization in ecosophy and what are its characteristics? Naess states self-realization is a dynamic process that moves towards interconnectedness. But, when one separates itself from others and nature, a form of isolation is created from the world and from oneself. This isolation obstructs an individual from the realization of the self as it is a basic aspect in regarding one's self-development. It encourages unnecessary violence and harming others for non-vital needs.

Whereas identifying the self with others and nature includes the realization of the complete self. The perfect self-realization leads to the unselfishness and is beyond the sense of ego. It is unselfish because the individual's degree of self-realization is dependent on the others. Though, collective self-realization does not eliminate individual uniqueness. As Naess puts it: "the identification process leads deeper into nature as a whole, but also deeper into unique features of particular beings.

Gandhi had a strong influence on Naess. He derived the concept of self-realization after being influenced by Gandhi. John Nolt states: "he embarked on an academic study of Gandhi's ideas and developed his own environmental philosophy, which incorporated Gandhi's idea that moral maturation amounts to increasing identification with all that lives."²² For Gandhi, the self-realization liberates atman from ego-driven desires and unites it with the higher Self.

Arne Naess's work on self-realization has been originated because of Gandhi. Naess in Gandhi and the Group conflict states:

The rock-bottom foundation of the technique for achieving the power of non-violence is the belief in the essential oneness of all life. More than a few people, from their earliest youth, feel a basic unity with and of all the human beings they encounter, a unity that overrides all the differences and makes these appear superficial. Gandhi was one of these fortunate people.²³

Naess and Gandhi both rely on the same notion of living a simple life. For them, ecocentric perceptives are important to the practice of non-violence because it induces humans to minimize their desires and stay in harmony with nature. The notion of identifying with others and natures as a whole, allows one to include genuine self-interest which is in the interest of all. Interconnectedness and identification help in developing an expanded sense of self, or self-realization which is necessary for maintaining the health of nature.

Gandhi's theory of self-realization, identification, interdependence, selfless service, sacrifice, cooperation, *RTA*, unity intimately contribute to an environmental ethic. These notions were examined on a secular basis, as they may be more likely to be accessible to people with different views and cultures. The attempt to find the similarity between Gandhi and Arne Naess got successful. As, the two environmental theories that very closely revolve around Gandhi have been adopted by Arne Naess in 'Ecosophy T': self-realization and identification. They both accept the fundamental principle of ecology that everything is interconnected and both foci on leading a simple life as a lifestyle which humans have adopted are harming the environment. The main focus of the philosophy given by both is identifying the self relates to other beings and to nature.

It was seen that the theories of both allow that nature can be the objects of ethical care, love and respect through the process of identification. According to Gandhi if an action is done by considering the welfare of all, then action is considered to be right. On this basis, the paper claims that with self-realization and identifying the self with others, humans can stay in harmony with nature. This establishes the possibility that granting value to nature underlies in the human conduct.

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