

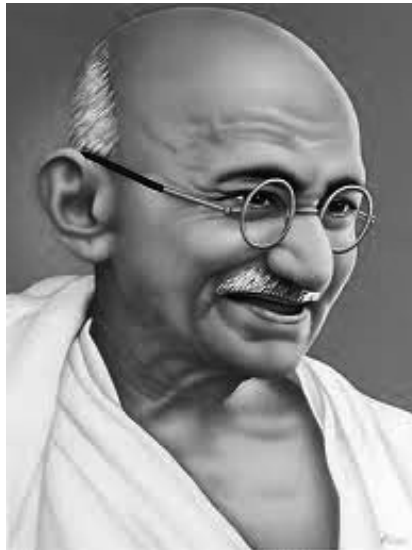
Mahatma Gandhi and Sustainable Development

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The theme of sustainable development has evolved with the evolution of human civilization. The very beginning of human society and its onward march is woven critically around this concept which has assumed significance for the survival of the modern civilization and planet earth. Whenever human civilization receded from the path of sustainable development the danger to its survival was ensured.

With the advent of industrial revolution in Europe began the era of unsustainable development. The unleashing of creative energies of people during that period led to the spectacular progress in the field of science and technology. The tapping of energy from coal and the application of new methods of production gave rise to unprecedented productivity.

While industrial revolution released humans from the fetters of feudalism and bigotry it put new chains around them in the form of materialism and materialistic appetite. The mind which became free from bondage of bigotry and



exploitative feudal mode of production became subservient to machinery and greed. Driven by the credo of mass production the modern western civilization chose the path of violence subjugating the territories of the peoples of Asia, Africa and

Latin America and appropriating their resources. Conquest and exploitation of the human and material resources beyond the boundaries of Europe became the guiding aspect of that civilization. The policies and values associated with that path led to the indiscriminate consumption of energy and resources of the planet earth and gave birth to an imperial mindset.

By 1980s it was realized that such an approach would degrade the environment beyond repair and cause unimaginable consequences to the very existence of the planet. An institutionalized approach in the form of The World Commission on Environment and Development under the Chairmanship of Harlem Brundtland was set up to find remedies to the problem. It produced a report in 1987 entitled “Our Common Future” which stressed on the

ability of mankind to make development sustainable.

It understood sustainable development in terms of “the limits imposed by the present state of technology and social organizations on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities.” A pertinent question exercises our mind. Why was the Commission established in 1983 and not before? A provisional answer was that by the beginning of the 1980s it was painfully realized that the western world was living beyond the limits of the planet earth. “The Living Planet” a report of the World Wild Life Foundation released in 2006 clearly stated that in 1980s it was realized that the ways of life followed by the western societies disturbed the subtle balance of the planet earth. The Human Development Report 2007-08 on the theme Fighting Climate Change : Human Solidarity in a Divided World also critically looked at the modern development and wrote “Climate change calls into question the enlightenment principle that human progress will make the future look better than the past.”

It is indeed tragic that it took so many centuries to realize that the mode of life of the western people and their path of development was unsustainable and therefore an attempt was made to search for the ways and means to rectify the course. There is in fact a desperate search for methods to decarbonise the environment and reestablish the atmosphere prevailing before industrial revolution.

It is in this context that one is struck by the approach of Mahatma Gandhi who in the first decade of the twentieth century understood the unsustainability of the modern civilization based on multiplication of wants and desires. He launched the first Satyagraha in 1906 which lasted

for eight years and ended in 1914. Based on truth and non-violence it stressed on simplicity of life, unity of all religions and of the entire mankind. The Common Future which Europeans understood through Brundtland Commission in 1987 was understood by Mahatma Gandhi in the end of 19th century itself. Through his book “The Hind Swaraj” he outlined the threat to common future of humanity caused by relentless quest for more material goods and services. He described the civilization driven by endless multiplication of wants as Satanic and defined civilization in terms of performance of duties, adherence to morality and exercise of restraint. Any approach which puts limitations on passion and greed and which aims at fulfilling the fundamental needs remain central to the concept and practice of sustainable development. The Hind Swaraj became a manifesto of sustainable development. Even though it did not refer to nature or environment in any of its passages it exposed the predatory instincts of modern civilization and thereby became an important publication critically scrutinizing the modern civilization which was at its zenith. It prophetically stated that modern urban industrial civilization contained in itself its own seeds of destruction. Hind Swaraj was a remarkable outcome of the first Satyagraha. Therefore his first Satyagraha launched for restoration of the democratic rights of Indians became a Satyagraha against the exploitation of the modern western civilization. In a much broader sense it was a Satyagraha which had the challenging and compassionate vision of saving the planet earth.

It is of paramount importance to note that sustainable development implying harmonious existence of mankind with nature and ecology presupposed an approach based on equity and justice and coexistence of all cultures and

civilizations. An unsustainable path of development centering around domination and conquest of other peoples and their natural resources give rise to an imperial world view which detects “fault lines” along nations and cultures and views the existence of different races in antagonistic terms. Towards the end of the twentieth century the celebrated American Scholar Samuel Huntington came out with the theory of clash of civilizations. His hypothesis in its expanded form assumed that diverse civilizations in the world would clash substituting the wars among nations. The dangerous thesis is a byproduct of the modern civilization which emerged after the industrial revolution and which contemptuously treated the civilizations and cultures of peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America. What Samuel Huntington wrote towards the end of the twentieth century was advocated by General Smuts in the beginning of the same century. When Indians fought non-violently against the restrictions imposed on them for their entry into Transvaal, he wrote to Mahatma Gandhi “South Africa is a representative western civilization while India is the centre of oriental culture. Thinkers of the present generation hold that these two civilizations cannot go together. If nations representing these rival cultures meet even in small groups, the result will only be an explosion.”

The incompatibility of the oriental and western civilizations outlined by General Smuts underlined the incompatibility of approaches of the two civilizations – the former stressing on simplicity and restraint and the later on extravagant consumption pattern. He in fact wrote in so many words that people of the oriental culture with their simple habits and contented life have an outlook which run contrary to the outlook of people

belonging to western culture which taught them to have and possess more and if necessary to shed blood for achieving that goal. What General Smuts wrote to Gandhiji was nothing but a gross and unabashed manifestation of an extravagant life style unmindful of its consequences on nature and other sections of humanity.

Mahatma Gandhi through his first Satyagraha in South Africa and subsequently during our freedom movement was engaged in criticizing the colonial modernity which went beyond the carrying capacity of the planet earth and exploited peoples and resources across the planet. Therefore our freedom struggle under his leadership was in a way the first ever struggle in history for sustainable development. There are many statements of Mahatma Gandhi which can be quoted to substantiate this point. One particular statement he made in the context of Europeans is of abiding relevance for the whole mankind. He wrote in 1938:

“The incessant search for material comfort and their multiplication is such an evil and I make bold to say that the Europeans themselves will have to remodel their outlook, if they are not to perish under the weight of the comforts to which they are becoming slaves.”

In fact the Europeans are gradually listening to the ringing words of Mahatma Gandhi. It is evident from the approach of some British citizens who have taken measures to simplify life so as to reduce their dependence on energy and resources. They have established a zero-energy (fossil) development system which enables them to run a housing society in London. At the entrance of the Society there is a line written which reads as follows:

“If everyone on the planet consumed as much as the average person in the U.K. we would need three planets to support us.”

These words recapture thoughts of Gandhiji who eight decades back wrote that if India followed the western model of development she would require more than one planet to achieve the progress they had attained.

The residents of the Housing Society in no way belong to the movements launched to protect climate and environment. They pursue diverse professions and services and are a part of the vibrant middle class. What distinguishes them is their remodeled outlook which eschew excessive consumption and production and follow in practice the methods of simple living.

They have resolved not to eat food which come from distant places. They are convinced that when items are transported from long distances a lot of energy is used for transporting, preserving and packing them. The growing consciousness that dependence on food from far off places would lead to excessive use of energy which in turn would lead to emission of more carbon dioxide and green house gases persuades them to use resources available within a few kilometers.

The Nicolas Stern Committee Report from the U.K. on Global Warming and Global Economy also underlined the same point when it observed that at the current rate of consumption of resources and energy of the planet, mankind would require more than one planet for survival. The Stern Committee Report therefore stressed on reduction of green house gas emissions by remodeling life style and by transiting from a carbon economy to a non-carbon economy.

What is being done in the ZED Housing Society and what is being recommended by the Nicolas Stern Committee Report was highlighted by Mahatma Gandhi during his first Satyagraha and our freedom struggle. He wrote on numerous occasions that failure on the part of human beings to satisfy their material needs by using resources available with fifteen or twenty kilometers would disturb the economy of nature. His usage of the phrase “economy of nature” in 1911 brings out his sensitivity and deeper understanding of human action vis-à-vis ecology.

In the Hind Swaraj he wrote against the annihilation of distance and time. While doing so he did not refer to the danger of excessive energy consumption. Yet with his remarkable intuitive understanding of the danger of modern technology on society and nature he advised mankind to simplify life. His critique of modern civilization, his condemnation of attempts to annihilate distance and his own life of simple and restrained living constituted refreshing attempts to establish a non-carbon and non-exploitative economy in the world.

In earlier paras we had argued that Mahatma Gandhi through our freedom struggle was going beyond the issue of independence and critically evaluating the colonial modernity which violently appropriated the resources of the planet and caused untold misery to the peoples in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The imperial rule and mindset was a byproduct of unsustainable development which was based on exploitation and injustice. He wanted India to avoid that path for the sake of not only Indians but for the whole mankind. Today people in Europe, as mentioned above, are realizing that their style and pattern of life cannot be sustained by utilizing resources available in our own planet. Their life style is a

continuation of the colonial mindset based on their presumption that nature and planet earth has limitless resources and they have the right to use them to the exclusion of the rights of others. The world view which excludes others and exploits their resources for the benefit of chosen few is a dangerous and unsustainable world view. As early as 1894 Mahatma Gandhi had written that the policy of exclusion has become obsolete. In subsequent decades he outlined the pain and misery caused by such a world view and cautioned that if India followed that approach it would spell incalculable danger to the whole mankind. His insights were reflected in a small passage on Industrialism which he authored in 1928. He wrote,

God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization 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 entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world like bare locusts.

The world of twenty-first century is reaping the adverse consequences of the industrialization process which was set in motion by the western nations after industrial revolution. It has become vulnerable to unimaginable destruction due to a development process which brought severe pressure on natural resources and which is almost depleting the finite reservoir of energy derived from hydrocarbon. Mahatma Gandhi's early warning in the form of the above statement of 1928 sounds so contemporary for a world confronting the unprecedented danger of global warming and climate change.

As mentioned earlier Mahatma Gandhi's outstanding leadership during India's struggle for independence was a leadership for a sustainable world order. He spoke, wrote and put into practice many ideas which brought out his leadership qualities for the cause of sustainable development. We are familiar with his historic Dandi March of 1930. The very reference to that March stirs our mind in grasping his unprecedented method of asserting the right of common people over natural resources of which salt is the most basic and primary one. The British empire thrived in monopolizing resources and depriving their legitimate owners access to them. Denial of access of common people to the basic resources is part of a strategy for unsustainable development. Mahatma Gandhi by breaking the salt law and asserting the rights of ordinary people to make salt was empowering the common people which is central to the issue of sustainable development.

After Dandi March was over, he outlined its larger goal by stating that the aim of the March went beyond the independence of India and encompassed in its scope the much broader objective of freeing the world from the monstrous greed of materialism. It was a powerful statement which in combination with his criticism of the greed based modern civilization made Mahatma Gandhi one of the greatest exponents and practitioners of sustainable development. In fact Joseph Stiglitz in his latest book 'Making Globalisation Work' wrote that in a globalised world the western nations give precedence to material values over environmental values. Mahatma Gandhi was once told by a British correspondent that in a materialistic world non-violence would not be effective. In responding to that observation Gandhiji wrote that when non-violence reigned

supreme materialism would take a back seat. Through Dandi March and indeed through his path-breaking non-violent work beginning in South Africa and culminating with his martyrdom he wanted non-violence to reign supreme. Creatively interpreting non-violence and non-violent mass action in its broadest sense he stressed, among other things, on communal harmony, economic equality, eradication of untouchability, progressive amelioration of the toiling people, social enfranchisement of women, free and compulsory primary education and overhauling of the system of higher education so as to meet the requirements of the ordinary people instead of the middle class. It is striking to note that most of these issues form integral part of Agenda-21 of the Rio Summit which gave a blueprint for sustainable development.

One of the defining features of modern civilization is the annihilation of distance by excessively using motorized transport. Proliferation of cars and airplanes to make communication easier for enhancing mobility and making the world smaller have choked peoples across the globe with air pollution and emission of green house gases. Joseph Stiglitz in his book 'Making Globalisation Work' has written that 80% of the global warming is caused by hydrocarbons and 20% is caused by deforestation. Increasingly more and more people are possessing cars which are symbols of status, individuality and mobility. The threat posed by growing number of cars to environment is well known. Now it is being asked if planet earth can cope up with the toxic emissions from 4 billion cars possessed by peoples in America, China, India and Europe. The ability of people to have cars and provide fuel to them does not augur well for the climate. Combined with refrigerator and air-conditioning it will cause irreversible damage

to the ozone layer and carrying capacity of the earth. Annihilation of distance coupled with pursuit of comfort will further contribute to unsustainable development.

The craze for car began in 1930s when the President of America Mr. Hoover outlined his plan for two cars and two radio sets for each American family. Mahatma Gandhi was informed about it by an American correspondent and requested to outline his future vision of Indian society. He in his characteristic way replied that if every Indian family would possess a car there would be so many of them resulting in lack of space to walk. Adding further he stated that in his vision of Indian society possession of a car would not be considered a meritorious thing.

Again during the Dandi March when some people brought oranges in a motorized transport he disapproved of it and said, "The rule should avoid the car if you can walk." There are many European countries where congestion tax is imposed for cars to enter certain key areas to keep them free from vehicular pollution. There are several other countries in Europe which are adopting a car less day. They have realized the demerit of possessing too many cars. In other words the utterances of Mahatma Gandhi concerning cars are being realized with added poignancy.

Going beyond the terrestrial sphere we find that the civil aviation sector is growing in an unprecedented scale and thriving by introducing cheaper fares for passengers. It is contributing to the greater integration of different parts of the country and world. Annihilation of distance through airplanes is not an unmixed blessing. The London Economist in its issue of 10th June, 2006 carried a cover story under the caption "The Dirty Sky: Why Air Travel will be the Next Green Battle

Ground”. It observed “Put frankly, air travel makes a mockery of many peoples attempts to live a green life. Somebody who wants to reduce his “carbon footprint” can bicycle to work, never buy aerosols and turn off his air conditioner - and still blow away all this virtue on a couple of long flights.”

Writing in the Observer of 12th May, 2006 Joanna Walters states “Can you still call yourself green at 30,000 feet? Frankly, no. Air travel is choking our world faster than any other form of transport”. Stating that “Air transport is the fastest growing source of green house gas emission but so far sparked relatively little concern among Governments and international bodies” she wrote “One return flight to, say, Miami, and you are responsible for more carbon dioxide production than a year’s motoring”.

These grave concerns expressed in foreign press starkly remind us about Mahatma Gandhi’s reservations about annihilation of distance. In Hind Swaraj, he described railways a necessary evil. All other faster means of communication can indeed constitute necessary evil. The necessary evil stretched beyond a point will overwhelm mankind and the planet earth. It is in this context that his wise counsel not to subordinate human interest to machine assumes paramount significance.

While dealing with Mahatma Gandhi and Sustainable Development one would inevitably deal with the question of poverty which is the worst source of pollution. Fight for eradication of poverty by using appropriate technology and non-violent means is nothing but a fight for sustainable development. Mahatma Gandhi wrote in Hind Swaraj not only to criticize modern civilization but also to eradicate poverty in India. Smt. Indira Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India in her

speech in the first ever U.N. Conference on Environment organised in Stockholm in 1972 declared that poverty is the worst source of pollution. Mahatma Gandhi by addressing the issue of eradication of poverty in Hind Swaraj was addressing the core issue of sustainable development. Almost eight decades after Mahatma Gandhi did deal with the issue of poverty The Brundtland Commission on “Our Common Future” wrote “A world in which poverty is endemic will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes”.

Adoption of a comparatively simple life style by the western people will be a major factor for eradication of poverty. In fact the life style of the people of the advanced countries have gravely endangered environment. They have given priority to their own interests over the interests of nature. Prof. David H. Bennett in an insightful article “The Cinderella Syndrome : Ecologically Sustainable Development and Ecological Competence – A Second Precautionary Tale” wrote that aborigines in Australia during 40,000 to 80,000 years have done much less damage to the continent than the non-aborigines inhabitants in the last 200 years. He holds that the technological imperative of the non-aborigine inhabitant contributed to the damage of the ecology and exhorts them to learn the lessons of restraint and ecological competence from the aborigines to adopt a sustainable way of life. At the end he captures the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi by writing “Dominant western cultures must learn to live simply so that others can simply live.” It is this simple living which can go a long way in addressing the issue of poverty eradication and promoting the cause of sustainable development.

The discussion of Mahatma Gandhi and Sustainable Development would be incomplete

without referring to the burning issue of water scarcity in the world. Twenty first century has been described as the most water stressed century in the world. Water scarcity across the world may cause conflicts among nations. If not controlled and dealt with in a fair and equitable manner the water scarcity problem may give rise to another world war reminiscent of other world wars over resources and other trading and commercial interests. It is in this context that Mahatma Gandhi's ideas need to be recollected and put into practice.

During our struggle for independence he referred to the water famine occurring in the Kathiawar region of Gujarat ruled by many princes. To address the issue of acute shortage of water he advised all the princely States to form a confederation and take long term measures for planting trees in vast tracts of land. He opined that afforestation on a large scale constituted the most effective step to face the water crisis. The twenty-first century world need to follow his words with utmost seriousness. The British rulers who treated forests as a source of revenue hardly understood their relevance from the point of view of ecology and sustainable development. Their approach was a byproduct of the exploitation of natural resources regardless of its consequences for the common people and environment.

Tuning himself with the common people whom he called "the dumb millions" he also suggested in a prayer meeting in Delhi in 1947 for harvesting rain water and using it for irrigational purposes to avoid famines and food shortages. The M.S. Swaminathan Commission for Farmers in its report submitted to the Prime Minister in 2006 recommended to harvest rain water for addressing the problem of irrigation affecting our farmers.

Mahatma Gandhi was far ahead of his times in grappling with challenges to planet earth arising out of a life style which multiplied wants and desires and left no stone unturned to satisfy them. At a time when mankind is facing the dangerous prospects of getting annihilated due to accelerating pace of global warming it is important to rediscover Gandhiji's ideas and put them into practice. It is heartening that in many parts of the world people are getting inspired by his ideals and taking appropriate action. It was best reflected in the initiative taken in Germany to establish Green Party and pursue policies consistent with nature and ecology. One of the founders of Green Party Ms. Patra Kelly admirably summed up the impact of Mahatma Gandhi in forming the party when she wrote the following:

In particular area of our work we have been greatly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. That is in our belief that a life style and method of production which rely on endless supply of raw materials and which use those raw materials lavishly, also provide motive force for violent appropriation of raw materials from other countries. In contrast a responsible use of raw materials as part of an ecologically oriented life style and economy reduces the risk that policies of violence will pursue.

Such a vision provides the remedy to create a new civilization the foundation of which is based on discipline, restraint and morality. It is heartening to note that the recent literature being brought out in the western world is eloquently following the vision of Mahatma Gandhi. A book "Surviving the Century : Facing Climate Chaos" edited by Professor Herbert Girardet and brought

out by the World Future Council stresses on measures suggested by Mahatma Gandhi in the beginning of the twentieth century. The book argues for an approach which would speak for the earth community. It suggests that such an approach can be devised if we become non-violent, respect nature, follow the path of sustainable development and ensure justice to the poor. All those aspects remained central to Mahatma Gandhi's life and work. There is slow but sure realization that by following Gandhiji's ideals we can survive the century. The line of argument which attempts to speak for the earth community essentially recaptures the immortal and eloquent words of Mahatma Gandhi that earth has enough for fulfilling everybody's need but not anybody's greed. These words constitute the sum and substance of sustainable development. There is no alternative to such a world view. The Time

Magazine in its 29th April 2007 issue came out with 51 Global Warming Survival Guides. The 51st Guide earnestly suggests to share more, consume less and simplify life. In other words the Time Magazine, one of the mouth pieces of the western world, is turning to Mahatma Gandhi to save the world from the danger of extinction caused by global warming. It is a measure of Mahatma Gandhi's enduring and deeper significance in the context of attempts to protect the planet earth. It is therefore indispensable to rediscover his writings and comprehend them to further the cause of sustainable development.

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