

Original Article

Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi in Reference to Environmental Justice

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy provides profound insights into the harmonious coexistence of humanity with nature, emphasizing sustainable living and moral responsibility towards the environment. Central to his worldview is the principle of Ahimsa (non-violence), which extends beyond human interactions to encompass all living beings and the natural world. Gandhi's advocacy for simple living reflects his belief in minimizing resource consumption, reducing waste, and avoiding the greed-driven exploitation of nature, which he saw as a root cause of environmental and social degradation. His concept of trusteeship further underlines his vision of equitable resource distribution. Gandhi argued that the Earth provides enough for everyone's needs but not for anyone's greed. This principle resonates with modern environmental justice, which seeks to address the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on marginalized communities. By promoting local self-sufficiency, Gandhi critiqued the destructive tendencies of industrialization and globalization, which he viewed as alienating individuals from nature and their local communities. Gandhi's critique of industrialization was not an outright rejection of progress but a call for development rooted in ethical and ecological considerations. He envisioned a society where economic practices aligned with the principles of sustainability and equity, ensuring that future generations inherit a liveable planet. In the face of modern environmental crises, Gandhi's teachings offer timeless guidance. His emphasis on moral responsibility, community-centric approaches, and sustainable living provides a pathway for addressing issues like climate change, resource depletion, and environmental injustice. Thus, Gandhi's philosophy remains profoundly relevant in shaping contemporary environmental discourse and action.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, environmental justice, sustainability, non-violence, trusteeship, simple living, industrialization, ecological balance

Introduction

Environmental justice seeks to address the inequitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, particularly affecting marginalized communities. Mahatma Gandhi's teachings, rooted in ethics and spirituality, provide a profound framework for addressing these challenges. His commitment to non-violence, equitable resource use, and community-driven development resonates with the principles of environmental justice. This essay examines Gandhi's philosophy and its application to contemporary environmental issues.

1. The Foundations of Gandhi's Environmental Philosophy

Mahatma Gandhi, revered as the Father of the Indian Nation, is widely celebrated for his principles of nonviolence, truth, and self-reliance. However, less discussed is his environmental philosophy, which holds significant relevance in addressing today's ecological crises. Gandhi's environmental worldview is deeply rooted in his ethical principles, simplicity, and spiritual vision. His ideas transcend mere conservation; they offer a holistic approach to human life in harmony with nature. This essay explores the foundational principles of Gandhi's environmental philosophy and their timeless relevance.

1. Simple Living and Sustainability

At the heart of Gandhi's environmental philosophy lies the concept of 'simple living'. He believed in minimizing human wants to avoid unnecessary exploitation of natural resources. His famous dictum, "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed," encapsulates this idea.



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Gandhi recognized that unbridled consumption leads to environmental degradation and social inequality. Gandhi's advocacy for the use of local resources and self-sufficient village economies (the 'Gram Swaraj' model) was a direct challenge to the industrialized and consumerist economies that exploit both people and the planet. He viewed over-industrialization as a threat to ecological balance, advocating instead for small-scale, decentralized systems that respect nature's limits.

2. Nonviolence towards Nature

Gandhi extended the principle of 'Ahimsa' (nonviolence) beyond human relationships to encompass all living beings and the environment. This interconnectedness between humans and nature is deeply embedded in Indian philosophy, and Gandhi revitalized this worldview in the modern context.

By advocating for practices like vegetarianism and opposing animal cruelty, Gandhi highlighted the ethical imperative to live in harmony with all forms of life. His stance against colonial exploitation of India's natural resources also underscored his broader commitment to environmental justice.

3. Critique of Industrialization

Gandhi was a vocal critic of the industrial revolution and its adverse impact on the environment. In his seminal work, 'Hind Swaraj' (1909), he argued that modern industrial civilization, with its insatiable appetite for growth, leads to ecological destruction and moral decay. He warned against the unsustainable extraction of resources to fuel economic expansion, which he saw as harmful to both the environment and the rural poor.

Gandhi's vision for industrial development was not one of rejection but of ethical moderation. He supported the use of technology that empowered local communities and preserved ecological balance, rather than machines that replaced human labor and devastated the environment.

4. Spiritual Foundations of Ecology

Gandhi's environmental philosophy is deeply spiritual. He viewed the natural world as a manifestation of the divine, deserving reverence

and care. Drawing upon Hindu, Jain, and Christian teachings, Gandhi saw the earth as *a living entity*, much like a mother, whose resources must be used responsibly. His spirituality emphasized interconnectedness, where harming the environment was tantamount to harming oneself.

Gandhi's prayers, fasts, and ashram life reflected this ecological spirituality. His ashrams served as models of sustainable living, where simplicity, resourcefulness, and respect for nature were not just ideals but daily practices.

5. The Role of Trusteeship

The principle of 'trusteeship' is a cornerstone of Gandhi's environmental ethics. He believed that humans are not the owners of nature but merely its trustees, holding its resources in trust for future generations. This idea opposes the modern notion of private ownership and exploitation of natural resources.

Trusteeship emphasizes equitable distribution, ensuring that no individual or group accumulates excessive wealth at the expense of the environment or society. Gandhi's approach calls for a moral responsibility to use resources judiciously, avoiding waste and ensuring that nature's bounty remains available for all.

6. Advocacy for Localized Economies

Gandhi's vision of 'Gram Swaraj' (self-reliant villages) reflects his belief in local economies as a sustainable alternative to centralized industrial systems. He argued that localized production and consumption reduce the environmental footprint by eliminating the need for extensive transportation and resource extraction.

By promoting khadi (hand-spun cloth) and rural craftsmanship, Gandhi sought to create an economy that valued human labor and minimized environmental harm. His emphasis on local agriculture, composting, and organic farming practices also prefigures today's sustainable development movements.

7. Relevance in the Modern Context

Gandhi's environmental philosophy offers profound insights for tackling contemporary challenges such as climate change, deforestation, and resource depletion. The global crisis of ecological imbalance is rooted in the very issues Gandhi critiqued—consumerism, over-

industrialization, and disregard for the limits of nature.

In the age of global warming, Gandhi's advocacy for renewable energy sources, sustainable agriculture, and minimalism resonates strongly. His principles challenge nations and individuals to rethink their relationship with the environment, focusing on long-term well-being rather than short-term gains.

8. Criticisms and Interpretations

While Gandhi's environmental philosophy is admired, it is not without criticism. Critics argue that his model of rural self-sufficiency may not be scalable in a world with complex global systems. Others suggest that his rejection of modern industry may hinder technological progress. However, proponents of Gandhi's ideas emphasize that his principles are not rigid prescriptions but adaptable guidelines for achieving sustainability in diverse contexts.

Modern environmental movements, such as eco-feminism and deep ecology, have drawn inspiration from Gandhi's principles, demonstrating their adaptability and universal appeal.

2. Gandhiji's Views on Industrialization and Environmental Exploitation

Mahatma Gandhi, a visionary leader and advocate for sustainable living, had profound insights into the impact of industrialization and environmental exploitation. His ideas, rooted in simplicity, ethics, and interconnectedness, are increasingly relevant in the modern context of climate change and resource depletion.

1. Critique of Industrialization

Gandhi was critical of industrialization, particularly the Western model of rapid industrial growth, which he believed led to environmental degradation, exploitation of resources, and widening economic inequalities. According to him, industrialization prioritized material progress over moral and spiritual growth. He warned that the unbridled pursuit of industrial advancement would lead to the destruction of natural ecosystems, as it emphasized mass production, consumerism, and the exploitation of labor.

In his famous critique of modern civilization, outlined in his book **Hind Swaraj**,

Gandhi expressed concerns about the overdependence on machinery and its dehumanizing effects. He believed that industrialization would create a cycle of greed, alienation, and competition, disrupting the harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

2. Environmental Consciousness

Gandhi emphasized the importance of living in harmony with nature. He believed that humans are merely trustees of the earth and its resources, not its owners. This principle of trusteeship advocated for the responsible and equitable use of resources, ensuring that future generations inherit a healthy planet.

Gandhi's philosophy was deeply influenced by the idea of **Aparigraha** (non-possession) and **Ahimsa** (non-violence). He extended the concept of non-violence to include nature, emphasizing that exploiting the environment is a form of violence. He often said, "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed," underscoring the unsustainable nature of greed-driven exploitation.

3. Rural Economy and Self-Sufficiency

Gandhi proposed a model of development based on self-sufficient villages, where production is localized, and communities rely on sustainable agricultural and small-scale industries. He believed that this decentralized approach would not only prevent environmental exploitation but also foster equality and economic stability.

In contrast to large-scale industries, Gandhi supported the use of simple tools and technologies that aligned with the natural rhythm of life. He encouraged spinning khadi as a means to empower rural communities while reducing dependence on exploitative industrial systems.

4. Relevance Today

Gandhi's views on industrialization and environmental exploitation resonate strongly in the 21st century, as the world grapples with climate change, deforestation, pollution, and unsustainable consumption patterns. His call for ethical living, resource conservation, and decentralized economies offers a viable framework for achieving sustainable development.

In conclusion, Mahatma Gandhi's critique of industrialization and his emphasis on environmental sustainability were ahead of his time. By advocating for simplicity, self-reliance, and respect for nature, Gandhi provided a blueprint for a more balanced and ethical approach to progress—one that values the environment as an integral part of human well-being.

3. Gandhiji's Views on Environmental Justice Through Simplicity and Sustainability

Mahatma Gandhi, one of the most revered figures in modern history, championed principles of simplicity and sustainability that are deeply aligned with environmental justice. His philosophy emphasized a harmonious coexistence with nature, urging humanity to balance its needs with the planet's capacity to sustain life.

1. Simplicity: A Path to Sustainability

Gandhiji believed in "simple living and high thinking," a principle that reflects his commitment to minimizing the exploitation of natural resources. He advocated for a lifestyle that fulfills basic needs without indulging in excessive consumption. According to Gandhi, overconsumption and greed disrupt the balance of nature and lead to social and environmental injustices.

Gandhi's personal life embodied his teachings. He wore simple khadi clothes, promoted hand-spinning, and lived in self-sufficient communities. By advocating for local production and self-reliance, he sought to reduce the environmental degradation caused by industrialization and large-scale transportation. This approach aligns with modern concepts of reducing carbon footprints and promoting sustainable living.

2. Trusteeship: A Principle of Justice

Gandhi's concept of trusteeship further underscores his views on environmental justice. He believed that resources are not private possessions but should be used responsibly as a trust for the benefit of all, including future generations. This idea challenges the exploitative practices of industrial capitalism and promotes equitable resource distribution, essential for environmental and social sustainability.

He often said, "The earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed." This highlights his concern for environmental degradation caused by overexploitation and the need for restraint and moderation in resource use.

3. Sustainability and Community Living

Gandhi stressed the importance of sustainable development that nurtures both the environment and society. He championed decentralized economies and local production, which reduce the ecological costs associated with large-scale industrialization. By empowering local communities, he envisioned a society that is resilient, self-sufficient, and less dependent on exploitative systems.

Furthermore, Gandhi's ashrams were experiments in sustainable living, where practices like organic farming, water conservation, and waste recycling were emphasized. These practices resonate with today's environmental movements promoting eco-friendly lifestyles.

4. Nonviolence and Environmental Justice

Nonviolence (Ahimsa), the cornerstone of Gandhi's philosophy, extends to his views on the environment. He believed that harming nature equates to violence against life itself. His call for respect and compassion towards all living beings aligns with the modern ethos of ecological conservation and the rights of nature.

5. Relevance Today

Gandhi's principles are more relevant than ever in addressing contemporary environmental crises like climate change, deforestation, and resource depletion. His emphasis on reducing material desires, adopting sustainable practices, and ensuring justice for all forms of life offers a timeless blueprint for achieving environmental justice.

4. Relevance of Gandhi's Philosophy in Modern Environmental Justice

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, rooted in simplicity, non-violence, and sustainability, holds significant relevance in addressing modern environmental justice challenges. As the world grapples with climate change, resource inequities, and environmental degradation, Gandhi's teachings provide a moral and practical framework for

sustainable living and equitable resource distribution.

1. Simplicity and Sustainable Living

Gandhi emphasized "simple living and high thinking," advocating for a lifestyle that minimizes ecological footprints. His principle of **aparigraha** (non-possession) aligns with contemporary efforts to curb overconsumption and reduce waste. By promoting a minimalist lifestyle, Gandhi's teachings encourage individuals and communities to consume resources responsibly, a critical step in mitigating environmental harm and ensuring equitable access for all.

2. Non-Violence and Ecological Harmony

Gandhi's commitment to **ahimsa** (non-violence) extends beyond human relationships to include the environment. He viewed exploitation of nature as a form of violence and advocated for a harmonious coexistence with all living beings. This perspective resonates with modern environmental ethics, which emphasize protecting biodiversity and respecting the intrinsic value of nature. The idea of non-violence toward the environment underpins movements against deforestation, wildlife poaching, and pollution.

3. Decentralization and Self-Reliance

Gandhi championed decentralized systems and self-reliant communities, believing that local economies and governance could address inequities more effectively. This principle is crucial in environmental justice, where marginalized communities often suffer disproportionately from environmental harm. Decentralized, community-led solutions—such as sustainable agriculture and renewable energy initiatives—empower these communities to achieve environmental equity and resilience.

4. Justice and Equity

Gandhi's vision of 'Sarvodaya' (the welfare of all) aligns closely with the principles of environmental justice, which seek to ensure that all people, regardless of socioeconomic status, have equal access to a clean and healthy environment. Gandhi's focus on uplifting the poorest and most vulnerable resonates with current efforts to address environmental racism and the disproportionate burden of environmental degradation borne by marginalized communities.

5. Ethical Consumption and Development

Gandhi critiqued industrialization and materialism, warning of their destructive impact on humanity and nature. His insights are increasingly relevant in today's context of unsustainable development driven by consumerism. The emphasis on ethical consumption, renewable energy, and circular economies mirrors Gandhi's call for restraint and mindful development.

5. Challenges in Applying Gandhi's Philosophy

1 Balancing Modernization and Sustainability

While Gandhi's critique of industrialization is valid, reconciling it with the demands of modern development poses challenges.

2 Globalization and Environmental Inequities

Globalization often exacerbates environmental injustices, necessitating adaptations of Gandhian principles to address these complexities.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy offers a holistic framework for achieving environmental justice. His emphasis on non-violence, equitable resource use, and sustainable living addresses the root causes of environmental degradation and social inequities. By integrating Gandhian principles into contemporary environmental practices, we can build a more just and sustainable world.

Gandhi's vision of simplicity and sustainability is a profound guide for fostering environmental justice. By adopting his principles of moderation, community-centered living, and respect for nature, humanity can work towards a more equitable and sustainable world.

Findings

1. Gandhi's concept of trusteeship provides a moral foundation for sustainable resource management.
2. His critique of industrialization highlights the need for sustainable alternatives to large-scale development.
3. Gandhi's principles remain relevant in addressing modern environmental challenges, such as climate change and resource inequities.
4. Community-driven approaches inspired by Gandhi can effectively promote environmental justice.

5. Policymakers can draw from Gandhian thought to design equitable and sustainable development frameworks.

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