



GANDHI'S CONCEPT OF SARVODAYA FOR PEACE AND SUSTAINABILITY  
IN A TECHNOLOGICALLY CHALLENGED WORLD

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**Abstract:** Mahatma Gandhi was a visionary, a supreme leader, a social activist, a philosopher, and a great freedom fighter. He was the pioneer of truth, love, peace, and non-violence (*ahimsa*) as the means for a peaceful world. This paper deals with the theoretical and practical relevance of Indian ethics concerning the Gandhian concept of Sarvodaya, used to achieve sustainability, social, economic and environmental uplift. The paper critically evaluates the western model of sustainability, and highlights various theoretical aspects of Indian ethics. Specifically, it focuses on the Gandhian sustainability model in Sarvodaya, and attempts to balance the two theories for the practical purpose of sustainability and the need for the present situation.

**Keywords:** sustainability ethics; Sarvodaya; social, economic and environmental uplift

INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi was a visionary, a supreme leader, a social activist, a philosopher, and a great freedom fighter of India. He was a firm believer, upholder, and propagator of truth, love, peace, and non-violence (*ahimsa*). As a law student in England, after being exposed to the appreciative western proponents, he realized the real worthiness of great Indian culture. After that, influenced by various religious persons, Gandhi also studied Islam during his stay in South Africa as a legal practitioner. The new interpretations of Christianity by Tolstoy (Tolstoy 1894) and Ruskin (Ruskin 1962) imbibed the dignity of manual labour in his life. By merging all these theological schools, he envisioned that an individual's good is contained in the interest of all, and each human being can serve the society within their domains.

With the growth of population, the needs of humans have also grown. However, natural resources are limited. Although technology and artificial intelligence have advanced beyond our imagination, we have not used them successfully to produce non-renewable natural resources necessary for the sustenance of life. Gandhi certified that our sorrows' root cause is our "desire for more and more" and self-interested modern life pattern. He was intensely devoted to the uplift of India's village economy without

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any adverse effect on the environment. This gave birth to *Sarvodaya*, originating from two Sanskrit words: ‘sarva’ and ‘udaya’, which mean ‘all’ and ‘uplift’ respectively. In this article, Sarvodaya is used as an extension of the word *sustainability* and vice versa. The terms *sustainability* and *Sarvodaya* stand for the equal intrinsic nature to promote human well-being. The paper is an application of Gandhian means (Sarvodaya) for an end (sustainability). It also tries to justify the Indian value system and its deep-rooted principles of interconnectedness and interdependence.

## METHODOLOGY

It adopts the philosophical method of Analysis as well as the hermeneutics method to explain the relevance of Gandhian Ethics in particular and Indian Ethics in general for today's unsustainable world: the world of climate emergencies, the world of power and insecurities, and the world of wars.

### Desideratum for Sustainability Ethics

Sustainability ethics, which deal with humans' sustainable relations i.e. those with contemporaries, the future generation, and the natural environment, was one of the vital topics at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit. It is well discussed in the Brundtland Report. However, addressing the problems only through policies is not going to help. The normative question regarding sustainable development should also be addressed, and this question is not only limited to ‘what is to sustain’, but it also includes ‘how’ and ‘why to sustain’. Ethical considerations influence sustainability as a whole by providing a framework of normative and evaluative questions. Sustainable development is about sustainable relations, and sustainable relations are complex issues as they are a subject matter of different aspects. Hence, it needs scientific, educational, ethical (philosophical), and factual approaches (Becker 2012).

The on-going ecological crisis can also be referred to as the ‘spiritual crisis’ or ‘value crisis’ because it challenges human beings to explore what we hold to be of utmost importance and value. Even though theories are there, they are not properly implemented as the problems now are not one-dimensional. Therefore, it would be meaningless to locate the problem from one place and to solve another place's problem. Sustainable relations cannot be established individually – any particular theory would not be sufficient to deal with sustainable relations. It needs an all-inclusive analysis, as well as an integrated approach. Therefore, sustainable ethics need an all-inclusive theory-practice model for sustainable relations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Sustainability: The Western Models and Their Drawbacks

There are many western models; however, the paper discusses few essential models like the Brundtland Report and Caring for the Earth. Using the requisite amount of resources responsibly, carefully and wisely in order to ensure the comfortable survival of our future generation is known as *sustainable development*. The World Conservation Strategy was the first to coin this term in 1980, and it defined it as a path to human progress that can continue in the long run. In the 1987 Brundtland Report, ‘Our Common Future’, published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987), defined sustainable development as the development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987). However, it has been criticized for being highly anthropocentric, not definite about the term *need*, and focusing exclusively on economic development.

Caring for the Earth uses the word ‘sustainable’ in various combinations, such as ‘sustainable development’, ‘sustainable economy’, ‘sustainable society’, and ‘sustainable use’. In Caring for the Earth, ‘sustainable development’ implies “improving quality of life and living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystem” (UNEP 1991). The given definition equates development with quality of life and recognizes the environmental limits. Caring for Earth can be expressed in two ways: “it helps to improve the condition of entire human civilization by implementing the ethics for sustainable living” and “it helps in integrating conservation and development to keep our actions within the Earth's capacity” (UNEP 1991). It attempts to meet these goals by providing practical policies and strategies that promote sustainable development. However, the problem associated with the Caring for Earth definition is that it is not efficient enough to address the critical issues related to biological diversity caused by human beings’

massive use of natural resources. Hence, the situation demands a clear conservation policy and an action plan to implement ecological imperatives with sustainable development goals.

Another critical drawback in Caring for Earth's definition of sustainable development is the lack of 'needs' (any type: basic or luxury). Unintentionally, it appears as an improvement (continuous) in the level of humans' well-being in perpetuity. Arguably, here lies the significant implication or, to be more specific, the major limitation of it. The commendation regarding the constant development of human well-being is in the UN Declaration on the Right to Development of 1986, where the marathon of continuous improvement (constant development) is candidly mentioned. This commendation is illogical and immoral. It is irrational because it conflicts with the second law of thermodynamics<sup>6</sup>; it is immoral as it puts a lot of burden on the earlier generations to facilitate the relentless improvement of the quality of life for their successors. Wilfred Beckerman states that there is no logical reason for making all successors' life better than that of their predecessors (Beckerman 1999). Therefore, he rejected the concept of justice between the generations (intergenerational justice).

Indian theories on ethics have not been evaluated much at the theoretical level, so this work aims to present Indian ethics as a possible theory towards practicing sustainable goals through Gandhian ethics. This paper suggests an ethical model which amalgamates the Gandhian idea of Sarvodaya with the aforementioned western models for a sustainable change; the change that will connect humans with fellow humans, humans, with others, and with the future generation. One of the important ways to make this possible is by adopting the ethics of sustainability.

### **Sustainability Ethics from an Indian Perspective**

India has diverse geographical features, peoples, languages, cultures, religions, and creeds. Still, a subtle unity prevails beneath the apparent diversity. Most of the world's glorious religions either have their roots in India or have come to India. Hinduism, a major world religion that originated in the Indian subcontinent, is at least 4,000 years old. After that, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, Jainism and Buddhism originated, flourished, and found ways to different parts of the world.

Contrary to the Western developed countries, Indian ecology did not emerge from any environmental crisis. Instead, it has been omnipresent in its culture and heritage right from the onset of its civilization. In India, forest culture (*aranya sanskriti*) has been prevalent, emphasizing that humans who grow with trees and flowers are blessed. Indian culture has always been considered a nature-based culture, instructing man to view nature as his progenitor and to respect it.

While Western philosophy debates anthropocentrism (human-centered) and ecocentrism, Indian ethics focus on dharma. Dharma is derived from a Sanskrit word that means 'to uphold' or 'to sustain'. The concept of dharma signifies the behaviour which governs every aspect of the universe. Most tribal Hindu communities like the Bishnois, Bhils, and Swadhyayas have maintained healthy communal practices to conserve and protect local ecosystems not as environment preservation acts, but as dharma expressions (Jain 2011). Morality has been an inseparable notion in Indian culture. *Ahimsa*, which means non-violence, is one of Hinduism's elementary moral beliefs that govern the relationship not only between human species themselves, but also with non-human species (Gandhi 1987).

According to *Manusmriti*, one of the oldest codes and rules of conduct and behaviour in Hindu tradition, "happiness is rooted in contentment; its opposite is rooted in misery" (Rao 2000). A similar view was expressed by the great Mahatma Gandhi, "The earth has enough for everyone's needs, but not for everyone's greed" (Gandhi 1955).

### **Sarvodaya: An Ideology of Mahatma Gandhi**

Mahatma Gandhi, alias Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, was born in the Indian land of complex traditions. He was a visionary, a supreme leader, a social activist, a philosopher, and a great freedom fighter. He was a firm believer, upholder, and propagator of truth, love, peace, and non-violence (*ahimsa*). He led his life based on fact and unity to meet both eastern and western cultures.

During India's fight for freedom against the British government, Mahatma Gandhi persuaded the people to work for six significant goals of their life: truth (*satya*), non-violence (*ahimsa*), self-govern-

<sup>6</sup> According to the second law of thermodynamics, the energy that has been lost due to interaction and transformation cannot be recovered from the reverse process. <http://www.rsc.org/learn-chemistry/resources/res00000647/the-second-law-of-thermodynamics?cmpid=CMP00000673> (Accessed 25 June, 2016)

ment (*swaraj*), using Indian manufactured goods and boycotting foreign goods (*swadeshi*), realization of truth (*satyagraha*), and, last but not least, universal upliftment (*Sarvodaya*). After realizing the detrimental after-effects of modernization and industrialization, Gandhi envisaged a new society that will lead India and the whole world to the welfare of all.

According to Gandhi, every member of the Sarvodaya society should get rid of their greed to acquire material possessions and a luxurious lifestyle, which will create equal opportunities for all human beings to earn sufficiently while being honest to lead a comfortable life. In the context of the use of machines in the industrial sector, Gandhi asserted, "If we feel the need for machines, we certainly will have them. However, there should be no place for machines that concentrate power in a few hands and turn the masses into mere machine-minders, if, indeed, they do not make them unemployed" (Schumacher 1973). He firmly believed in the sanctity of manual labour to minimize the use of machines.

The intrinsic nature of Sarvodaya discards the utilitarian principles of "the greatest good of the greatest number" and "the end justifies the means". Gandhi exclaimed, "A votary of Ahimsa cannot subscribe to the utilitarian principle of the greatest good of the greatest number and others as mere means" (Weber 1991). He strived for the greatest good of all and followed the right means to attain that.

#### **Sarvodaya: A Means Towards Social Uplift**

According to Gandhi, the fundamental nature of Sarvodaya calls for complete annihilation of any discrimination based on caste, religion and race to attain perfect social uplift. Gandhi was convinced that it was possible to categorically abolish untouchability on account of his inherited Hindu tradition, including its caste system. He further considered untouchability a sin as he quoted, "the caste system is a hindrance, not a sin. But untouchability is a sin, a great crime, and if Hinduism does not destroy this serpent while there is time, it will be devoured by it". According to Gandhi's Sarvodaya principle, all humanity is one large family without distinction of race, religion, or nationality. At the Depressed Classes Conference in 1918, Gandhi declined to move any resolution without the presence of untouchables at the conference and stated, "He who demands swaraj must give swaraj to others. It is a principle in law that he who seeks justice should render it to others" (CWMG).

Moreover, Gandhi advised that "it shall be the duty of all Hindu leaders to secure, by every legitimate and peaceful means, an early removal of all social disabilities now imposed on untouchables" (Fischer 1983). Thus, by using the concept of Sarvodaya, Gandhi was successful in eliminating the social injustice of 'untouchability' using non-violence, love, and *satyagraha* as weapons, thereby bringing social justice and equality in the form of social sustainability. Furthermore, to bridge the gap between people of different castes, he encouraged inter-caste, interprovincial, and international marriages.

#### **Sarvodaya: A Means Towards Economic Uplift**

Gandhi claimed that agriculture is the quintessential form of social and economic activity where the spiritual goals of *swaraj* could be merged with *satyagraha*'s ethical, economic, and political constituents to create a genuinely free society (Clements 1988). Gandhi believed in simple living and high thinking. The Sarvodaya movement criticizes and rejects the western economy, especially the capitalist economy, which judges everything in terms of money. Nowadays, companies have become more profit-oriented rather than supplying the needs of society. Influential persons with lots of cash exploit economically backward classes, consequently widening the gap between the rich and the poor. Therefore, it is necessary to strike a balance between poor and affluent communities so that all of them can lead their lives in a better way.

Sarvodaya also demands non-possessions, i.e. limits to possessions rather than accumulation. While possessions imply the right of ownership to the accumulated money to meet our future needs, non-possession does not comply with one for being poor. Instead, non-possession calls for trusteeship, i.e. transferring ownership to the society. To be economically sustainable in the community with stability and peace, it is indispensable for the rich to share their belongings with the poor and needy. It can be possible only by shedding the sense of private ownership. Though Gandhi's notion of trusteeship was severely criticized during its conceptualization, its importance could be well realized in the last few decades. According to Tandon (Tandon 1965), "yet it has a permanent truth, and its validity is being more and more realized in the west today".



Economic sustainability is when there is decentralization of the economy, i.e. to be self-sufficient for production of primary goods in different regions. Injustice, exploitation and corruption are all by-products of a competitive economy. Sarvodaya requires a cooperative economy for every individual's collective growth in a society so that a true community spirit would prevail over competition and desire.

### **Sarvodaya: A Means Towards Environmental Uplift**

Anticipating the dangers inherent in the modernization and industrialization era, Gandhi rightly warned, "this modern civilization is such that one has only to be patient and it will be destroyed" (Gandhi 1938). He criticized the destructive nature of modern industrial civilization through his influential work "Hind Swaraj" in which he states, "Machinery has begun to desolate Europe. Ruination is now knocking at the English gates. Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilisation; it represents a great sin" (Gandhi 1938). Furthermore, in his journal *Young India*, a shudder for his country was evident when he wrote, "God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West" (Gandhi 1965). The economic imperialism of a single tiny kingdom (England) is keeping the world in chains today. Though environmentalism has prevailed in India since the onset of civilization, the country has now started exploiting its own people and environment for the so-called development, being attracted by the development in England and America. Consequently, tribal and rural communities are being deprived of their traditional rights of access and natural resources due to their channelization for industrial and corporate sectors.

Gandhi urged the people for a non-violent, cooperative, and spiritual order where science and spirituality enrich each other. Man and nature constitute a mutually reinforcing entity, and the freedom of individual and social progress is ensured. Most of the environmental movements in India have been influenced by the Gandhian ideology, be it the Chipko movement led by Sunderlal Bahuguna, or the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement) led by Medha Patkar. Though Gandhi never directly protested for depleting the environment, his way of living life in complete harmony with his surroundings, fellow people and the environment proves that he was an environmental ethics practitioner. He envisioned that the real change in the present scenario could occur only with self-realization.

The Gandhian ideology of Sarvodaya inherits the notion of environmental conservation, sustainability, and survival. Inspired by Adolf Just's book *Return to Nature*, Gandhi further acclaimed that it is indispensable to share our life with fellow human beings, all living beings, and the whole ecosystem to lead a wholesome life. Sarvodaya strives for the respect of nature and environmental protection, and advocates using proper technology to prevent environmental degradation and destruction. Arne Naess, one of the most influential propagators of deep ecology, certified that "Gandhi's utopia is one of the few that shows ecological balance, and today his rejection of the Western World's material abundance and waste is accepted by progressives of the ecological movement" (Naess 1974).

### **CONCLUSION**

The values, ideas, and action strategies of Mahatma Gandhi, especially Sarvodaya, can offer a panacea to the current social, economic, and environmental challenges. Voluntary simplicity of lifestyle by abstaining from luxury, recycling natural resources, uplifting rural communities, and restricting the use of chemical manures can significantly contribute to sustainability. Economic development should be part of the total welfare of humankind and nature rather than conflicting with the real interest. Sarvodaya is the movement of the people, by the people, and for the people.

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