

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND MAHATMA GANDHI: AN OVERVIEWDr. Kiran Bala¹

Abstract

The prime concern of the undertaking has been to critically analyze the societal and individual aspects of the developmental processes and the consequences of the same. The paper lays down a comparative path for the developmental processes and further tries to study the same from a Gandhian perspective. It has been well observed that the new age approach to development has manifested itself in the form of sustainability and popular participation. This clearly resonates with the Gandhian ideas of peaceful coexistence and grass root empowerment. The Gandhian ideas have been instrumental in shaping the world since the world has realized the efficacy of sustainability and community participation. The paper emphasizes on the inculcation of participatory mechanics and mass empowerment. The paper also tries to shed some light on the Gandhian contribution in the evolution of ecological consciousness and the subsequent effects of the same. The paper also acknowledges the efficacy of modern technologies and hence vies for the inculcation of the same in policy making and implementation.

Introduction

The notion of development is different for the people around the world. Some think of it as an economic process while for others it is but a necessity for the socio-cultural and the personal well being of an individual or the community as a whole. Development is a relative term and that stands true everywhere. The real deal being that the conception of people is different about it. The developmental notion has led man to newer realizations and hence it has breached the walls of traditionalism and conservatism. However, the current scenario demands that the notion of development should be reconsidered and that a new idea must be formed of the same.

The advent of man has been marked by the great “Cognitive Revolution” that came about in the homo-sapiens species. This has been the reason that our species has been able to evolve and organise itself into the complex socio-political and regional spheres. The notion of identity and nationality has further taken it to a new level. The evolution of the concept of nation- state has been the pivotal development that has shaped our conception of the developmental idea as a whole.

Understanding development has been the new vogue among the academics and theorists since developmental pursuit has led to the onset of newer technological revolutions that have been instrumental in changing the traditional feudal outlook of the people and hence it has brought about the

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genesis of the scientific revolution and the age of reason. The scientific revelation has led to the onset of a new age of knowledge which has redefined the meanings of the very existence itself.

Human existence is defined by evolution and that means progress in rational and behavioural terms. The humans are programmed to be better and better and our genetic code bears this as a constant reminder. The human DNA has been mutating into newer and newer combinations so that adaptive capabilities can be more effective. This is particularly evident due to the survival of the human species in adverse conditions and it still continues. The recent trend makes it very obvious that the entire process depends upon the developmental conception since it has been the very reason for the huge strides taken by humans in the name of development and progress.

The current rate at which the world is changing makes it clearly a concern since many things are at stake. The environment has been a great concern in today's world hence the idea of sustainability has been in vogue. The sustainable view of development aims for a balanced approach so that the progress cannot be at the cost of environment and hence this new idea has been the reason for a positive change in the world. The industrial revolution has brought about a great change in the lifestyles of the people but the results have been devastating for people and communities around the world.

Gandhi has been a great inspiration for millions of people around the world and his ideas have been instrumental in shaping billions of lives. The idea of Gandhi was simple and unique in the same time. While the world around him was talking of fast paced progress in the name of development, Gandhi was of the view that development was not only about personal or material benefits but it had to liberate the people from the shackles of penury and servitude. This has been the aim of every welfare state that has been active in its pursuit of this goal.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) goals are a big thing in the current world and hence this is a big achievement for the people of the world that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have now been given a new lease of life through the same. The MDGs were more specific or rather concentrated on the efforts of the developed world and hence it presented a halfway to the goal of eradicating hunger and poverty. The SDGs however have a more inclusive approach of educating and empowering people and communities of the world so that their lives can change for the betterment of their condition.

The concept of sustainability is increasingly discredited as a useful concept by itself, it appears to be serving some purpose when preceded by a delineating modifier like "ecological" or "agricultural" or "economic." Efforts have been made by members of various professions to give meaning to the term within the context of those respective professions. Callicott and Mumford, for example, develop the meaning of the term "ecological sustainability" as a useful concept for conservation biologists; In "Ecological Sustainability as a Conservation Concept," these authors advance an ecological definition of sustainability that connects human needs and ecosystem services: "meeting human needs without

compromising the health of ecosystems.” They propose this concept as a guiding principle for areas where human activities take place. (Callicott and Mumford, 1997)

Mahatma Gandhi was a beacon of hope for the millions of people around the world and hence he gave his entire life for the values and ideals that he believed in. The Gandhian way of freedom was very similar as that proposed by the great academics around the world in the form of SDGs. The idea of village republics and character building was Gandhi’s main focus and he strived hard for the same. Eradication of poverty and hunger has always been the aim of leaders around the world and efforts have been made for the same in different capacities. The great hindrance for the same has been that the world has been too focused on the pursuit of material wealth.

The advent of capitalism has been the single greatest reason for the technological revolution and the coming of the industrial revolution which namely led to the advancements in the sectors of health, transport, communications and technology. The coming of the IT revolution and the nano-science has further intensified the human race to immortality. The human life expectancy has increased, epidemics such as the black plaque have been decoded and medicines have provided a new lease of life to billions of people around the world. Healthier babies are born and food production has been on a completely new level. Fruits and vegetables are available all around the world.

The effect of all this has been that the human population has boomed and more than seven billion people live around the globe in the present day. The lives of all these people are not pleasant but are plagued by misery, disease, poverty and conflict. The capitalist machine clearly makes a distinction between the rich and the poor and this gap will continue to grow with the passage of time since the equitable distribution of wealth and resources is impractical to such a system which relies on the equations of demand and supply. The profit curve has to be maintained so that the machine can be fed and the developmental crusade continues unabated.

For Gandhi, industrialisation and profit making were at odds with moral progress. He advocated, “The incessant greed for material comforts and their multiplication is an evil. I make hold to say that the Europeans will have to remodel their outlook, if they are not to perish under the weight of the comforts to which they are becoming slaves.” Further, with a prophetic words, Gandhi forewarned that a time would come when those who are in mad rush today of multiplying their wants, would retrace their steps and say; what have we done?” If we observe subtly the contemporary debate on climate change, the manner in which the West is frantically trying to persuade the developing countries to reduce their carbon emissions and the billions of dollars being spent by developed countries to moderate the process of climate change, it validates Gandhi was utterly accurate in his prophecy. Although from the early seventies we came to know about the environmental degradation through literature like *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher 1973) and *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972), it took over a decade for the world to realize the gravity of the situation.

The developmental idea has only related to the economical sphere and has catered to the needs of the few at the cost of the most. A handful of people rule the world and hence the entire welfare perspective of the western liberal nations is being borne by the underdeveloped third world nations. Conflict and political instability have been a part of these petty nation states and the resolutions have always been provided in the form of long term debts and military support. Human rights have to be protected by some nations in some nations so that some nations can witness that something is being done.

The entire discourse of this system creates problems and then seeks a bigger problem so that the previous one looks smaller. The case of pesticide abuse has been the prime example of this. Pest control witnessed the use of harmful chemicals which not only destroyed the local ecosystem but also has long lasting impacts on the food chain and the human population. Food production has to be increased but the after effects of the same were neglected which led to newer problems. Antibiotic abuse and cattle industry are related but they abound due to the fact that they sate the population and maintain a sense of developed world.

The pursuit of luxury and well being has led to a new paradigm in the developmental realm. Living standards of people have improved but the future depends on the continuous innovative spree which further creates problems for the existing workforce. A balanced approach is needed which not only ensures the betterment of all but on the other hand it also ensures that we do not destroy lives, people and communities. There has to be some inflection point. The SDG initiative has been a great leap forward since it thinks of sustainability as a collective goal.

Mahatma Gandhi was a man of great vision and he brought about the great change in the Indian perception of the world. He started the era of mass politics and brought millions of Indians into the freedom struggle. He vied for women rights and hence women participated in great numbers in the freedom struggle. The people of all castes and creed stood for a national cause and brotherhood. The Gandhian way of struggle was different from the typical ones since he blended asceticism with nationalism. This led to a new kind of movement which became a new challenge for the British imperialists.

Gandhi wanted village republics to be the basis of the Indian movement. He stood for the strengthening of the Indian people and wanted more and more decentralization of power so that the people could participate in the national struggle for self sufficiency. The Gandhian concept of Swarajya and Swadeshi was relevant to the modern idea of sustainability. The basic idea was that people should be empowered so that they may be able to tackle their problems and come up with a collective and effective solution.

The world is a big place and hence the problems that originate in such a diverse and sensitive sphere are also complex. The customary approach has always been top to bottom where the elite has always tried to play their role. This particularly has not been able to work since imposition is not a solution to the problems of the people. It clearly creates another problem which leads to other socio-political and

regional worries for the leaders and the system. The solution lies with the people themselves since it relate to them.

Laws and regulations are needed to control the people but Gandhian thought was different from the same. He particularly believed that human emancipation was possible through self realization and penance. The system that he sought to establish focused on village development and empowerment. Panchayati Raj and community participation was paramount for him. He basically wanted the individual to have a social existence but on the same time, personal development was also a necessity. The Gandhian view of development was inclusive and challenging. The method he sought was of personal sacrifice and individual penance. He sought the spiritual realization and “*Mokshapath*” but he did not want that at the cost of the people.

Personal emancipation and salvation was not acceptable at the cost of the people. This can be related to the idea of “*Daridranarayan*” as professed by the great saint-teacher Ram Krishna Paramhansa, the guru of the great Swami Vivekananda. The idea clearly focuses on the service of the poor and the needy. Vivekananda continued his guru’s work by starting the Ram Krishna Mission and hence the idea became more and more real. The Gandhian way stood for truth and non-violence. He advocated this in his lifetime and the same manifests itself in the form of the freedom struggle that was led by him.

Sustainability has evolved as a new thought with the industrial nations and has rather come on the global scene with the mixed causes of high mass consumption and global environmental chaos. The people have thought that such excessive consumption does have some implications on the planet as a whole. The per person carbon imprint of any citizen of the United States of America is greater than any other nation of the world. One can have champagne delivered to him through a private jet in any part of the world but such extravagance should not only be assessed in dollars or bit coins but should rather be thought in a relatively concerned way.

The idea of sustainable living has not been new but is a reality in tribal and ancient cultures that still struggle to have their own way of life. Protected tribes have been the greatest sufferers of the global developmental pace since it is always their lands that end to be the ones with all the resources but we have been successful in creating nature trails in the form of national parks and protected forests. All this seems to be a comedy of errors but the matter is serious since we need to protect our forests from ourselves.

This is the most promising aspect that has been touched by Gandhi since he believed in “*Sainyam*” or self-control and wanted to guide people in having an amicable life. The modern take on sustainability relies on regulation and laws while Gandhi was of the view that one should traverse beyond the same. It has to be imbibed into the very soul of the people so that the understanding can continue in the long run. The reality being that the human nature defies law and hence laws and regulations are bound to create some problems. The solution lies in the way how we deal with the problems.

Gandhi used the famous tool of **Sarvodaya**, **Swadeshi** and **Swarajya**. He basically summed the entire process in these three steps and hence showed us the perfect way to have the target. These are not only words but they are entire set of ideals and teachings of the great man. The “**Sarvodaya**” movement aimed for the empowerment and the upliftment of all. It basically strived for the idea of equality and hence sought to get rid of the oppression and differentiation that was prevalent in the name of caste, race, colour and religion. Gandhi was very specific about his ideals and hence he imparted his teaching through his revolutionary mass movements and thus created a new generation of leaders. It was these leaders that imbibed Gandhian principles into their life and hence shaped India in the way it is.

The ideas of equality and poverty eradication are not new and people have always been writing and professing of the same in their own time. The Gandhian way stands out due to its practicability and ingenuity. The idea of collaborating communities and teaching moral education has only been talked of recently in international circles. The reason for this being that this education system has only produced bookworms and patients. Civility has been enacted and speeches are made but the problem remains as it was. The world should seriously notice that the education system really needs an overhaul so that we do not create but we shape the lives of our children. They have to be made self reliant and worthy of being called the dwellers of this mother earth.

Gandhi experimented with and wrote at length advocating simple living in harmony with the environment (Power, 1991). His ideas about human connectedness with nature, therefore rather than being explicit, must be inferred from an overall reading of the Mahatma’s writings. Naess explains that ‘Gandhian approach advocates manifestation of the internal relation between self-realisation, non-violence and what sometimes has been called bio spherical egalitarianism’, and acknowledged that he was highly influenced by the Mahatma’s metaphysics ‘which contributed to keeping him (Gandhi) going until his death.’ Moreover, ‘Gandhi's Utopia is one of the few that shows ecological balance, and today his rejection of the Western World's material affluence and consumerism culture is accepted by progressives of the ecological movement’ (Naess, 1974: 10).

Gandhian thought led one to think and reconsider the cause of this great divide and the solution is very evident. The world is a common ground for all hence everyone is responsible for everyone. Every life is important and hence it should be the duty of all to be on the responsible side. The developmental agenda is necessary but we have to make sure that we get on it in a better way. Unplanned and specific developmental agenda has led to regional imbalances and hence a lot of socio-economic and political issues have cropped up around the world. The solution lies in a balanced and just way. This has to be beyond petty considerations and political vendetta.

Governments and communities around the world have been focusing on these sustainable goals but the basic change has to come from the developing and the underdeveloped nations since they have most of the people and problems in the first place. The combined populations of India and china almost account for 40% of the global population. The change has to come from these countries since they form the

major chunk of the depressed and poor. Gandhi had been vocal about the industrial revolution and the rapid unplanned urbanization but he died too early to witness the real wonders of globalization.

The idea of sustenance has always been advocated by people in different cultures in different ways. Some worshipped nature while some started to conserve nature through their cultural practises and traditions. A balance was always the most vital part of the basic understanding of these people. The modern ways of life have led us far into the wild where we not have destroyed species and their habitat but now we threaten human existence to its core. Air, water, soil and even our thoughts are polluted. This has to stop somewhere but we have to make sure that it does not end with our own kind.

Conclusion

The present times need some of the most planned and calculated approaches so that the balance can be had in a proper way. The damage due to the developmental pursuit has left millions in abject poverty. It has brought the wrath of calamities upon millions more. People have forgotten the way of life that meant sharing and caring for all. The individualistic way of life has given a new lease of life to creativity and innovation but the societal traits have been becoming a theoretical concept. The newer technologies and the development of AI has been a revolutionary step and will have serious impact upon the way humans exist. James Barrat has been quite vocal about this in his seminal work, “Our Final Invention” where he reasons that this may be the last generation of lawyers, doctors, engineers and academics. This being due to the fact that AI will fundamentally change the way the world exists. (James, 2013)

The world needs to be on a conclusive and cooperative mode so that a united front can be had for this struggle. The new era needs new solutions and that does not mean shunning old practises completely but we just need to be more adaptive and receptive. The future belongs to all and we must ensure that it is that way. The SDGs have shown a bright light but a lot needs to be done so that it can be achieved. The people of different nations and understanding have to come on a common plank so that they may be able to help each other and save the planet for their future generations.

The greatest struggle starts with the individual and the self. Sustainable goals have to be achieved and furthered so that we may save the threatened world. Gandhian views have often been termed as idealistic but the man lived on these very principles. Gandhian principles have been a great contribution in the idea of sustainable development and people and governments have tried to emulate these very ideas. The real tribute to Gandhi won't be in the form of statues and awards but by adopting those very principles which were sacred to him.

Sustainability is the need of the hour and we must learn to shape our lives for the better so that we may change the life of others in a positive way. The future will belong to the ones who have the courage to bring about the change and stand up for what is right. Resistance has been there as it was in the time of the mahatma but great change comes at a great cost. The question being the humankind's will to pay the price. The way of the mahatma was and is still relevant.

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