

**GANDHI'S ECOLOGICAL KERNEL –
*A VISION OF LIFE***

Submission to The Trumpeter

FOR THE TRUMPETER

GANDHI'S ECOLOGICAL KERNEL – A VISION OF LIFE

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BY

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BIOGRAPHY

Kalpana R J is an erudite scholar and a perceptive critic. She obtained her Doctorate in English from the University of Mumbai. Her Doctoral thesis "A Critique of Feminism" was highly eulogized for its original thought content and refreshingly lucid style. She has published a three volume set on Feminist Issues In Indian Literature - Feminism and Family, Feminism and The Individual, Feminism and Sexual Poetics, which was released during the International Conference for Commonwealth Literature.

In addition, she has had published a book of poetry titled - Temple Dreams. Her Haiku poetry has been published in various journals like Acorn, RoadRunner.

She won the first prize in the Muse India Poetry contest in 2008. She is currently working on two biographies - one of which is on the Life and Times of a Hindu Missionary.

Professionally, she is a Management Consultant on Knowledge Management.

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“Nature has enough to satisfy everyone’s needs but not everyone’s greed.”¹

This famous Gandhian pronouncement gives us a glimpse into the ecological philosophy of Gandhi. Historians and critics have at definitive periods in time debated Gandhi’s commitment to the environment.

Whether Gandhi was an environmentalist in the conventional sense of the word is quite beside the point. For to walk down that path is to get caught in dialectics; it will entail an automatic subscription to either one or the other school of thought. To slant towards a statement of Gandhi being an ‘early environmentalist’ or to lean towards the other school of critics who quote Gandhi’s writings as having relatively little to say about nature.

Given that Gandhi was a practical man and a public activist, he had a practical approach to life and living. We can assume that he also would have had a practical approach to environmental conservation. Gandhi was a world citizen; having been raised in India at the height of the British rule, he studied law at London, travelled to South Africa and was as well-versed with Western philosophers as he was with the Hindu philosophers. Consequently, Gandhi’s thoughts are more broad-ranged, applicable to a variety of issues and have withstood the test of time.

The kernel of Gandhi’s ecological philosophy rests within a set of interconnected ideas and principles that dominated and directed his life and work. In order to approach and unveil Gandhi’s ecosophy, we will have to dig deep within the contextual framework of the principles through which he not only lived his life for

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himself and as an example to others, but also sought to gain independence for India
and its teeming millions.

Satyameva Jayate, Truth alone triumphs! Truth was the first and fundamental
principle for Gandhi.

“Truth is the sovereign principle which includes numerous other principles.
This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not
only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal principle,
that is God.”²

The word Satya derives from the Sanskrit root *sat* which means ‘to be.’ So,
truth is not a mere quantitative aspect of speech but is a qualitative dimension of
nature. Keeping in mind the cosmogenesis of the word, Gandhi sought to define his
theory of non-violence and the civil disobedience method of action as *Satyagraha*. He
understood its vast karmic and dharmic potential and sought to define his policy as
truth-force.

“...the force that is born to Truth and Love or non-violence.”³

Gandhi’s emphasis on Truth was such that it was a power to be reckoned with;
it was a power to be called upon in all situations, whether public and political or
personal and spiritual. Yet Gandhi acknowledged that as a human being he hadn’t still
found Absolute Truth or God.

“There are innumerable definitions of God because his manifestations are
innumerable.”⁴

So Gandhi in search of this elusive but Absolute Truth titled his autobiography
as “My experiments with truth” because he saw his entire life and work as an attempt

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to come closer to the Absolute Truth. In order to amass an understanding of Absolute Truth, he experimented with its manifestations at various levels of living.

‘Practical truth’ was a phrase that often defined Gandhi’s campaigns through *satyagraha* or to define actions and events in the world that attempted to discern the Absolute Truth. Truth for Gandhi was a ‘vital force’ that was forged in the larger spiritual realm of cosmology that shaped moral actions. In other words, it was a truth that had to be lived.

Gandhi was a political force to be reckoned with and the truth-force was then not relegated to the personal and the spiritual but to the political and the economical as well.

“That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.”⁵

So Truth is a force for good in a world where other dubious ideas hold sway. To view life in all its complexities from the point of view of truth is to search for the kernel of Absolute Truth in everything that one encounters. In the greater cosmology, Absolute Truth exists in everything and everyone. To acknowledge that basic premise increases our boundaries of understanding and moral responsibilities towards nature.

Ahimsa or the theory of non-violence was Gandhi’s second principle that he adopted for the efficacy of the truth-force.

“*Ahimsa* does not need to be taught. Man as an animal is violent but as spirit is non-violent. The moment a man awakens to the spirit within he cannot remain violent.”⁶

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Gandhi searched for the basic cosmological premise of *ahimsa* on which to base his theory of non-violence. Caught between the inherent dialectics of non-violence in the Hindu philosophy and the Western suggestion of 'passive resistance' Gandhi redefined *ahimsa* from a cosmological perspective.

Bhagavad Gita, the treatise on the right way of living that flowered amidst a battlefield was more a clarion call to show the futility of war according to Gandhi.

"I have admitted in my introduction to the Gita...that it is not a treatise on non-violence, nor was it written to condemn war. Hinduism...has certainly not condemned war as I do... I hold that the logical outcome of the teaching of the Gita is decidedly for peace at the price of life itself...The immortal author of the Mahabharata...has shown to the world the futility of war by giving the victors an empty glory, leaving but seven victors alive out of the millions said to have been engaged in the fight."⁷

But Gandhi was decidedly not looking to base his theory of non-violence on literal truth. He was looking to base it on Absolute Truth.

"The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law – to the strength of the spirit."⁸

This spiritual strength springs from the spiritual law and therefore, *ahimsa* is clearly an eternal attribute of Absolute Truth.

Gandhi clearly disregarded the European term of 'passive resistance' as being too narrowly construed. He defined it as, "...a weapon of the weak, that it could be characterized by hatred and that it could finally manifest itself as violence."⁹

So, *ahimsa* then for Gandhi was not merely non-violence at a physical level but it was a dynamic method of action that sprang from the truth-force. *Ahimsa* then

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In order for this spiritual dimension to be brought to the forefront, Gandhi advocated self-discipline. For according to Gandhi as defined earlier, non-violence doesn't stem from cowardice but from an indomitable will and strength of character. Self-discipline is wrought by fasting and prayer in order to set the spiritual essence free.

“A genuine fast cleanses body, mind, and soul... A sincere prayer can work wonders... Fasting and prayer therefore are a most powerful process of purification, and that which purifies necessarily enables us the better to do our duty and to attain our goal.”¹⁰

Gandhi consistently links prayer and fasting to the cultivation of *ahimsa*. This concept of personal purification links us to nature in a fundamental way,

“Identification with everything that lives is impossible without self-purification...”¹¹

Gandhian ecosophy is woven with the threads of truth, non-violence, and self-purification. View this in turn against the backdrop of the Hindu cosmogenesis worldview that insists upon a homologous and interdependent relationship between humans and other animate and inanimate aspects of creation and a clearer picture begins to emerge.

The Ancient Hindu *Varna* system or caste system is an organizing principle of Vedic thought and in turn, organizes all aspects of creation into four discrete categories. This in turn establishes the cosmological inter-dependencies that connect

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human beings with all other aspects of creation. This web of relationships determines the person's duty with relation to other persons and nature.

Gandhi clearly accepted the Hindu understanding of interdependence between humans and nature and all his consequent acts and theories of governance sprung from such a worldview.

Swaraj and *Khadi*, self-rule and the spinning wheel symbolized the visible and practical aspects of the inner logic of Gandhian ecology. Keeping in line with self-purification, *swaraj* or self-rule is realized within.

“We can realize Truth and Non-violence only in the simplicity of village life... The essence of what I have said is that man should rest content with what are his real needs and become self-sufficient.”¹²

From this one can clearly deduce that Gandhi was against mindless industrialization. His quest for *swaraj* or self-rule had stringent economic and spiritual meanings in his notion of a ‘simple life’ based solely on one's needs and not on one's wants. Its only when one tries to define *swaraj* from a political standpoint that the significance of the term is misunderstood.

At a micro-economical level, a non-violent, self-sufficient village is an independent economic entity that can halt greedy capitalism. The political and economical repercussion of this idea is to have one entity working in collaboration with other entities and bound together in a republican government.

Gandhi's concept of economic self-reliance was based on his assessment of rampant industrialization. The centralization policy of power, the mechanization of factories led to unemployment.

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“What I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for labour-saving machinery.... I want to save time and labour not for a fraction of mankind but for all. I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of the few, but in the hands of all. Today, machinery merely helps the few to ride on the backs of millions.”¹³

This collaborative effort of existence at a micro-economic level led to the development of the spinning wheel ideology. The spinning wheel was not a mere symbol of political defiance, but rather a practical solution brought to the villages in answer to unemployment caused by industrialization. It put economic power back into the hands of the individuals and helped them to be self-reliant and self-sustained. It was a most basic practical concept of economic independence.

On a spiritual level, it drew the individual into a meditative cycle and a reflective life that offered opportunity for personal development.

Khadi or the spinning wheel was symbolic of the political, spiritual, and economical self-rule of India nurtured out of *ahimsa* or non-violence.

In order to live in an ecologically sustainable world according to Gandhi, every individual must adopt *satya*, *ahimsa*, *swaraj*, *khadi*; truth, non-violence, self-rule and the spinning wheel as being symbolic of economic independence. The Tolstoy Farm in South Africa ¹⁴ and the various Gandhi ashrams, especially the principle one at Sabarmati, gives us a glimpse of how Gandhi's ideal works.

Gandhian ecology demands respect and compassion for nature and its residents. The inter-connected weave of spiritual, political, and economic life will encourage self-sufficiency. As the Chipko movement showcased, Gandhian ecology is a practical expression of both a political and economic mode of living that can co-

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exist harmoniously. Going a step further, it will not just oppose environmental abuse through non-violent means as that of the Chipko movement, but in a typical Gandhian ecosophy, it will seek to create new forms of sustainable living for the future.

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