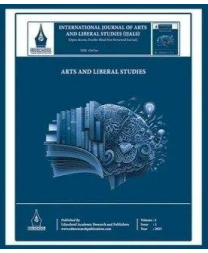
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Eco-Spirituality: the Perceptions of Mahatma Gandhi

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Abstract

The green thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi, rooted in the Hindu tradition and the Bhagavad Gita, offer a vision for harmonising nature with the needs of the people, and Gandhi has been described as the apostle of applied human ecology. His ideas of satyagraha, founded on truth and non-violence, of simple living and of need-based development show how progress is possible without harm to nature or to fellow beings, and his teaching that nature has enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed provides an ethical foundation for modern environmentalism. Gandhi regarded the earth as a living organism and expressed his ecological thought through two fundamental principles, the cosmic law and the law of species. His call to go back to the villages, his swadeshi spirit and his support for small-scale and cottage industry all express a Gandhian environmentalism, while the methods of non-violence and tapasya that he taught were later taken up by environmental movements such as the Chipko Movement and the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Drawing on his notions of Advaita, Mother Nature, self-realisation and self-discipline, this paper sets out the philosophical foundations of Gandhi's eco-spirituality and its bearing on the search for a sustainable way of life.

Keywords: - Cosmic Integrity, Eco-Spirituality, Hindu Tradition, Sustainability, Ahimsa, Satyagraha, Nishkama Karma.

Introduction

Eco-spirituality is a deeply felt connection between the inner spiritual life and the natural world, bringing together religion, philosophy and environmental awareness (Hettinger 1995; Gardner 2006). It holds the earth to be sacred and humanity to be not the master of nature but a small part of a great living organism, so that trees, rivers, animals and soil all carry value and a spark of life, and a sense of interconnectedness follows. For Gandhi, caring for the environment was not merely a political matter but a deep moral and spiritual duty, and he asked people to live simply, with less possession and more gratitude, finding joy in nature rather than in things. Eco-spirituality is not a new idea: it draws on many old traditions, honours indigenous cultures and treats Mother Nature with reverence, and the Eastern traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism teach that everything has life and that no living creature should be harmed (Bhandari 2021). Above all, eco-spirituality changes our orientation towards nature, teaching us to protect it not out of fear but out of love and respect (Crowe 2013).

Statement of the Problem

Achieving sustainability and sustainable development is acutely difficult in modern times (Ozili 2022). This study takes eco-spirituality, expressed through non-violence and satyagraha, to be a means of attaining

sustainability, and the inner purification of the mind to be its foundation (Lester & Böhm 2020; Dhiman 2016). Yet in a world shaped by science, technology and consumerism, that path faces serious challenges, and the problem this study addresses is how Gandhi's eco-spiritual vision can speak to the contemporary ecological crisis.

Objectives of the Study

- To understand the concept of eco-spirituality.
- To recognise the significance of sustainability.
- To find out the relevance of Advaita.
- To examine the concept of Mother Nature and the significance of forest satyagraha.
- To understand self-realisation and the significance of non-violence, or ahimsa.

Scope and Significance

The study sets out the significance of eco-spirituality, of natural healing, and of resilience against ecological anxiety and despair, and it offers a deeper understanding of the concept (Lester & Böhm 2020). Its significance is underlined by the growing international attention to non-violence, now marked each year by the International Day of Non-Violence on Gandhi's birthday.

Literature Review

Much of the writing on environmental philosophy traces a debt to Gandhi. One of the primary causes of the present environmental crisis, on this view, is the loss of the older perspective on the interrelationship of man, nature and cosmos, a perspective that Gandhian thought sought to recover (Dwivedi 1990). Different streams of environmental philosophy are held to have their origin in Gandhi, for whom the over-exploitation of natural resources in the name of development leads to serious harm, and a science that does not respect nature's needs, together with a development that does not respect people's needs, threatens both human survival and ecology.

A second strand connects Gandhi to the deep-ecology movement. Arne Naess, the pioneer of deep ecology, argued that ecological preservation is non-violent in nature, and read Gandhian philosophy as a philosophy of ecological balance (Naess 1973); some thinkers go further, regarding Gandhi as a man whose ecological view of life ran deeper even than deep ecology. Thomas Weber systematised the link between non-violence, self-realisation and the mutual dependence of all living beings (Weber 1999), and the Indian environmental movements, the Chipko Movement and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, are widely seen as living examples of Gandhian environmentalism (Shenoy 2016). Underlying all of this is the claim that every living thing has a right to life, which is the primary moral argument for a sustainable existence (Kothari 1990).

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, using descriptive, analytical and historical methods. The descriptive method sets out the concept of eco-spirituality and its Gandhian expression; the analytical method interprets Gandhi's ecological principles and relates them to contemporary environmental thought; and the historical method traces these ideas through the Hindu tradition, the Bhagavad Gita and Gandhi's own life and writings. The study relies on secondary sources, including the works of and about Gandhi and the scholarly literature on eco-spirituality and deep ecology.

Gandhi's Eco-Spiritual Philosophy

The Two Ecological Laws

Gandhi regarded the earth as a living organism and expressed his ecological thought through two fundamental laws, set out in Table 1. The cosmic law treats the entire universe, living and non-living alike, as a single entity informed by the cosmic spirit, so that, as Gandhi held, all life and all creation are one, an expression of the doctrine of Advaita, or non-duality, and of the essential unity of man and nature (Elayath 1992; Osho 2003). The law of species holds that evolution is impossible without the cooperation and sacrifice of all beings, human and non-human, so that it is the duty of rational humanity to respect the rights of fellow beings and to cherish diversity, and to take more than one needs is a theft from the environment that cannot be justified (Praveena & Raju 2023).

Table 1. Gandhi's two ecological laws.

Law	Principle	Ecological implication
Cosmic law	The universe, living and non-living, is one entity informed by the cosmic spirit (Advaita)	Humanity is part of, not master over, nature; the unity of man and nature
Law of species	Evolution depends on the cooperation and sacrifice of all beings	A duty to respect the rights of fellow beings and to cherish biodiversity

Source: compiled by the author.

Ahimsa, Satyagraha and the Ethic of Restraint

At the centre of Gandhi's ecology stands ahimsa, non-injury in thought, word and deed, whose ecological scope he held to be unlimited, and which, together with his vegetarianism, made him a votary for the conservation of all diversity of life, society, culture and religion. For Gandhi, truth was the end and non-violence the means, truth being the ultimate reality, which he equated with God (Gandhi 1959). Around these stand a family of disciplines of restraint, set out in Table 2, by which the individual limits his wants and so leaves room for the needs of others and of nature. To take more than one's share, Gandhi taught, is a kind of theft (Dwivedi 1990), and the remedy is the voluntary self-limitation expressed in aparigraha, asteya and the rest.

Table 2. Gandhian principles and their ecological significance.

Principle	Meaning	Ecological significance
Ahimsa	Non-injury in thought, word and deed	Reverence and protection for all forms of life
Satyagraha	Holding firmly to truth	Non-violent resistance to ecological harm, as in forest satyagraha
Aparigraha	Non-possession	Voluntary limitation of wants and restraint on consumption
Asteya	Non-stealing	Not taking more than one's share of natural resources
Swadeshi	Self-reliance	Local, small-scale production and a smaller ecological footprint
Sarira-srama	Bread labour	The dignity of manual work and living within one's means
Brahmacharya	Self-control	Conquering trishna, the greed at the root of over-consumption
Nishkama Karma	Selfless action	Acting in harmony with nature, without selfish motive
Anuvrat	Self-discipline (from the Jain tradition)	Personal restraint as the basis of ecological balance

Source: compiled by the author.

Self-Realisation, the Gita and Deep Ecology

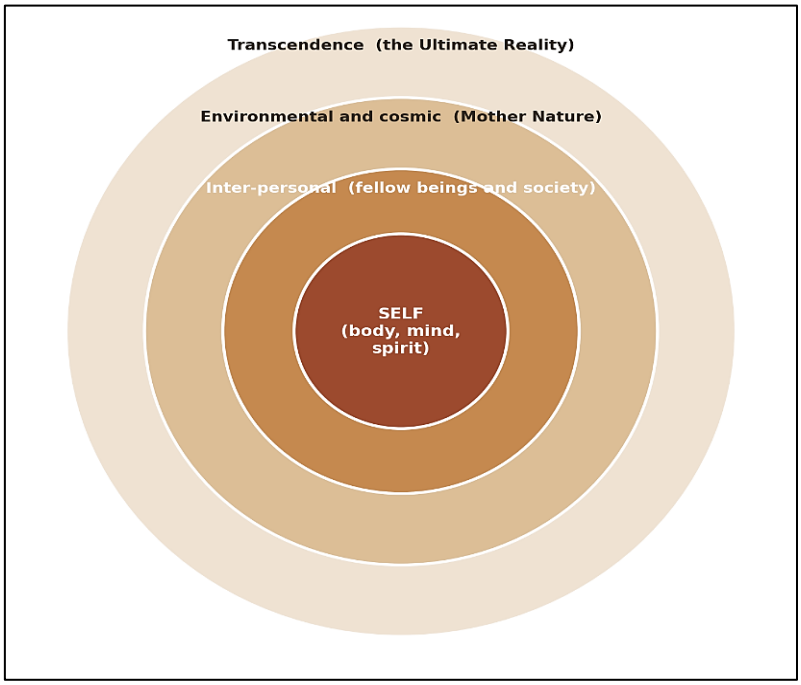
The Bhagavad Gita deeply influenced Gandhi, who drew from it the idea of self-realisation, and it is regarded as a source of deep ecological attitudes (Prabhupada 2016). Gandhi held the universe to be a part of the omnipresent Paramatma, so that every creature has its own rights, and he taught that the most important thing is to know oneself, since self-realisation reaches to the roots of human civilisation and is the ultimate object of deep ecology (Vivekananda 1893; Bodhasarananda 2012). The practice of brahmacharya disciplines mind and body and so helps to conquer the greed that is the root of all problems, while nishkama karma, selfless action, becomes possible through a spiritual enlightenment lived in harmony with nature. Thomas Weber set out the logic that connects these ideas: that self-realisation is possible only through the search for truth; that all living beings are

one; that violence against any living being is violence against oneself; and that such violence therefore makes complete self-realisation impossible (Weber 1999). From these premises Arne Naess built the broader philosophy of deep ecology, reading Gandhian thought as a philosophy of ecological balance in which non-violence has the power to resolve even the ecological crisis (Naess 1973).

Mother Nature, Scientific Spiritualism and the Triple Harmony

Gandhi's notion of Mother Nature drew on the Hindu Prithvi and the Greek Gaia, the earth long seen as the mother of all living beings (Ranganathananda 2002; Bhandari 2021), and he viewed ecology within a framework of what may be called scientific spiritualism, embracing the Jain idea of anuvrat, or self-discipline, and the principle of anasakti, non-attachment to material growth joined to deep affection for the earth. Believing that every economic activity carries an inherent violence, he held to a need-based economics of the kind later captured in the phrase small is beautiful. His vision of a healthy life rests on a triple harmony, shown in Figure 1: a harmony within the person, between body, mind and spirit; a harmony between the person and fellow beings; and a harmony between the person and the environmental and cosmic order, all of it opening, through a dimension of transcendence, towards the ultimate reality that is the source and goal of life. To neglect any one of these, allowing the intellectual to outgrow the physical and the spiritual, is to risk a disequilibrium in the individual that issues in conflict in society.

Fig 1. Gandhi's triple harmony, widening from the self to transcendence.



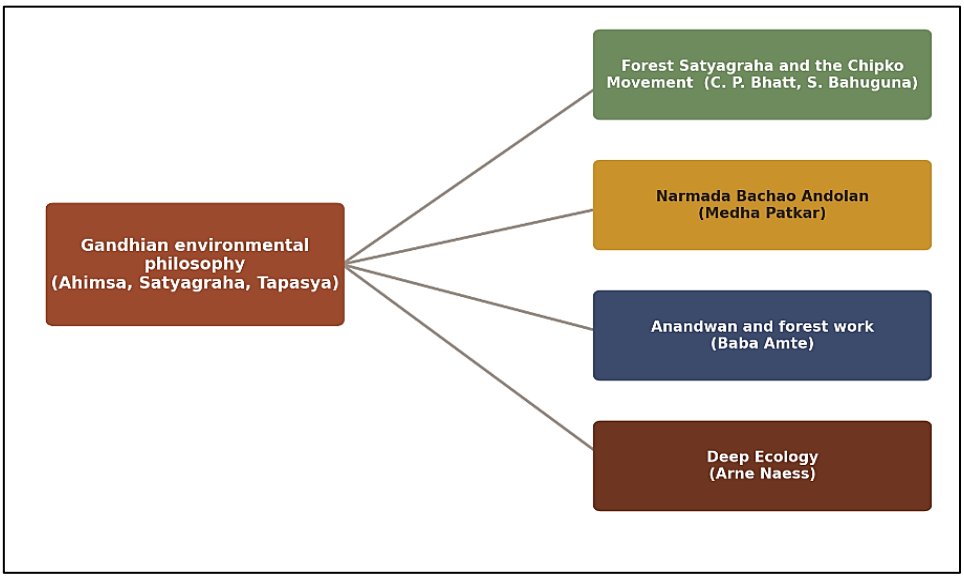
Source: compiled by the author.

On this view, the ancient practices of tree and cow worship are a reverential attempt to identify with the plant and animal levels of existence, and Gandhi's emphasis on cow worship in Young India expresses his faith in Advaita. Natural resources, he held, are not for human consumption alone but for all of God's creatures, and not for this generation only but for those to come; in this way Gandhi rejects anthropocentrism and puts a bio-centrism in its place, calling on us to reorient our lives from materialism to spirituality for the sake of ecological balance.

Gandhian Environmentalism in Practice

Where Western environmentalists urged a return to nature, Gandhi urged a return to the villages, in which he held the soul of India to lie (Paranjape 2013), and his swadeshi spirit and his support for small-scale and cottage industry gave that vision an economic form. The method he forged, forest satyagraha, was first used to effect in the Chipko Movement (Dwivedi 1990), and the techniques of non-violence and tapasya that he taught were carried forward by later environmentalists, as Figure 2 shows. Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sundarlal Bahuguna led the Chipko Movement, Medha Patkar the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and Baba Amte joined forest and community work at Anandwan, while Arne Naess built Gandhian non-violence into the philosophy of deep ecology.

Fig 2: Gandhi's influence on modern environmentalism.



Source: compiled by the author.

From Industrial Civilisation to a Gandhian Alternative

Gandhi's life and writings amount to a paradigm shift, offering a comprehensive and ecologically sound alternative to the unsustainable model of modern industrial civilisation. He would replace consumerism with conservation, mass production with production by the masses, private ownership with community ownership, and the obsession with quantity with a concern for quality, as Table 3 sets out. Because these features of deep ecology are fundamental to his philosophy and his way of life, many regard him as a founder of contemporary environmentalism (Shenoy 2016; Gardner 2006).

Table 3. Industrial civilisation and the Gandhian alternative.

Modern industrial civilisation	Gandhian alternative
Consumerism	Conservation
Mass production	Production by the masses
Private ownership	Community ownership
Dominating power	Enabling power
Reductionism	Holism
Centralisation	Decentralisation
Crass materialism	Genuine spirituality
Obsession with quantity	Concern with quality

Source: compiled by the author from Gandhi's writings.

Conclusion

Gandhi's eco-spirituality rests on a deep philosophical base: the conviction, drawn from the Bhagavad Gita and the Hindu tradition, that all life is one and that the earth is a living organism to be served rather than exploited. Self-realisation, for Gandhi, leads to an inner purification that issues outward as reverence for every creature, and his perception of ecology is, in the end, a philosophy of ecological balance grounded in non-violence and self-discipline. He earned the title of Mahatma for his pursuit of the triple harmony of body, mind and spirit, and of thought, word and deed, and it is this same harmony, widened to embrace all of nature, that his eco-spirituality offers to a world in ecological crisis. As an alternative to the consumerism and centralisation of industrial civilisation, Gandhi's vision of conservation, decentralisation and genuine spirituality remains, as he himself might have said, current and suitable for the soul of India and beyond.

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