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GANDHIAN NATIONALISM AND ITS PORTRAYAL IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF DEEP ECOLOGY

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Abstract

This essay provides attention towards the inclusion of philosophical point of view of Gandhian nationalism in the context of Deep Ecology. “Deep Ecology” as an alternative catchphrase for eco-centrism or biocentrism was coined by Arne Naess (1912-2009), a Norwegian Professor of Philosophy who calls upon us to respect the integrity of insentient ecosystems because every life form in principle has right to live and blossom. The main thesis of deep ecology is the “rejection of the man-in-environment, total field image” (“The Shallow...” 95). It encourages one to seek one’s true identity by identifying with wider and wider circles of nature, presenting the nature world as an extension of oneself. Very specifically, Naess acknowledges that his philosophy is indebted in a large extent to the Gandhian vision of the nation and its treatment of the natural world. He is a great admirer of Gandhi’s capacity as a political and spiritual leader. This paper is an attempt to see that Gandhism or rather is Gandhi’s concept of Indian Nationalism is a variant of egocentrism or contemporary radical environmentalism. This attempt has been made under the light of Naess’ acknowledgement of his indebtedness to Gandhi in formulating deep ecology as a worldwide grassroot ecological movement.

Key Words: Gandhian Nationalism, Ecocentrism, Deep Ecology.

Introduction

Gandhian Nationalism and deep ecology are two contemporary trends in the field of social justice and environmental protection movements respectively. Arne Naess (1912-2009), a Norwegian Professor of philosophy, coined the umbrella term, ‘Deep Ecology’ as an alternative catchphrase for ‘Ecocentrism’ or ‘biocentrism’. Eco-centrism holds the view that one has to recognize the value in all species of organisms residing in the ecosystems. Eco-centrism advocates for the rights of not just animals but also inanimate

elements belonging to any particular ecosystem. This view tries to identify humans as merely a part and not the owners of the biotic community. It makes the claim that every object in the system is interrelated. In 1972 Naess delivered a lecture at the Third World Future Research Conference in Bucharest and the following year published it as “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary” in the journal *Inquiry*. In this lecture, deep ecology has been described as a worldwide eco-centric movement that contrasts an anthropocentric or human-centric

value approach. In this sense, it is the broader meaning of deep ecology. On the other hand, in its narrow meaning, deep ecology is used to refer to Naess' own self-realization thesis.

The main thesis of deep ecology is the "rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image" ("The Shallow..." 95). Deep ecology calls upon us to respect the integrity of insentient ecosystems as a whole. The basic ethics of it takes a holistic view of nature in which every life form has the right to live and blossom. It encourages one to seek one's true identity by identifying with wider and wider circles of nature, presenting the natural world as an extension of oneself. Deep Ecology is 'deep' because of some deep questionings related to the fundamental problems of the relationship between human and non-human world.

Deep ecologists said to have acquired inspiration from certain wilderness thinkers and have roots in wilderness places. Naess acknowledges that his philosophy is indebted to a large extent to the Gandhian vision of nationalism regarding the treatment of the natural world. He also took inspiration from the philosophical ideas of Buddhism, Spinoza, Thoreau, Leopold, Carson, etc. This paper is an attempt to see that in Gandhism there is a variant of contemporary radical environmentalism. This attempt has been made here under the light of Naess' acknowledgement of his indebtedness to Gandhian nationalism in formulating deep ecology as a worldwide grass root ecological movement.

Gandhi's entire thought of nationalism is based on his ethical ideas of truth and non-violence. Non-violence is the means and truth is the end. Gandhi's vision of 'Ramrajya', a broader concept of free India, is not to upgrade small towns into smart cities, but for a renewal of its villages. His conviction is that "the blood of the villages is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built". By taking a radical stand he protests against the replacement of plough by the tractor and spreading of chemical fertilizers. In the matter of economic progress also, he never compromised with ethical principles. According to him, the first and last ideal for man should be spiritual progress. Gandhi was in favour of economic progress for India but not at the cost of moral values. It was purely based on an indigenous approach to

thinking which lays emphasis on minimizing the wants rather than maximizing them. Therefore, he was against mechanization for nation building. However, he permitted the use of small machines necessary for day-to-day work.

Gandhi's emphasis was on three aspects of the nation: economy, society and environment. According to him, the present materialistic lifestyle has to be changed for sustainable development of India. The principle of simple living and high thinking was the spiritual basis of Gandhi's idea of sustainability. In his first book, *Hind Swaraj*, published in 1909, rejects industrialization for our country as it would make us selfish, competitive and grossly destructive to nature. On the other hand, Gandhi believes that the preindustrial civilizations were marked by imperative restrictions upon, and a strict regulating of man's indefinite want for wealth and luxury. He says, "The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed". Definitely, his focus was on voluntary simplicity that can minimize human needs.

Gandhiji practiced almost everything that he preached. As he suggested for recycling to minimize one's needs, his own letters were written on the back of used papers. Ramachandra Guha writes, "When he died in January 1948 this man, whose followers were reckoned in the tens of millions, and who helped bring down one of the most powerful empires in history, had possessions that could fit in a small box: two or three changes of clothes, a clock, a pair of spectacles, and a few other odds and ends" (*Environmentalism* 30).

Gandhi's discovery of the Vegetarian movement in England was important to him as a growing experience. The vow given to his mother determined his vegetarian diet in England. He even excluded eggs from his menu because of what he believed would be her definition of vegetarianism. Even in South Africa, he came to lay increasing stress on the moral and ethical aspects of vegetarianism. According to Gandhi, 'Brahmacharya' is more than 'chastity', involving the conservation of energy, for it covers the mastery of all the senses. There should be a reduction in consumption, a simplification and reduction in needs. (Lannoy 431)

The strongest reason why Gandhi is against too much of industrialization in making

India is the fact that poisons the very spirit of man. It makes life mechanical and artificial and even seeks to reduce man to the status of a machine. It lets loose a process of dehumanization. The result is that a man seeks an escape by indulging in pursuits like drinking, gambling and the like. Consequently, he loses his moral sense and his soul itself. Gandhi reflects with horror on the possible consequences of such an 'apparently progressive' nation. Therefore, he recommends a lifestyle for citizens of 'ideal India' that would make human existence meaningful.

Arne Naess is a recognized authority on Gandhi's philosophy and has incorporated Gandhi into his personal ecological philosophy (Sessions 134). He was also influenced by Gandhi's vision of 'Advaita' or non-duality among all beings in the universe. Naess directly applies the Gandhian vision of unity among all forms of life to his deep ecology movement, arguing that by identifying oneself with nature, one is naturally prompted to protect the environment of his country.

Gandhi offers a nation-affirming non-dualistic philosophy. He speaks about self which is not of narrow egocentric interest. This self is the supreme or universal self, the 'Atman'. This self-realization is not an "ego-trip". He upheld life "not only in man and animal but in plant and flower, as sacred." (CWMG, LX, 45; LXII, 285). Though, the world may appear transitory and impermanent, there was something that persisted, "changeless and endless", even when a tree fell or a leaf withered. (CWMG, XIV, 116) The self-realization of every Indian citizen was to be attained through the service of God and his created order. According to him, the liberation of each individual was tied up with the liberation of all. Similarly, Deep Ecology encourages an egalitarian attitude not only towards all members of the ecosphere but also to all identifiable entities in the ecosphere. It is the claim that all living things have equal moral worth and intrinsic value. At a fundamental level, all organisms are intrinsically related in a bio-spherical net.

It is pertinent to mention that as a child Gandhi spent much of his time outdoors, away from the small, dark, airless rooms of home. He played with other children on the beach or in the streets nearby, took long walks, made friends with animals he met or indulged in his passion

for gardening. Throughout this life, he was affected by the beauty of natural scenery and awed by stars. There was no aesthetic snobbishness in his appreciation. He saw beauty not only in the rainbow but also in ordinary vegetables (CWMG, LXXXIII, 265). Likewise, Naess got involved with the idea of deep ecology at the age of four or five years. In his early childhood, he explored the shoreline of Ford of Norway, his native land. He was very much intrigued by the incredible diversity of life forms there. Exploring mountains was one of his main hobbies. In fact, his mother had a cottage in high mountains. It developed a sense of his belongingness to the mountains. Naess states that he used to treat the mountains as his father (who died when he was very young). In the "Series Editors Introduction" of SWAN, Harold Glasser gives an inspirational background of Naess's articulation of egalitarian attitude towards all creatures on earth. Glasser writes:

Much of Arne's early childhood was spent at the seashore, and this is the period in which his interest in nature and experimentation began to flourish. Feeling somewhat distanced in his relations with people, he identified with nature, especially little sea creatures. He waded in shallow water for hours, inventing experiments to test nascent hypotheses about the behavior of small sole, tiny translucent shrimp, and crabs. He describes these experiments as engendering an early enthusiasm for diversity and a tendency to suspend judgment on the nobility or status of different beings. He loved these creatures for their unique qualities and their amusing adaptations and limitations. They inspired a certain egalitarianism, which took hold and later influenced his philosophical approach in profound ways. (xxvii)

Naess advocates the universal right of all life-forms to live. Thereby, he rejects any view that attributes one species more right to blossom than that of another: "Plants and animals also have a right to unfolding and self-realization. They have the right to live" (*Ecology* 165). Further, he mentions that this right of living, this biospherical egalitarian principle cannot be quantified. Naess writes, "living beings have a right (or intrinsic or inherent value, or value in themselves) to live and blossom that is the same for all. If we speak of differences in rights or value, we do not

speak of the rights or value I have in mind. It is not meaningful to speak of degrees of intrinsic or inherent value when speaking of the right of individuals to live and blossom” (“Equality...” 223)

On the other hand, Gandhi speaks about the self-realization of human and non-human living beings. The central thesis of his political philosophy for nation-building is nonviolence. It is a doctrine of socio-political activism. It recommends selecting personal actions or mass attitude which reduces the tendency of violence. His principle suggests fighting antagonisms, not antagonists. These principles may encourage environmental activism by changing the attitude towards nonhuman ecosphere. Thereby, it may restrict the environmental degradation. Incidentally, in his article titled ‘Self-realization...’ he writes that the idea of ‘ecological self’ is metaphysically influenced by Gandhi. He further writes, “As a student and admirer since 1930 of Gandhi’s non-violent direct actions in bloody conflict, I am inevitably influenced by his metaphysics which to him personally furnished tremendously powerful motivation and which contributed to keeping him going until his death” (“Self-Realization...” 38). Self-realization for Gandhi, as also for Naess, constitutes a realization of the broader ‘Self’ and an ever-widening identification with the interests and sufferings of each and every being. Self-realization is an active expression and involves maximal realization of potential from every living entity.

Naess particularly praises Gandhi’s view of identification of oneself with the rest of nature. He cites some examples of Gandhian non-violent thought embedded in his spirit of nationalism. He reveals that such a concept is a realization of ‘Ecological Self’ or ‘Greater Self’. Gandhi in his ashrams allowed unhindered movement of snakes, scorpions, spiders, etc. for which his European companions who lived there were taken aback. What Naess wants to justify is that Self-realization in a wider sense can be practiced in daily life. He further mentions, “Thus, Gandhi recognized a basic common right to live and blossom, to self-realization in a wide sense applicable to any being that can be said to have interests or needs. Gandhi made manifest the internal relation between self-realization, non-violence, and what has sometimes been called

biospherical egalitarianism” (“Self-Realization...” 39)

Deep ecology conceives that the earth does not belong to humans alone. Humans only inhabit the lands. In a same tone Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), a wildlife ecologist, says that humans belong to the land. Land does not belong to them. The concept which deliberates that fragments of natural entities belong to diverse agencies like individual, organization, state, nation, etc. is a narrow one from the perspective of deep ecology. Naess cites the example of his birthplace Norway in a similar fashion. He says that the landscapes, rivers, flora and fauna of Norway are not the property of Norwegians only (*Ecology* 74). Any natural entity does not belong to a particular state or a particular nation or community alone. Humans should use natural resources to meet their vital needs only. Though, the term ‘vital needs’ has considerable amount of differences in its meaning, in plain language it means minimum essentials for the sustenance. At the same time, it is meant to consider the needs of other species along with humankind. There should not be any conflict of interest in between two orders of existence. Thus, Naess’s formulation of deep ecology becomes a personal system and shares the view of Gandhian Self-realization,” the priority rule of nearness”. Further, this is accompanied by vigorous nonviolence which is a move away from stress on consumption by killing and exploitation. (Dasgupta 10-11)

The realization that environment is degrading, and it is causing concern to the planet as a whole (even to the human beings), is of recent origin. The awareness for environmental protection in the face of the realized crisis is a new phenomenon. Gandhi’s practical attitude towards non-human attitude towards non-human nature may not have seen as an environmental ethics during his time, but it paves certain day-to-day ways for radical ecology. Radical ecology, one of the broad streams of environmental philosophy, is concerned with the socio-cultural-political roots of the ecological crisis of environment. Thus, the Gandhi’s nationalistic ethics that revolves round the idea of nonviolence is the basis of the Naessian interpretation of man-environment interaction through deep ecology. Naess’s claim of the success of deep ecology in the twenty-first century is partially substantiated by certain developments of

attention among the policy makers of diverse cultures. For instance, in a landmark case for the 'Rights of Nature', officials in New Zealand grant legal personhood to Whanganui, the nation's third-longest river. Following this development, India's Ganga and Yamuna were also regarded as living beings by the Uttarakhand High Court. Ecuador passed similar ruling giving its forests, lakes, and waterways rights at par with humans in order to ensure their protection from harmful practices. Finally, to conclude one may comment that Gandhi and his preaching-practice of nationalism has make a way for Naess to shift from green-talk to green-walk on the backdrop of deep ecology.

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