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Gandhi's Movement for Better Environment: South African Phase

Researchers on the subject – Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 – 1948) and his environmental thoughts and activities, have so far focussed on some topics such as his doctrine of non-violence, right of animals, vaishnavism, experiments on diets, naturopathy, *Hind Swaraj* as the Gandhian manifesto of ecological living, similarity between the environmental thoughts of Gandhi and the modern concept of sustainable human development and moreover his influence on the environmental movements in India and abroad.¹ But in none of these writings Gandhi's movement for a clean, habitable environment based on the concept of conservation of nature, received due importance. He started his movement in South Africa where he went in 1893 to assist a reputed lawyer in a civil case of a businessman from Porbander. His next twenty one years (1893 – 1914) in South Africa was the most formative period for his life in many ways. It is well known that in South Africa Gandhi organized a movement in favour of small Indian businessman and labourers who were the victims of racial discrimination. The movement was based on the ideology of 'Satyagraha'. Along with this political movement he struggled to build up a movement for a better environment.

The Beginning of Eco-friendly Life in South Africa: Phoenix Farm and Tolstoy Farm

Towards the end of 1890s he was attracted to the easy and simple life, free of any lavishness. In 1904, on his way from Johannesburg to Durban, Gandhi read the book *Unto This Last* by John Ruskin (published in 1890). Ruskin was a staunch critic of the modern

industrialization adopted by the western world. Ruskin emphasized on physical labour and advocated a life based on simplicity and ethics. He was influenced by his thoughts and this led to the establishment of the Phoenix Farm. Gandhi was also deeply influenced by Tolstoy. He claimed that he first found the philosophy of love and non-violence in 1893, in Tolstoy's book – *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. Gandhi believed Tolstoy's teaching could replace the brutality of civilization with humanitarianism. According to Gandhi, the urge for an easy, simple and ethical life had once motivated Tolstoy to leave his lavish and indisciplined life. During this time, Tolstoy, while repairing shoes and tilling the land, wrote his greatest book *What is Art?* So in 1910 the 'ashram' that Gandhi set up for the participants of the movement of passive resistance and their families in South Africa was aptly named 'Tolstoy Farm', where life was based on physical labour, simplicity and non-violence.

In Phoenix and Tolstoy Farm Gandhi and his followers tried to conserve the virginity of nature. Phoenix Farm area had a small spring, some dilapidated huts, some fruit-bearing trees and many wild snakes. The owner of this place was Kallenbach, a German friend of Gandhi. Kallenbach experimented with various kinds of snakes and had also trained the inhabitants to identify venomous snakes. Albrecht, another resident of Tolstoy Farm, engaged himself in playful activities with snakes to remove the fear of snakes from the minds of the residents of Tolstoy Farm. In the 'ashram' life in South Africa, it was against the custom to kill or evict wild animals without any reason. Later on Gandhi wrote in his autobiography, "*The rule of not killing venomous reptiles has been practised for the most part at Phoenix, Tolstoy Farm and Sabarmati. At each of these places we had to settle on waste lands.*" (CWMG 39, 341). In Phoenix Farm Gandhi emphasized on the minimization of needs in daily life. At first, it was decided that the friends, relatives and colleagues who would come from India would stay in Phoenix in thatched

mud houses or brick houses as the huts of small farmers of India are usually made this way. Later old sheets of corrugated iron were reused to build the houses. Later in India, Gandhi put emphasis on recycling rejected or waste material and he believed that this was essential to keep the environment pollution free. In Tolstoy Farm, to maintain a healthy environment, the residues of food and vegetables were buried and used as manure. The process of disposing faeces and urine in the right places was compulsory and it was properly disposed off and buried. The residents of the 'Ashram' were not allowed to splatter water here and there. Used water was collected in a reservoir and was used to water the plants. Later in India, in constructive programme, the appropriate reuse of waste and decomposing it into manure was given much importance to keep a village clean. It was a topic which was often repeated by Gandhi in the pages of the *Harijan*.

Development of Faith in Nature Cure

Since Tolstoy Farm was far away from the city, the minimal medicines and even doctors were not available. It was at this time that Gandhi developed complete faith in naturopathy treatment. In 1903, a book named *Return to Nature* written by Adolf Just had been read by Gandhi. However, even before this, during his stay in India in 1902, Gandhi had practised giving treatment through waist bath, water therapy and a specific diet to cure diseases. Simultaneously, he had felt the urge to change his residence for the need of light and air and shifted with his family from the dark, damp and clumsy house in Girgaum to the bungalow of Santa Cruz. In 1904 in Johannesburg in South Africa, Gandhi as a volunteer had applied mud therapy to the victims of an epidemic of plague. In 1905 Gandhi's wife Kasturba and their sons came to Johannesburg. On the way to Johannesburg, one of his sons Ramdas had sustained a fracture in his hand and Gandhi treated him with mud therapy. During this time, many patients with

wounds, fever and indigestion used to come to Gandhi to seek relief from their diseases. By applying water therapy and through proper diet, he cured Kasturba who was suffering from anaemia. Keeping aside the question of the effectiveness and scientific aspect of Gandhi's naturopathy it may be said that he had tried to bring out the simple and effective cure that is hidden in natural world. That man is a part of the natural world and in some cases only natural elements can cure him – was his realization and this belief of Gandhi flourished later in his establishment of the Uruli Kanchan Clinic in Pune on 23rd March, 1946 and in naturopathy becoming a part of rural reconstruction programme. Gandhi always believed that to prevent diseases man must strive to maintain a clean and habitable environment. According to him, *“Nature cure implies an ideal mode of life and that in its turn presupposes ideal living conditions in towns and villages.”* (CWMG 84, 180).

Gandhi's Movement in Favour of a Healthy and Habitable Environment

During his stay in South Africa, Gandhi had pioneered a movement to set up a healthy and habitable environment among the small Indian traders and labourers there. During this time, in his writing, he mentioned that the main accusation of the whites against the Indians in South Africa was that they were dirty and their presence was harmful for public health. (CWMG3, 487-492).

On this pretext, the licenses of the Indians were confiscated. In this regard, Gandhi emphasized on cleanliness and sanitation and almost took this to the extent of a movement.

In 1904, an explosive outbreak of pneumonic plague took place in Johannesburg occupied by Indians. The Medical Officer of Health in this locality, Dr. Porter, informed in his report that there had been no previous indication of the impending outbreak (Meer 792). But

Gandhi had warned the authority a few times that an outbreak of plague was imminent in this locality. In 1899 he wrote a letter to the British agent in Pretoria on behalf of the Indian community in Johannesburg (Meer 796 – 797). According to him, Indians were living in crowded conditions without adequate sanitary arrangement, water supply etc. and this residential area was situated in the vicinity of the place where the refuse from the town and night-soil were deposited. Instead of providing helpful assistance, the unhealthy conditions were put forward as the basis for capturing the land occupied by the Indians and confiscating their licenses. Gandhi wrote to the Medical Officer of Health and the City Council again and again, warning them that an outbreak of some epidemic disease was merely a question of time. He also reminded the Council of its responsibility to take care of the sanitary conditions of the area. In a letter to the *Rand Daily Mail* (14th April, 1904) Gandhi wrote that the City Council had been warned since 1902 of the impending outbreak of epidemic, but the Council had ignored it (Meer 793). In the meantime plague tolled upon 86 lives in Johannesburg, most of them being Indians. The Public Health Committee and Gandhi became involved in a public debate regarding who was responsible for the outbreak of plague – the dirty Indians or the negligent City Council. Gandhi continued to emphasize that there was a statistical correlation between the standard of hygiene, risk of disease and the socio-economic condition of a group, regardless of colour (Meer 795). On the other hand, he tried to make the Indians aware of the matter through the *Indian Opinion*.

On 2nd July 1903, Gandhi wrote in the *Indian Opinion* for the Indians residing in South Africa, “*We are, then, charged with insanitation and niggardly living. In our opinion, neither charge is technically provable. Our countrymen have often been able to produce exclusive evidence that as a class, the British Indians are no worse than the Europeans, as to sanitation.*” (CWMG 3, 427-428).

However, he even reminded them that it was not right to accept unhygienic habits by citing poverty as an excuse; and a clean, decent way of living should be followed even within the humiliating surroundings in which Indians were living in Durban or Transval. Regarding cleanliness and discipline, he gave the example of the British who, according to him, could transform a chaotic ambience to a properly planned one. He reminded the Indians of the disorderly vast habitations of the Indians in Zanzibar. Though Indians had come to South Africa much earlier than the British, they had not contributed to the beautification of their locality and development of any elegant town (CWMG 3, 428). According to Gandhi, the lack of the spirit of unity, co-operation and spirit of sacrifice for the sake of the general welfare made the Indians negligent about their neighbourhood (CWMG 3, 428).

Gandhi wrote in the *Indian Opinion* in 1903 that the whites blamed the Indians for setting up dirty, unhealthy localities and so were responsible for the spread of epidemic and hence they had to be isolated from other residents (CWMG 3, 487 - 492). To prove this allegation wrong, in August of 1903 Gandhi published in the *Indian Opinion* a comment by Dr. F. P. Marais and Dr. Johnstone which contained the fact that the allegation against the Indians was not completely true (CWMG 3, 487 - 492). Dr. F. P. Marais had an experience of around 10 years of working among the Indians. Dr. Johnstone was a sanitary expert and was a fellow of Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh. Besides, he had also got a diploma of Public Health from Edinburgh and Glasgow and was aware of the conditions of the Indians residing in South Africa.

Gandhi tried to create awareness among the Indians while he was engaged in annulling the allegation of the whites against the Indians. Despite his efforts such allegations continued to be aimed against the Indians. In 1904, the rice imported from Bombay was cited as contaminated and was claimed to be the cause of the spread of plague in Johannesburg. A physician named Dr.

Pakes had submitted a report on this issue after extensive enquiry into the matter. Gandhi protested against this report in the *Indian Opinion* on 28th October, 1905 and proclaimed it completely wrong. On the other hand, he continued in his efforts to make the Indians residing in South Africa conscious of their surroundings. In June, 1905, when a report of the Town Council of Krugersdorp had made the similar allegation against the Indians, Gandhi tried to make the Indians aware of their dirty habits such as spitting here and there and also spoke of the importance of cleaning dirty, unhealthy urinals (*CWMG* 3, 316). Gandhi realised that these habits would be cited by the authorities to deprive the Indians from their rights and freedom. As in Krugersdorp, where no cases of plague had been found and where the Public Health Authority found nothing to accuse the Indians, the Municipality removed all Indians to a locality far from town and their trading areas. In September 1905, through newspapers Gandhi appealed to the students to develop clean habits. He appealed not only to students, but also to all Indian communities, to make efforts to establish a healthy environment (*CWMG* 5, 83).

In May 1906, Gandhi wrote in the *Indian Opinion* that it had been found that the most serious accusation against Indians in the newspapers of last twenty years was about their uncleanliness. According to him, though most of the allegations of the whites were exaggerated, yet not to be ignored completely. He appealed to the Muhammedan Association and the Hindu Sanatan Sabha to make an effort in the issue (*CWMG* 5, 316).

Another dimension is found in Gandhi's writings on this issue in 1906. It is known from his various writings that there were allegations of the white administrators against the unhealthy lifestyle of the Indian labourers. However, Gandhi was not ready to accept this allegation only against the labourers. He explained that the industrialists did not pay enough attention to the setting up of the dwellings of the labourers. On 5th May in 1906, in *Indian Opinion* Gandhi

wrote about the necessity of fresh air in daily life. He informed that the conscious and educated people of the present times were gradually stressing the necessity of fresh air. Big cities were being established but the labourers were working in the factories of the cities which were like cages. Since the price of land was increasing, there were less open spaces in the factory buildings and the tenements of the labourers were becoming more congested, leading to the obvious result of the deterioration of the health of the workers ('Workmen's Living Habits', *CWMG* 5, 472). Gandhi mentioned in his writings about the work of Dr. Newman of Hinsborough, London, who spoke of the increasing death rate among people living in one room in congested areas, where 38 out of 1000 would die. However, if the same number of people lived in two rooms then the death rate would be lowered to 22 out of 1000, whereas if they lived spaciously in three rooms, the death rate would be lowered even more, to 11. When they managed to use 4 rooms, the death rate would be only 5. Gandhi wrote that there was nothing surprising in Newman's statistics because people may live a few days without food and for some time without water, but one cannot live even a minute without air. Therefore, Gandhi's conclusion about fresh air is that, it is extremely important for life and if it is not pure, its effect will surely be ruinous('Workmen's Living Habits', *CWMG* 5, 472).

There was acute scarcity of fresh air in the big industrial cities of west. However, Gandhi mentioned exceptions to this too. The large manufacturers Cadbury Brothers and Lever Brothers were concerned about the welfare of their labourers and so they established their factories outside the cities, in open surroundings. Gandhi mentioned that inspired by their example, in many places in England, such work had been started.

Then, Gandhi wrote to the Indian leaders, *“This matter deserves consideration by Indian leaders. We suffer much because we do not realise the value of pure air, and this again is a strong reason why disease like plague spread among us.”* (CWMG 5, 414 - 415).

After this in 1906 in the October issue of the *Indian Opinion* another article of Gandhi was found in which he reminded the Indians residing in South Africa of the new Municipal ordinance of Johannesburg. If they did not abide by that ordinance, their licenses would be seized. Gandhi wrote, *“In cleanliness and other matters we have to compete with whites. That stage has not yet come. But if we wake up from our slumber, give up our indolence, shed some of our greed and persist in our efforts, we can in no time drive away the evil of uncleanness from our midst. We have been perpetually tormented by the malignant tumour of uncleanness which eats into our vitals.”* (CWMG 5, 470).

In the Gujarati edition of the February 1907 issue of the *Indian Opinion*, stress was laid on the cleanliness of the individuals for establishing a healthy environment and it was also mentioned that spitting here and there was the cause of spreading the germ of tuberculosis. And Indians had the bad habit of spitting anywhere after chewing tobacco. Referring to a Gujarati proverb, Gandhi wrote that every addiction degrades the environment. The proverb was *“Addicts to tobacco spoil the corner of the house where they chew tobacco, the whole house if they smoke and their clothes if they take snuff”* (CWMG 6, 309).

In 1907 Gandhi started the non-violent resistance ‘Satyagraha’ with the Indians against the oppressive laws of the South African Government. At this time he came across the writings of David Thoreau. Gandhi explained his idea of Satyagraha to the people of the west using the term coined by Thoreau, ‘Civil Disobedience’. He was also influenced by Thoreau’s ‘Walden’

and other articles. He may well have read 'Walden' as early as 1906; before the first Satyagraha movement he dispensed with servants, acted as his own scavenger, and attempted to be independent of machinery. The first chapter of 'Walden' was economy which according to Thoreau was that way of life where life can be lived to the fullest even while keeping the demands least.² Gandhi's views were seemingly influenced by 'Walden' though his reactions to 'Walden' were not discussed in his paper. But one can easily find out in his later writings how 'Walden' had inspired Gandhi to embrace the virtue of simplicity. He started believing that most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to mankind. So Gandhi was inspired simultaneously by the new technique in political movement and also to practise a simple lifestyle. He was accused of civil disobedience on 10th January, 1908 and imprisoned for two months. The Government of South Africa reached an amicable settlement in the face of the united resistance of the Indians. Gandhi and the others were released. However, General Smut did not accept the conditions laid by Gandhi and so on 16th August 1908, the movement was started again. Gandhi was again sentenced to imprisonment for two months. During these captive days he used to clean the urinals of the prison. Hence, even during the extremely harsh circumstances, he continued with his fight for a clean environment.

Hind Swaraj and Gandhi's Concern for Environmental Degradation in the West as well as in India

Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* in 1909 in Gujarati and published in English in 1910 in South Africa after the Government of Bombay proscribed the Gujarati version. The ideas presented in the book grew out of Gandhi's reading and his experience in South Africa. In this book he attacked every aspect of western civilization in order to prove how evil and how harmful it was.

He criticized the particular form of western civilization which emerged with the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. According to him, the Industrial Revolution took an important role in transforming people's lives and their attitudes to themselves and to the world around them. Advanced knowledge of science made human beings capable of mastering nature in order to fulfill their desires and wants. Gandhi put forth England as an example of industrialized civilization where men were compelled to work in the unhealthy atmosphere of factories and mines in order to earn money and to get comforts purchased with money. The condition of the factory workers was worse than that of animals. He showed that before the advent of the modern civilization, people used to work in the open space and in fresh air. In 1906 Gandhi had published a report based on the increasing death rate in the factory areas and workers' tenements. In 1909, this issue was raised once again in *Hind Swaraj*. Then he mentioned that living against nature was giving rise to various new diseases (*Hind Swaraj* 101). In this book he mentioned a great British writer Edward Carpenter and his book *Civilization : Its Cause and Cure* while trying to explain the nature of modern western civilization. Carpenter had been significantly influenced by John Ruskin and he was not only a critic but also advocated a simple lifestyle close to nature. He was also vocal about the rights of animals and birds. Gandhi did not know him personally, but he was acquainted with one of his followers, Henry Salt. Salt was an active worker for the rights of animals. Along with advocating a life close to nature, Salt admired the simple, rustic life. Gandhi's early writings were published in Salt's journal of the Vegetarian Society. Gandhi pointed out that the main characteristic of this civilization was to provide physical comfort – greater desire for a better house, lavishness of clothes, dependence on machines, faster means of transport and rejection of physical labour (*Hind Swaraj* 103).

In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi criticized the decline of natural environment in England and also the harm caused to the natural environment of India under the British rule. Evaluating the condition of India, Gandhi wrote that India was being ruled not only by the British but by modern civilization. He came to know of the harmful effects of the modern industrialized civilization not only through the writings of the western writers like Leo Tolstoy, Carlyle, John Ruskin, David Thoreau and Edward Carpenter, but also through the writings of Ramesh Chandra Dutt. Through Dutt's *Economic History of India* he became aware how the Industrial Revolution of Europe was harming India. He was deeply pained on reading how during the rule of the East India Company, the handicraft industry of India was destroyed in the interest of the British. According to Gandhi, the decline of these industries was the reason for the shift of the centre of civilization in India from the village to the city. He believed that this harmed India severely because the villages were the refuge of innumerable people and against these; the cities which gained importance were inhabited by a few only. The unhealthy environment of the newly built towns of Colonial India was mentioned in *Hind Swaraj*. While writing the summary of *Hind Swaraj*, in a letter Gandhi mentioned that he would have been happy if cities like Calcutta and Bombay had not come into existence. He described the big cities like Calcutta and Bombay, along with other cities as the epicentres of plague (Tendulkar, 107). One of Gandhi's accusation against the railway set up by the British was that the expansion of the railway helped in the rapid spread of plague among the Indians (*Hind Swaraj* 110).

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi questioned the issue of unhealthy and unplanned urbanization of the colonial cities in India which later regularly appeared in many of his speeches and letters. Conditions of bastis of Calcutta and chawls of Bombay have been discussed several times by him (*CWMG* 14, 126). He repeatedly reminded the municipalities of their responsibilities

towards making the slums and chawls habitable by improving the sanitation system there.

Wherever he went he requested the residents to improve the living environment by reminding them of the importance of pollution free air and water (CWMG 35, 12, 30, 71, 72, 95). In this regard his experience in South Africa was referred to in his comment. He mentioned that though the whites of South Africa were racist, there were much to learn from them, especially the works of municipality.

In India on many occasions he recalled his memories of South Africa days. For example, when Gandhi took part in tree preservation and planting with Shri Joykrishna Indrajit in Kutch, he dwelt upon his memories of afforestation of Johannesburg. In *Navajivan* he wrote, *“Johannesburg was a similar region. Nothing but grass grew there at one time. There was not a single building. Within forty years this same place became a golden city. There was a time when people had to pay twelve annas for a single bucket of water and sometimes had to make do with soda water. Sometimes they had to wash even their face and hands with the latter. Today there is water and there are trees also. From the very beginning owners of gold mine converted the region into a relatively green belt and increased the amount of rainfall by enthusiastically bringing over saplings from far off places and planting them . . .”* (Navajivan) To solve the problem of scarcity of water in some places in India Gandhi advised to preserve rain water. *“In South Africa where rainfall was scarce and there was a dearth of underground water-supply, they had a reservoir in every house for storing rain water. It was the duty of all of them, most of the municipality and the Public Health Department, to remedy these defects.”* (Harijan) said Gandhi when he observed the problem of water scarcity in Panchagani.

So it can be concluded that Gandhi’s South African phase was a formative period for his movement for better environment in India.

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