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Rethinking Gandhian Concept of Sustainable Development in the context of Responsible Tourism

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Mahatma Gandhi underlined the concept of ‘Sustainability’ as the course of life for the present and the future. He observed that human body requires three kinds of nourishments namely, air, water and food. Nature provides these three components and, hence mankind fully depends on nature for its existence. It is high time to think of preserving the nature and its environment as its degradation and the subsequent climate change have raised serious challenges/threats to the existence of life on earth. Steadily constructing a discourse on sustainability and properly conceiving the developmental paradigms are the need of the hour. Gandhian concepts and ideals have contributed to the broader discourse on sustainable development with special emphasis on environment. Most of the developmental activities in one way or the other, affect nature. The much celebrated Eco-Tourism is one such developmental activity introduced in Kerala with the goal of ensuring environmental sustainability. The paper explores the prospects of Ecotourism in Kerala within the Gandhian concept of sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Environmental Sustainability, Economic Sustainability, Social Sustainability, Responsible Tourism, Sustainable Tourism, Eco-tourism, Kyoto Protocol, Rio Earth Summit, Swaraj, Sarvodaya, Ahimsa, Social Justice

Introduction

‘Sustainable development is a kind of development that meets the needs of the present generation without affecting the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. It is the development paradigm envisioned by United Nations Organisation for the preservation of the Blue Planet. The concept attained a concrete form in the Brundtland Commission Report of 1987. The environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and social sustainability are the three pillars of sustainable development as defined in the Report. Eco-Tourism is envisaged as a means to achieve economic sustainability by equitable economic growth, optimum use of resources, fair trade and equitable distribution of income and wealth. Economic sustainability naturally leads to social sustainability ensuring eradication of poverty and hunger, access to quality education and health care, gender equality and social inclusion and promotion of peace and equitable justice. Over population and resource depletion are the consequences of the unsustainable industrial practices; and inequality is found in every sector challenging sustainability. A fine synthesis of economic and ecological ideas facilitates sustainable development. Ecotourism is encouraged as it carries the ideology of sustainable development creating space for economic opportunities as well as nature conservation. Along with conservation of nature, man-centred development is possible in Ecotourism sector. In the opinion of Gandhi, man should be at the center in any scheme of development and his basic needs should be met by the judicious use of natural resources without disturbing ecological balance.

The environment is a powerful resource for the existence of human beings. The planet earth is divided into four divisions namely, atmosphere, biosphere, hydrosphere and lithosphere. All these spheres have their own distinctive characteristics and independent relationship. They support various life forms and they together create conditions which are conducive for human life to survive and grow on our planet. But any disturbance on these spheres will have a profound impact and disturb the balance of the ecosystem. The environmental pollution, depletion of natural resources, land erosion, loss of natural habitats, traffic congestion and garbage trails are some of the major disturbances

occur in relation to environment. Hence it is the need of the hour to address these environmental challenges.

The first global meeting to address environmental issues was held at Stockholm in Sweden in the year 1972. It was United Nations Conference on Human Environment and a watershed moment which recognized a global dialogue relating to environmental issues in the context of economic growth. Its main aim was to create a global framework to promote sustainable development, safeguard natural resources and environmental governance. It created United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and recognized the need of integrating environmental protection with economic development. It brought environmental responsibilities to the forefront of international arena.

Then, the Brundtland commission report of 1987 introduced the concept of sustainable development. It was a World Commission on Environment and Development. The commission was headed by Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former prime minister of Norway. Its main aim was to popularise the concept of sustainable development. Though the commission was appointed in 1983, it submitted its report in 1987. This report defined the concept of sustainable development as something which meet the needs of the present generation without affecting the future generations to meet their own needs. The report addressed the environmental challenges occurred across the globe. Moreover, it laid the foundation stone for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held at Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in the year 1992.

The Rio Earth Summit of 1992 marked 20th anniversary of first Human Environment Conference held in Stockholm in 1972. The main aim of Rio Summit was to produce a new blueprint for a coercive action on environmental and developmental issues. The Summit in its Agenda 21, marked certain global strategies for sustainable development. It was conceived that the concept of sustainable development was an attainable goal for all the people across the globe. The Summit expressed its concerns regarding the vital needs for sustaining the human life on the planet. It also addressed the issues

like climate change and biodiversity and later resulted into adopting Kyoto Protocol under the initiative of United Nations.

The Kyoto Protocol of 1997 was an international treaty under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It was targeted legally to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by developed and industrialised countries. The Protocol permitted the developed countries to invest and jointly implement emission-reduction projects in other developed and developing countries. However, generally speaking, global emissions continued to rise overall. But still the Protocol has served as a landmark agreement. Because it was the first of its kind in the world which made countries responsible for their greenhouse gas emissions.

The Continuing Journey Toward Sustainability of 2015 adopted 2030 Agenda and the 17 goals for Sustainable development. Its main aim was to achieve a sustainable future by addressing the issues of global poverty, health, climate change etc. The proposed journey involves certain sustainability principles into various sectors like education, agriculture and business etc. It also made a global framework to protect the planet and to ensure peace and prosperity to all by 2030.

In spite of the developments took place in 1972, 1987, 1992, 1997 and 2015 regarding sustainable development, that means even before the UN conception of Sustainable development, India under Gandhi familiarised and popularised the concept of sustainability across the country.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable Development is generally defined as the Development that meets the needs of the present generation without any compromise upon the ability of future generations in meeting their needs at that time. It focuses on improving the quality of life for all the citizens of the earth. It requires to increase the use of natural resources. But while using our natural resources we have to keep in mind that these resources are also to be made available to the future generations. Then only sustainability can be achieved. In order to achieve this, we have to adopt eco-friendly approach with nature. It is built upon the

basis of three pillars, namely environmental, social and economic. These are closely interrelated and are to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. It is more connected with tourism sector. Because these three pillars are so significant and are involved in tourism. This indicates that the travellers seeking for entertainment from tourism should be environmental, social and economic. They should love and respect environment and be social and economical in their approach and attitude.

Though the sustainable development or sustainable tourism is of recent origin, especially during 1970s, the concept and its ideology existed even during Gandhiji's times. Gandhiji had taught the lessons of sustainable development in the context of travel and tourism.

Gandhian Concept of Sustainable Development

Gandhiji adopted a holistic approach and provided an ethical and moral framework emphasizing harmony among humanity, society and nature. With regard to the sustainable development, Gandhiji emphasised simplicity, self-sufficiency and harmony with nature. The establishment of harmonious relationship with nature provides equity and justice among the people in a given society. Gandhiji's principle of satyagraha emphasises the significance of truth in social justice.

Gandhiji believed in Sarvodaya, which focused on welfare and well-being of all with betterment of human life and ensuring the fulfilment of basic needs of human beings. He gave priority to poorest and vulnerable for their true development. It seeks to uplift all segments of society including oppressed and marginalised. It ensures benefits from progress and resources even to all the vulnerable sections of the society.

He visualised Swaraj with the motive of self-reliance and local self-sufficiency along with promoting local economies and industries. Gandhiji argued that the local production and consumption with only aim in mind to meet their local needs would empower local communities and will minimize environmental degradation. He believed that the emphasis on local resources and traditional knowledge can enhance sustainability.

Gandhiji's ideas on simplicity reflected simple living by reducing consumption and waste. This indicates that his concept was eco-friendly in nature. He had a lifestyle of simplicity and wanted to reduce the pressure on natural resources. He argued that the true happiness comes from being harmony with nature and not from the accumulation of material resources in plenty. It encourages the individuals to assess their needs based on environmental responsibility.

The principle of Ahimsa or non-violence disseminated not only to human beings but also to nature and all living creatures, by which he promoted harmony with nature. It advocates environmental ethics. This principle promotes a sense of responsibility towards environment. It urged man to avoid harm to ecosystems. One can have more sustainable relationship with environment by embracing the principle of Ahimsa.

Gandhian Concept of Environmental Sustainability

Gandhiji made a remarkable statement that "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed". He believed that the resources of the earth are finite and therefore they should be used judiciously and wisely. Gandhiji viewed nature as an important entity of life. His emphasis on harmony with nature resonates with modern environmental conservation. He encourages a sense of environmental responsibility. The preservation and responsible stewardship of natural resources are the paramount principles in Gandhian thought. Gandhi's philosophy emphasises the significance of environmental sustainability which is reflected in his principles of Ahimsa, Satyagraha, Sarvodaya, Self-reliance and Simplicity.

Gandhiji was well aware of the fact that the environment is a powerful resource for the very existence of human beings. Hence it should be protected at any cost from its environmental impacts like several kinds of pollution like air, water, land and even noise, depletion of natural resources, land erosion, loss of natural habitats and garbage trails etc. He had high concern on the damage of ecology which affect the local people including peasants and tribal people.

Gandhiji's environmentalism is built on ecological practices of peasants and tribal communities. He encouraged local communities

to rely on regional resources and traditional knowledge. He promoted organic farming by promoting the use of traditional agricultural methods. He viewed nature as a living entity and hence emphasised responsibility towards environment. Certain ideas of Gandhiji like population stabilisation, land- use planning, water conservation, sustainable agriculture, conservation of biodiversity and non-polluting renewable energy systems provide environmental priorities in terms of its sustainable development. His principles offer valuable insights into environmental sustainability and focused on harmony with nature by upholding social justice and empowerment of local community.

Gandhian Concept of Economic Sustainability

The notion of Swadeshi propounded by Gandhiji intended to promote self-sufficiency among local people. Gandhiji was a strong advocate for a village-based economy. He wanted to enhance the local production and consumption so as to make them self-reliant. It supports the economic development and community resilience in every countryside.

Economically Gandhiji envisaged the factors like employment generation, income generation, increased foreign exchange, promotion of rural development and developing infrastructure etc., which are essential for achieving sustainability. Because he wanted to promote human well-being, ecological harmony and self-sufficient communities in meeting their basic needs like food, clothing and shelter. He visioned to minimise environmental impact and promote decentralisation.

The economic principles of Gandhiji consists of decentralisation, sustainable agriculture and equitable distribution of natural resources. Decentralisation is considered to be the vital part of sustainable development. Localised agriculture, industries and economies can adapt better environmental changes. He believed that sustainable agriculture promotes ecological health and food and security. It also encourages soil preservation and biodiversity for the betterment of environment. The equal distribution of resources is essential to provide opportunities for all community members to ensure sustainable development.

Gandhian concept of Social Sustainability

Gandhiji wanted to ensure social justice. His ideas on Sarvodaya focused on well-being of all with social justice, particularly the marginalised and vulnerable sections of the society. He also stressed the principle of equality for sustainability. Gandhiji focused on equitable distribution of power and resources to make them self-reliant. He argued that the community participation and empowerment of communities are essential for sustainable development. He emphasised the promotion of education, awareness and participation for sustainable practices.

Gandhiji emphatically stood against certain social evils like disrespect to local customs, disruption of lifestyles, money laundering, societal crimes, alcoholism, drug abuse and other health problems. Because these evils are the enemies of sustainability. He wanted to develop entrepreneurship and improve quality of life. He also envisaged to preserve our local heritage.

Gandhi's ideal for social sustainability also involves gender equality and the empowerment of women. The social principles envisaged by Gandhiji are crucial for achieving holistic and sustainable development along with social justice. These principles are still relevant in promoting social sustainability.

Responsible Tourism in the light of Gandhian Thought

Responsible Tourism, also known as sustainable tourism or eco-tourism, is a tourism industry which is responsible to environment as envisaged by Gandhiji. It requires to promote environment friendly practices and is closely connected with Gandhian concept of sustainability, because it focussed on environmental conservation, which seeks to minimize impacts of tourism on the environment and preserve cultural heritage. It is the responsibility of the government to develop linkages with local community. It is the responsibility of the local community to ensure the safety and comforts of the tourists. It is the responsibility of the local people to respect, invest, develop local cultures and prevent exploitation of any form. It is the responsibility of tourists to observe local norms and practices and conserve ecology by adopting eco-friendly approach while travelling destinations.

Responsible tourism is mainly conceived three types of responsibilities namely, environmental responsibility, social responsibility and economic responsibility in the light of Gandhian perspective. This type of tourism encompasses all forms of tourism and seeks to minimise negative impacts of environmental, social and economic. It is intended to generate greater economic benefits to host communities.

Viewing responsible tourism through the lens of Gandhian thought, one can understand that it is holistic and community-centered approach with special emphasis on well-being of local people. In tourism, Gandhiji's principle of non-violence ensures that tourism activities cause minimal harm to the local eco-systems.

Gandhiji also conceived and propagated the same principles of responsible tourism like conservation of natural resources, respecting local customs and tradition, protection of cultural heritage sites, supporting local economies and involvement of local communities in the development of tourism and contributing much to economic development. These ideals can be ensured only with the promotion of Gandhian concept of sustainable development.

Gandhiji emphasised the respect for local cultures and environment. He supported local communities by promoting local economies and to share the benefits of tourism among the local people. In Gandhian perspective, to make sustainable, the development of responsible tourism should involve community participation. The local and indigenous communities can be included from the planning stage to gaining stage.

The responsible tourism envisages community-based tourism with the initiatives of the involvement of local people in planning, decision making, implementing, management and sharing of benefits of tourism related activities. This is more or less connected with the Gandhian principles of Swaraj and Sarvodaya. To be specific, it indicates that travellers should choose locally owned and operated accommodations and local restaurants. They should buy handicrafts directly from artisans. So that economic benefits of tourism will be enjoyed by the host community itself.

He wanted tourists to protect environment while travelling and during entertainments. He does not consider tourism as an industry, because industries do harm to environment and damage its ecology. But he considered tourism as a travel and tourists as travellers. Gandhiji encouraged travellers to reduce solid and other types of wastes and to adopt simple and sustainable lifestyles in a responsible manner. He insisted them to respect the local customs, traditions and cultural heritage sites and to have eco-friendly accommodations with sustainable practices. This kind of tourism can be rightly called as Gandhian tourism because of its eco-friendly nature and promotion of environmental conservation which ultimately contribute to socio-economic development.

Conclusion

Sustainable development is a synthesis of ecological, economic and social ideas and concepts which are kept together to solve environmental crisis. It is a science with systematic relation of man with plants and animals along with their habitat and environment. Gandhian concept of sustainable development is not only an ideology but also a movement. As an ideology, it has drawn our attention to global responsibility with ecosphere. As a movement, it calls for an active participation of all members of society for sustainable development. Gandhian concepts can be applied with sustainable tourism to ensure sustainability. His approach to responsible tourism transforms the act of travel into a meaningful journey. It promotes and fosters self-sufficiency and benefits to every one involved like the traveller, the host community and the earth.

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