

Ecological Meltdown And Nuclear Conflict: The Relevance Of Gandhi In The Modern World

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A few months ago, entrepreneur Charles Devenish contacted me to tell me about his plans to develop various mining enterprises across India. He spoke about the massive amounts of untapped mineral resources lying beneath India that is just lying there and has been for a long time. What he thought I might find appealing were his plans for how small-scale mining could dovetail with a model of agriculture aimed at restoring Indian soils, which have been seriously degraded by decades of 'green revolution' chemical poisoning, and a rolling back of the increasing and harmful corporate control of farming.

Devenish wants to set up co-operative mining enterprises in rural areas that would involve local farmers, who would then have a say and a stake in these local mines (see [this report](#)). The farmers would also benefit from the profits that would supplement their farming income and also be funnelled into investment in research and knowledge, which would enable them to restore their soils and move towards organic agriculture that would be in harmony with the local ecology.

Taken at face value, the plan sounds reasonable, especially given the current push to make farming financially non-viable, displace farmers from their lands and then implement a petro-chemical intensive system of agriculture based on the industrialised model of farming that the West has adopted. This model has led to de-nutritified food, degraded soils, contaminated water, serious health issues and various other problems. Although there are calls to help farmers by, for example, providing them with a [proper living income](#) and stopping wrongful land acquisition, waiting for policy makers in central government to address the plight of farmers could be a very long wait indeed, particularly as much of officialdom is facilitating the [corporate takeover of farming](#).

But what caught my attention was Charles Devenish's commitment to a Gandhian model of rural development. The model of mining he is proposing seems a long way from those stories we hear about people being driven from their lands as big corporations move in to destroy the landscape and ecology courtesy of corrupt back-room deals done with officials. The aim is to keep farmers on their lands and provide them with additional sources of income, not least from mining.

Devenish's 'Gandhian model of development' appears to have nothing to do with Gates-Zuckerberg models of 'philanthro-capitalism' that we currently hear about. What Gates is attempting to do with agriculture in Africa is very much tied to a [corporate model](#) as envisaged by Monsanto. And what Zuckerberg seems to want is to roll out a 'free' and basic version of the internet which is again [tied to corporate interests](#).

But mention Gandhi in certain circles and the response is one of cynicism: many would say

his ideas are outdated and irrelevant in today's world. Such a response could not be further from the truth. Gandhi could see the future impact of large-scale industrialisation in terms of the devastation of the environment, the destruction of ecology and the unsustainable plunder of natural resources.

Gandhi was ahead of his time. Although he might not have used today's terms, ideas pertaining to environmentalism, agroecology, sustainable living, fair trade, local self-sufficiency, food sovereignty and so on were all present in his writings. He was committed to inflicting minimal damage on the environment and was concerned that humans should use only those resources they require and not amass wealth beyond their requirements. People have the right to attain certain comforts but a perceived right to unbridled luxuries would result in damaging the environment and impinge on the species that we share the planet with. His own lifestyle was a highly sustainable one, focusing on simplicity, austerity and need rather than want.

For Gandhi, indigenous capability and local self-reliance (*swadeshi*) were key to producing a model of sustainable development. This is in stark contrast to what is currently taking place. For example, Chennai (Madras) has just experienced its worst flooding in over 100 years. This [article](#) in the Hindustan Times outlines how uncontrolled urban sprawl and planning across India has ignored watershed management and proper environmental planning and has placed cities at the peril of major flooding. In Delhi, the authorities are building on flood plains. Across India, cities are "sitting ducks for all sorts of natural disasters."

Another example is agriculture, whereby the 'green revolution' brushed aside indigenous agriculture and replaced it with water- and chemical-intensive farming that relies on external inputs from corporations and results in massive external costs, including huge dam construction projects, soil degradation, ecological devastation, population displacement and a poisoned environment. It has also exposed farmers to the vagaries of [rigged](#) global trade and markets, [commodity speculation](#) and the [geopolitics](#) of food. They are also often encouraged to grow cash crops for export rather than supply local people. The result for many of them has been debt, suicide and financial crisis. Farmer and campaigner Bhaskar Save outlines what the green revolution did for India [here](#).

Rather than a push towards urbanisation, Gandhi felt that the village economy should be central to development and India should not follow the West by aping an urban-industrial system. He noted that it took Britain half the resources of the planet to achieve its prosperity and asked how many planets would a country like India require? Gandhi added that the economic imperialism of a tiny island kingdom was keeping the world in chains, and if an entire nation of 300 million (India's population at the time) took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.

India is now 1.2 billion plus and China, 1.3 billion. The US with 300 million has already stripped much of the planet. US citizens as a whole constitute 5 percent of the world's population but consume 24 percent of the world's energy. On average, one American [consumes as much energy](#) as two Japanese, six Mexicans, 13 Chinese, 31 Indians, 128 Bangladeshis, 307 Tanzanians and 370 Ethiopians

Gandhi argued that the type of industrialised development adopted by Britain was based on a mind-set that encourages humans to regard man as conqueror and owner of the Earth. Apart from uncontrolled urban sprawl that tramples over the environment, this arrogance

also manifests itself in geo-engineering, genetic engineering and the appropriation of all facets of life from water and land to forests, seeds and food by powerful corporations.

The view of development envisaged by Gandhi was fundamentally different. Although there was a role for industrialisation that was not resource- or energy-intensive and which involved for example shipbuilding, iron works and machine making, this would exist alongside village handicrafts. This type of industrialisation would not make villages and village crafts subservient to it: nothing would be produced by the cities that could be equally well produced by the villages and the function of cities would be to serve as clearing houses for village products. He argued that with new technology even energy could be produced in villages by using sunlight and local materials. And, of course, people would live within the limits imposed by the environment and work in harmony with the natural ecology rather than by forcing it to bend to the will of profiteering industries.

In his book '[Mahatma Gandhi: An Apostle of Applied Human Ecology](#)', the late environmental scientist T N Khoshoo writes:

"... Gandhiji called the so-called modern society a nine-day wonder. Poverty has been aggravated due to cumulative environmental degradation on account of resource depletion, increasing disparities, rural migration to urban areas resulting in deforestation, soil erosion, loss of soil fertility, desertification, biological impoverishment, pollution of air, water and land on account of lack of sanitation, chemical fertilizers, pesticides and their biomagnification, and a whole range of other problems."

Consider that prior to the British, India was [among the richest countries in the world](#) and had controlled a third of global wealth until the 17th century. It was an exporter of spices, food grains, handicrafts, handloom products, wootz steel, musk, camphor, sandalwood and ivory items, among other things. The village was the centre of a rural economy, which was the centre of entrepreneurship. The British dismantled much of this system by introducing mono crop activities and mill-made products, and post independent India failed to repair the economic fabric. As a result, successive administrations have ended up preparing relief packages from time to time and rural India is thus too often depicted a basket case.

Officials now seem to be preoccupied with a fetish for GDP growth and an unsustainable model of 'development'. Part of this process involves destroying the environment and moving hundreds of millions from the land and into what are already overburdened mega-cities. Depriving people of their livelihoods in rural India (and deliberately running down agriculture) means mass migration to cities that are [failing to produce anywhere near the volume of jobs](#) required to soak up new arrivals.

If a forest can be chopped down and the land and timber sold, this increases GDP and thus constitutes 'growth'. The wildlife has gone and the forest which had been managed for centuries by local people who had used its resources sustainably for their needs has disappeared. And the people who lived on the land migrate to cities to live in slums and search for work that does not exist. This is regarded as 'development'.

It is, according to [Vandana Shiva](#), a model of development underpinned by a certain ideology:

"People are perceived as 'poor' if they eat food they have grown rather than

commercially distributed junk foods sold by global agri-business. They are seen as poor if they live in self-built housing made from ecologically well-adapted materials like bamboo and mud rather than in cinder block or cement houses. They are seen as poor if they wear garments manufactured from handmade natural fibres rather than synthetics.”

And the result of this mind set is that the ‘poor’ must therefore be helped out of their awful ‘backwardness’ by the West and its powerful corporations.

What some might regard as ‘backward’ stems from an ethnocentric ideology, which is used to legitimize the destruction of communities and economies under the banner of ‘globalisation’ (ie neoliberalism and imperialism) that were once locally based and self-sufficient.

Reflecting Gandhi’s views, [Sudhansu R Das](#) argues that reweaving the Indian village economy lies in the ability of the leadership to revert the change in societal behaviour that lets villagers prefer unnecessary consumer items to real economic assets. Das argues that the young generation in villages today prefers fast food to homemade nutritious food. Similarly, many biodegradable, handcrafted, daily use items have given way to plastic and synthetic products. People give up many climate friendly traditional dresses, footwear and a wide range of homemade eatables for no convincing reason but for the influence of ‘the market’ and advertising. People are persuaded to borrow and live beyond their means. The mad craze for status symbol has indebted millions of people. Das calls for reinvigorating entrepreneurship in villages.

However, government after government aggravates the problems by creating an impression that the villagers are a backward, inefficient and unproductive lot who can survive only on relief. With proper investment and appropriate policies, India’s rural economy could once again thrive.

T N Khoshoo argued that Gandhi’s advocacy of an ‘non-interventionist lifestyle’ provides the answer to the present day problems. The phrase ‘health of the environment’ is not just a literary coinage, he argues. It makes real biological sense because, as Gandhi argued, our planet is like a living organism. Without the innumerable and varied forms of life that the earth inhabits, without respecting the species we share this place with, our world will become lifeless.

Alternatively, before that happens, humans will become extinct and the planet will shake us off like a bad case of fleas. But, in the meantime, how much damage will have done by then and how much suffering will we have caused by a system that thrives on turning people into slaves to their desires and allowing imperialism to reign free?

Gandhi was “an apostle of applied human ecology,” according to T N Khoshoo. He offered a vision for a world without meaningless consumption which depleted its finite resources and destroyed habitats and the environment. Given the problems facing humanity, his ideas should serve as an inspiration to us all, whether we live in India or elsewhere.

Unfortunately, his message seems to have been lost on many of today’s leaders who have capitulated to an out-of-control ‘capitalism’ that is driving the world towards resource-driven conflicts with the ultimate spectre of nuclear war hanging over humanity’s head.

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