

DEVELOPMENT LESSONS FROM GANDHI

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Human Values - Lessons from the lives and teachings of great Leaders, Reformers and Administrators

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[Mahatma Gandhi](#)'s philosophy influenced not only Indians, but many great personalities across the world. Interestingly, it also influenced many a treatise at the international level. But, there is little that the international community attributes to him while drafting the future of the world.

These days, sustainable development goals (SDGs) are the buzzword. In 1908, Gandhiji showed us the path for sustainable development through sustainable consumption. In his Hind Swaraj, he outlined the threat to the common future of humanity from our relentless quest for material goods and services.

In 2015, when the UN adopted 17 SDGs, the 12th was about "ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns". This was perhaps the most fitting tribute to the enduring greatness of Gandhi. But no mention of Gandhiji or of Indian values was made in the preamble to this declaration. If we carefully read the subtext of SDGs, we find that they mirror the philosophy enunciated in Hind Swaraj.

The adoption of some of Gandhiji's tenets in the SDGs bear testimony to the fact that these were not flights of fancy, but rather, achievable aims. This has been demonstrated by the development model evolved by the Deendayal Research Institute (DRI) and other such institutions. The DRI was set up to perpetuate the memory of Deendayal Upadhyaya, who carried on Gandhiji's legacy. After his death, his contemporary, Nanaji Deshmukh, undertook the task to translate this philosophy into action.

An avowed follower of Gandhiji, Nanaji worked in the most backward districts of the country with a holistic approach, encompassing all aspects and dimensions of human life including education, life sciences, livelihood, technology, and social consciousness. This model can be seen in action in Chitrakoot, Gonda, Beed and Nagpur.

Gandhiji was honest in admitting that some of his thoughts may become outdated and, therefore, he had no problem in changing his stance. But the basic principles remained same. For example, both these great men believed that native, indigenous knowledge and culture needs to be respected. This worldview shuns the idea of more consumption, which is both a cause and consequence of greed.

Like Gandhiji, Nanaji also felt that villagers are the trustees of the country's resources. But at the same time, Gandhiji agreed that with technological advancement and changing aspirations of the people, the tools may have to be different. However, he cautioned against unnecessary consumption. Nanaji adopted the same approach while developing his model. Both believed that harmonious growth can be achieved by employing cultural practices. They had an unshakeable faith in the native's wisdom and intelligence. They strongly believed that it could be achieved only by employing local resources and local talent.

Gandhiji's life is an example of how he subtly taught us the virtues of sustainable consumption.

On many occasions, he chided [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) for wasting precious natural resources for his comfort. He spoke about harnessing natural resources as a virtue. Harnessing seems to be the closest English translation of the Indian concept of “dohan”, which says that natural resources should be used respectfully, and carefully to ensure equitable distribution and also to ensure that we leave a better world for future generations. Needless to say, this would ensure judicious consumption of the resources.

Every region has distinctive social and geographical characteristics. There are 127 agro-climatic zones in India. And when the policymakers try to formulate policies on the basis of mere statistics, they find that each such zone has scores of eco-climatic zones.

In 2008, the then French President Nicholas Sarkozy set up a commission to identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress, and to examine what additional information might be required for more relevant indicators of social progress. The commission found that there were vast diversities that govern the development of a region.

This is exactly what Gandhi had said a hundred years before the commission was set up. He had underlined the need for a decentralised system of economics and development so that local, distinctive characteristics can be factored in while formulating plans on the basis of statistical information.

Talking of sustainable development without understanding the true meaning of sustainable consumption will be mere rhetoric. Unless we practice restrained consumption, we cannot avoid exploitation of natural resources, and cannot achieve sustainability in production patterns. Upadhyaya also delved into the Indian ethos of restrained consumption (sanyamit upbhog). Citing various classical scriptures and cultural practices, he eulogised frugal (maryadit) spending by Indians, in accordance with their dharma. This, he explained, would lead to less exploitation of resources. He was also averse to vulgar displays of wealth and ostentatious lifestyles. All these form the subtext of SDG 12.

The writer is general secretary, Deendayal Research Institute. This is a part of the lecture delivered in St. Paulskirche, Frankfurt on October 11, to celebrate Gandhi 150

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