

Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

Gandhian ethics for sustainable development goals

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Nandhikkara, Jose
Publisher	Globethics.net
Rights	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-07-11 07:36:51
Item License	http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4011256

GANDHIAN ETHICS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

*Jose Nandhikkara*¹²¹

Introduction

The UN General Assembly on 25 September 2015 adopted a Resolution (70/1) with a Charter of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and 169 Targets to be achieved by 2030 for People and Planet, Peace, and Prosperity. The Resolution calls for Global Partnerships for Sustainable Development: “We resolve to build a better future for all people, including the millions who have been denied the chance to lead decent, dignified and rewarding lives and to achieve their full human potential.” It is a united global response to the cry of the People and the Planet. As the Resolution reminds:

“We can be the first generation to succeed in ending poverty; just as we may be the last to have a chance of saving the planet. The world will be a better place in 2030 if we succeed in our objectives.”

Sustainable development was defined in the Brundtland Report, 1987: “... development that meets the needs of the present without

¹²¹ Jose Nandhikkara, Regional Director, Globethics.net India.

compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainability is a comprehensive notion for people living in peace and prosperity on the planet, and the SDGs are a transformative agenda with the conviction that our individual, collective actions and partnerships will transform our world –People and Planet – bringing Peace and Prosperity for all.

After five years, though progress has been made, the world is not on course to achieve the SDGs by 2030. Even though the global industrial developments contribute to an impressive growth of GDP, the gap between the rich and the poor, people and planet, and peace and prosperity also continues to widen. Referring to the technocratic paradigm and market driven economy, Pope Francis on 27 March 2020 during his prayer for the world in the context of COVID-19 Pandemic said:

“We have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste.”

It is a sad fact, and an ethical issue that unjust inequalities exist, and continue to increase, with the disadvantaged groups suffering disproportionately from the disastrous effects of market driven development. It is therefore a moral imperative that we develop an action plan, bringing together all the fields of knowledge and economic and political powers, providing an antidote to the culture driven by market economy and short-term politics. We need an ethical approach to our policies and action plans; our efforts to achieve economic and material prosperity will result in the suffering for people and planet, peace and prosperity. As moral agents, human beings are caretakers of the earth, and all who are living in this common home should live in collaboration and solidarity with all. It is here that the vision proposed

by Mahatma Gandhi,¹²² that is, *Sarvodaya* (uplift of all) through *Anthyodaya* (uplift of the last), shows us an ethical path to true sustainability. Sustainable societies are ethical societies, and only ethical societies could be sustainable; a society is sustainable to the extent that it is ethical.

Announcing Gandhiji's martyrdom on 30 January 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, in his address to the nation said: "The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere." He added, however,

"The light has gone out, I said, and yet I was wrong. For the light that shone in this country was no ordinary light. The light that has illumined this country for these many years will illumine this country for many more years, and a thousand years later, that light will be seen in this country and the world will see it and it will give solace to innumerable hearts."

Mahatma Gandhi, who led India's freedom movement, remains a beacon of light in the contemporary moral darkness of the world, which is driven by the brute force of military and the abusive powers of money and media. As Albert Einstein wrote,

"The moral influence he [Gandhi] had on the consciously thinking human being of the entire civilised world will probably be much more lasting than it seems in our time with its overestimation of brutal violent forces. Because lasting will only be the work of such statesmen who wake up and strengthen the moral power of their people through their example and educational works. We may all be happy and grateful that destiny gifted us with such an enlightened contemporary, a role model

¹²² Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (2 October 1869—30 January 1948) was the leader of the Indian Independence Movement and is honorifically called Mahatma (Great Soul) Gandhi.

for the generations to come. Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this walked the earth in flesh and blood”.

Gandhiji indeed had a great “moral influence ... on the consciously thinking human being of the entire civilised world.” Though, contrary to Einstein’s hope, Gandhian influence is diminishing as the world is still run “with its overestimation of brutal violent forces”. Gandhiji is “a role model for the generations to come.” It is my conviction and claim in this chapter, that we all should learn from his life lessons in our journey to transform the world through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Gandhiji wrote in his “Message to Shanti Sena Dal” on September 5, 1947: “My Life is my Message.” Let us learn from his life a vision and mission for sustainable societies. He considered himself as a devotee of Truth (Truth is God, for Gandhi) and a votary of *ahimsa* (non-violence), which he practised consistently for realising *swaraj* (self-rule) in moral, economic, and political life. “I will not sacrifice Truth and *ahimsa* even for the deliverance of my country or religion,” Gandhi said (*Young India*, 20-1-1927: 21). The Gandhian path of *ahimsa* and truth that transformed his own life and played the leading part in the successful Indian independence struggle against two centuries of British rule, shows us a path to transform the world into Sustainable Societies. For Gandhi, the path to peace and prosperity is always moral, established in truth and *ahimsa*.

Experiments with Truth and Practice of *Satyagraha*

Devotion and dedication to Truth characterise Gandhi’s life, vision, and mission:

“I claim to be a votary of truth from my childhood. It was the most natural thing to me. My prayerful search gave me the revealing maxim ‘Truth is God’, instead of the usual one ‘God is

Truth'. That maxim enables me to see God face to face as it were. I feel Him pervade every fibre of my being" (Harijan, 9-8-1942: 264).

He was like a monk in his experiments with Truth,¹²³ however, he did not go to the Himalayas, but to the people and experimented with truth in the life situations wherever he was. In his words, "I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity" (*Harijan*, 29-8-1936: 226). Gandhi joined the political field as a way to do social work, which, in turn, resulted from his religious quest.

"Politics concern nations and that which concerns the welfare of nations must be one of the concerns of a man who is religiously inclined, in other words, a seeker after God and Truth. For me, God and Truth are convertible terms" (Young India, 18-6-1925: 214).

His political struggles resulted from his religious quest and moral struggle to be a votary of Truth, to achieve moral and social progress. Indeed, according to Gandhi, religion should pervade every one of our actions. Gandhi was eager to clarify that by religion he does not mean any particular religion or sect.

"It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. ... This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality" (Harijan, 10-2-1940: 445).¹²⁴

¹²³ Gandhi's Autobiography is titled *My Experiments with Truth*.

¹²⁴ Gandhi was a devout Hindu whose Hinduism included the best of all religions. Early in his life he was moved by the religious stories told by his mother, especially which of Harichandra, who never lied in his life and to fulfil his promise he renounced his throne, sold his family, and agreed to be a slave. He was also influenced by Hindu Bhakti saints, and the teachings of Advaita Vedanta, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. The *Gita* and the *Sermon*

For Gandhi, “religion means being bound to God, that is to say, God rules your every breath” (*Harijan*, 2-3-1934: 23), and his political mission was to establish the Ramarajya, the Kingdom of God.¹²⁵ In his view, “politics bereft of religion are absolute dirt, ever to be shunned” because as a votary of Truth, his politics is “inextricably bound up with non-violence and truth” (*Young India*, 1-10-1931: 281). Without non-violence and truth, societies would become oppressive as they would be guided by ‘brute force’ (physical/material power) and not ‘soul force’ (moral/spiritual power) characteristic of humanity.

Gandhi was a votary of Truth, completely dedicating his life in pursuit of Truth and called his movement *Satyagraha* (holding on to Truth). In the words of Gandhi,

“Satyagraha teaches us the art of living as well as dying. Birth and death are inevitable among mortals. What distinguishes the man from the brute is his conscious striving to realize the spirit within” (*Harijan*, 7-4-1946: 74).

on the Mount guided him in his lifelong experiments with Truth. During a train journey to Durban, Gandhi read John Ruskin’s *Unto this Last* (1860) and it gripped him profoundly. In his words, “I saw clearly that, if mankind was to progress and to realize the ideal of equality and brotherhood, it must adopt and act on the principle of *Unto This Last*. It must take along with it even the dumb, the halt and the lame” (*Harijan*, 25-8-1946: 281). Leo Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1894) and Henry David Thoreau’s *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* (1849) were also very influential in Gandhi’s life, message, and struggles. Living contact and conversation with Raychandbai, a Jain poet, also influenced Gandhi for his religious and spiritual vision and mission (*Autobiography*, 65).

¹²⁵Though Gandhi was devoted to Rama from his childhood, he clarified in *Young India* that, “By Ramarajya I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by Ramarajya Divine Raj, the Kingdom of God. For me Rama and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of truth and righteousness” (19-9-1929: 305).

Satyagraha is a personal, national, and global pilgrimage, with economic, political, moral, and religious dimensions of human life. For Gandhi, “*Satyagraha* first and *Satyagraha* last” (*Harijan*, 15-9-1946: 312).

‘*Satyagraha* first’ refers to its personal and universal application, making "no distinction between kinsmen and strangers, young and old, man and woman, friend and foe." (*Young India*, 23-2-1930: 340). The education and training for *Satyagraha* is meant for all, irrespective of gender, age, ethnicity, socio-political status, religion, or nationality (*Harijan*, 17-3-1946: 45). According to Gandhi, *Satyagraha* is part of human nature and is upheld by all traditions and religions. It is personal, social, and global. Beginning with oneself, it is to be extended to family, village, circle of villages, nation, and the world at large (*Harijan*, 31-3-1946: 64). *Satyagraha* as ‘universal force’ is “the introduction of truth and gentleness in the political, i.e., the national, life” (*Young India*, 10-3-1920: 3). He declared: “There is no other or better road to freedom” (*Harijan*, 15-9-1946: 312). Gandhi gave certain qualities for a *Satyagrahi*:

- He must have a living faith in God, for He is his only Rock.
- He must believe in truth and non-violence as his creed and, therefore, have faith in the inherent goodness of human nature which he expects to evoke by his truth and love expressed through his suffering.
- He must be leading a chaste life and be ready and willing, for the sake of his cause, to give up his life and his possessions.
- He must be a habitual Khadi-wearer and spinner. This is essential for India.¹²⁶

¹²⁶Gandhi presented spinning wheel as a symbol for the realization of his goal of swaraj. Khadi is home-spun cloth. More than the boycott of imported clothes, it was conscious preference indigenous and local products for survival and wellbeing of all.

- He must be a teetotaler and be free from the use of other intoxicants in order that his reason may be always unclouded and his mind constant.
- He must carry out with a willing heart all the rules or discipline as may be laid down from time to time (Harijan, 25-3-1939: 64).

In his *Autobiography* Gandhi clarified the law-abiding character of the Satyagrahi:

“A Satyagrahi obeys the laws of society intelligently and of his own free will, because he considers it to be his sacred duty to do so. It is only when a person has thus obeyed the laws of society scrupulously that he is in a position of judge as to which particular laws are good and just and which unjust and iniquitous. Only then does the right accrue to him of civil disobedience of certain laws in well-defined circumstances” (347).

In fact, a Satyagrahi is always following human nature and thereby obeying God’s law that is heard in the conscience of a morally upright person as God’s voice, which is superior to all other laws. That is how Gandhi understands *Satyagraha* as ‘soul force’ and a universal ethical practice, which today would contribute humanity’s agenda for transforming the world into sustainable societies.

‘*Satyagraha* last’ refers to non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Gandhi first developed the praxis of ‘civil disobedience’ while he was in South Africa, learning from *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* by Henry David Thoreau, and applying it to lead the Indian population in their agitation against the discriminatory rules by the colonial rulers in South Africa. Extending the vision and mission of *Satyagraha* for the Indian independence movement, Gandhi tabled a ‘Resolution on Non-cooperation’ in September 1920 before a session of the Indian National Congress. *Satyagraha* refuses to use ‘brute force’ against the oppressor and uses the ‘soul force’, to eliminate the enmity

between the oppressor and the oppressed. He gave three conditions necessary for the success of *Satyagraha*:

“(i) The Satyagrahi should not have any hatred in his heart against the opponent. (ii) The issue must be true and substantial. (iii) The Satyagrahi must be prepared to suffer till the end for his cause” (Harijan, 31-3-1946: 64).

‘*Satyagraha* last’ often involved fasting, and sometimes, fasting until death. This, indeed, is the last resort:

“Since *Satyagraha* is one of the most powerful methods of direct action, a Satyagrahi exhausts all other means before he resorts to *Satyagraha*. He will, therefore, constantly and continually approach the constituted authority, he will appeal to public opinion, educate public opinion, state his case calmly and coolly before everybody who wants to listen to him, and only after he has exhausted all these avenues will he resort to *Satyagraha*. But when he has found the impelling call of the inner voice within him and launches out upon *Satyagraha*, he has burnt his boats and there is no receding” (Young India, 20-10-1927: 353).

According to Gandhi, “a fast has to be based on unadulterated truth and *ahimsa*” (Harijan, 28-7-1946: 235). For personal life and national life, Gandhi declared: “I have no policy in me save the policy of Truth and *ahimsa*” (Young India, 20-1-1927: 21).

The Path of *Ahimsa*

Gandhi connected *Satyagraha* with *ahimsa* (non-violence), a fundamental principle taught by all religions and moral traditions:

“The word *Satyagraha* is often most loosely used and is made to cover veiled violence. But, as the author of the word, I may be

allowed to say that it excludes every form of violence, direct or indirect, veiled or unveiled, and whether in thought, word, or deed. It is breach of Satyagraha to wish ill to an opponent or to say a harsh word to him or of him with the intention of harming him” (Harijan, 15-4-1933: 8).

It is vindication of Truth, and not by infliction of pain, not on the oppressor but on one's own self and a *Satyagrahi*, one who holds on truth, is pledged to non-violence in thought, word, and deed (*Autobiography*, 345).

Ahimsa, like truth, is species-specific to human beings. As animals, we use physical force for the survival; when resources are scarce, only the fittest survive. “It was only when he rose from the state of a quadruped (animal) to that of a biped ([hu]man) that the knowledge of the strength of *ahimsa* entered into his soul” (*Harijan*, 25-8-1940: 261). As a species-specific character, *ahimsa* is “to be practiced by everybody in all the affairs of life. If it cannot be practiced in all departments, it has no practical value” (*Harijan*, 2-3-1940: 23). For Gandhi, *ahimsa* is the same as love, and is the life force of the people and planet, and that alone would give peace and prosperity. Though it is natural, as a force unique to human beings, we need to practice it knowingly and willingly. *Ahimsa* is to be cultivated in all walks of life, individually and socially: “The precious grace of life has to be strenuously cultivated, naturally so because it is uplifting” (*Harijan*, 14-12-1947: 468).

Gandhi followed *ahimsa* with devotion and dedication as his religious practice. He said: “*Ahimsa* is my God, and Truth is my God. When I look for *ahimsa*, Truth says ‘Find it out through me’. When I look for Truth, *ahimsa* says ‘Find it out through me’” (*Young India*, 4-6-1925: 191). “Truth is my religion, and *ahimsa* is the only way of its realization” (*Harijan*, 30-4-1938: 99). Truth and *ahimsa* are inextricably connected in theory and practice. They are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them. He saw *ahimsa* and Truth as his two lungs,

and declared, “I cannot live without them” (*Young India*, 21-10-1926: 364).

“My love for non-violence is superior to every other thing mundane or supra-mundane. It is equalled only by my love for Truth, which is to me synonymous with non-violence through which and which alone I can see and reach Truth” (*Young India*, 20-2-1930: 61).

Though inseparable, Gandhi made a distinction between truth and *ahimsa*: “*ahimsa* is the means; Truth is the end. Means to be means must always be within our reach, and so *ahimsa* is our supreme duty. If we take care of the means, we are bound to reach the end sooner or later” (*Yervada*, 12-13). As the means for achieving Truth, we need to practice *ahimsa* in our everyday life, and by extension in humanity’s journey towards sustainable societies. “It is *ahimsa*, therefore, that our masses have to be educated in. Education in truth follows from it as a natural end” (*Harijan*, 23-6-1946: 199). *Ahimsa* serves as the basis of the search for truth (*Autobiography*, 203).

Gandhi clarifies that *ahimsa* is the virtue of the brave, not a cover for cowardice. It is the cowards, according to Gandhi, who use physical force and weapons to resist oppression or to oppress the weak. Use of brute force by human beings is below human dignity and is unethical. Non-violent life requires more courage and power than that of ‘brute force’; it requires moral power, ‘soul force.’ Cowardice is wholly inconsistent with non-violence (*Young India*, 12-8-1926: 285), and the path of true non-violence requires much more courage than violence (*Harijan*, 4-8-1946: 248-249). According to Gandhi,

“The minimum that is required of a person wishing to cultivate the *ahimsa* of the brave is first to clear one's thought of cowardice and, in the light of the clearance; regulate his conduct in every activity, great or small” (*Harijan*, 17-11-1946: 404).

“The votary of *ahimsa* has only one fear that is of God. ... God is the shield of the non-violent” (*Harijan*, 1-9-1940: 268). One who practices *ahimsa*, “must have a living faith in God. Mere mechanical adherence to truth and *ahimsa* is likely to break down at the critical moment” (*Harijan*, 20-7-1947: 240). According to Gandhi, without God’s grace and religious commitment, one cannot willingly undertake self-suffering for a noble cause. We will use ‘brute force,’ physical power and weapons, to overcome oppression and to defeat the oppressor. *Ahimsa* is using the ‘soul force,’ moral power, to make the oppressor a collaborator for the welfare of all. As a votary of Truth, Gandhi is convinced that

“Ahimsa is one of the world's great principles that no power on earth can wipe out. Thousands like myself may die in trying to vindicate the ideal, but ahimsa will never die. And the gospel of ahimsa can be spread only through believers dying for the cause” (*Harijan*, 17-5-1946: 140).

It is the practice of *ahimsa* always and everywhere, by all that will lead to *swaraj*, self-rule of the person, family, village, and the nation.

Though *ahimsa* is to be the way of life of all people, Gandhi believes that

“...it is woman’s mission to exhibit ahimsa at its highest and best ... For woman is more fitted than man to make explorations and take bolder action in ahimsa... For the courage of self-sacrifice woman is any day superior to man, as I believe man is to woman for the courage of the brute” (*Harijan*, 5-11-1938: 317).

He calls woman as ‘the incarnation of *ahimsa*’ and draws attention to the pangs of labour and the self-sacrifice of woman in childbearing and child-rearing. His advice to women is

“Let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity, let her forget that she ever was or can be the object of man’s lust. And she will occupy her proud position by the side of man as his mother, maker, and silent leader. It is given to her to teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar” (Harijan, 24-2-1940: 14).

The world stands badly in need of the wisdom and compassion of feminine genius and women leadership, in building up sustainable societies with Peace and Prosperity for People and Planet.

Often, it was thought that *ahimsa* could be practiced only by individuals at the personal morality, and that society needs ‘brute force’ for survival and development. Gandhi committed himself to show that *Ahimsa* is not only a personal characteristic of a *satyagrahi*, but also a necessary attribute of political societies. Gandhi wrote,

“I hold that non-violence is not merely a personal virtue. It is also social virtue to be cultivated like the other virtue to be cultivated like the other virtues. Surely society is largely regulated by the expression of non-violence in its mutual dealings. What I ask for it an extension of it on a larger, national and international scale” (Harijan, 7-1-39: 417).

Truth and *ahimsa* must incarnate in societies, which will not be reached by any other means (*Harijan*, 20-7-1947: 240). “To convince people of this truth is at once my effort and my experiment” (*Harijan*, 25-8-1940: 261). What is possible for individuals, Gandhi argued, is possible socially. We already practice, by and large, truth and *ahimsa* in families, and he argued, “What is true of the family must be true of society which is but a larger family” (*Harijan*, 3-12-’38: 358). According to Gandhi, human survival and well-being also show that *ahimsa* and truth are natural to human beings, and individuals and societies survive only if majority of people practice truth and *ahimsa*.

Use of brute force would lead only to violence and destruction, not life and sustainability. Though the Gandhian agenda to transform the world begins with individuals experimenting with Truth, practicing Ahimsa (non-violence), and achieving Swaraj (self-rule) and it extends to *Swasraya* (self-reliant) village and self-reliant and self-governed nation, and ever-widening ‘oceanic circle’ of societies – individuals, villages, nations, and a peaceful and prosperous people and planet.

Gandhian *Swaraj* and Sustainable Societies

According to Gandhi, “The word *Swaraj* is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint, and not freedom from all restraint which ‘independence’ often means” (*Young India*, 19-3-1931: 38). It is self-discipline, which demands voluntary continuous self-sacrifice (*Young India*, 27-8-1925: 297), avoiding injury on the usurper (*Harijan*, 3-3-1946: 31). In *Swaraj* based on *ahimsa* duty comes first; rights flow from the due performance of one's duties. Even these rights are to be exercised for the service of society, not for themselves. *Swaraj* of the people is constructed when citizens perform their duties as votaries of Truth. As self-disciplined individuals who are ready for self-sacrifice, citizens perform their duties to the best of their abilities for the common good and the welfare of all (*Harijan*, 25-3-1939: 64). “To achieve *Swaraj* through truth and non-violence, gradual but steady building-up from the bottom upwards by constructive effort is the only way” (*Harijan*, 18-1-1942: 4) , and it is “maintained only where there is a majority of loyal and patriotic people to whom the good of the nation is paramount above all other considerations whatever including their personal profit” (*Young India*, 28-7-1921: 238).

Under *Swaraj*, based on non-violence, there are no enemies, no oppressors and the oppressed, everybody makes their contribution to the best of their abilities for the common goal. Gandhi envisions the *swaraj* of the poor and “It should not happen that a handful of rich people

should live in jewelled palaces and the millions in miserable hovels devoid of sunlight or ventilation” (*Harijan*, 30-12-1939: 391). Gandhi, who wanted a minimum military force, wanted to build “a very large army of self-sacrificing and determined workers”, to ensure the welfare of the masses, without which *swaraj* is a utopia. “Progress towards *Swaraj* will be in exact proportion to the increase in the number of workers who will dare to sacrifice their all for the cause of the poor” (*Young India*, 24-6-1926: 226). According to Gandhi,

“it is essential that desired results are achieved by the collective effort of the people. It will no doubt be good to achieve an objective through the effort of a supremely powerful individual, but it can never make the community conscious of its corporate strength” (*Harijan*, 8-9-1940: 277).

Swaraj of a people, whether family, village, or nation, is given by the sum total of the *Swaraj* of individuals involved (*Harijan*, 25-3-1939: 64).

Gandhi envisioned a village *swaraj*, self-disciplined and self-ruled individuals committing themselves to work to the best of their abilities for the common goal, as the basic unit of self-ruled and self-reliant nation. “My idea of village *Swaraj* is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary” (*Harijan*, 26-7-1942: 238). A village *swaraj* is self-sufficient for their basic needs – clean water, nutritious food, locally made clothes, locally available medicine from nature, and basic education, which is compulsory for all. The village will have its own school, theatre, and public hall. These are to be achieved, as far as possible, on the co-operative basis. The village *swaraj* follows the swadeshi policy, preferring products from their village to other goods. Though Gandhi favours division of labour in the society, he is against the caste system

with their graded untouchability. He wanted everyone to do at least one hour of manual labour. In the village *swaraj*, farmers have the uppermost voice, and they hold power in all matters including political power. The village is governed by a Panchayat of five persons, elected for one year by the adult villagers, with the necessary legislative, judiciary, and executive powers. Gandhi does not foresee punishments, as usual in a criminal system, as the individuals are self-disciplined and self-governed. Both the individuals and the societies are votaries of Truth and *ahimsa* (*Harijan*, 26-7-1942: 238).

Gandhi extends the principles of the individual *swaraj* and village *swaraj* to India as a democratic nation:

“In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units. Therefore, the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it” (*Harijan*, 28-7-46: 236).

This model could be very well used for constructing sustainable societies, rather than separately striving to achieve the 17 SDGs.

Though Gandhi called his ideal for India as *Ramarajya*, he clarified that it is not “the rule of the majority community, i.e., the Hindus. There could not be a greater mistake than that. To me Hind *Swaraj* is the rule of all people, is the rule of justice” (*Young India*, 16-4-1931: 78). There is room for all religions and all schools of honest thought. “My Hinduism teaches me to respect all religions. In this lies the secret of

Ramarajya” (*Harijan*, 19-10-1947: 378). Gandhi wrote in the *Young India* in 1929,

“Whether Rama of my imagination ever lived or not on this earth, the ancient ideal of Ramarajya is undoubtedly one of true democracy in which the meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure. Even the dog is described by the poet to have received justice under Ramarajya” (*Young India*, 19-9-1929: 305)

. He was emphatic: “There can be no Ramarajya in the present state of iniquitous inequalities in which a few roll in riches and the masses do not get even enough to eat” (*Harijan*, 1-6-1947: 172). Ramarajya of his vision is “sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority” (*Harijan*, 2-1-1937: 374), and he wanted a large army of votaries of Truth and ahimsa who are self-disciplined and ready to make sacrifice for the common good, for the realisation of this vision. In a market driven, pleasure and power seeking, consumeristic contemporary world, the message of Gandhi is all the more relevant.

Conclusion

Gandhi advocated *Anthyodaya* (uplift of the last) for *Sarvodaya* (uplift of all). It is through uplifting of the poor and the weakest the welfare of all is sought. He wrote in the *Harijan*,

“I stand by what is implied in the phrase, 'Unto This Last'. That book marked the turning in my life. We must do even unto this last as we would have the world do by us. All must have equal opportunity. Given the opportunity, every human being has the same possibility for spiritual growth” (*Harijan*, 17-11-1946: 404).

The modern emphasis on GDP and military might are antithesis to Gandhian path to sustainable societies. Sustainability is impossible unless resources are shared by all. The weakest should have the same

opportunity as the strongest and manual labour is cherished as much as the intellectual labour. Once the Gandhian *swaraj* is realized, “we would regard the humblest and lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land” (*Harijan*, 18-1-1948: 517). Gandhiji through his words and life reminds us that the “pilgrimage to *Swaraj* is a painful climb” (*Young India*, 28-7-1921: 238); but it is possible for the votaries of Truth through consistent and committed practice of *ahimsa*.

Though *Swaraj* is the birth right of all, it is to be cultivated through education and self-discipline. It cannot be gifted or held back by anybody (*Young India*, 25-5-1921: 164). “*Swaraj* will be a fruit of incessant labour, suffering beyond measure” (*Young India*, 5-1-1922: 4).

“What we mean and want through Poorna *Swaraj* ... is an awakening among the masses, a knowledge among them of their true interest and ability to serve that interest against the whole world, ... freedom from aggression from within or without, and a progressive improvement in the economic condition of the masses” (*Young India*, 18-6-1931: 147).

As votaries of Truth and *ahimsa*, we should walk with Gandhi always and everywhere, giving first preference to the poor and the marginalised. To a friend, who was tormented by doubts, Gandhiji wrote a letter. The letter was mislaid, but on a later occasion the words were recalled to memory and transcribed:

“I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, try the following expedient: ‘Recall the face of the poorest and the most helpless man whom you may have seen and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *Swaraj* or self-rule for the hungry and also spiritually starved millions of our countrymen?’

Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away” (“Gandhi Talisman”).

Gandhi saw democracy and military as contradiction in terms. In his view, “Democracy and dependence on the military and the police are incompatible. You cannot say it is good in one place and bad in another. Military help will degrade you” (*Harijan*, 12-1-1947: 489). This is true about sustainable societies. Since a true sustainable society will be

“...at peace with all the rest of the world, neither exploiting, nor being exploited ... All interests not in conflict with the interests of the dumb millions will be scrupulously respected, whether foreign or indigenous” (Young India, 10-9-1931: 255).

There is no need for a military in a sustainable world. True sustainability “can only be an outcome of non-violence” (*Correspondence*, 1942-44: 143). Sadly, today, many of the modern societies are held together by military and money powers and not by people’s moral power derived from the practice of truth and *ahimsa*.

Gandhi criticised Western civilisation as one driven by “brute force and immorality,” contrasting it with his categorisation of Indian civilisation as one driven by “soul force and morality.” He wrote, “The peoples of Europe have no doubt political power but no swaraj” (*Young India*, 3-9-1925: 304). Gandhi captured the imagination of the people of India with his ideas about winning “hate with love.” Gandhi wrote: “There must be no impatience, no barbarity, no insolence, no undue pressure. If we want to cultivate a true spirit of democracy, we cannot afford to be intolerant. Intolerance betrays want of faith in one's cause” (*Young India*, 23-2-1930: 340). Civil disobedience and non-co-operation as practised under *Satyagraha* are based on the “law of suffering,” a doctrine that the endurance of suffering is a means to an end. This end usually implies a moral uplifting or progress of an individual or society. Therefore, non-co-operation in *Satyagraha* is in fact, a means to secure

the co-operation of the opponent, consistently with truth and justice (*Young India*, 16-6-1920: 396–399). Gandhi successfully used non-cooperation and *ahimsa* in the Indian independence movement “in order to evolve democracy” (*Young India*, 8-9-1920: 5), and today we can use profitably in our journey towards sustainable societies. Unless we achieve the Sustainable Development Goals ethically, they will not be sustainable.

Gandhian path to *swaraj*, by extension today to sustainable societies, is “the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic, and spiritual resources of all the various sections of the people in the service of the common good of all” (*Harijan*, 27-5-1939: 143). To this effect, “every man and woman is taught to think for himself or herself” (*Harijan*, 14-7-1946: 220), and “the individual will is governed and limited by the social will which is the State, which is government by and for democracy” (*Harijan*, 28-9-1947: 350). Individual freedom is to be balanced by the limitations set by the common good and welfare of all. “Willing submission to social restraint for the sake of the well-being of the whole society enriches both the individual and the society of which one is a member” (*Harijan*, 27-5-1939: 144). This is possible only when the policies and action plans for the realisation of SDGs is governed by ethics, rather than military and market, and the transformative agenda consciously responds to the cry of the People and Planet for Peace and Prosperity. Societies are sustainable only to the extent that people practice truth and *ahimsa* and strive for *swaraj*.

Bibliography

Einstein, Albert. “Note on Gandhi.” The Hebrew University.

<www.gandhiserve.org/streams/einstein.html>

- Gandhi, M. K. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Trans. Mahadev Desai. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1959.
- Gandhi, M. K. ed., *Harijan*: English Weekly Journal, 1933-1956.
- Gandhi, M. K. ed., *The Bombay Chronicle*: Daily Newspaper.
- Gandhi, M. K. ed., *Young India*: English Weekly Journal, 1919-1932.
- Gandhi, M. K. From Yeravda Mandir: Ashram Observances. Trans. V. G. Desai. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1957.
- Gandhi, M. K. Gandhiji's Correspondence with the Government, 1942-44: Navajivan Publishing House, 1945.
- Gandhi, M. K. *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*. Madras: G. A. Natesan & Co., 1933.
- Gandhi, M. K. *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi: Encyclopedia of Gandhi's Thoughts*. Compiled and Edited by: R. K. Prabhu and U. R. Rao. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Mudranalaya, 1966.
- Gro Harlem Brundtland, "Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future," United Nations, 1987 <<http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>>
- Jawaharlal Nehru. "The Light has Gone." *Address to the Nation*, All India Radio, 30 January 1948.
<<https://thewire.in/history/light-gone-lives-nehru-words-gandhis-assassination>>
- Pope Francis, "Homily during the Universal Prayer during Covid 19"
<<http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/>

150 *Who Cares About Ethics?*

documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-
epidemia.html>

United Nations, *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for
Sustainable Development*,

<[https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformin
gourworld](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformin
gourworld)>