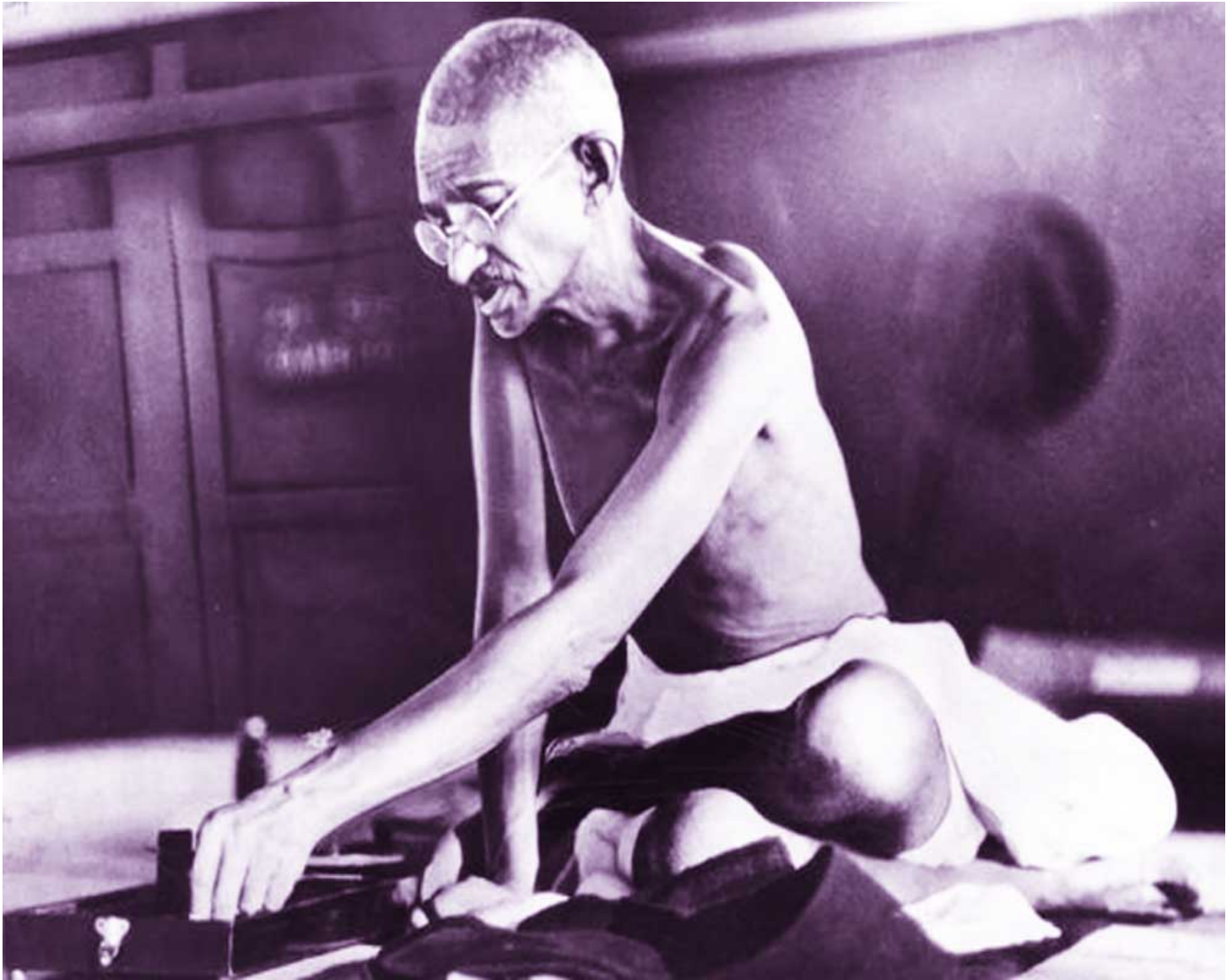


Path to sustainable future

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Those who raise the spectre of degrowth in the world need convincing on regrowth, involving nature and Gandhian principles

In a world that has reached unprecedented levels of aggregate wealth, we look around and find that the human condition is far from satisfactory and deviates substantially from the state of happiness that human beings normally would aspire to. We now have scientific evidence and mounting observations about human-induced climate change, the loss of biodiversity and a world population dominated by a small number of the rich exploiting a large sea of poor people, who have no access to the very basic services and facilities that would provide an individual with a dignified and secure existence. Increasingly, there is also a growing manifestation of racism and deep prejudice in several societies today.

Mahatma Gandhiji's solutions for some of the ills of today acquire much greater relevance, given the growing prominence of some of the deficiencies and issues that are causing concern across the globe. Mahatma Gandhi's blend of politics, combined with ethical and spiritual dimensions, is completely absent in this day and age.

As he stated, “Democracy must in essence, therefore, mean the art and science of mobilising the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the various sections of the people in the services of the common good of all.” He had a deep belief in and dedication to the Panchayati Raj as he advocated governance being strengthened at the lowest level of the system. He believed “independence must begin at the bottom... It follows, therefore, that every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its affairs.”

In the 70 plus years of independence that India has attained, we have consistently ignored the villages of this country, wherein almost two-thirds of the population still reside. The result has been the shameful existence of illiteracy, particularly of women, the absence of sanitation, healthcare, connectivity and market access. With agriculture displacing labour through technological changes, employment in rural areas has declined, leading to massive migration into cities and towns, with large slums co-existing side by side with small islands of prosperity.

Unfortunately, India has pursued the path of Western nations in a facile attempt to replicate industrialisation and urban living. Yet, the problems that we observe in our country are universal. The Oxfam report published each year reported that in 2018, billionaires' fortunes grew 12 per cent worldwide, which amounted to an increase in \$2.5 billion a day. At the same time, the poorest half of humanity, numbering 3.8 billion, saw its income decline by 11 per cent. Reflecting on these global trends, the fortunes of billionaires in India also grew by 35 per cent last year, which amounted to an increase of Rs 2,200 crore per day. Oxfam also found that the poorest 10 per cent of the country's population remained in debt since 2004. Meanwhile, India added 18 per cent new billionaires in 2018 and their wealth crossed \$ 400 billion.

Gandhiji was not opposed to capitalism. In fact, he stated: “Capital as such is not evil; it is its wrong use that is evil.” He obviously understood the subjugation of people under a totalitarian or communist regime would only trample the rights of the poor and destroy the panchayats, which in his view should be empowered for decision-making at the local level.

Most relevant today, however, would be Gandhian solutions in the field of the environment. With the concentration of greenhouse gases (GHGs), particularly carbon dioxide, major risks are occurring from the impacts of human-induced climate change. Gandhiji's wisdom provides us with a beacon light for the future.

When the Mahatma was asked if he would like to have the same standard of living for India's teeming millions as was prevalent in England, he responded by saying: “It took Britain half the resources of the planet to achieve this prosperity. How many planets will a country like India require?” He saw the driving force for the destruction of the earth's ecosystems and the environment as a reflection and manifestation of human greed.” He said, “The earth provides enough for every man's needs but not for every man's greed.”

His view was, therefore, that human beings must pursue a simple way of life, one which does not burden the earth with the weight of human activities. Pope Francis on September 1 in his message on the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation also stated: “It is also a season to reflect on our lifestyles and how our daily decisions about food, consumption, transportation, use of water, energy and many other material goods can often be thoughtless and harmful. Too many of us act like tyrants with regard to creation.”

One of the deficiencies of modern urban living is the complete alienation of urban societies from the beauty and wealth of nature. The fact that human beings derive the maximum amount of happiness from being close to nature has been analysed by a number of psychologists, including Paul Bloom of Yale University. Gandhiji expressed his reverence for nature when he stated: “I need no inspiration other than nature's. She has never failed me yet. She mystifies me, bewilders me and sends me into ecstasies.”

There is today an urgent need to bring about a shift in the practice of what now goes under the title of economic development. The footprint of humanity on the ecosystems of this planet has exceeded its biocapacity for well over 40 years now and human beings are today living far beyond the capacity of the earth's biocapacity.

This writer was the Chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) from 2002 to 2015. In this period and with recent reports of the IPCC, it has become evident that major structural and lifestyle changes

are essential now, involving almost a tectonic shift to Gandhian principles and practices. The problem of climate change, loss of biodiversity and destruction of ecosystems on this planet can only be solved through a major shift, which would ensure that humanity's footprint on this planet is rapidly reduced in size and that superior substitutes, such as the beauty of nature, which we have forgotten, provide us with happiness and joy.

In Gandhiji's view, the pursuit of consumerism and the multiplication of material needs must give way to an ethic which eliminates greed, and most importantly, reduces the externalities that human society is imposing on the ecosystems and natural resources of this planet. Those who raise the spectre of degrowth in the world need convincing on regrowth, involving rural development and resuscitation of nature along with Gandhian principles.

(The writer is former chairman, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2002-15)