Journal of East-West Thought
ISSN: 2168-2259 (online)
(*https://jetjournal.us/*)
Volume13, Issue 4–Dec 2023 Impact Factor: 7.665

UGC CARE 1

BEYOND GROWTH: THE RELEVANCE OF MAHATMA GANDHI'S ETHICAL ECONOMICS IN TODAY'S ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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Abstract

This paper explores the profound relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's economic and ethical philosophy in the context of today's global environmental crisis. At a time when consumerism, industrial growth, and widening inequality are placing immense strain on the planet's ecosystems, Gandhi's vision offers a radically alternative path centered on simplicity, self-restraint, and justice. Drawing from contemporary global data on pollution, climate change, and inequality—as well as examples like the Bhopal Gas Tragedy—the paper critiques the current model of development that prioritizes the wealth and comfort of a global elite at the cost of the poor and the environment. Gandhi's insistence on meeting the basic needs of the most vulnerable, and his belief that the earth has enough for everyone's need but not for anyone's greed, are examined as foundational principles for sustainable development. The paper concludes by emphasizing the urgency of re-centering development planning around the lived realities of the marginalized and adopting a model of economic progress that aligns with ecological balance and human dignity. In an age of climate breakdown and spiritual emptiness, Gandhi's ethical economics appears not only relevant but necessary for a livable future.ethical economics appears not only relevant but necessary for a livable future.

Keywords: Gandhi, development, ethical, environment, relevant.

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(*https://jetjournal.us/*)
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Today, the entire world is grappling with severe environmental and ecological crises. Numerous research papers have highlighted these issues, and scientists across the globe are working tirelessly to address the looming threats. Amidst this alarming scenario, the relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's constructive and environmentally conscious philosophy becomes more significant than ever. This short article seeks to reflect on Gandhi's positive views on environmental protection and emphasizes the urgent need to incorporate his principles into contemporary policy-making

Notably, in 1992, a historic statement was issued by 1,575 of the world's leading scientists, including nearly half of the living Nobel laureates at the time. They warned humanity of the catastrophic consequences of continuing environmental degradation, cautioning that the Earth's life-support systems were on the brink of irreversible damage.

There is an alarming level of pressure on the environment today, to the extent that by the year 2100, nearly one-third of all species across various regions of the Earth may face extinction. Perhaps the most tragic hallmark of the 21st century is the emergence of numerous man-made crises that threaten the very existence of life on this planet. Be it climate change, the depletion of the ozone layer, the dangerous accumulation of nuclear weapons, or the proliferation of biological and chemical agents of destruction—all represent a looming danger of mass annihilation. These crises are not merely abstract warnings; they are the result of a relentless exploitation of nature and a glaring neglect of ecological balance.

The most tragic manifestation of the 21st century is that, since its inception, humanity has faced a series of environmental crises—each largely a result of man-made decisions. These crises threaten not just specific regions but the very foundation of life on Earth. Climate change, the destruction of the ozone layer, the unchecked stockpiling of nuclear weapons, and the spread of deadly biological and chemical agents—all these phenomena together represent a looming threat of mass extinction.

One stark example of this illusion of progress is seen in the global handling of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), substances known to destroy the protective ozone layer. Under the Montreal Protocol, countries committed to completely halting the production of CFCs by 2010. On paper, this marked a significant achievement. However, the grim reality

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reveals that CFC production has, in some regions, not only continued but increased—illegally and often with minimal regulatory oversight.

The consequences of this inaction and deceit are deeply concerning. The depletion of the ozone layer directly correlates with the rise in black cancer (melanoma) and other skin diseases caused by increased exposure to harmful ultraviolet rays. It also affects the delicate balance of ecosystems, harming plant life, aquatic organisms, and agricultural productivity. Thus, despite international agreements and protocols, the global environmental crisis remains far from resolved.

This widening gap between international policy and on-ground reality calls for a radical shift in perspective—a shift that finds meaningful direction in the life and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi.

Until 1930, the world did not know the production of chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) chemicals. However, within just five decades, industrial development and the pursuit of convenience led to an exponential rise in their manufacture, posing a grave threat to life on Earth. The persistent warming of the atmosphere has severely disrupted the Earth's natural life cycle. The prospect of worsening natural disasters, rising sea levels, and the accelerated melting of glaciers—the planet's primary source of fresh water—is not a distant threat but an impending catastrophe. The consensus among climate scientists is unequivocal: the crisis is real, it is deepening, and it calls for immediate, concerted global action.

In this context, the thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi emerge as both timeless and urgently relevant. When asked whether he wanted India to develop in the image of industrialized Britain, Gandhi categorically rejected the idea. He remarked that if a small country like Britain needed to colonize much of the world to sustain its lifestyle, one could only imagine the consequences if a large country like India followed the same path. His response was a sharp critique of a development model based on exploitation, external pomp, and unsustainable luxury—a lifestyle maintained at the expense of others and of the environment.

Gandhi's warning was not just political—it was profoundly ecological. He famously said, "The world has enough for everyone's needs, but not enough for even one man's greed." This simple yet profound statement encapsulates the core issue behind today's

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environmental degradation: human greed surpassing human need. When we draw only what we need from nature, balance and sustainability are maintained. However, the moment greed enters the equation—even if only by a few—the consequences become devastating for all.

Although Mahatma Gandhi never used terms like environmental protection or sustainable development, his worldview was unmistakably clear: a life of luxury and comfort inevitably rests on creating inequality and denying others their rightful share of resources. At a time when billions of dollars are being spent on conferences and dialogues in the name of environmental conservation, Gandhi's message stands tall—challenging the morality of elites who speak of ecological balance while clinging to unsustainable lifestyles and the privileges of affluence.

recent study conducted by the Swedish government sought to determine how many people on Earth could realistically maintain a Swedish standard of living. The answer was stark—only 10 to 12 percent of the global population could possibly afford such a high-consumption lifestyle. This raises a fundamental question: What happens to the remaining 90 percent? Will the Earth's limited resources continue to fuel the comforts of the top 10 to 20 percent, while the majority of humanity remains in deprivation?

The uncomfortable truth is that, despite decades of intense discourse on environmental issues, global inequality has only widened. According to the United Nations, income inequality has doubled globally in the past thirty years. Today, the income of the richest 20 percent of people is 150 times greater than that of the poorest 20 percent. Furthermore, while 77 percent of the world's population resides in developing countries, they possess only 15 percent of the world's income. In contrast, just 23 percent of people live in developed countries, yet they command 85 percent of the global income. This highlights staggering inequality on an international scale—paralleled by deep divisions within nations, where even in poorer countries, the top 20 percent often control over 60 percent of the national income

On the other hand, the number of people living in extreme poverty and lacking access to even the most basic necessities remains alarmingly high. A just future demands that development efforts be focused primarily on fulfilling the needs of these vulnerable populations. This requires a shift away from promoting consumerism among the wealthy.

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The Earth and its ecosystems can no longer bear the strain of unchecked economic expansion and industrial growth. If the needs of all people are to be met without destroying nature, the culture of excess must be reined

The difficulty, however, lies in the resistance of the rich and powerful—those who wield control over development policies and environmental negotiations. Whether through the policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, or the bargaining during GATT talks, the evidence is clear: the global economic system is structured to perpetuate inequality. Despite the rhetoric of support for poorer nations, real policy measures often work to reinforce the dominance of the affluent world. Conditions imposed by powerful financial institutions rarely promote genuine equity or environmental justice

The environmental cost of this disparity is stark. According to the United Nations, while only 22 percent of the global population lives in wealthy countries, they are responsible for 68 percent of all industrial waste. And this figure does not even account for the fact that many rich nations have outsourced their most hazardous industries to poorer countries. Disturbing reports of toxic waste being shipped across oceans to impoverished regions continue to surface. Beyond industrial waste, the very culture of consumerism is deeply destructive. Consider just the packaging used for consumer goods—meant to attract and seduce, discarded quickly, and yet contributing massively to environmental degradation

Ultimately, the primary responsibility for the ecological crisis lies with the affluent elite. Though small in number, their ecological footprint is disproportionately large. By monopolizing resources and marginalizing the poor, they push the disadvantaged toward environmentally harmful survival strategies—such as illegal logging. The forest dweller who cuts down a tree is condemned, but what about those who dispossessed him of land, resources, and opportunity, leaving him no other choice?

is one of the strangest ironies of modern civilization: humanity expends immense effort to acquire comfort and luxury, only to find that the very air around them has become unfit to breathe. This tragic realization has become especially relevant in recent decades as pollution has escalated to alarming levels worldwide.

What makes this situation even more troubling is the paradox that pollution is largely the byproduct of affluent lifestyles, yet it is the poor who suffer the most from its

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consequences. While the wealthy reside in cleaner neighborhoods and benefit from advanced healthcare, the marginalized are often forced to live and work in the dirtiest, most polluted environments. Urban slums, industrial zones, and landfills are home to millions who must endure daily exposure to toxins and contaminants.

1997 United Nations-supported study revealed that nearly two-thirds of the world's urban population is subjected to air pollution levels far exceeding the safety thresholds established by the World Health Organization (WHO). This excessive exposure has led to a dramatic increase in heart and respiratory diseases, particularly among those who can least afford medical care.

In a collaborative assessment conducted in 1992 by the WHO and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the air quality of the world's twenty largest cities was analyzed across various pollutants. Shockingly, not a single city complied fully with the WHO's safety standards. Among the most dangerous pollutants is sulfur dioxide, which contributes to acid rain—a phenomenon that transforms life-giving rainfall into a corrosive agent. Acid rain has already caused extensive damage to forests, crops, water bodies, infrastructure, and human health.

Beyond local pollution, a more insidious threat looms globally: the rise of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide, in the Earth's atmosphere. Over the past few decades, this accumulation has intensified concerns about global warming and rising sea levels. For younger generations in particular, the looming dangers feel increasingly immediate and existential.

While debates continue over the specifics and scale of impact, the scientific consensus warns of a future marked by more frequent natural disasters, the extinction of countless species, and the submergence of coastal areas, including major cities and ports around the globe. In a worst-case scenario, even the very survival of humanity could come under threat.

The rapid surge in greenhouse gases—especially carbon dioxide—over the past few decades is nothing short of staggering. During the 250 years preceding 1960, largely marking the Industrial Revolution, the concentration of these gases increased by 20 percent. Yet, in just the 30 years that followed (1960–1990), greenhouse gases rose by 40

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percent—twice the increase in one-eighth the time. This accelerated pace highlights not only the scale of industrial activity but also the growing disregard for the long-term consequences of unrestrained economic development.

Apart from greenhouse gases, another environmental threat has emerged in the form of synthetic chemicals. One of the most controversial is chlorofluorocarbon (CFC), a compound that has severely damaged the ozone layer—the Earth's natural shield against harmful ultraviolet radiation. Once hailed as a technological marvel for its use in refrigeration and aerosols, CFCs became part of a booming industry, largely producing non-essential goods. In just a few decades, millions of tons of CFCs were released, weakening the ozone layer and raising the risk of skin cancer and other serious health hazards. It is astonishing that the grave danger posed by these chemicals went unnoticed for nearly seventy years after their invention. Though international agreements aimed to phase out CFCs by 2010, the full extent of the damage remains uncertain.

While such chemical threats pollute the upper atmosphere, a more localized but equally dire pollution crisis unfolds on the ground. Workers laboring in cramped, unventilated spaces, surrounded by dust, noxious fumes, and pests, face daily exposure to life-threatening conditions. Whether in poorly ventilated kitchens, overcrowded factories, or hazardous workshops, their air pollution problems are immediate and deadly. What's worse, those who operate and profit from these industries often live in clean, green enclaves, far removed from the filth and danger that others must endure.

This reality reflects an extreme inequality in the distribution of pollution's causes and its consequences. United Nations data shows that per capita energy consumption in the U.S. is 280 Giga Joules, and in Japan, it's 110 GJ. By contrast, the entire continent of Asia averages only 21 GJ, and Africa a mere 12 GJ. Despite accounting for just 20 percent of the global population, developed countries are responsible for 50 percent of greenhouse gas emission

This disparity is not merely economic—it's ecological and moral. According to the 1990 New Mandal Report of the United Nations Development Programme, the answer to global energy conservation does not lie in halting the progress of developing nations. Instead, the rich must reassess their consumption habits, scaling down luxury and waste so others may

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gain access to basic development. Scientific analysis supports what Gandhi preached long ago—real solutions lie not in charity but in changing the way we live, consume, and think.

To understand the human cost of ignoring these truths, we need only look back to the Bhopal Gas Tragedy—one of the worst industrial disasters in history. Imagine a densely populated city, and at its heart, a massive tank filled with a lethal gas—a gas whose presence is concealed from the public, and for which no real safety measures exist. This is exactly what happened in Bhopal in 1984. Around half a million people were exposed, and according to government estimates, 10,000 died. Independent assessments suggest the real toll could be much higher. Even today, decades later, people continue to suffer from long-term health effects—a grim reminder of what happens when human lives are treated as expendable in the pursuit of profit.

The Bhopal Gas Tragedy raises difficult yet essential questions. Why was such a colossal risk allowed? Why were the lives of thousands endangered? What was so vital about producing a chemical pesticide that such dangers were accepted? Was there no safer method of production? If one searches for honest answers, a grim truth emerges: the primary goal of Union Carbide, the American multinational that operated the plant, was profit. From the perspective of an ordinary person, no justification exists for endangering human life just to manufacture pesticides. Yet, the thinking of profit-driven corporations like Union Carbide diverges sharply from human-centric values. The company's actions revealed a chilling reality: enormous risks were deemed acceptable—as long as profits were preserved.

This tragedy is not isolated. Across the globe, threats to the environment continue to mount alarmingly. In India, the flood-affected area grew from 7 million hectares in 1960 to 55 million hectares by 1980. Despite modern flood prevention measures, the increasing frequency and intensity of floods raise serious doubts about the so-called progress of development. Similarly, the crisis of access to safe drinking water has worsened, and hunger remains a major catastrophe, especially in parts of Africa. Despite advances in science and technology, millions died due to hunger and malnutrition in the last few decades. Between 1987 and 1992 alone, over 2 million people perished from hunger in Africa, according to UN data. These figures expose the hollowness of claims about global progress

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parallel, environmental degradation has given rise to nearly 30 new diseases over the past two decades, many of which are fatal and have no known cure or vaccine. Diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Brazilian Fever, Hantavirus, and others emerged during this time, threatening the health of billions. These are not isolated medical phenomena—they are part of a larger, interconnected ecological and public health crisis that stems from modern industrial practices and consumerist lifestyles.

In response to this worsening situation, some of the world's leading climate scientists gathered under the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Their recommendations were stark: a 60% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions is immediately necessary. If one reads between the lines, this is nothing short of a call to dismantle the global economy built on greed and consumption. If we continue on this path, the survival of not only humankind but all life on Earth is at stake.

a time when colonial ideologies of industrial expansion were globally dominant, Mahatma Gandhi presented a radically different vision of development. When asked whether India should develop like Britain, Gandhi replied pointedly:

"To achieve this so-called prosperity, when a small country like Britain had to exploit and colonize half the world, how many colonies would a vast country like India need?"

He urged that India's path of development must be self-reliant, need-based, and rooted in local resources—not a blind imitation of Western models. Gandhi was clear:

"Nature has enough for everyone's need, but not for anyone's greed."

His emphasis on simplicity, restraint, and self-sufficiency stands today as a crucial message in a world hurtling toward climate collapse. Gandhi avoided the illusion that economic growth alone could eradicate poverty. Unlike many thinkers of his time, he centered the basic needs of the poorest, not GDP or industrial output, as the true measure of progress.

He famously advised:

"Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man you have seen, and ask yourself whether the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him."

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This moral test—based not on abstract models but on human dignity and equity—remains urgently relevant. In an era defined by climate emergencies, mass extinction, and widening inequality, Gandhi's legacy offers not nostalgia, but guidance. His philosophy does not reject progress but demands that it be ethical, inclusive, and ecologically balanced.

In the end, the path to environmental justice is also the path to social justice. And in Gandhi's simple life, there lies a profound and revolutionary idea—that true progress lies not in having more, but in living better, together, and sustainably.

Mahatma Gandhi made a deeply radical intervention in the dominant economic thinking of his time by placing the poor at the very center of the developmental discourse. At a time when rapid technological advancement and mechanization were being hailed as the engines of progress—particularly in Europe—Gandhi dared to challenge this narrative. He resisted the reckless mechanization that threatened the livelihoods of India's farmers, artisans, and laborers. His critique was not rooted in nostalgia or resistance to change, but in a deep understanding of economic justice and human dignity.

Gandhi's most original contribution lay in his rejection of value-neutral economic growth. He envisioned an economic system intrinsically linked to the moral and spiritual development of the individual and society. For him, economic progress was not an end in itself but a means to cultivate contentment, peace, and happiness. In this way, he expanded the scope of economics beyond the material, positioning it as a tool for holistic human development

Yet, because he represented a colonized and impoverished nation, Gandhi's revolutionary ideas were largely ignored by the global powers of his time. His approach was overshadowed by the dominant industrial-capitalist model. However, in the wake of the escalating global environmental crisis, the relevance of his ideas has resurged. Today, on international platforms that discuss alternative, sustainable models of development, Gandhi's name is not only remembered—it is revered.

Unfortunately, in India, despite being the land of his birth, only a few have actively worked to carry forward Gandhi's ideals in development planning and governance. Gandhi had anticipated this very risk. After India's independence, he proposed that the Indian National Congress transform itself from a political party into a service-oriented organization

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dedicated to the welfare of the masses. He understood that a genuine connection with the poorest sections of society was vital for shaping any meaningful path of development.

Had this connection been preserved, and had the voices of the most vulnerable been placed at the center of policymaking, India might have progressed along a more equitable, sustainable, and human-centric path—closer to Gandhi's vision. Instead, the developmental trajectory has often veered toward consumerism, centralization, and ecological neglect.

If we are to redirect the wheel of development toward justice, sustainability, and shared well-being, this fundamental disconnect must be addressed. Gandhi's ideas are not relics of the past; they are blueprints for a livable future. A future where development is not measured merely in terms of GDP, but by the dignity, health, and happiness of the poorest, and the ecological balance that sustains all life.

As the world grapples with intensifying climate change, rising inequality, and a deepening ecological crisis, the limitations of the current model of development have become increasingly clear. Despite decades of discussions around environmental protection, global economic systems continue to prioritize profit, luxury, and consumerism—often at the expense of the poor and the planet. The consequences are visible not only in data and disasters but in the everyday suffering of millions forced to endure pollution, displacement, hunger, and disease.

Mahatma Gandhi, though writing in a different era, offered a vision of development rooted in justice, restraint, and dignity. He recognized early on that a system built on greed and exploitation would ultimately be unsustainable—not just environmentally, but morally and socially. His insistence on meeting the basic needs of the poorest, on living simply, and on aligning economic activity with ethical and spiritual values offers a compelling alternative to the dominant paradigm of growth at all costs.

In placing the most marginalized at the center of development and calling for a fundamental shift in lifestyle and values, Gandhi challenges us to rethink what it means to live well—not just individually, but collectively. If the world is to find a sustainable and equitable path forward, Gandhi's thought must move from the margins of memory to the core of our policy, planning, and purpose

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