

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES

PEER REVIEWED, INDEXED & REFEREED QUARTERLY INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

ISSN 0302-9298

<https://www.jndmeerut.org>

[Vol. 35, No. 1 (January-March), 2026]

<https://doi.org/10.62047/CSS.2026.03.31.115>

Gandhian Environmentalism vs. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): A Critical Study

Saurabh Pandey¹ & Anuj Kumar Mishra²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, P.P.N. (P.G.) College, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh (India) E-mail:<pandeg480@gmail.com>

²Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, P.P.N. (P.G.) College, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh (India) E-mail:<anujkumarm38@gmail.com>

Abstract

The world is facing a huge problem in the environmental crisis in contemporary times. Now there is the widespread popular idea to counter-balance it, through SDGs. This study delves into finding the loci of the traditional method of Gandhian environmentalism and SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) and making a comparative analysis of both. Since both types present different methods for environmentalism, so this study will find convergences and divergences. This study will follow the theoretical method to critically analyze both dimensions. After making a discussion on various points (to compare them) related to environmental ideas, I reached to the conclusion that Gandhian ideas cannot be integrated with the goals of SDGs. The main reason behind this is that Gandhian ideas focus mainly on abandoning the material needs (Aparigraha), against heavy industrialization of any kind, spirituality as the ultimate goal etc., whereas SDGs don't find any incompatibility between high material consumption and environmental degradation. Instead, they pose the argument of green growth. In the I pose that Gandhian environment is the need of the hour and are definitely superior to SDGs in protecting the environment. But it cannot be put into action by any action by any country unilaterally, as it will put that country into a serious disadvantageous position in real politic world. Therefore, a global level authority should properly enforce these ideas (especially onto big countries) to follow the environmental rules and regulations.

Keywords

SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), Gandhian environmentalism, Aparigarha, Green growth.

Research Foundation International, New Delhi
(Affiliated to UNO)

Editorial Office : D-59, Shastri Nagar, Meerut - 250 004 (INDIA)

Ph. : 0121-2763765, +91-9997771669, +91-9219658788

Gandhian Environmentalism vs. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): A Critical Study

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century faces a huge and growing environmental crisis. Climate change, global warming, biodiversity loss, the overuse of natural resources, etc. are threatening the survival of all the species. The foremost reason behind is that the modern world is concentrated on economic growth, industrial production, and rapid urbanization, basically on material prosperity only. This modern lifestyle has indeed brought material prosperity, benefitting millions of people, but also caused ecological imbalance and social inequality as well.

The search for a global solution to this crisis has led to the idea of sustainable development. Means balancing the healthy environment without compromising with economic growth. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal framework to balance this economic progress, social inclusion, and environmental protection. The SDGs have various aims like to end poverty, reduce inequality, protect the planet and many more (United Nations, 2015). They represent a scientific and institutional global level effort to make development sustainable.

However, the idea of sustainability is not new. In India, since ancient times and recent, Mahatma Gandhi and his followers had already expressed a deeper and more ethical view of human-nature relationships. These thought connects the outer world of economy and society with the inner world of morality and self-discipline. In this study our focus will be on Gandhi's philosophy, His environmental philosophy rests on practical concepts like truth (*satya*), non-violence (*ahimsa*), self-restraint (*aparigraha*), trusteeship, etc. As for him, real development means harmony between man and nature, not domination over it. Gandhi repeatedly warned that blind industrialization and endless consumption would lead to ecological and moral decay. His famous quote, "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed" (Gandhi, 1909/1997). His followers, such as J. C. Kumarappa, Vinoba Bhave, Sunderlal Bahuguna, E. F. Schumacher, etc. further developed this idea into what is now known as Gandhian environmentalism or Gandhian ecology.

This study focuses on how SDGs and Gandhian environmentalism both represents their way of environment protection, how they are similar and different. And further can the contemporary model of SDGs encompass the Gandhian ethics or not.

Both Gandhian thought and the SDGs aim to achieve a sustainable and just world. Yet, they differ in their foundations and methods. Then where is the problem? The central paradox lies in their understanding of development. The SDGs promote growth-led sustainability. They seek to make growth “greener” and more inclusive without rejecting the modern industrial model. Economic expansion remains a key measure of progress in this. In contrast, Gandhian environmentalism gives a different picture of development. As it promotes restraint and self-sufficiency over material prosperity. It argues that true sustainability cannot emerge from greed or competition. This will be discussed in detail in study further from critical point of view.

2. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology based primarily on secondary sources. Its objective is to critically examine the philosophical foundations of Gandhian environmentalism and compare them with the sustainability framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The first stage involves a conceptual analysis of the environmental ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, particularly the principles of *Swaraj*, *Sarvodaya*, *Swadeshi*, *Trusteeship*, and *village decentralization*. These ideas are interpreted through primary writings of Gandhi and the works of Gandhian thinkers such as J. C. Kumarappa, Vinoba Bhave, Sunderlal Bahuguna, E. F. Schumacher, and Vandana Shiva. The second stage examines the conceptual and policy framework of the SDGs using official UN documents and scholarly literature. Finally, a comparative analytical approach is employed to identify convergences and divergences between Gandhian environmental ethics and the SDG model in terms of ethical foundations, development orientation, and ecological vision.

3. Theoretical Framework: Understanding Gandhian Environmentalism

Gandhian environmentalism is grounded in India’s civilizational ethos where nature is not an object of exploitation but a partner in existence. Although Gandhi himself didn’t specifically advocated ideas related to environmentalism but its spirit is implicit in his ideas. He viewed *Dharma* as a guiding principle of universal order and believed that one must live according to it. Gandhi’s environmental

vision can be said to be relying on core ethical principles: *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Aparigraha* (non-possession). *Ahimsa* extends compassion to all living beings and non-living beings, reflecting his belief that a civilization is judged by how it treats its weakest members. It not only include humans but all animals and nature as well. *Aparigraha* advocates for voluntary simplicity. It rejects material excess viewing over-consumption as a subtle form of violence against the Earth. So this way rather than reacting to ecological collapse, Gandhian ecology promotes restraint, compassion, and moral responsibility in the first place to avoid collapse. Several scholars have tried to theorize Gandhian environmentalism. T. N. Khoshoo emphasized Gandhi's lifestyle of simplicity and restraint as a blueprint for sustainable development, framing it as an "unfinished task" in modern environmental policy (Khoshoo, 1995). Vinay Lal explored Gandhi's ecological vision as a radical alternative to Western paradigms, highlighting his critique of industrial civilization and his call for ethical minimalism (Lal, 2000). Santigopal Giri further deepened this discourse by linking Gandhian ideas like *ahimsa*, *swaraj*, and trusteeship to contemporary ecological ethics (Giri, 2012). These ideas will be further discussed in the study. Collectively, these scholars have positioned Gandhi not merely as a political figure, but as a profound ecological thinker whose philosophy offers a civilizational critique of modernity and a moral framework for environmental justice. Their work has been instrumental in bridging spiritual ecology, post-colonial critique, and sustainability discourse. And this makes Gandhian environmentalism a vital strand in global environmental thought. This way his (Mahatma Gandhi's) ideas can be associated with environmentalism. Some of the major ideas are:

3.1 Swaraj (Self-rule)

Gandhi's concept of *Swaraj* was meant much more than political independence. It was a call for self-rule rooted in moral discipline, self-reliance, and ethical living. True *Swaraj*, for him, began with the individual mastering their desires and living simply and resisting both colonial domination and internal oppression. For this, he envisioned decentralized village republics, upliftment of the marginalized, a society built on truth, nonviolence, spiritual strength, etc. Political freedom without this inner transformation, he warned, would only replace one form of tyranny with another. This way asks for self-control over this market, advertising society, which keeps you promoting for more and more consumption.

3-2 Sarvodaya (Welfare of All)

The idea of *Sarvodaya*, meaning “the uplift of all”, places ecological well-being at the heart of social progress. True progress must ensure the welfare of the poorest and the health of the planet (Gandhi, 1909/1997). This way, he ensured not to be anthropocentric and integrate us all with a large self that is the environment.

3-3 Swadeshi (Local Self-sufficiency)

Swadeshi emphasizes the use of local resources and small-scale production systems. For Gandhi, the global economy built on mass production alienates humans from nature and fosters inequality. This idea is similar to Karl Marx’s idea to some extent. By contrast, according to Gandhi, local production fosters ecological balance and human dignity. This idea is close to the later Western concept of “small is beautiful” popularized by E. F. Schumacher (1973), who acknowledged Gandhi as his intellectual inspiration.

3-4 Trusteeship

The concept of Trusteeship represents Gandhi’s moral economics. He believed that wealth and natural resources belong to God or Nature, and human beings are merely their custodians. The rich should act as trustees-not owners-of their property. And this excess (money except that is used for living with minimum needs) money is used for the welfare of society and nature (Gandhi, 1909/1997). This idea introduces an ethical restraint absent in modern capitalist models and aligns closely with modern discussions of ecological justice. Later, Vinoba bha interpreted *Sarvodaya* as both social and environmental upliftment. His *Bhoodan* (land-gift) movement symbolized the redistribution of natural wealth to ensure justice and ecological harmony (Bhave, 1958).

3-5 Village Decentralization Model

Mahatma Gandhi’s village decentralization model is indeed one its kind. He envisioned India as a network of self-sufficient and autonomous/independent villages, which would be governed by local Panchayats. And each village would manage (separately) its own resources, economy, and social affairs in harmony with nature. He described this structure as an “oceanic circle”, with the individual at the centre, radiating outward to the village, then to a cluster of villages, and ultimately to the nation each layer supporting the next without hierarchy or exploitation. Gandhi believed such a decentralized system would foster environmental protection by promoting simple

living. And this village decentralization, since it will be based on minimal industrialization, will promote mass employment and a deep respect for ecological balance.

4. Gandhian Thinkers and Environmental Interpretation

Several Gandhian thinkers expanded and modernized his ecological philosophy, linking it with contemporary environmental issues. Some of the mentions are:

4.1 J. C. Kumarappa (1892-1960)

He is often called “the father of Gandhian economics”. Kumarappa articulated a comprehensive model of sustainable living in his book *Economy of Permanence* (1945). He classified economies into five types- Predatory, Parasitic, Enterprising, Gregarious, and Service economies. He writes for the service economy “It functions neither for its present need nor for its personal future requirement, but projects its activities into the next generation, or generations to come, without looking for any reward” (Kumarappa, 1945: 13). He argued that only the service type economy can be “economy of permanence” ensuring harmony with nature. For Kumarappa, economic activity must serve the cycle of life rather than disrupting it.

4.2 Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982)

As mentioned earlier also, Bhave’s Bhoodan and Sarvodaya movements demonstrated the application of Gandhian ethics to land and ecology. By urging landowners to donate the some part of their land to the landless, he promoted both social justice and ecological balance. Bhave’s principle of *lokasangraha* (collective welfare) mirrors the ecological interdependence later emphasized in global environmental discourse (Bhave, 1958).

4.3 Sunderlal Bahuguna (1927-2021)

Bahuguna, leader of the Chipko Movement, embodied Gandhian non-violent activism in defence of forests. His slogan, “Ecology is permanent economy”, captured Gandhi’s insight that economic development cannot survive without ecological balance (Guha, 1989). He emphasized that tree-felling was a form of violence against life itself.

4.4 E. F. Schumacher (1911-1977)

A Western economist influenced by Gandhian philosophy, Schumacher’s *Small is Beautiful* (1973) argued for an economy “as if people mattered”. He criticized large-scale industrialism and called for intermediate technologies that respect both human and ecological

limits. Schumacher's notion of "Buddhist Economics" also draws directly from Gandhi's principles of simplicity and non-violence. He also coins the word, 'ecosophy' which stands moral and spiritual connectedness with nature. This idea is reflected in deep ecology to some extent.

4.5 Vandana Shiva (1952-)

A contemporary environmental activist and ecofeminist, Shiva interprets Gandhian ideas for the modern global context. She (Shiva) extended Gandhi's *Sarvodaya* to the planetary level, emphasizing biodiversity, seed sovereignty, and resistance to corporate globalization. She argues that the Gandhi's emphasis on local economies and self-reliance provides the moral foundation for sustainable living today (Shiva, 2016).

So in a nutshell, Gandhian environmentalism is rooted in simplicity, self-restraint, and reverence for nature. Gandhi and his followers believed in living with minimal needs. He promoted village industries and local self-reliance. He rejected industrial excess and consumerism. The problem is not merely material but civilizational and spiritual that requires a reorientation of human consciousness toward harmony with nature. He (Gandhi) offered spiritual development as an alternative to material development. This line of thinking see nature as sacred, not a resource to exploit (ecocentrism).

As discussed earlier, SDGs are contemporary popular methods of countering climate change and promoting environmental health. The following passage will include details about it.

5. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Global Framework for Sustainability

5.1 Historical Genesis of SDGs

The roots of the current framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs) lie in the evolving international recognition of the interconnectedness of environment, economy and society. In 1987, the Brundtland Report (Our Common Future), chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, offered the now-famous definition of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (IISD, n.d.). Subsequent major international events like the 1992 Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro) which adopted Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, and the follow-up process culminating in the SDGs in 2015 -

mark the institutional evolution of sustainable development into more concrete targets. (Suforall, n.d.). Hence the historical sequence may be summarized: Brundtland Report (1987)→Earth Summit/Agenda 21, (1992)→Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015)→SDGs/2030 Agenda (2015 onward) and various in between. This trajectory reflects the transition from theoretical definition to policy frameworks and then to quantifiable goals and targets.

5.2 Theoretical Basis of SDGs

The SDGs draw upon several approaches underpinnings that frame the logic and ambition of the goals. Some of the highlights of it are as follows:

5.2.1 Human Development Approach

One major theoretical strand by these (SDGs) is the Human Development paradigm advanced by Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq. Sen's Capability Approach redefined development as the expansion of individuals' freedoms and capabilities-the real opportunities people have to lead lives they value (Sen, 1999). Mahbub ul Haq operationalized this vision by creating the Human Development Index (HDI), which measures development through health, education, and income rather than GDP alone (Haq, 1995). This approach emphasizes that development is not merely economic growth but the enlargement of people's choices, dignity, and well-being. The SDGs reflect this by including not only growth metrics but goals for quality education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), reducing inequality (SDG 10), etc. It includes all sections of people irrespective of any caste, place, sex, religion, place of birth, etc.

5.2.2 Ecological Modernization Approach

This approach is the core of the SDGs. It posits that modern societies can reconcile industrial growth with environmental protection through technological innovation, institutional reform and market-based mechanisms. Thinkers such as Joseph Huber and Martin Jänicke laid the foundation for this approach, they argue that environmental concerns can be internalized within industrial capitalism through reflexive modernization and policy learning (Huber, 1985; Jänicke, 1990). Arthur P. J. Mol further developed the theory by emphasizing ecological restructuring and the role of governance and civil society (Mol, 1995). In the applied domain, Amory Lovins and Paul Hawken demonstrated how resource efficiency and biomimicry-through concepts like Factor Four and Natural Capitalism-can align profitability with sustainability (Lovins, 1997; Hawken, Lovins &

Lovins, 1999). Theoretically, this is what known as ‘bright green environmentalism’. The theory says that sustainability is compatible with growth if managed appropriately through above mentioned methods. Some goals of the SDGs that can be related with it are: “sustainable economic growth” (SDG 8), “affordable and clean energy” (SDG 7) and “industry, innovation and infrastructure” (SDG 9). Despite certain critiques (see Section 3.5), the underpinning theoretical logic of the SDGs is thus a combination of human-capability enhancement and growth-compatible ecological governance.

5.2.3 Environmental Protection and Developmental Approach

One of the foremost aspects of the SDGs is this. Since environmental protection is the most important reason of this idea. Therefore, it discusses environmental protection as an underlying idea in all the goals. However specific goals are also mentioned especially Goal 13 (Climate Action), Goal 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), Goal 15 (Life on Land), etc. These targets aim to reduce carbon emissions, preserve biodiversity, promote renewable energy, and ensure responsible consumption. Sustainable development urges nations to integrate ecological limits into policy, fostering long-term resilience rather than short-term exploitation.

The SDGs give a holistic mechanism for the growth and prosperity of both man and nature. But these are not without critical observation. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), though ambitious, face several criticisms from scholars and practitioners. *First*, many of the goals are too broad and vague that makes them difficult to measure or implement effectively. *Second*, the framework lacks legal enforcement, relying instead on voluntary compliance, which weakens accountability. *Third*, the SDGs continue to promote economic growth as a central aim, often conflicting with ecological sustainability and the need to respect planetary boundaries. *Fourth*, they do not challenge deeper structural issues such as global inequality, colonial legacies, or the dominance of neoliberal economic models. *Finally*, implementation remains uneven, with marginalized communities frequently excluded due to limited resources, data gaps, and political inertia. There can other criticism as well, as it is not an exhaustive list.

6. Convergences and Divergences: Gandhian Environmentalism and the SDGs

There are various evident convergences between Gandhian philosophy and the SDGs. They lie in their shared moral foundations. If we look at the ideas/goals both are rooted in universal human

values such as justice, dignity, equality, and sustainability. Gandhi's vision of *Sarvodaya* (the welfare of all) aligns closely with the SDG commitment to "leave no one behind". His ethical framework sought to eradicate poverty through self-reliance and equitable resource distribution (through trusteeship), principles that resonate with SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities through progressive taxation and corporate social responsibility-type measures). The divergence in these ideas is that Gandhian environmentalism relies on a voluntary nature for bringing out the equality, and the SDGs still rely on taxation (which is levied forcefully).

Furthermore, both the Gandhian environmentalism and the SDG approaches recognize that ecological sustainability cannot be separated from social justice. Gandhi's dictum - "the Earth provides enough for everyone's need, but not for anyone's greed" is proof to it. captures the ethical restraint that global development goals attempt to institutionalize through responsible consumption (SDG 12) and climate action are proof to it. (SDG 13, 14, 15, etc). Yet, beneath these ethical resonances lie profound divergences. While the important distinction is that SDGs frameworks gesture toward Gandhian ideals (such as responsible consumption (SDG 12) and climate action (SDGs 13-15)) they are still embedded in a global economic architecture that perpetuates the very excesses Gandhi warned against. The SDGs do not challenge the structural drivers of ecological degradation which are real culprits like consumer capitalism, extractive growth, technocratic governance, etc. Unlike Gandhi's radical call for self-restraint and civilizational transformation, the SDGs (on the other hand) rely on market-based solutions, corporate partnerships, and incremental reforms type of measures, that fail to confront systemic inequality or ecological overshoot. For example, SDG 12 promotes sustainable consumption, yet global resource use continues to rise unabated and that too is driven by affluent nations and elite consumption patterns and being blindly followed by commoners as well (if possible for them). Similarly, climate goals (SDG 13) are undermined by the absence of binding commitments and the continued subsidization of fossil fuels. Gandhi's vision of trusteeship is also non-binding. But there is a stark difference between theses as Gandhian environmentalism keeps a moral economy rooted in voluntary simplicity at its heart. But the SDGs remain closely attached to the logic of unbridled growth of the economy, luxury lifestyles while also keeping the environment neat and clean and affordable and accessible to all. So there is a contradiction in SDGs itself.

Then probably the most ignored fact is that Gandhian environmentalism presents the alternative to something beyond the materialistic wellbeing. While the SDGs also discuss something down the related to this in its GOAL 3 (Good Health and Well-being), GOAL 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), etc., emphasizing about community life style and shared responsibility. But it still not enough. On the other hand Gandhian environmentalism talk about spiritual upwardness (deeply rooted in religious beliefs). That starts by knowing ourselves and making our critical analysis. Where SDGs talk about looking outward and Gandhism talk about inward looking. This reveals a deeper philosophical dissonance.

Gandhism (or here Gandhian environmentalism) strongly advocates for vegetarianism, but this has never been discussed explicitly. However, its various interpretations do indicate towards it.

In essence, both frameworks converge in their holistic view of sustainability, integrating environmental integrity with human development, but they differ in goals (Gandhism - spiritual growth and SDGs - green growth). Where SDGs articulate these values in developmental language, Gandhian philosophy frames them in moral and spiritual terms.

7. Integration Potential between Gandhian Ethics and the SDGs

The similarities and differences between Gandhian ethics and the SDGs present practical opportunities for integration. The SDGs (as already mentioned earlier) while comprehensive in nature, often focus on technological efficiency and policy targets, leaving a moral vacuum in implementation. We will understand whether Embedding Gandhian principles with SDGs is possible or not. Because if it is possible, then it (evolved idea/theory) can address this gap by infusing ethical consciousness into global and local sustainability practices. Since there are many goals- 17 in total, so we won't be talking about those individually. We will rather study core of Gandhian environmentalism and then see whether SDGs (as a whole) can accommodate these or not. As we have already understood in earlier paragraph that there are similarities as well between the two ideas. This section will understood about whether differences can be bridged or not.

Mahatma Gandhi viewed the end of poverty as inseparable from moral, spiritual, and self-reliant living. He emphasized "*Sarvodaya*" (the welfare of all) through simple living, local production, and "trusteeship" (rich is only trustee and not the owner of extra wealth).

For Gandhi, true poverty eradication meant restoring human dignity and ensuring that every individual could meet basic needs through honest labour rather than dependence on industrial capitalism or external aid (Gandhi, 1942, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 73). In contrast, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 1 (No Poverty), approach poverty reduction through global economic growth, modernization, and social protection systems. They adopt taxation system. Gandhi's vision was ethical and decentralized, focusing on self-restraint, local empowerment, and harmony with nature rather than consumption-driven development (United Nations, 2015). So this is also something that cannot be integrated together.

Gandhi envisioned a decentralized village system (*Gram Swaraj*) where each village was a self-sufficient, morally grounded republic sustaining itself through local production and cooperative living (Gandhi, 1942). He saw true progress in "production by the masses, not mass production". In contrast, the SDGs promote global integration, emphasizing "partnerships for the goals" and interconnected economies for collective progress (United Nations, 2015). While Gandhi's model cherishes local autonomy and simplicity, the SDGs celebrate global collaboration and technological advancement. Together, they represent two paths-moral self-reliance versus global interdependence. So even this cannot be incorporated in SDGs as it (Gandhian idea) does not match with it (SDGs).

Finally, the ultimate goal of Gandhian environmentalism is the spiritual harmony between man and nature. It is something where simplicity, self-restraint, and reverence for all life lead to inner and outer peace. His vision sought not just ecological balance but spiritual awakening. In contrast, the SDGs, though pragmatic and measurable, remain largely silent on the soul of sustainability. Gandhi's path, therefore, elevates ecology into ethics and enlightenment rather than mere development. This thing, however can be integrated (if done in the right way). And if it is done then everything else will be solved on its own.

So, a critical evaluation reveals that Gandhian environmentalism and the SDG framework operate from fundamentally distinct epistemologies. Gandhian sustainability is ethical, transformative, and holistic. It emphasizes so much on the moral responsibilities of individuals, communities, and institutions toward nature, society, and future generations. Gandhi (along with his followers-J. C. Kumarappa, Vinoba Bhave, and others) highlights the root (might be) causes of

ecological degradation (that might be ecologically destructive because when Gandhi was writing the idea of environmental degradation was not famous): human greed, over-consumption, and the exploitation of natural and human resources (Kumarappa, 1945; Gandhi, 1947). From this perspective, ecological and social crises are manifestations of deeper moral and spiritual failings, and solutions must therefore also address inner transformation, restraint, and moral conscience.

By contrast, the SDGs represent a managerial, reformative, and goal-oriented framework. They also respond to observable social and environmental challenges like poverty, inequality, pollution, climate change, etc. But they do it through technological innovation, policy instruments, and institutional coordination, ignoring the root causes as mentioned in Gandhian environmentalism. While SDGs are effective in creating measurable outcomes and promoting international cooperation but they often treat sustainability as a problem of management rather than a matter of ethical or spiritual responsibility (Sachs, 2015; UN, 2015). The biggest failure (from an environmental perspective) of SDGs, both in theory and practice is that the global material footprint is continuously increasing. The total amount of raw materials extracted to meet human consumption has grown from 43 billion tonnes in 2000 to over 75 billion tonnes in 2019, and this is a 74% increase (Global Footprint Network, n.d.). This growth far outpaces both population and GDP expansion, indicating that economic development is becoming increasingly resource-intensive rather than efficient. The whole problem with this increase arises from this fact. That One of the most alarming consequences of this trend is the advancing date of Earth Overshoot Day. It stands for the point/date in the year when humanity's resource use exceeds Earth's capacity to regenerate those resources. In 2020, Earth Overshoot Day fell on August 22, but by 2025, it had moved all the way up to July 24 (Global Footprint Network, n.d.). This data shows that just one Earth is not enough to meet the needs of human population (1.8 Earth required at present). All of this because, that for more than five months each year, we are living in ecological debt-depleting natural capital and accumulating waste, especially carbon dioxide. And we must also not forget that this use of resources is absolutely uneven through out the world. As rich countries have huge material footprint than poor countries. So, restraint in the material consumption not only benefits the environmental health but also the social inequality as well.

Therefore, in order to preserve the environment, Gandhian environmentalism offers a far superior ethical and ecological

framework. Rooted in principles of self-restraint (*aparigraha*), minimal consumption, and harmony with nature. However, one of the most important points is that despite its philosophical strength, Gandhian methods cannot be implemented unilaterally by any single nation without facing severe disadvantages in the competitive global order. In the current realpolitik landscape which is highly dominated by economic interdependence, trade competition, geopolitical rivalries, etc. a country that voluntarily adopts radical ecological restraint risks economic isolation, reduced industrial output, etc. For example, if India were to fully embrace Gandhian environmentalism by drastically reducing fossil fuel use and industrial expansion. There are high chances that it might suffer trade imbalances, and reduced GDP growth, and an overall decrease in the power of the country. While other major emitters like the United States or China will continue high-carbon development and keep their power intact and increase their relative power. This asymmetry would not only undermine domestic sustainability efforts but also erode public support and political stability.

Therefore, a global-level authority or binding multilateral framework is essential to enforce ecological restraint equitably. Especially in major polluting nations. Institutions like the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) or the World Trade Organization (WTO) could play a role in mandating these ecological compliance through (first)carbon tariffs, sustainability-linked trade agreements, or global ecological taxation, then moving slowly but steadily towards Gandhian principles. The Paris Agreement (while a step forward) remains largely voluntary and lacks enforcement teeth. A stronger mechanism that is perhaps modelled on the Montreal Protocol's success in phasing out ozone-depleting substances could ensure that Gandhian principles of restraint and ecological justice are not just moral ideals but actionable global norms. In this sense, Gandhian environmentalism must be scaled through global ecological governance, where spiritual and ethical values are institutionalized across borders, notions like degrowth are popularized, and where the burden of transformation is shared proportionately-especially by historically high-emitting nations.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Gandhian environmentalism offers a deeper ethical and philosophical framework that extends beyond the largely utilitarian orientation of the

Sustainable Development Goals formulated under the United Nations. While the SDGs provide an important global institutional architecture for addressing urgent social, economic, and environmental challenges, their approach often remains policy-driven and technocratic. In contrast, the environmental philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi emphasizes restraint in consumption, the principle of *Aparigraha* (non-possession), and the pursuit of moral and spiritual development. These ideas foreground ethical responsibility, self-discipline, and community-oriented action, thereby addressing the deeper structural and moral causes of ecological degradation and social inequality.

From this perspective, integrating Gandhian ethical insights into contemporary sustainability discourse offers a significant theoretical and normative contribution. Gandhian environmentalism presents a holistic vision that links ethics, ecology, and human development within a coherent moral framework. Ultimately, the analysis suggests that Gandhian environmentalism and the SDG framework represent two distinct paradigms of sustainability—one rooted in global governance and technocratic policy mechanisms, and the other grounded in ethical self-restraint, decentralized living, and spiritual values. Recognizing this fundamental difference is crucial for understanding the limitations as well as the possibilities of contemporary sustainability debates, and it forms the central argument of the present study.

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