

# Gandhi and the Ecological Vision of Life: Thinking beyond Deep Ecology

Vinay Lal\*

Although recognized as one of the principal sources of inspiration for the Indian environmental movement, Gandhi would have been profoundly uneasy with many of the most radical strands of ecology in the West, such as social ecology, ecofeminism, and even deep ecology. He was in every respect an ecological thinker, indeed an ecological being: the brevity of his enormous writings, his everyday bodily practices, his observance of silence, his abhorrence of waste, and his cultivation of the small as much as the big all equally point to an extraordinarily expansive notion of ecological awareness.

## I. GANDHI AND THE INDIAN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

In a lecture given in 1993, the Indian historian Ramachandra Guha proposed to inquire whether Gandhi could be considered an “early environmentalist.”<sup>1</sup> Gandhi’s voluminous writings are littered with remarks on humankind’s exploitation of nature, and his views about the excesses of materialism and industrial civilization, of which he was a vociferous critic, can reasonably be inferred from his famous pronouncement that the earth has enough to satisfy everyone’s needs but not everyone’s greed. Still, when “nature” is viewed in the conventional sense, Gandhi was rather remarkably reticent on the relationship of humans to their external environment. His name is associated with innumerable political movements of defiance against British rule as well as social reform campaigns, but it is striking that he never explicitly initiated an environmental movement; nor does the word *ecology* appear in his writings. Again, though commercial forestry had commenced well before Gandhi’s time, and the depletion of Indian forests would persistently provoke peasant resistance, Gandhi himself was never associated with forest *satyagrahas*, however much his name was invoked by peasants and rebels.

---

\* Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles, Box 951473, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1473. Lal is the author of *South Asian Cultural Studies: A Bibliography* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996), and has edited *Dissenting Knowledges, Open Futures: The Multiples Selves and Strange Destinations of Ashis Nandy* (Delhi: Oxford, 2000). He is coeditor (with Ashis Nandy) of *Dictionary for the Twenty-First Century: A Guide to Knowledge and Power* (New York: Praeger and Delhi: Oxford, 2000), forthcoming. This paper was first presented at the “Hinduism and Ecology” conference at the Harvard University in 1997. It will appear later this year in *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky, and Water*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker (Cambridge: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000), forthcoming.

<sup>1</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *Mahatma Gandhi and the Environmental Movement*, Parisar Annual Lecture, 1993 (Pune: Parisar, 1993), p. 2.

Guha observes also that “the wilderness had no attraction for Gandhi.”<sup>2</sup> His writings are singularly devoid of any celebration of untamed nature or rejoicing at the chance sighting of a wondrous waterfall or an imposing Himalayan peak; and indeed his autobiography remains utterly silent on his experience of the ocean, over which he took an unusually long number of journeys for an Indian of his time. In Gandhi’s innumerable trips to Indian villages and the countryside—and seldom had any Indian acquired so intimate a familiarity with the smell of the earth and the feel of the soil across a vast land—he almost never had occasion to take note of the trees, vegetation, landscape, or animals. He was by no means indifferent to animals, but he could only comprehend them in a domestic capacity. Students of Gandhi certainly are aware not only of the goat that he kept by his side and of his passionate commitment to cow-protection, but of his profound attachment to what he often described as “dumb creation,” indeed to all living forms.

The modern environmental movement was, of course, still several decades distant from being inaugurated in Gandhi’s time, but it is indubitably certain that Gandhi at least cannot be constrained or exculpated by that conventional and tedious yardstick with which so much scholarship sadly contents itself: namely, that he was a man of his times, and that an environmental sensibility was not yet positioned to intervene significantly in the shaping of society. Gandhi was an ardent exponent of vegetarianism, nature cure, and what are today called “alternative” systems of medicine well before these acquired the semblance of acceptability in the West; he was a dedicated practitioner of recycling before the idea had crept into the lexicon of the liberal consciousness; he was a trenchant critic of modernity before the Frankfurt school, not to mention the post-modernism of Lyotard, had provided some of the contours of modern thought; and he was, needless to say, an advocate of nonviolent resistance long before uses for such forms of resistance were found in the United States, South Africa, and elsewhere. No one suspects that Gandhi was merely a man of his times: so it is not unlikely that Gandhi could have been an environmentalist and more, anticipating in this respect as in many others modern social and political movements.

Indeed, the general consensus of Indian environmentalists appears to be that Gandhi inspired and even perhaps, in a manner of speaking, fathered the Indian environmental movement. He cannot, however, be likened to John Muir or Aldo Leopold, and much less to Thoreau: Gandhi was no naturalist, and it is doubtful that he would have contemplated with equanimity the setting aside of tracts of land, forests, and woods as “wilderness areas,” though scarcely for the same reasons for which developers, industrialists, loggers, and financiers object to such altruism. The problems posed by the man-eating tigers of Kumaon, made famous by Jim Corbett, would have left less of a moral

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

impression upon him than those problems which are the handiwork of men who let the brute within them triumph. It is reported that when the English historian Edward Thompson once remarked to Gandhi that wildlife was rapidly disappearing in India, Gandhi replied: "Wildlife is decreasing in the jungles, but it is increasing in the towns."<sup>3</sup> Although Guha has noted some limitations in viewing Gandhi as an "early environmentalist," such as his purportedly poor recognition of the "distinctive social and environmental problems" of urban areas, Guha readily acknowledges, as do most others, that the impress of Gandhian thinking is to be felt in the life and works of many of India's most well-known environmental activists.<sup>4</sup> It was Gandhi's own disciples, Mirabehn and Saralabehn, who came to exercise an incalculable influence on Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Vimla and Sunderlal Bahuguna, and others who have been at the helm of the Chipko agitation, a movement to ensure, in the words of women activists, that Himalayan forests continue to bear "soil, water and pure air" for present and future generations.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Baba Amte and Medha Patkar, the most well-known figures associated with the more recent Narmada Bachao Andolan, a movement aimed at preventing the construction of one of the world's largest dam projects and the consequent dislocation and uprooting of the lives of upwards of 100,000 rural and tribal people,<sup>6</sup> have been equally generous in acknowledging that their inspiration has come in great part from Gandhi. It may be mistaken to speak of these movements as "Gandhian," since any such reading perforce ignores the traditions of peasant resistance, the force of customary practices, and the appeal of localized systems of knowledge, but the spirit of Gandhi has undoubtedly moved Indian environmentalists.

Thus far, then, it appears that Gandhi presents something of a difficulty to those who would propose to describe him as the author or father of Indian environmentalism. It is undoubtedly possible to see the environmentalist *in* him, but one hesitates in describing him as an environmentalist. Similarly, if I may multiply the layers of this anomaly, Gandhi was a lover of animals

---

<sup>3</sup> Cited by T. N. Khoshoo, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Apostle of Applied Human Ecology* (New Delhi: Tata Energy Research Institute, 1995), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Guha, *Mahatma Gandhi and the Environmental Movement*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> For a short account of the Chipko movement that highlights in particular its Gandhian impetus, see J. Bandyopadhyay and Vandana Shiva, "Chipko," *Seminar*, no. 330 (February 1987):33–39; a more scholarly and detached treatment is furnished by Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 153–84. Mirabehn's work in the Himalayan region is ably and touchingly evoked in Krishna Murti Gupta, *Mira Behn: Gandhiji's Daughter Disciple*, Birth Centenary Volume (New Delhi: Himalaya Seva Sangh, 1992). On the women of Chipko, see Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988), pp. 67–77.

<sup>6</sup> The figure of 100,000 displaced people is based, as Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha have noted, on the "outdated 1981 census," and others have furnished much higher numbers. See their book, *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India* (Penguin Books, 1995), p. 73.

without being a pet lover, a warrior who absolutely forsook arms, an autocrat deeply wedded to democratic sentiments, an admirer of the Ramayana who rejected the dogmatism of many of its verses, a follower of the *sanatan dharma* or eternal faith who in his later years would only bless inter-caste weddings, and a traditionalist whose apparent allegiance to hideous traditions led him to counsel the rejection of all authorities except one's own conscience. Although his pronouncements spoke of the conventional division of labor between men and women as "natural," in his own ashrams he insisted that all its members were to partake equally of all the tasks, and no differentiation was permitted, in matters of either labor or morality, between men and women; moreover, the kitchen, the toilet, the Viceroy's palatial residence, and the prison were all equally fertile arenas for testing the truth of one's convictions. These circumstances constitute the grounds, as I endeavor here to argue, for viewing Gandhi as a man with a profoundly ecological view of life, a view much too deep even for deep ecology.

## II. WHAT IS DEEP ECOLOGY?

Gandhi's own views would perhaps be deemed to have the closest resemblance, among the various strands of radical ecology encountered today, to the philosophical presuppositions of deep ecology. It is no coincidence that the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, with whose name *deep ecology* is preeminently associated, was an ardent student of Gandhi's thought and work before he turned his attention to the problems of the environment, and that in Gandhi he found a political philosopher who most clearly shows the way to the resolution of group conflicts.<sup>7</sup> From Gandhi, Naess divined the importance of all work as a form of self-realization, and it is Gandhi who, as he was to write in a study of Gandhi's mode of conflict resolution, provided him with the assurance that

. . . the rock-bottom foundation of the technique for achieving the power of non-violence is belief in the essential oneness of all life . . . . More than a few people, from their earliest youth, feel a basic unity with and of all the human beings they encounter, a unity that overrides all the differences and makes these appear superficial. Gandhi was one of these fortunate people.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Arne Naess, *Gandhi and the Nuclear Age* (Totowa, New Jersey: Bedminster Press, 1965). See also David Rothenberg, *Is It Painful to Think? Conversations with Arne Naess* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 103–05. Elsewhere Naess wrote of himself as a "student and admirer since 1930 of Gandhi's non-violent direct actions in bloody conflict," "inevitably influenced by his metaphysics." See Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," *The Trumpeter* 4, no. 3 (1987): 35–42, reprinted in Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue, eds., *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995), p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Arne Naess, *Gandhi and Group Conflict: An Exploration of Satyagraha: Theoretical Background* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974); cited by Rothenberg, "Introduction," *Is it Painful to Think?* p. xix.

In a short paper published in 1973, Naess distinguished between the “shallow” and “deep” approaches to environmentalism, so as to pave the way for the “deep ecology” movement.<sup>9</sup> The exponents of the shallow view of environmentalism, Naess maintained, are bound to an anthropocentric view of the universe. They have no intrinsic commitment to the preservation of nature, but are only interested in nature insofar as it affects the interests of humans. Their world view has room enough for viewing nature as something other than merely the repository of wealth to be extracted and exploited for use and profit; but if nature is not merely an instrument to some better end, it is emphatically not an end in itself. While not necessarily beholden to an economic framework, they are by no means averse to cost-benefit analyses: thus, they would deplore pollution not only on the grounds that it fouls the air, contaminates the soil and the food that is put on the table, and renders unsafe our supply of drinking water, but because it leads to numerous other costs that outweigh any benefits that might be generated by industries that release pollutants in the air. Thus, the shallow environmentalists would insist on factoring in the costs of treatment for respiratory and skin diseases, the expenditure on research aimed at providing solutions to problems created by pollution, and so on. They would be sensitive to the fact that smoke from industries in the vicinity of the Taj Mahal has eroded the pristine quality of the marble and rendered somewhat obscure the marvelous hues of the inlaid gems and stones, and they would undoubtedly have agreed with the judge who ordered the relocation of these industries. But they may too readily ignore the fact that such relocation jeopardizes the livelihood of many people and introduces a new set of class relations. As Naess notes, “If prices of life necessities increase because of the installation of anti-pollution devices, class differences increase too.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, if I may hazard the proposition in this provocative form, shallow environmentalists prize museums more than they do living cultures.

Shallow environmentalists, as can now be surmised, have no intrinsic objection to industrialism, but only to its excesses: they are advocates, in the clichéd phrase, of “development with a human face,” or “sustainable development” as it is known in the scholarly literature, although this characterization perhaps slightly overstates their compliance with bourgeois models of human engineering. Naess has also objected to shallow environmentalists on the grounds that they are largely concerned with the fate of the affluent or post-industrial nations, this concern having arisen as a consequence of the rapid depletion of non-renewable natural resources. Although shallow environmentalists are not without democratic sentiments, they have always envisioned an upward leveling: the rest of the world was to be raised to a higher standard of living, but no decrease in their own standards of living was to be contemplated.

---

<sup>9</sup> Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary,” in Drengson and Inoue, *The Deep Ecology Movement*, pp. 3–10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Thus, when faced with an oil crisis and increased pollution, the shallow environmentalists would not necessarily have countenanced the elimination of automobiles, but only their more efficient use. They are largely agreed that the problems created by technology are best resolved by improved technology. The ingrained presupposition is that technology can invariably resolve, if necessary with the aid of ethics, sociology, and the applied sciences, its own shortcomings.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to “shallow” environmentalism, Naess and his supporters posit an ecological view of the world that is less wedded to technocratic and managerial solutions, short-term panaceas, and an instrumentalist (though not necessarily exploitative) view of nature. What is distinctive about deep ecology, quite simply, is that it asks “deeper questions.” Where shallow environmentalism, or what may be called (after Kuhn) normal ecology, is reticent about asking “what kind of society would be the best for maintaining a particular ecosystem,”<sup>12</sup> deep ecology is intrinsically committed to the proposition that it is not possible to alter man’s relationship to nature without altering man’s relation to man and even the relationship to self.<sup>13</sup> Deep ecology entails, in Naess’s words, the “rejection of the human-in-environment image in favor of the relational, total-field image.”<sup>14</sup> Man is viewed as being not merely “in” the environment, but “of” it; and where the environment takes precedence, humankind and all other species receive their just due. The elaboration of the deep ecology movement is to be found in what are called the “platform principles.” These principles command us to recognize that the “well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves,” and that these “values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.” Human beings are enjoined to respect the “richness and diversity of life forms,” which are not to be compromised “except to satisfy vital needs”; the “quality of life,” rather than a “higher standard of living,” is to be accorded primacy; and this “quality of life,” for human and nonhuman species alike, is described as not being achievable except through a “substantial decrease of the human population.” The platform principles decry the increasing interference of humans with

---

<sup>11</sup> For an engaging critique of “technicism,” see Ashis Nandy, “From Outside the Imperium: Gandhi’s Cultural Critique of the West,” in his *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987; Oxford India Paperbacks, 1992), pp. 127–62.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Bodian, “Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: An Interview with Arne Naess,” in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> I have used the expression “man’s relationship to nature” deliberately, since the brunt of ecofeminist criticism, which I consider at greater length below, is precisely that deep ecology is just as patriarchal as environmentalism or the other philosophies that it critiques.

<sup>14</sup> Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement,” in Drengson and Inoue, *The Deep Ecology Movement*, p. 3.

the nonhuman world, and call for policy changes that would affect the “basic economic, technological, and ideological structures” that are today widely accepted.<sup>15</sup>

Deep ecology, unlike shallow environmentalism, recognizes the intrinsic worth of the nonhuman world, just as it recognizes the importance of conserving resources for the use of all species, not only human beings. Domestic animals are valued not merely because they make good pets and serve as companions in increasingly fragmented societies, or because they satisfy our aesthetic impulses or desire to nurture those who are weaker than us, but because they have an invaluable place in the moral order. If the principles of diversity, symbiosis, and “biological egalitarianism” undergird deep ecology,<sup>16</sup> no less important is its insistence on spiritualism and religious values: as Gandhi might have put it, we are only God’s trustees on earth. Deep ecology rejects the claim, while advocating responsibility for future generations, that growth is an intrinsically good economic end. Thus, deep ecology recognizes that overpopulation in so-called advanced countries is no more acceptable than overpopulation in developing countries,<sup>17</sup> and it would even go so far as to acknowledge that the vastly higher per capita consumption, whether of goods or resources, in industrialized countries places greater pressures on the environment than does overpopulation in the developing world.<sup>18</sup> To this extent, deep ecology can be said to have sensitivity to issues of class, and it certainly does not appear to countenance a world order where the health and well-being of the affluent nations become the predominant criteria by which policies are framed.

The proponents of deep ecology would, then, go far beyond the shallow environmentalists in the manner in which they address problems posed by the degradation of nature. If the most radical proponents of shallow environmentalism would be prepared to go no further than to advocate exclusive spending on mass-transit systems, deep ecologists must be prepared to offer a critique of automobile pollution of an altogether different ontological order. Such a critique must begin with the complex social history of the automobile, its relationship to the design and planning of American megalopolises such as Los Angeles and Houston, and the culture of fast food, drive-in theaters, and shopping malls that emerged from automobiles. This social history would also encompass the relationship of the automobile to the creation of the American suburb and the rise

---

<sup>15</sup> Arne Naess and George Sessions, “Platform Principles of the Deep Ecology Movement,” in Drengron and Inoue, *The Deep Ecology Movement*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>16</sup> See Ariel Kay Salleh, “Deeper than Deep Ecology: The Eco-Feminist Connection,” *Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 4 (1984): 340.

<sup>17</sup> Bodian, “Simple in Means, Rich in Ends,” p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Arne Naess, “The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects,” in Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, pp. 72–73.

of advertisements: “pollution” itself must be seen as taking on new meanings. The deep ecologist must go still much further in expounding a different world view. If analytically one might ask how the automobile alters conceptions of time and space, and how it gives rise to new ideas of leisure and changing conceptions of “home,” the deep ecologist must also inquire what inverse relation the automobile has to the ethos of walking. What does the decline of walking as a once widely recognized activity for the mind and body portend for our culture, and what different conception of self does the peripatetic mode suggest? Must we go only as far as our hands and feet take us, as Gandhi was to argue in *Hind Swaraj*, and what sort of transgression of limits is entailed by the automobile?<sup>19</sup> Have our bodies, as a consequence of automobiles, become unfit for experiencing other modes of reality?

There is something self-evidently ecological about walking, no doubt, but here common-sense understanding, or even the interpretive framework of the “expert,” will not suffice to suggest why it is that the peripatetic mode signifies a different symbolic and cultural order of being. It is a telling fact that, in the English language at least, politicians run (or even stand)—but do not walk—for elections; and it is equally significant that no Indian had walked across the breadth and length of India as much as did Gandhi, just as he never ran for office. With the attainment of independence and the creation of the nation-state, the space for those who would rather walk than run had appeared to narrow. Gandhi’s life was marked by an extreme regularity, and prominent in his daily regime of subversive discipline—if I may so entertain an oxymoron which has never been explored—was the daily walk of ten kilometers. It is on these walks that Gandhi encountered the poverty of a nation, and so came face to face with the village India that had all but disappeared from nationalist discourse; it is on these walks that Gandhi was flanked on both sides by his secretaries, who took down his dictation and so enabled him to reply to each and every one of the tens of thousands of letters that he received; and it is on these walks that Gandhi kept pace with the time of India and the rhythms of his own body.

From the perspective of deep ecology, the whole can never be encompassed by the sum of the parts. It requires no great imagination to critique technology on the grounds that it displaces human labor and so leads to anomie, just as it is transgressive of limits, but it does require an ecological vision to be able to hint at the principle of compensation that underlies the moral universe we inhabit. When the gain is easily perceived, the heart must be moved to apprehend the loss; and when the loss is patently before our eyes, we must train ourselves to perceive the gain. How many of us have even momentarily thought, as the typewriter collapsed before the onslaught of the computer, that

---

<sup>19</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (1909; new ed., 1938; reprint ed., Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1982), pp. 44–46.

the typewriter required a spirited defense on the grounds that the computer surrenders possession of the primal sound? What relation does the aesthetics of sound bear to the flow of ink and the stream of thought? And what of the typewriter's own predecessors, the writing brush or the humble lead pencil which no one other than Henry David Thoreau did more to develop before he moved to the next phase of his adventure in the woods?<sup>20</sup> The novelist Junichiro Tanizaki wonders what the history of Japan might have been if the fountain pen had been invented by the Chinese or Japanese. "The ink would not have been this bluish color but rather black, something like India ink," he writes, "and it would have been made to seep down from the handle into the brush." Japanese paper would still have been in vogue; and Japanese literature and thought might not have been so imitative. "An insignificant little piece of writing equipment, when one thinks of it," Tanizaki concludes, "has had a vast, almost boundless, influence on our culture."<sup>21</sup>

It is no less than the "vast, almost boundless, influence on our culture" that a pencil exercises on us that Gandhi had in mind on the occasion when he misplaced a two-inch stub of a pencil. One of Gandhi's associates, Kaka Kalelkar, has noted that at an annual session in Bombay of the Indian National Congress, the preeminent body of nationalist opinion, he found Gandhi frantically searching for something one evening. When his inquiry revealed that it was no more than a pencil, he offered Gandhi his own pencil and pleaded with him not to waste his time. But Gandhi insisted that he could not have any other pencil, and added: "You don't understand. I simply must not lose that little pencil! Do you know it was given to me in Madras by Natesan's little boy? He brought it for me with such love! I cannot bear to lose it."<sup>22</sup> If today we effortlessly substitute one pencil for another, what prevents us from substituting something else in its place tomorrow? What are the limits of substitutibility? If we recognized that we hold even a pencil in trust, would we not treat the Earth more gently? And when this trust is betrayed, how do we calibrate the nature and extent of that betrayal? Another one of Gandhi's associates, Jehangir Patel, tells us, to evoke a yet more complex pencil story, that one morning he found him examining the tiny stub of a pencil "which had been put ready for his use." Gandhi commented that whoever had sharpened the pencil was "very angry. See how roughly and irregularly the wood has been scored and cut." At breakfast, Gandhi looked around the table, and as soon as his eyes fell on young

---

<sup>20</sup> For an arresting account of the history of the pencil and the part played by Thoreau in creating what is essentially its modern shape, see Henry Petroski, *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (New Haven, Connecticut: Leete's Island Books, 1977), pp. 7–8.

<sup>22</sup> Kakasaheb Kalelkar, *Stray Glimpses of Bapu*, 2d rev. ed. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1960), pp. 26–27. G. A. Natesan, founder and editor of the *Indian Review*, was an avid supporter of Gandhi's various endeavors.

Manu, he asked her: "Manu, you sharpened my pencil this morning, didn't you, and you were feeling angry when you did it?" "Yes, I was," she replied. "Well," said Gandhi, "please don't sharpen my pencil while you are angry, it distresses me."<sup>23</sup> To deep ecology's concern for spiritualism and idolization of "value," Gandhi would no doubt have added, in the fullest sense of these terms, the insistence on truth and nonviolence.

### III. THE CRITIQUE OF DEEP ECOLOGY

So far deep ecology has appeared as a movement that might receive our sympathetic if not unequivocal assent, although I have already hinted at the beginning of a critique. As is now well known, it has been subjected to more systematic criticisms by exponents of social ecology and, more recently, ecofeminists. In keeping with my endeavor to pave the way to Gandhi from deep ecology, with which its proponents believe he would have had considerable affinity, I suggest only the outlines, and that too briefly, of the principal critiques of deep ecology, since one can imagine that Gandhi would have shared in these critiques to some extent. A more exhaustive study of the critiques of deep ecology, or of the numerous variants of the ecological movement, such as bioregionalism, is well beyond the scope of this paper. From there I move, finally, to a discussion of how Gandhi might be seen as having an ecological view of life, though perforce that does not make him an environmentalist.

The critics of deep ecology have described it as an ideology and movement that, in its resolute ecocentrism, expects human beings to reorganize their societies around the laws of nature. They have pointed to deep ecology's misanthropic tendencies, and it has not helped that such prominent ecologists as Dave Foreman, who has been prominent in the Earth First! movement, have described humans as a "cancer on nature."<sup>24</sup> The principal organ of the Earth First! movement, *Earth First! Journal*, has frequently been known to espouse neo-Malthusian positions, and in the early years of the AIDS crisis, its pages aired the view that this epidemic was a blessing in disguise, since it promised to diminish human population and so relieve the pressure on the Earth's resources. Many feminists perceive deep ecology's agenda to contain the human population as yet another patriarchal attempt to take control of women's reproductive powers, and in particular to render Third World women subservient to the interests of both indigenous and First World elites. Although the celebration of

---

<sup>23</sup> Jehangir P. Patel and Marjorie Sykes, *Gandhi: His Gift of the Fight* (Rasulia, Madhya Pradesh, India: Friends Rural Centre, 1987), pp. 107–08.

<sup>24</sup> Dave Foreman, "Beyond the Wilderness," *Harper's Magazine*, April 1990, p. 48. Murray Bookchin, in the revised edition of *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Montreal and New York: Black Rose Books, 1991), says of deep ecology and other "mystical ecologies" that they "often view the human species as an evolutionary aberration—or worse, as an absolute disaster, a 'cancer' on the biosphere" (p. xxi).

nature's fertility receives fulsome expression in the writings of deep ecologists, they seem considerably less enthused by human fertility. This tendency points to more than what feminists axiomatically assume to be the male fear of female sexuality, and to the declining emphasis on female fertility: it suggests the continuing inability of Western culture to treat children with dignity, as something other than incomplete or miniaturized versions of adults, and to exult in the joy of children.

It is the same ecocentrism of deep ecology that, as some scholars and critics have suggested, renders it oblivious to the fact that its agenda cannot be transplanted to Third World countries without aggravating the social inequities that exist in those societies. The establishment of wilderness areas—a widely agreed upon objective of the American ecological and conservation movement—in India, it has been argued, often involves the displacement of local populations and the loss of traditional homelands; elsewhere, as among the Ik people of Uganda, who were expelled to make way for the Kidepo National Park, the consequences have been more catastrophic, including famine, begging, the rise of prostitution, and the total collapse of traditional societies.<sup>25</sup> The American model of national parks, many of them set up in areas which are very sparsely populated, and where in any case there was little conflict between people and resources, was transplanted wholesale to countries such as India where the relationship between people and their environment has been much closer, and where animals and people continue to have a symbiotic, though scarcely conflict-free, relationship with each other.<sup>26</sup> All of these matters were opaque to the members of the Indian “conservation establishment,” who are inclined to see “‘ordinary people’ and ‘conservation’ [as] irreconcilably opposed,” and who would rather trust the judgment of experts than pay heed to the experience of peasants and tribals.<sup>27</sup>

As Ramachandra Guha writes, “the emphasis on wilderness is positively harmful when applied to the third world.”<sup>28</sup> Guha suggests that such an emphasis amounts, in effect, to a transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich, just as it ignores the more pressing problems of environmental degradation that affect the poor, from scarcity of key natural resources to air and water pollution. If there is an intellectual poverty in deploying the conservation ethos of industrialized nations in countries that have not similarly been able to fatten themselves on the exploited wealth of others, there is perhaps also a failure in the deep ecology

---

<sup>25</sup> See Ashish Kothari, Saloni Suri, and Neena Singh, “People and Protected Areas: Rethinking Conservation in India,” *The Ecologist* 25, no. 5 (1995): 188–94, esp. 90.

<sup>26</sup> On the Sundarbans Tiger Preserve, which has the largest tiger population in the world, see the charming book by Sy Montgomery, *Spell of the Tiger: The Man-Eaters of Sundarbans* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Kothari, Suri, and Singh, “People and Protected Areas,” p. 190.

<sup>28</sup> Ramachandra Guha, “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique,” *Environmental Ethics* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1989), p. 75.

movement as a whole to recognize adequately the “structural” nature of environmental problems. The brunt of the Marxist critique is none other than the assertion that it is the logic of capitalism that leads to environmental degradation, and that the establishment of a “wilderness cult” not only creates rifts between environmentalists and all those who are involved in innumerable other social and political struggles, but that it signals a descent into reactionary politics. “The moral cant that marks the recent reworking of the ecology movement into a wilderness cult,” writes the vitriolic Murray Bookchin, “a network of wiccan covens, fervent acolytes of Earth-Goddess religions, and assorted psychotherapeutic encounter groups beggars description. . . . such mystics actually manage to navigate themselves away from the serious social issues that underlie the present ecological crisis and retreat to strategies of personal ‘self-transformation’ and ‘enrichment’ that are predicated on myths, metaphors, rituals, and ‘green’ consumerism.”<sup>29</sup>

Although Bookchin’s own denigration of what may be called poetic modalities, his caricature of certain strands of feminism, and similarly his equation—which he has rendered explicit elsewhere—of deep ecology with gnosticism and witchcraft, sheer woolliness about pre-literate man’s supposed oneness with nature, and Oriental forms of “mysticism”—which are better recognized in the West than they are in the East—all equally point to the acute limitations in his own thinking, the force of his criticism cannot but be acknowledged by those who are conversant with the history of how radical movements and philosophies are almost invariably denuded of their political force in the United States. Indeed, Bookchin and many others have gone much further in denouncing deep ecology for its fascistic tendencies. It is alleged that deep ecology’s valorization of “rootedness in the soil,” its excessive biocentrism, and its undifferentiated love of animals make it the companionable mate of the “nature mysticism” of National Socialism. It is Nazi Germany that, in November 1933, passed the first law in the Western world calling for the explicit protection of animals as beings-in-themselves—in other words, a law which “would recognize the right which animals inherently possess to be protected in and of themselves.”<sup>30</sup> One philosopher finds in Nazi legislation and deep ecology “a shared revalorization of the *primitive* state against that of (alleged) civilization,” the “same *romantic and/or sentimental* representation of the relationship between nature and culture.”<sup>31</sup> Of course, this criticism is little more than the tiresome rejoinder that we all are, or ought to be (barring the reticence of some obdurate primitives), the children of the Enlightenment, and that no

---

<sup>29</sup> Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Cited by Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 91–100.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93. See also the discussion in Michael Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth’s Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 170–83.

critique of modernity is to be permitted except in categories and terms rendered permissible by the Enlightenment's own structures of thought. Those critiques that seek to lay bare the purported fascism of deep ecology seem woefully unaware of their own oppressive parochialism.

By far the most sustained critique of deep ecology, however, has emanated from within ecofeminism. Where social ecology finds deep ecology inadequately grounded in an awareness of the nature of modern social relations, ecofeminism finds deep ecology deeply embedded in the same patriarchal assumptions which men generally hold, and which as a consequence render them sharply deficient in political awareness. The Australian feminist Ariel Kay Salleh has observed that the formulations of deep ecology use "the generic term *Man* in a case where use of a generic term is not applicable." This is no minor matter, for women's experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and menopause already ground their consciousness "in the knowledge of being coterminous with Nature." What the deep ecologist seeks to introduce as an "abstract ethical construct," namely, the desirability of a communion with nature on the principle of shared living, already constitutes part of women's experiences.<sup>32</sup> Although deep ecology purports to celebrate life-affirming values, its advocacy of strict population control constitutes an intervention in natural life processes, and to this extent it partakes of the same rationalist and technicist world view that it otherwise critiques.

While deep ecology recognizes the fact of oppression, and deplores man's exploitation of man and of nature, it is not sufficiently attentive to man's oppression of woman: this is an extraordinary shortcoming, as "the parallel between the original exploitation" of nature and "nurturant women" is obscured.<sup>33</sup>

Although appreciative of deep ecologists' endeavors to be more humane and caring, Salleh characterizes their objective, the "spiritual development of 'personhood,'" as the "self-estranged male reaching for the original androgynous natural unity within himself." Deep ecology, she writes, is a largely "self-congratulatory reformist move," and it represents "a spiritual search for people in a barren secular age."<sup>34</sup> It is surely no accident that it is the most secular versions of Eastern spiritual traditions, such as Zen Buddhism and the thought of Krishnamurti, that have attracted the largest followings in the West. Even with regard to deep ecology's most sustained contribution, the rejection of the "instrumentalist pragmatism of the resource-management approach to the environmental crisis," Salleh finds deep ecology's shortcomings ominous. She

---

<sup>32</sup> This paragraph draws on Ariel Kay Salleh, "Deeper than Deep Ecology: The Eco-Feminist Connection," *Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 4 (1984): 340-41.

<sup>33</sup> The argument is reinforced in Ariel Salleh, "The Ecofeminism/Deep Ecology Debate: A Reply to Patriarchal Reason," *Environmental Ethics* 14, no. 3 (1992): 204; idem, "Deeper than Deep Ecology," p. 341.

<sup>34</sup> Salleh, "Deeper than Deep Ecology," pp. 344-45.

makes the very pointed remark that the constant references to “implementation of policies,” “exponential growth of technical skill and intervention,” and the like betray the fact that “the masculine sense of self-worth in our culture has become so entrenched in scientific habits of thought, that it is very hard for men to argue persuasively without recourse to terms like these for validation.” Naess’s own writings are pervaded by terms such as “rules,” “postulates,” “hypotheses,” and “policy formulations,” and his “overview of ecosophy is a highly academic and positivized one, dressed up in the jargon of current science-dominated standards of acceptability.”<sup>35</sup>

It was another feminist writer who suggested that ethics has been discussed primarily in the language of the father. This is the language of fairness, justice, and rights. Perhaps, if ethics deigned to speak in the language of the mother, the language of human caring, and of the memory equally of caring and of being cared for, deep ecology might become truly deep.<sup>36</sup> It is this language that, as we have seen in the expression of Bookchin’s outrage, hard-nosed realists will seek to mock, and not always without cause. Caring, too, in the manner of everything else, has become an industry with its management specialists, professionals, and various other staffers; it has also become, in a world saturated by the media, pop psychology, and political correctness, a substitute for thought, reflection, spiritual discipline, and equanimity. Nonetheless, the contamination of the ethic of caring by marketing and crude psychological reductionism does not entirely vitiate the possibility that we can yet render ourselves ecological in more ways than deep ecology can possibly imagine. The “deep ecology movement will not truly happen,” writes Ariel Salleh, “until men are brave enough to rediscover and to love the woman inside themselves.”<sup>37</sup> No ecology, howsoever deep, can give us pregnant fathers. How far beyond deep ecology, then, does Gandhi take us?

#### IV. GANDHI AND THE ECOLOGICAL VIEW OF LIFE

Although Gandhi was not a philosopher of ecology, and can only be called an environmentalist with considerable difficulty, he strikes a remarkable chord with all those who have cared for the environment, practiced vegetarianism, cherished the principles of non-violence, resisted the depredations of developers, or accorded animals the dignity of humans. It is useful to recall that the word *ecology* is derived from *economy* (from the Greek *oeconomy*) which itself has little to do, in its primal sense, with inquiries made by those who are now styled economists; rather, economy was understood to pertain to the most

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 342–43.

<sup>36</sup> Patsy Hallen, “Making Peace with Nature: Why Ecology Needs Feminism,” in Drenegson and Inoue, eds., *The Deep Ecology Movement*, p. 208; citing Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Salleh, “Deeper than Deep Ecology,” p. 345.

efficient and least costly management of household affairs. It is the economy of lifestyle that Thoreau spoke of in *Walden*—and indeed of conduct, speech, and thought—that Gandhi ruthlessly put into practice in his various ashrams. To follow the trajectory from *economy* to *ecology*, let us recall that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *ecology* as the “science of the economy of animals and plants,” and this definition implies the imperative to look after animals, plants, and the environment to which they bear a relation. Ecology consequently means, in the first instance, that we are commanded to economize, or render less wasteful, our use of the Earth’s resources. To do so, we have to use our own resources, howsoever narrowly conceived, with wisdom and with the utmost respect for economy. On no other grounds can we explain the many apparently enigmatic, and some would say bizarre or idiosyncratic, practices of thought and conduct in which Gandhi engaged.

A recent study of Gandhi which describes him as “a practicing ecological yogi” argues that it is from his observance of certain environmental and ethical principles, which variously counsel us to practice austerity, introspect on the self, cultivate contentment, learn self-reliance, renounce possessions beyond our needs, and always keep in mind the interests of the weakest and the poor, that Gandhi forged his political movement; and it is from these same principles, argues Khoshoo, that Gandhi worked to develop his ideas of “sustainable development.”<sup>38</sup> It is doubtful, however, that Gandhi spoke at all in the language of “development,” much less in the language of “sustainable development,” since the very idea of development owes a great deal to the politics of knowledge in the post-World War II period.<sup>39</sup> Besides, ethics, ecology, and politics were all closely and even indistinguishably interwoven into the fabric of his thought and social practices. If, for instance, his practice of observing twenty-four hours of silence on a regular basis was a mode of conserving his energy, entering into an introspective state, and listening to what he called the still voice within, it was also a way of signifying his dissent from ordinary models of communication with the British and establishing the discourse on his own terms. Similarly, Gandhi deployed fasting not only to open negotiations with the British or (more frequently) various Indian communities, but to cleanse his own body, free his mind of impure thoughts, feminize the public realm, and even to partake in the experience of deprivation from which countless millions of Indians suffered. Gandhi deplored the idea of waste, and fasting was a sure means of ascertaining the true needs of the body and preserving its ecological equanimity.

In considering Gandhi in relation to ecology, then, his entire life opens up before us, a life documented, moreover, in almost excruciatingly minute detail.

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 8.

<sup>39</sup> See Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Whatever Gandhi's propensity to be ecological in thought and conduct, he was an extraordinarily prolific writer: yet he did not waste a word. To write poorly was to do violence to the language and to the recipient of one's missives, and Gandhi chose his words with great care. He was also quite adamant that nothing was to remain of his writings upon his death. "My writings should be cremated with my body," he wrote, adding: "What I have done will endure, not what I have said or written."<sup>40</sup> Indeed, what is remarkable about Gandhi's life is that, unlike most public figures with a political career, whose social practices are tradition-bound even when their pronouncements are radical, Gandhi was extremely conservative in his pronouncements while being radical in his conduct. Although he thought that men would continue to be the principal breadwinners for the family, his ashrams were run firmly on the principle that women and men would share equally in all the work. Spinning in village India might well be a task undertaken by women, but Gandhi himself spun every day. If he was insistent that women were to remain chaste, he was even more adamant that such chastity was incumbent on men, who had rendered women into sexual objects.<sup>41</sup> The profoundly ecological impetus of his style here demands recognition: promising little, he was generous in the fulfillment of his word. Nature may appear to be niggardly, but its rewards are rich and deeper than we habitually imagine.

In Gandhi's social practices and conduct is writ large his ecological vision of life. First, as nature provides for the largest animals as much as it provides for its smallest creations, so Gandhi allowed this principle to guide him in his political and social relations with all manner of women and men. Gandhi's close disciple and attendant, Mirabehn, wrote that while he worked alongside everyone else in the ashram, he would carry on his voluminous correspondence and grant interviews. "Big people of all parties, and of many different nations would come to see Bapu, but he would give equal attention to the poorest peasant who might come with a genuine problem."<sup>42</sup> In the midst of important political negotiations with senior British officials, he would take the time to tend to his goat. It is this aspect of Gandhi's personality that his contemporary, the short-story writer Acharya Chatursen Shastri, captured when, in a story about Gandhi, he showed him peeling potatoes while in a conversation with a little boy.<sup>43</sup> He remained supremely indifferent to considerations of power, prestige, and status in choosing his companions; similarly, he was as attentive to the minutest details as he was to matters of national importance. One of his

---

<sup>40</sup> Cited by Sunil Khilnani, "A Bodily Drama," *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 August 1997.

<sup>41</sup> See Puspha Joshi, *Gandhi on Women* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1990); for his experiments in the kitchen and thoughts on food, see M. K. Gandhi, *Key to Health*, trans. Sushila Nayar (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1948), pp. 10–24.

<sup>42</sup> Gupta, *Mira Behn: Gandhi's Daughter Disciple*, pp. 286–87.

<sup>43</sup> Acharya Chatursen Shastri, "Lauhapurusha" (in Hindi); translated into English by Vinay Lal as "The Iron Man," unpublished manuscript.

associates has reported—and such stories are legion—that when news reached Gandhi of the illness of the daughter of a friend, he wrote to her a long letter in the midst of an intense political struggle in Rajkot, detailing the medicines that she was to take, the food that she was to avoid, and the precautions she was to exercise. Though he was notoriously thrifty, writing even some of his letters on the back of envelopes addressed to him, he did not begrudge spending a large sum of money to send her a telegram.<sup>44</sup> His own grandniece, Manu, pointing to the meticulous care with which Gandhi tended to her personal needs, all the while that he was engaged in negotiations for Indian independence, perhaps showered him with the most unusual honor when, in writing a short book about him, she called it *Bapu—My Mother*.<sup>45</sup>

Second, without being an advocate of wilderness as that is commonly understood today, Gandhi was resolutely of the view that nature should be allowed to take its own course. Naess has written that he “even prohibited people from having a stock of medicines against poisonous bites. He believed in the possibility of satisfactory coexistence and he proved right. There were no accidents. . . .”<sup>46</sup> His experiments in nature care are well-known, as is his advocacy of enemas and mud baths, but there is more to these narratives than his rejection of modern medicine. Mirabehn has reported that one day as Gandhi worked in a tent in the afternoon heat of 110 degrees, she and some other workers became exasperated at their inability to keep away the hordes of flies. “I’m told they have come down from the tree tops for shade, Bapu,” said Mirabehn, whereupon he replied: “Yes. It is not for me to blame them. If God had made me one such, I should have done exactly the same.”<sup>47</sup> Gandhi scarcely required the verdict of the biologist, wildlife trainer, or zoologist to hold to the view that nature’s creatures mind their own business, and that if humans were to do the same, we would not be required to legislate the health of all species. On occasion a cobra would come into Gandhi’s room: there were clear instructions that it was not to be killed even if it bit him, though Gandhi did not prevent others from killing snakes. “I do not want to live,” he wrote, “at the cost of the life even of a snake.”<sup>48</sup> Gandhi was quite willing to share his universe with animals and reptiles, without rendering them into objects of pity, curiosity, or amusement. He described himself as wanting “to realise identity with even the crawling things upon Earth, because we claim descent from the same God, and that being so, all life in whatever form it appears must essentially be so,”<sup>49</sup> but it is altogether improbable that he would have followed some deep ecologists in treating animals, insects, and plants as persons.

---

<sup>44</sup> Kalelkar, *Stray Glimpses of Bapu*, pp. 165–66.

<sup>45</sup> Manubehn Gandhi, *Bapu—My Mother* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1948).

<sup>46</sup> Naess, “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach,” p. 28; see n. 8 above.

<sup>47</sup> Gupta, *Mira Behn: Gandhi’s Daughter Disciple*, p. 120.

<sup>48</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Truth is God* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1959), p. 102.

<sup>49</sup> Gandhi, *Truth is God*, p. 50.

Although it may be reasonable to infer that it was Gandhi's adherence to non-violence that would have prevented him from taking the life of a snake, such an interpretation ignores the critical primacy accorded to *satya* (truth) over *ahimsa* (non-violence) in Gandhian thinking, much as it overlooks the fact that Gandhi was an advocate of the mercy killing of animals. The incident when he had a young calf in his ashram put to death with an injection when she could not be saved from an extreme illness is well-known; less known is the incident of the stray dogs.<sup>50</sup> In 1926, Ambalal Sarabhai, a textile magnate in Ahmedabad and friend of Gandhi, rounded up sixty rabid dogs on his properties and had them shot; subsequently, feeling repentant, he approached Gandhi to share his anguish with him. Gandhi comforted him with the remark, "What else could be done?"<sup>51</sup> When the Ahmedabad Humanitarian Society came to know of this remark, it sought an urgent explanation from Gandhi; and thereafter, for the next three months, as Gandhi himself took this issue to the public, he was plummeted with letters accusing him of cruelty to animals and of forsaking his commitment to *ahimsa*. Throughout, while admitting that he might have erred, Gandhi explained his position with consistency and clarity: "At times we may be faced with the unavoidable duty," Gandhi remarked, "of killing a man who is found in the act of killing people."<sup>52</sup> Roving dogs, particularly a swarm of them, were a "menace" to society; the multiplication of them was quite unnecessary; and those who now counseled their protection on the grounds of religion, even at cost to the life and safety of humans, were to be reminded that to practice "the religion of humanity" required also the recognition that "we offend against dogs as a class by suffering them to stray and live on crumbs or savings from our plates that we throw at them and we injure our neighbours also by doing so."<sup>53</sup> Gandhi unequivocally rejected the argument that protection must always entail "mere refraining from killing"; quite to the contrary, "Torture or participation, direct or indirect, in the unnecessary multiplication of those that must die is *himsa* [violence]."<sup>54</sup> As he was to reiterate in another rejoinder, "Merely taking life is not always *himsa*, one may even say that there is sometimes more *himsa* in not taking life."<sup>55</sup>

Third, Gandhi transformed the idea of waste and rendered it pregnant with meanings that were the inverse of those meanings invested in it by European representational regimes. Almost nothing was as much anathema to European colonizers as the idea that the vast lands lying before their gaze, whether in

---

<sup>50</sup> Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), p. 239.

<sup>51</sup> M. K. Gandhi, "Is this Humanity?" no. 1, in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 100 vols. (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1969), vol. 31, p. 486. Gandhi penned eight articles on this subject under the title "Is this Humanity?" All citations are from these articles.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 31, p. 487.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 31, pp. 505–06

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 31, p. 505.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 31, p. 525.

largely barren areas of Australia and Canada, or in the densely inhabited parts of India, were entirely unproductive or certainly not as productive as they thought desirable. To render them fertile, they had to first render them productive of meaning, as something other than realms of emptiness (and hence of nothingness), which was only possible by construing them as wastelands which required the brain, will, and energy of white men to effect their transformation. Gandhi, on the other hand, was inclined to the opposite view that man was prone to transform whatever he touched, howsoever fertile, fecund, or productive, into waste. His close disciple and associate, Kaka Kalelkar, narrates that he was in the habit of breaking off an entire twig merely for four or five *neem* leaves he needed to rub on the fibers of the carding-bow to make its strings pliant and supple. When Gandhi saw that, he remarked: "This is violence. We should pluck the required number of leaves after offering an apology to the tree for doing so. But you broke off the whole twig, which is wasteful and wrong."<sup>56</sup> He also described himself as pained that people would "pluck masses of delicate blossoms" and fling them in his face or string them around his neck."<sup>57</sup> Yet these acts alone were not wasteful: there was also human waste, around the disposal of which an entire and none too savory history of India can be written. While it was a matter of shame that Indian society had set apart a special class of people to deal with the disposal of human excrement, whose occupation made them the most despised members of society, Gandhi found it imperative to bring this matter to the fore and make it as much a subject of national importance as the attainment of political independence and the reform of degraded institutions. Unlike the vast majority of caste Hindus, Gandhi did not allow anyone else to dispose of his waste. His ashrams were repositories for endeavors to change human waste into organic fertilizer, and Gandhi engaged in ceaseless experiments to invent toilets that would be less of a drain on scarce water resources.

Fourth, Gandhi did not make of his ecological sensitivities a cult or religion to which unquestioning fealty was demanded. His attitude toward meat is illustrative in this respect. Although he was himself a very strict vegetarian, he was not insistent that everyone else should be forbidden from eating meat. Khoshoo credits him with the saying, "I am a puritan myself but I am catholic towards others," and he rightly rejects the notion that Gandhi might have been a "puritanical vegetarian."<sup>58</sup> But this is a testimony only to Gandhi's liberality, not to that ecumenical feature of his thinking which is based on a different notion of largesse. He even had meat served to European visitors at his ashram who were habituated to meat at every meal. Gandhi himself partook of milk and milk

---

<sup>56</sup> Kalarthi, *Anecdotes from Bapu's Life*, p. 31. Mirabehn has recounted having had a similar experience and being reprimanded by Gandhi for plucking too many leaves, that too at night when trees are resting (see Gupta, *Mira Behn: Gandhiji's Daughter Disciple*, p. 130).

<sup>57</sup> Gupta, *Mira Behn: Gandhiji's Daughter Disciple*, p. 130.

<sup>58</sup> Khoshoo, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Apostle of Applied Human Ecology*, p. 19.

products, unlike those who style themselves “vegans” in the United States, and his reverence for life and respect for animals did not border on that fanaticism which is only another name for violence. Once, when meat had been placed next to Gandhi’s food in the refrigerator at a friend’s home where he was staying, his intimate associate, Mirabehn, became extremely agitated and lashed out at the kitchen staff. Gandhi’s own response was to take some of the grapes placed next to the meat and pop them into his mouth; turning then to Mirabehn, he said: “We are guests in our friend’s house, and it would not be right for us to impose our idea upon him or upon anyone. People whose custom it is to eat meat should not stop doing so simply because I am present.” Similarly, though Gandhi championed prohibition, he condemned altogether the principle of drinking on the sly; as he told one disciple, “I would much rather you were a drinker, even a heavy drinker, than that there should be any deceit in the matter.”<sup>59</sup>

Gandhi’s entire life, I would submit, constitutes an ecological treatise, and it is no exaggeration to suggest that he left us, in his life, with the last of the Upanishads or “forest books.” He dispelled wisdom, but not from a mountain-top; he even waded through human waste as he walked around riot-torn villages, but he retained his equanimity. The grounding for his own ecological vision was clearly furnished by what he understood, perhaps with some naiveté, as the ecological wisdom of India’s epic and religious literature, just as it is amply clear that in his practice of simple living and non-violence, and advocacy of *satya* and *brahmacharya*, Gandhi sought to put the principles of an ecologically aware life into motion. But these are truisms that shall have to be inflected in more than the ordinary fashion, and yield more than the clichéd observations that Gandhi was the “prophet of non-violence” or an astute political campaigner unusually interested in moral questions, if we are to be fully cognizant of the profound manner in which Gandhi’s entire life functioned much like an ecosystem. This is one life in which every minute act, emotion, or thought was not without its place: the brevity of Gandhi’s enormous writings, his small meals of nuts and fruits, his morning ablutions and everyday bodily practices, his periodic observances of silence, his morning walks, his cultivation of the small as much as of the big, his abhorrence of waste, his resort to fasting—all these point to the manner in which the symphony was orchestrated. Though the moralists, non-violent activists, feminists, journalists, social reformers, trade union leaders, peasants, prohibitionists, nature-cure lovers, nudists, critics of Western medicine, renouncers and scores of others will all find in Gandhi something to sustain them in their aspirations and objectives, Gandhi will remain elusive unless the deeply ecological foundations of his life are recognized.

---

<sup>59</sup> Patel and Sykes, *Gandhi: His Gift of the Fight*, pp. 103–04.