

Nonviolent Economics: From India to the L.A. Eco-village

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For adherents of principled nonviolence, the law of *ahimsa*, or non-harming, is more than just a tactic to attain short-term goals: it is a systematic way of life, aimed at building a lasting peace from the individual to the global level and contributing to the welfare of all. In a society of individuals who truly want to refrain from harming one another, the distribution of resources would be managed in such a way as to reduce excessive concentration of wealth, and provide everyone with basic needs. Market capitalism, the dominant model of economics today, is diametrically opposed to this picture: capitalists maximize profits through the continual expansion of production and consumption, which results in a high concentration of wealth. In fact, 20 percent of the world's population uses 86 percent of its resources, while many people are left to survive on only a dollar or two per day. Mahatma Gandhi, who dedicated his life to the betterment of humankind, realized the problems inherent in this system and its ties to dehumanization and violence. The legacy of his ideas and work offers a guide to transforming market capitalism into a more humane system of economics.

In his treatise *Hind Swaraj* (Indian Home Rule), Gandhi comes to an ominous conclusion about the "Western" way of life, stating, "This civilization is such that one only has to be patient and it will be self-destroyed."¹ He believed that a lifestyle based upon continual material profit was unsustainable because it relied on environmental exploitation and emphasized the needs of the market over humans' livelihoods. In place of this flawed system, the Mahatma promoted an economic and social order based upon decentralization, needs-based production, a system of "trusteeship" drawing on the principle of non-possessiveness and the concept of "bread labor." The goal of such a society would not be industrial growth or the enhancement of unnecessary privileges for a few, but the spiritual and material "uplift of all." *Svadeshi*, meaning "own region," is a key element of Gandhian economic theory.¹

To prevent dependency on foreign countries and economic exploitation, Gandhi insisted that small communities must become self-sufficient in meeting their own basic material needs. Thus, he appealed to Indians to boycott British products and instead take up the practice of spinning *khadi* — the Urdu word for cotton — and supporting cottage

industries. From the Gandhian point of view, local autonomy is not "backwards" but actually leads to healthier international relationships: with the freedom of self-sufficiency comes the acceptance of responsibility for one's actions. In a system based on *svadeshi*, the consequences of negative actions are contained within smaller communities. Local production is also inherently democratic, because it decentralizes power and allows small groups of people to make the economic, political and social decisions that best fit the specific needs of their community. In addition, followers of Gandhian economics balance the regional focus of *svadeshi* with a recognition of and respect for interconnectedness and equality at the global level.

Gandhi is known for making the statement, "There is enough in the world for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed." In this spirit, overconsumption in one region of the world means that many people elsewhere will be forced to live in poverty, which is a form of violence in itself. Therefore, self-control is essential to a nonviolent system of economics.² Any production in such a system would be geared towards meeting basic needs, replacing the capitalist tendency towards excessive consumption. E.F. Schumacher refers to this type of production as an "economy of permanence," based on careful wisdom rather than blind "progress."³ A simple lifestyle allows one to respect others' needs and live in harmony with the human community, the animal community and the environment.

The Gandhian institution of trusteeship is related to the idea of a simple and compassionate lifestyle. The Mahatma considered this a realistic solution to the problem of world poverty, and a painless way of allowing the upper and middle classes to "reform themselves" through selfless aid to the less fortunate. In the system of trusteeship, individuals would be expected to act as "trustees" and use their wealth for the benefit of others. In formulating his economic theory, Gandhi denied the existence of personal property rights, but did not alienate property owners by coercing them to give up their possessions. Instead, he believed that nonviolent persuasion could affect a "change of heart" in these capitalists.

A central assumption in the heart unity paradigm is the ability of human beings to self-improve; all nonviolent activity is geared toward awakening this universal impulse. In this sense, trusteeship allows each individual to unleash their full potential to render selfless service, and enhance their ability

to contribute to the well-being of humankind. On the other hand, Gandhi reasoned that if the economically privileged consciously continue to maintain a sense of personal ownership and use their resources for selfish ends, they will ultimately be hurting themselves by isolating themselves from other human beings for the sake of an attachment to impermanent material possessions.

Another component of Gandhian economics is the universal requirement of "bread labor." Gandhi felt that it was necessary to recognize the "dignity of labor" and to carry this recognition into action by performing a minimum amount of physical labor, despite one's main occupation or position in life.⁴ Whereas capitalist economists see labor as a necessary evil and a means to the end of consumption, Gandhi viewed it as useful and fulfilling in itself. Additionally, he believed that mutual constructive labor was the best way to bring people together in a spirit of harmony. Gandhi promoted this principle on his ashrams, where community members worked to cultivate the land and shared equally in performing daily chores. "Bread labor" is very egalitarian because everyone contributes her part without sacrificing her dignity in performing physical tasks that are considered inferior by the rest of society. In addition, bread labor resonates with the ideal of a simple lifestyle based on meeting the basic needs of the community.

Living in an advanced industrial society, it may be less realistic for Americans to grow their own food or make clothing than it was for inhabitants in the villages of Gandhi's rural India. However, more and more people in the developed world are finding creative ways to incorporate equitable and sustainable economics into their daily lives. Eco-villages are one of the best examples of current attempts at shifting to a nonviolent method of living. In these "human scale neighborhoods," residents and friends work together to "create a healthy community socially, physically and economically."⁵ The 500 residents of an urban ecovillage in Los Angeles, founded in 1993, have initiated environmental education programs in K-12 schools, planted small gardens and over 100 fruit trees, established a tradition of potluck meals, and carried out several other projects to transform their urban community into a "soil-regenerating, food-producing, soul-healing environment."⁶ Lastly, they conduct regular tours to expose other Americans to this sustainable lifestyle. The L.A. Eco-Village Demonstration is only one part of an international network of sustainable neighborhood groups that seek to model healthier ways of living based on environmental sustainability and socioeconomic justice.⁷



Members of the Los Angeles Ecovillage hold a weaving workshop in their courtyard. Gandhi believed everyone should practice one hour per day of 'bread labour' - the basic work to meet survival needs.

On a smaller scale, seemingly insignificant changes in consumption patterns and daily life can make a big difference. Buying organic produce from the local farmer's market is *svadeshi* in action. The residents of the University Students' Cooperative Association contribute five hours of "workshift" per week, performing a variety of tasks such as cooking, cleaning, garden work, or house maintenance to keep their system of student-owned housing and cooperative living running smoothly.⁸ Also, community service organizations such as Habitat for Humanity exemplify the Gandhian ideal of manual labor performed in the service of others.

Martin Luther King once stated, "The good and just society is neither the thesis of capitalism nor the antithesis of communism, but a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism."⁹ The foundations of this "socially conscious democracy" can be found in the principles of Gandhian economics outlined above. While government reforms are certainly necessary, these are ultimately top-down measures that are not sufficient to provoke a "true revolution in values" and cause human beings to change their own economic behavior. Gandhian economics, on the other hand, place an emphasis on human agency or "person power," appealing to the grassroots nature of sustainable economic and social change. This approach is, in the end, both more revolutionary and easier to realize in practical terms.

References:

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