Q: **GANDHI AND ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT**

The life and work of Gandhi have had a considerable influence on the contemporary environmental movement in India. This movement truly began with the Chipko Andolan in April 1973; in one of the first printed accounts of Chipko, a breathless journalist announced that Gandhi’s ghost had saved the Himalayan trees. Ever since, Mahatma Gandhi has been the usually acknowledged and occasionally unacknowledged patron saint of the environmental movement. From the Chipko Andolan to the Narmada Bachao Andolan, environmental activists have relied heavily on Gandhian techniques of non-violent protest, and have drawn abundantly on Gandhi’s polemic against heavy industrialization.

Again, some of the movement’s better known figures, for example, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sunderlal Bahuguna, Baba Amte, and Medha Patkar, have repeatedly underlined their own debt to Gandhi. One must of course not deny other influences; for under the broad umbrella of the Indian environmental movement are many groups with little connection to Gandhi. Think, for example, of an organization like the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad; a group coming from a background of Marxism , but whose contribution to the environmental movement is second to none. Other voluntary groups in the environment field are variously influence by socialism, liberation theology and traditions of self-help. All the same, it is probably fair to say that the life and practise of Gandhi are the single most important influence on the environmental movement.

Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna were also two gandhain influencers.

Urban admirers of Chipko usually identified Chandi Prasad or Sunderlal supporters, but there is in fact example reason to celebrate both men. Bhatt and his organization, the Dashauli Gram Swarajya Mandal, played a seminal role in the origins of Chipko: the technique itself was suggested by Bhatt to the villagers of Mandal. Since coordinating those early protests against commercial forestry, the DGSM has focused increasingly on environmental restoration. Here it has taken the initiative in organizing women for afforestation work in villages of the Alakananda valley, where its tree planting and protection programme have been a good deal m ore successful than the lavishly funded schemes of the Forest Department. Whereas Chandi Prasad Bhatt must be reckoned the pioneer of Chipko, Sunderlal Bahuguna has a record of social work that goes back even further. He and his wife, vimala , were among the first group of Sarvodaya workers trained in the hills by Sarla Devi, a remarkable English disciple of Mahatma Gandhi who moved to Kumaun in the 1940s. In the Bhageerathi valley, which is his home base, Bahuguna organized several important Chipko protests between 1977 and 1980.

In the years since, where Bhatt and his colleagues have concentrated on ecological restoration within the Himalaya, Bahuguna has chosen to take the message of Chipko beyond the hills. An indefatigable padayatri, with the endurance of men half his age, he has traveled widely in India and abroad. He is a captivating speaker too, and in this capacity has done a great deal to alert the urban intelligentsia (in particular) to the dangers of unbridled materialism. These two Chipko leaders are, among the greatest living Indians. The example of Gandhi animates the lives of both men, that each has taken something distinctive from the life of the master. Here Bahuguna, in his uncompromising denunciation of industrial society, more closely follows the Gandhi of Hind Swaraj (1990), that slim volume which contains a massive indictment of modern civilization. As expressed through his walking tours and lectures, Bhatt and his group are more in line with the Gandhi of the Sabarmati and Wardha ashrams. Chandi Prasad’s work has helped infuse a new ecological meaning to the Mahatma’s ideal of gram swaraj, or village self-reliance.

The Chipko movement brought closely contact with their work. Those of who have been associated with the Narmada Bachao Andolan might like-wise have seen something of the spirit of Gandhi in the lives and actions of its leaders. The Chipko and Narmada Andolans are outstanding, but by no means isolated examples of the living heritage of Gandhi, as it is embodied in the contemporary environmental movement.

However, the environmentalists of today do not merely claim that they are following the example of Gandhi; they go on to argue that the Mahatma himself foresaw the ecological crisis of modern industrial society. So, Gandhi was indeed an early environmentalist is usually answered in the affirmative by his admirers, but rarely with supporting evidence. That is, it is taken for granted that Gandhi anticipated environmental concerns, but without demonstrating precisely where and in what ways he did so. If at all his writings are invoked for the purpose, it is almost always his work hind Swaraj (published in 1909) which a distinguished Gandhian of the present day has claimed gives us an ‘alternate perspective’ on development while explaining how ‘the current mode of development is exploitative o f man by man and of Nature by man’ .

 In hind Swaraj this book was, of course, written on Gandhi while he in South Africa. On his return to India in 1914, Gandhi began immediately to acquaint himself at first hand with economic and social conditions in the village. Through his travels in the Indian countryside and the organization of those early satyagrahas among the peasants of Champaran and Kheda (in 1917 and 1918), Gandhi was to come face to face with colonialism as a system of economic exploitation, not merely— as had been his experience in South Africa— of racial discrimination.

Through his immersion in village India and this deeper understanding of colonialism, Gandhi came to see that it would be impossible for India to emulate western patterns of industrial development. It must be acknowledged at once that he does not anywhere offer an alternate model of devel-opment for India— for one thing, he was not a systematic thinker; for an-other, he was preoccupied with more pressing questions of political mobilization and social reform. All the same, scattered through his writings of the 1920s 1930s, and 1940s are clues to such an alternate path.

Gandhi’s reservations about the wholesale industrialization of India are usually ascribed to moral grounds— namely the selfishness and competitive-ness of modern society— but they also had markedly ecological undertones. Take this remarkable passage, from Young India of 20 December 1928:Perhaps Gandhi would not have been surprised. As he recognized, the bias towards urban-industrial development could result only in a one-sided exploitation of the hinterland. In 1946, he had expressed this with characteristic lucidity: ‘The blood of the villages is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built’. On an earlier occasion, Gandhi had, in his characteristically gentle yet forceful manner, alerted a gathering in Indore to the concentration of resources on which city life has come to rest. ‘We are sitting in this fine pandal under a blaze of electric lights’, he remarked, ‘but we do not know we are burning these lights at the expense of the poor’ ).In 1937, some years after he had moved to Wardha to devote himself to rural reconstruction, Gandhi defined his ideal Indian village.

Finally, Gandhi’s philosophical critique of modern civilization also has profound implications for the way we live and relate to the environment today. For him, ‘the distinguishing characteristic of modern civilization is an indefinite multiplicity of wants’; whereas ancient civilizations were marked by an ‘imperative restriction upon, and a strict regulating of, these wants’.