

## **DIVINE ENVIRONMENTALIST**

**M R Rajagopalan**

The title of the book\* is quite unusual. In a general context the term implies a godly person. The word Ecology refers to the study of the environment and the way plants, animals and human beings live together and affect each other—i.e. their inter-relationships. By using the term 'Applied Human Ecology' the author seems to imply Human Environment—and the whole title—implies Gandhiji was a 'divine environmentalist'.

Nevertheless, the title is strange. Environmental problems, pollution, etc. started gaining attention only from 1970s. In 1980s and 1990s all over the world Environmental pollution was recognized as the greatest crisis facing humanity. Mahatma Gandhi lived upto January, 1948. In truth no scientist of any discipline had even hinted or mentioned about any environmental problem before 1960s and 1970s. It is equally true that Gandhiji has never commented on environmental issues because there was no such issue during his life time. Yet, the author has justified the title by his remarks in the opening page that Gandhiji "was much ahead of his time... Few could have made such futuristic statements on environment and development particularly when, at that time, the environmental problems were either not too obvious, or at least were only in their incipient stages. It needed the Mahatma's mind and eye to discern these, and talk and write about the same. This only shows his forethought and vision of the state of things to come."

T N Khoshoo, the author of the book under review has brilliantly made Gandhiji's famous statement that "My life is my message" as the key stone for his work. True, Gandhiji's life was a statement on environmental issues—though futuristic—among other things. There are any number of illustrations to prove this point. A couple of quotes would be in order:

"His personal life style was the most sustainable one - simple, austere, clean, need based, adequate worldly possessions and reasonably comfortable. He thus identified himself with the poorest in the country who were irresistibly drawn towards him. His strength came from the fact that he preached what he practiced. He experimented first on himself and then shared his experience with others. His book "My Experiments with Truth stands testimony to this."

"Gandhian model of Rural Development envisaged that governance should be bottom up and not top down; goals should be self-defined and not stranger defined. Production should be aimed at basic goods to fulfil basic needs with use values and not at non-basic and greed oriented luxury goods with exchange-values; the process should be production by masses—not mass production and the whole approach should be pluralist and singularist. He felt that unless India focuses on the economic development of villages and villagers, which are the weakest link in the socio-economic chain, the country cannot become strong in the real sense of the word. His chief aim was to strengthen political independence with economic independence."

His Ashrams were located in open and rustic rural settings and were based on self-help including cleaning latrines by inmates themselves, local self-reliance, participatory management, gender equality, etc. the importance of which has been realized only now. According to N Radha-krishnan "The ashram or the communities Gandhi founded, both in South Africa and in India, were meaningful centers where Gandhi demonstrated with convincing success how each member of the community could live in harmony with nature. The community life Gandhi was developing consisted of manual labour, tree planting, agriculture, simple life, and crafts. In short, they were attempts at self-sufficiency without invoking the blessings of the temptation from outside. While they could be described to be bold experiments, but by no stretch

of imagination could anyone say they were utopian ideals. The running and recurrent principle of the community life was to live according to the rhythm of nature and in harmony with nature with minimum needs and not to exploit nature beyond taking what nature offers."

The author observes that today the human race is at the cross roads; the present eco-degradation and pollution are the result of greed of the rich, need of the poor to eke an existence, and careless application of technology. He continues "Humankind, for its survival, has to prepare itself for an Ecological (or should we say Eco developmental) Revolution, which would be the fourth in a series. The first one was the Tool Making Revolution that took place over one million years ago when humankind, in its present physical form, just began to colonize the planet. This gave human beings a tremendous edge over all other animals and ensured their stabilization as a species. The second was the Agricultural Revolution some 10,000 years ago, when the human being took to agriculture and became a son of the soil (Bhoomiputra) rather than continue to remain a nomad. The third revolution took place in mid - 1700s when the steam engine was invented in England and coal became an energy source; this revolution was named the Industrial Revolution. The third revolution has been the worst for the environment of the planet even though it has been for a short period of only about 275 years. It has created tremendous ecological degradation and pollution of all sorts; and often the damage has been permanent".

The importance of environment is ever increasing and there is no compartment of life which is not affected by it.

This book, rather booklet is just of 71 pages long, including two appendices which take seven pages. It is very well written. Almost in every page there is a gem - either a quote of Gandhiji or a brilliant interpretation of Mahatma's statement.

Late Dr T N Khoshoo was one of the foremost environmental scientists of the country. His environmental canvas widened considerably when he was Secretary to the Government of India in the Department of Environment. He was Fellow of all the major science academies in the country, and had to his credit a number of prestigious medals, prizes and awards including the Padma Bhushan.

His achievements are best summed up in the citation that accompanies the award of the Indira Gandhi Paryavaran Puraskar, Government of India (1993) for his contributions to the field of environmental management and sustainable development:

"Dr T N Khoshoo's breadth of vision and depth of knowledge coupled with broad humanism has made him what he is today, a dedicated strategist for human survival. His work both in high office and outside relating to the management of resources, the utilization of biodiversity and the need to develop forests for long-range ecological security are path breaking". □□□

*\*Mahatma Gandhi : An Apostle of Applied Human Ecology* by T N Khoshoo