

Gandhian Interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita: A Solution to Sustainable Living

Gandhijska interpretacja Bhagavad Gity: rozwiązanie dla zrównoważonego życia

Namarta Sharma

MAIT, Department of Applied Sciences, Delhi, India
E-mails: namrata.ssharma@gmail.com, namratasharma@mait.ac.in
ORCID: 0000-0003-2397-2200

Abstract

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, an apostle of non-violence and satyagraha (holding firmly to truth), reiterates Lord Krishna's call to selfless action in his interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita to envisage a society wherein all the people of the world are able to make ends meet peacefully and prosper together to fulfil their needs. In fact, Gandhi's call for selfless action has a potential to impeccably synchronize with the action plan to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adumbrated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for a peaceful and decent living for all. To attain selfless action Gandhi propagates the need for inner progress by adopting spiritual means as material progress alone can derail nay destroy humanity and her habitat. Gandhi's commentary on the Bhagavad Gita's *Anasakti Yoga* is an effort to broadcast the message for a sustainable living of humanity that he himself experiments and experiences. The present paper posits that Gandhi's message of the detached service gives a solution to the world which is troubled with myriad problems especially the ones that are posing an ecological challenge that in itself has acquired the status of an existential threat. Gandhi postulates that desires tend to distract human beings from the right-living. How to subside the desires? To answer the above question Gandhi interprets the Bhagavad Gita in his novel way and presents his own life experiences in controlling the senses, the source of desires. This paper discusses that knowledge with devotion coupled with selfless action will pave the way to sustainable development.

Key words: selfless action, bread labour, sustainable living, knowledge, vegetarianism, devotion

Streszczenie

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, apostoł niestosowania przemocy i satyagraha (mocnego trzymania się prawdy), powtarza wezwanie Krishny do bezinteresownego działania w swoim rozumieniu Bhagavad Gity, do tworzenia społeczeństwa, w którym wszyscy ludzie na świecie są w stanie współpracować pokojowo, aby zaspokoić swoje potrzeby. Wezwanie Gandhiego do bezinteresownego działania ma potencjał, aby idealnie zsynchronizować się z planem działania na rzecz osiągnięcia Celów Zrównoważonego Rozwoju (SDGs) przedstawionych przez Program Narodów Zjednoczonych ds. Rozwoju (UNDP), na rzecz pokojowego i godnego życia wszystkich. Gandhi propaguje potrzebę wewnętrznego rozwoju duchowego, ponieważ sam postęp materialny może nawet zniszczyć ludzkość i jej środowisko. Komentarz Gandhiego do *Anasakti Yoga* z Bhagawadgity jest próbą przekazania przesłania o zrównoważonym życiu ludzkości, którego on sam doświadcza. Niniejszy artykuł zakłada, że przesłanie Gandhiego stanowi rozwiązanie dla świata, który jest dotknięty niezliczonymi problemami, zwłaszcza ekologicznymi, stanowiącymi zagrożenie dla ludzkości. Gandhi postuluje, że pożądania mają tendencję do odwracania uwagi ludzi od właściwego życia. Jak je stłumić? Aby odpowiedzieć na to pytanie, Gandhi interpretuje Bhagawadgitę na swój nowatorski sposób i przedstawia własne doświadczenia życiowe w kontrolowaniu zmysłów, źródła pożądań. Niniejszy artykuł sugeruje, że wiedza z oddaniem połączona z bezinteresownym działaniem utoruje drogę do zrównoważonego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: bezinteresowne działanie, praca przy chlebie, zrównoważony tryb życia, wiedza, wegetarianizm, oddanie

Introduction

The evolution of human civilization has unfolded itself through several distinct stages of development, each characterized by innovations that enhanced the relative quality of life of the time of their introduction and after, bringing greater ease and comfort to human existence. Central to this progression was the principle of *necessity is the mother of invention*, as civilizations consistently devised new methods and tools to overcome the challenges posed by both the nature and their fellow living beings especially marauding humans. From the construction of small and big dwellings designed to improve living conditions to the erection of fortified castles with thick walls, ramparts, ditches deliberately infested with crocodiles and towering watchtowers for protection against external threats, humanity's quest initially for safety and security and later on for comforts or even for show-off has been relentless. Early human societies also made significant strides in codifying the shrieks, growls and gestures into languages that eventually became the vehicle of communication and repository of knowledge, accumulating understanding on a wide array of subjects. The process of accumulation of knowledge and understanding about the world enabled the humankind to innovate further in a large number of fields such as agriculture, architecture, governance and also in the sphere of warfare. For instance, the advancement in the sphere of agriculture technology ensured initially a steady food supply and in later stages of abundant surplus that helped what we call division of labour that provided humans time away from agriculture to indulge in other walks of life necessary to run the complex societies. Similarly, advancements in metallurgy and weaponry proved increasingly helpful in provisioning defence mechanisms against human and non-human predators. The introduction of money as a medium of exchange further facilitated trade, enhancing human comfort by simplifying economic transactions and creating more sophisticated markets. However, accompanying this trajectory of mankind's progress was the growth of more and more complex cultures and civilizations. While on the hand, humankind apparently endeavoured to create a world that could provide safety from the foes of all sorts but also provided freedom from hunger. The pace of these developments, as many academicians and intellectuals from across the world think, found fuel for further acceleration in the wake of the European Renaissance, geographical explorations and growth of scientific temper in the Western world. After, the European Renaissance and still burgeoning stage of colonialism perhaps the most remarkable happening was the Industrial Revolution, which was to affect the world in ways that even today provide propulsion to an unprecedented development of science & technology by simply being the plinth. Nevertheless, in the last couple of centuries, human societies especially those in the northern hemisphere, grew leaps and bounds riding on their success in the field of science and technology as well as on acquiring more and more geographical areas as a result of colonization. The Industrial Revolution and colonization were tied to each other in the cause and effect relationship, however, often with role reversals. As we all know, as the world became more mechanized especially in so far as the process of production of goods was concerned, the machines needed more and more raw material and produced large amounts of finished products which in turn required vast markets and inordinate number of consumers. It was not that covetousness was something new to the society during this phase, however, with the growth of materialism and consumerism, grew greed and a desire to accumulate more than one needs for her decent sustenance. This we may assume was perhaps an unintended consequence of the materialistic spree or a deliberate overlooking of the flip side of garnering comforts at all costs that gradually began to manifest in the over-exploitation and depletion of the natural resources that are indeed finite, if not left alone to repair and re-grow. During the initial phase itself of what eventually was christened as globalization by the experts of the subject, the different forms of ecological imbalances became more evident as the rise of global trade and colonization picked up, with appalling consequences, such as the extinction of species of flora and fauna. One of the most talked about case was that of Dodo, a bird of Mauritius, which was hunted to her extinction by the 17th century. Thus, we can safely assume that with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, human greed accelerated exponentially, as mass production and the unchecked extraction of natural resources became central to economic growth. The focus on the expansion of industrialization, primarily based on the extraction of fossil fuels to run the factories, mills and other such activities required massive exploitation of all kinds of natural resources. Therefore, it was not surprising to find the forests across the globe dwindling and disappearing. Deforestation, excessive mining of common and rare materials, cutting of hills and digging a host of landscapes for stones and other materials to be used in making comfortable and also luxurious human habitation has led to enormous environmental degradation, pushing the planet on the brink of an existential climate crisis that has been recognised by the United Nations which has been clamouring for some time now for sustainable development through the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). During the last two centuries, particularly in the 20th Century, the world has seen an unprecedented level of pollution due to the use of fossil fuels, massive destruction of ecology and shrinking habitat for a large number of species, and biodiversity loss. This is contributing cumulatively to the current state of global climate change, which possesses the threat of a complete breakdown of life on Earth. The relentless pursuit of development in its present paradigm, if left unchecked, will only exacerbate the ongoing ecological crisis, further

imperilling the future of both humanity and the natural world. Given this dire context, it is imperative for contemporary societies to reassess their notion of progress and adopt more sustainable practices that integrate economic development with environmental stewardship. However, as Pankojini Mulia (2016) argues, rigid adherence to the strong sustainability model – one that prioritizes ecological preservation above all else – may prove unfeasible under the current global paradigm. Mulia contends that this model, while theoretically appealing, would ultimately incite conflict at multiple levels: among humans over resources such as food, water, and shelter, and between humans and animals, whose needs would increasingly overlap with those of expanding human populations. This underscores the inherent tension between the imperatives of development and ecological preservation.

Furthermore, Mulia emphasizes that modern society cannot simply reverse the clock to an era of harmony with nature. The technological advancements, industrial growth, and urbanization that define contemporary civilization are now deeply embedded in its structures. To expect societies to abandon these pillars of modernity would be both unrealistic and disruptive, threatening global economies, societal stability, and livelihoods. While the environmental consequences of unchecked development are undeniably catastrophic, Mulia's analysis reveals the impracticality of halting this forward momentum entirely. Thus, the challenge lies in reimagining progress not as a return to pre-industrial simplicity but as a transformative integration of sustainability within the framework of development. This nuanced perspective suggests a balanced approach, wherein technological innovation, sustainable resource management, and policy interventions can mitigate environmental harm without derailing societal progress. Failure to achieve this balance risks a cascade of ecological and social crises, the consequences of which would be far-reaching and irreversible.

The world is now on an irreversible trajectory, driven by the forces of industrial and technological progress, and any attempt to stop this march would be both futile and catastrophic. Given this context, the pressing question becomes: what, then, is the solution to the environmental and social crises that are the byproducts of this relentless drive for development? According to many of the leading voices in environmental science, policy-making, and economics, the most viable solution lies in the concept of sustainable development (Basheer, M., 2022). Sustainable development, as defined by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, aims to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It represents a middle path between unchecked economic growth and environmental conservation, focusing on a balance between development and ecological preservation. In practice, this means rethinking how we produce and consume resources, with an emphasis on reducing waste, conserving energy, and minimizing environmental degradation. Examples of sustainable development abound in sectors like energy, agriculture, and urban planning. In the energy sector, the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, and hydropower represents a shift towards sustainability. Countries like Germany and Denmark have made significant strides in reducing their carbon footprints by investing heavily in renewable energy infrastructure (Jaeger J., 2023). Similarly, sustainable agricultural practices, such as organic farming, crop rotation, and agroforestry, are being implemented to protect soil health, reduce water consumption, and prevent deforestation. For instance, India's National Agroforestry Policy encourages the integration of trees into agricultural landscapes, which has proven to be an effective strategy for increasing biodiversity and improving climate resilience (Datta, Pritha, 2024).

In urban planning, the concept of sustainable cities is gaining traction. Initiatives like Smart Cities in India aim to incorporate sustainable technologies, efficient waste management, and green infrastructure to reduce the environmental impact of urban growth. The city of Curitiba, Brazil, is often cited as a model of sustainable urban planning, with its innovative public transport system, green spaces, and waste recycling programs (Green City Times, accessed 23.08.2024).

Still, the steps taken by the policy makers of various nations as well as of the international bodies especially the United Nations to counter the current ecological trends like global warming have not been effective especially when it comes to join hands and fight the menace collectively. Seeing the pandemic nature of the environmental predicament the world faces today, it is indeed a necessity to call for a collective wisdom and more importantly a collective action. United Nations Organization did recognize the same by envisaging the SDGs and pushing for its consequent adoption by all the member nations of the UN in the year 2015 and immensely important declaration was made public to achieve the SDGs by 2030. The 17 SDGs are indeed the initiative that apart from the governments every single human being must also understand the importance of the SDGs and strive to lend support in achieving the same. For example, the 12th Sustainable Development Goal calls for adopting the habit of sustainable consumption by every single citizen of the world as in Gandhian paradigm, take only what you need for it will be nothing less than stealing from others. In other words Gandhi denounced hoarding things mindlessly and by doing so, depriving others from what is their due and putting unjustified pressure on the natural resources which are indeed finite.

It is understandable that the sustainable development is not without its challenges. It requires a global commitment to long-term environmental stewardship, economic restructuring, and social equity. Developing countries often face the dilemma of choosing between immediate economic growth and long-term

sustainability. Perhaps, one of the best examples of the disagreements in the global posturing against ecological problems is that of the availability of green technologies, which are costly and by far lie in the hands of the developed nations, which, according to the policy makers of the developing and the underdeveloped nations must be financed to them. The tune of this fiscal assistance from the developed nations to fight the global warming is yet another point of discord. Therefore, it is not surprising to see several Conference of the Parties (COP) including the one held recently at Baku, failing to yield any consensus on a matter that is no less than the one of life and death for the planet earth. Yet, many experts argue that sustainable development is the only way to ensure that progress continues without exacerbating the environmental and social crises we currently face. If done correctly, it can pull the planet back from the brink of ecological catastrophe while still allowing societies to thrive. The key lies in embracing technologies and policies that foster sustainability, incentivizing green practices, and fostering international cooperation on environmental issues.

While it may be impossible to reverse the clock and return to an era of pre-industrial harmony with nature, sustainable development offers a feasible solution to balance human progress with the preservation of the Earth's ecosystems. It provides a framework for continuing development in a way that mitigates environmental harm and ensures the well-being of future generations.

The commonest of all definitions of sustainable development is the development that not only caters to the needs of the present population but also leaves ample resources for the posterity for an inordinate and unforeseeable time frame to live (Boardman D. and Ranger G, 1996). Not to deplete natural resources wholly and to the contrary, harnessing the existing natural and other kinds of resources formulate the basis of the idea of sustainable development. The escalating environmental degradation has intensified concerns about the planet's future, with environmentalists highlighting the disastrous consequences of prioritizing short-term gains over long-term sustainability. All life forms are interdependent, and while other organisms can survive without humans, human survival depends on the Earth's ecosystems (AICTE, 2019). The four natural orders – Physical, Pranic (vegetation), Animal, and Human – show that the Human Order relies heavily on the others for a conducive environment. However, humanity's reckless exploitation of resources disrupts this balance, threatening future generations. Nitze (1993) argues that while it's inevitable to use natural resources now, our responsibility lies in developing technologies that sustain future generations. Yet, true sustainability requires more than technological fixes – it demands a shift in values toward environmental stewardship and long-term thinking, ensuring development that safeguards the planet for the future. The current paper seeks to explore these themes in detail, examining how we can transcend destructive behaviours and adopt more sustainable practices. By fostering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of all forms of life and the importance of protecting natural systems, it is possible to move toward a model of development that preserves the environment for future generations while still allowing for progress benefitting the generation enjoying the endowments of the nature. The solutions lie not only in technological innovations but also in a collective commitment to sustainable values that prioritize the health of the planet and the well-being of all living organisms. The collective commitment to sustainable values is what the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal number 12 (to be precise goal 12.8) gives an emphasis *about ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns, which is key to sustain the livelihoods of current and future generations*. (UNSDGs). Here it is pertinent to mention Mahatma Gandhi's insightful assertion which underscores the need for a responsible consumption; *There is enough on this earth for everyone's need but for no one's greed*. If followed, this assertion, which points out at a behaviour of self-restraint, has a wider potential to become a dictum to adhere to for a responsible and sustainable consumption. This exhortation indeed summarizes the quintessence of sustainable living and equitable sharing of wherewithal that are necessary for humans to live in peace and comforts that justify spirit of the Biblical concept of bread labour.

The exploitation of natural resources stems from humanity's limitless desires and *Vikaras* (anti-values), driven by materialism and a lack of ethical guidance. Drawing on the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, as emphasized by Gandhi, a society grounded in spiritual wealth and governed by the principle of *Svadharmā*¹ (the natural duty of self) is inherently sustainable, as it fosters desire-lessness and harmony with nature. While technology plays a crucial role in sustainable development, its potential for destruction becomes evident when ethical imperatives are ignored. Empirical evidence shows that material progress often comes with unintended consequences, as seen in the cases of plastic, atomic energy, and the automobile. For instance, while vehicles serve transportation needs, they have also been repurposed into tanks for war. Similarly, atomic energy is harnessed both for electricity generation and, paradoxically, for weapons of mass destruction. These examples underscore the dual nature of technological advancements, where progress without

¹ *Svadharmā* can be understood with the following example: A warrior's natural duty is to obey their commander and fight the enemy. Cardinal Newman expresses this idea poetically: *So works the All-wise! Our services, Dividing, not as we ask: For the world's profit, by our gifts deciding, Our duty-task*.

Gandhi reinforces this by stating that performing someone else's duty is dangerous, as it deviates from one's natural role and purpose.

ethical oversight leads to devastation. Thus, the balance between technological innovation and ethical values is critical to ensuring that development remains beneficial and sustainable, rather than destructive. Gandhi's autobiography is like a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. He experienced the ideas of the Bhagavad Gita in his own life and referred to the Bhagavad Gita as his *dictionary of daily reference* (Gandhi, 1927). The principles of the Bhagavad Gita can be followed in our daily life, these are about action. The Bhagavad Gita provides a secret art of living. It is enduring, manageable and pertinent to everyone (Jordens, 1991). A robust inner environment, grounded in spiritual values, is essential for fostering a sustainable and resilient outer environment. Without the spiritual progress, the material advancement runs the risks of eroding the ethical foundations of life. Gandhi asserted that his personal conduct was deeply influenced by the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, which he integrated into his daily practices. He further emphasized that his interpretation of the Gita was not merely theoretical, but a result of lived experience and personal experimentation. Thus, spiritual and ethical growth is imperative for achieving true sustainability in the material world.

Vegetarian diet: A way to compassion for all living beings

As a man eats, so shall he become – An Indian Proverb (Gandhi, 1927).

We are what we eat. Gandhi recommends the *sattvik*² (in mode of goodness) diet as described in the Bhagavad Gita chapter 17, verse 8. Food has a direct impact on our mind. Compassion and non-violence are related to the food one eats. He contended that non-violent dietary selections promote compassion, purity, and harmony, consistent with his spiritual and ethical convictions (Gandhi, 1927). The Gita reinforces this by categorizing food into *sattvic* (pure), *rajasic* (stimulating), and *tamasic* (lethargic), suggesting that *sattvic* food promotes mental clarity and self-control, essential for a balanced mind (Sharma, Namarta, The Bhagavad Gita, 2023, p.133). For instance, choosing plant-based meals over meat not only avoids harm to living beings but also nurtures qualities like empathy and peace, vital for personal and societal well-being. He attested this with references from the different books like Salt's *Plea for Vegetarianism*, Howard Williams' *The Ethics of Diet*, Dr. Anna Kingsford's *The Perfect Way in Diet* and Dr Allinson's writings on health and hygiene (Gandhi, 1927). These works appeal to conscience, urging a shift towards vegetarianism for a more humane and balanced world. Animals do feel pain and do not want to be killed for satiating the human taste buds. They do have emotional and psychological needs. Human beings do not have any right to kill animals. Satinder Dhiman elucidates the concept of vegetarianism. He says that *we must minimize the harm we cause to other creatures as far as possible...clearly no one is arguing that Eskimos and others who have no other means of sustenance should adopt a vegetarian diet. Abstaining from eating meat is possible for nearly all of us* (Dhiman, 2016). Anil Narang testifies the same in his research paper. He goes a step further and pleads for veganism i.e. plant-based diet. He asserts that one should not take even the dairy product as there is a lot of cruelty involved against the dairy animals to get more production of milk (Narang, 2015). Though Gandhi also experimented with this in his life but somehow, he says that he could not find a vegetable substitute for milk, which is equally nourishing and digestible (Gandhi, 1927). There is a pertinent aspect of Lord Krishna's³ life especially His childhood which needs to be mentioned here. So far as Gandhi's thoughts about milk and other dairy products are concerned, we find an answer to what an ideal relationship should be at least with cows. In a host of religious and mythological sources, a lot of stories were woven around Lord Krishna's caring attitude towards cows and their milk and butter. Here, the most important point to note is the kind of relationship between Lord Krishna and His cowherd. His relationship with His cows was the same as that of a mother and her child, where the child is entitled to the milk of his mother. Here, it implies that cow's calves were not kept deprived of their share of milk, contrary to what we see in today's time in most of the dairy farms across the world. In modern dairy farms, the emotional and psychological needs of the animals are completely overlooked. The calves are meant only to excite the udders to optimize milk production and are also not allowed to move in open fields so that their muscles remain tender and their meat juicy for consumption as a variety of non-veg delicacies (Nobis, 2002).

The purpose of a meal is to keep human bodies healthy and to make their minds pure. *Sattvik* food includes *rasya* (juicy) and *snigdha* (fatty like butter and *ghee*) food. However, Gandhi rejects *snigdha* food also. Only a demon would love fatty food (Gandhi, 2011). Gandhi believes that the strength of truth is higher than anything else. Unlike Swami Vivekananda, he suggests that strength to fight against the enemy does not require a diet that includes meat. Satyagraha is such a weapon that comes from within when we do not harm living beings and has the power to defy the toughest of enemies.

According to Gandhi, for the seeker of God *restraint in diet both as to quantity and quality is as essential as restraint in thought and speech* (Gandhi, 1927). The seeker of God loves the creation of God. He would never torture fellow beings. Rather, he would desire to end the suffering of others and in this respect, ends his sufferings

² Fresh vegetarian diet.

³ Lord Krishna is the supreme personality of the Godhead of Hindus. He delivered the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna.

(Gandhi, 2011). Reading the Bhagavad Gita would be in vain if one does not strive to embody its teachings by practicing a spirit of equality toward all living beings. Gandhi says that even a snake should not be killed. One should feel the same towards others. One has to remain good for even a scorpion or a centipede. This whole universe is a manifestation of Vasudev (Lord Krishna) (Gandhi, 2011). What right we have to take the life of animals for our pleasure and disturb the ecosystem?

Gandhi's advocacy for vegetarianism was not merely theoretical but a principle he rigorously applied in his life and family. Even during severe hardships, he remained steadfast in his commitment to non-violence through dietary choices. For instance, when his son Manilal suffered from typhoid and pneumonia, despite the doctor's recommendation of eggs and chicken broth, Gandhi opted for hydropathic treatments and the chanting of *Ramnaam*⁴ (Gandhi, 1927). Similarly, when his wife, Kasturba, was critically ill in Durban, the doctor advised beef tea, but both she and Gandhi refused, citing their moral commitment to vegetarianism. Kasturba's reply, *I will not take beef tea. It is a rare thing in this world to be born as a human being, and I would far rather die than pollute my body with such abominations*, exemplifies their steadfastness (Gandhi, 1927). For Gandhi, vegetarianism was central to his mission of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and aligned with his interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita. In his commentary, Gandhi emphasized that *yajna*⁵ (sacrifice) should be about serving others, not harming other creature.⁶ He believed that non-violence was fundamental to pursuing truth, asserting that *non-violence is the means and truth is the end. Devotion to the truth is the sole justification of our existence* (Gandhi, 1944). This ethical framework of non-violence extended to the protection of animals and the broader ecosystem, underscoring that true charity begins with non-harm towards all living beings.

Bread Labour: Necessary to reduce inequality

In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat thy bread – the Bible (Gandhi, 1944).

Gandhi's interpretation of the concept of *yajna* in Chapter 3 of the Bhagavad Gita closely aligns with the idea of *bread labour*, as articulated by T.M. Bondaref (Gandhi, 1944; Gandhi, 2011). He posits that human beings must earn their sustenance through physical labour, asserting that *he who eats food without performing 'yajna' eats sin* (Gandhi, 2011). While Bondaref presents a significant aspect of this truth, Gandhi expands the discourse by recognizing an alternative perspective after studying the Gita (Gandhi, 2011). In this context, *yajna* signifies the bodily labour essential for justifying one's consumption of food. Gandhi argues that individuals who do not exert themselves physically for their meals relinquish their right to eat.

He asserts that adherence to this principle would eradicate starvation and eliminate moral corruption from the planet. By promoting a labour ethic grounded in *yajna*, individuals would not only benefit their souls but also contribute positively to society, fostering a sense of tranquility that extends beyond physical existence. Gandhi explicitly rejects the notion of performing *yajna* through superficial rituals, such as burning sticks, deeming such practices imprudent in contemporary times. Instead, he advocates for the sustainable practice of tree planting as a genuine form of *yajna*, emphasizing that misusing natural resources inherited from previous generations is tantamount to neglecting one's responsibilities. He illustrates this by drawing parallels between the inescapable cycle of birth and death and the necessity of engaging in physical labour. Thus, Gandhi's framework for *yajna* underscores a holistic understanding of labour as integral to moral and spiritual well-being, reinforcing the notion that true sustenance stems from conscientious engagement with the world.

People must engage in some form of exercise to aid digestion; therefore, why not adopt a productive form of labour, such as *bread labour*? Unlike others, a farmer does not need to focus on breath control or muscle-building exercises, as their daily activities inherently fulfil these physical requirements. The majority of people rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, and Gandhi argues that if the remaining population were to join this majority, they would experience greater happiness, improved health, and increased peace of mind. This shift would not only address the hardships associated with agricultural work but also contribute to the dismantling of social hierarchies and class distinctions. By embracing productive labour, individuals would cultivate a deeper connection to their work, fostering a sense of fulfilment and communal harmony. Here, Gandhi explains the concept of *loksangraha*⁷. Gandhi suggests that the affluent people should be involved in bread labour. Gandhi posits that the wealthy should regard themselves as trustees of their property, emphasizing that it is morally unacceptable to accumulate wealth solely for personal gratification (Gandhi, 2011). Beyond the pursuit of an honourable livelihood, the affluent have a responsibility to allocate their resources for social welfare. Gandhi questions the right of the wealthy to retain their riches if they are unwilling to share a fair portion with the impoverished and vulnerable. Philanthropy, therefore, is not merely a charitable act but a social obligation. He asserts that anyone who refrains from engaging in

⁴ Continuously chanting God's holy name.

⁵ Rituals done in front of a sacred fire, often with mantras.

⁶ Some people just to satiate their taste buds attached yajna with sacrificing the animals that Gandhi opposed vehemently.

⁷ To unite people together for the common goal of their collective welfare.

physical labour for the betterment of society is akin to a thief, as they are unjustly hoarding resources without contributing to communal well-being (Gandhi, 2011).

While agriculture is often viewed as the ideal form of labour, Gandhi encourages engagement in various other productive activities, such as weaving, spinning, carpentry, or metalworking. He advocates for the dignity of all forms of labour, asserting that sanitary work, often regarded as menial, should be embraced rather than shunned. Such engagement in diverse forms of labour fosters a sense of equality among individuals, as it dismantles class distinctions and affirms the intrinsic value of each person's contributions (Gandhi, 1944). This perspective aligns with contemporary movements advocating for the appreciation of essential workers, illustrating how Gandhi's ideals remain relevant in discussions about labour dignity today.

Gandhi further highlights the importance of civic responsibility and the rejection of shame associated with manual labour. He introduced skill and craftwork in school education through the Wardha scheme, aiming to instill a sense of responsibility and community service in children (Sharma & Behura, 2019). By encouraging individuals to engage in physical labour for the benefit of others, Gandhi promotes the idea of *svadharma*, which calls for self-restraint and an understanding of one's duty to society.

Restraint self imposed is no compulsion. A man who chooses the path of freedom from restraint i.e., of self indulgence, will be a bond slave of passions, whilst the man who binds himself to rules and restrains releases himself. All things in the universe, including the sun and the moon and the stars, obey certain laws. Without the restraining influence of these laws the world would not go on for a single moment (Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, p. 123-124).

Mahatma Gandhi's emphasis of self restraint amidst the today's consumption spree is indeed a mantra to be followed for without self restraint the idea of sustainable consumption will never succeed. Moreover, he also asserts that one should carry out assigned tasks with unwavering dedication and a sense of duty, as the wise are those who work for the betterment of others (Gandhi, 2011). This ethos not only cultivates personal growth but also strengthens societal bonds, fostering a more equitable and harmonious community.

Knowledge and devotion: the pillars of sustainability

Have devotion and knowledge will follow (Gandhi, 2011).

Gandhi's interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita is significant enough for solving the dilemmas of human life and taking human beings to Knowledge societies which pave the way to sustainable living. The Bhagavad Gita gives complete knowledge, but at the same time, it is beyond human intelligence to understand it completely. When God finds one having single-minded devotion towards Him, He kind-heartedly gives the one pure knowledge (Sharma and Behura, 2019). Attaining pure knowledge is vital for the sustainable development of humanity. If human beings detach themselves from material objects, they would not be proud of their wealth, virtues, skills, abilities, arts etc. The absence of pride is one such knowledge that makes one realize that every creature is unique in some manner and their life has some motive. We have no right to denigrate or belittle anyone. Everyone deserves the honour by dint of being created uniquely by God. Gandhi wants to identify himself with everything that lives (Agarwal, 1993). The unwavering devotion towards God makes one believe that God pervades all and the universe is a manifestation of Him. This understanding will deter human beings discriminate against other living beings. It becomes pertinent to worship the sustaining energy of God in all its aspects (Gandhi, 2011). It leads to preserving nature in its pristine- form; and thereby contributing towards the well-being of one and all. Everyone can realize God in their lifetime with single-minded devotion towards Him. The realization of God makes one pantheist, and one starts seeing God in every particle of nature. Such a person would never harm the creation of God and will abandon self-interest that will ultimately lead him to salvation. Those who work with unselfish motives and aspire for communion with God do not have wants, as their needs are looked after by God Himself (Gandhi, 2011).

The entire universe is created in such a manner that there is nothing for one's self, but everything is for others. We are not born on this earth to fulfil our endless desires. Humans desire material progress more and more and want at the same time permanent happiness and tranquility. How can it be possible? When the material itself has a temporary life, how can it give bliss forever? The wise abandon all desires and acts desireless. One should learn to be content with oneself (Framarin, 2006). The purpose of our existence is to serve other beings. My duty is the right of others, and the other's duty is the right of mine. For example, the writer is meant for the reader, and the reader is meant for the writer. Therefore, every person should perform their duty to safeguard the rights of others. The ideal way of living, as espoused by various philosophical traditions, emphasizes a harmonious communion with nature. This principle suggests that just as the environment selflessly provides benefits to all beings without discrimination, humans, too, should strive to act benevolently toward one another. This ethos is encapsulated in the profound teaching of *Vasudevam Sarvamiti*, which translates to *God is all-pervading* and highlights the inter-connectedness of all existence (Gandhi, 2011). This understanding of universal unity forms the basis for ethical living, where the welfare of one is intricately tied to the welfare of all.

In this context, the Upanishads introduce the concept of *Panch Bhoot Yajna* (Five-fold offerings), which underscores the need for reverence towards the five basic elements: *Aakash* (ether), *Agni* (fire), *Vayu* (air), *Jal* (water), and *Prithvi* (earth) (Sivanand, 1961). This practice emphasizes making offerings not only to deities and seers but also to nature, animals, plants, fellow humans in need, and our ancestors. By participating in *Panch Bhoot Yajna*, individuals acknowledge their responsibilities towards maintaining ecological balance and purity within these elements. Dhiman (2016) asserts that this practice is a manifestation of our reverence for the cosmos, promoting a sense of harmony that extends beyond the living beings to encompass the souls of those who have departed.

The principle of ecological interconnectedness is increasingly supported by contemporary ecological research. Numerous studies reveal how disturbances in one aspect of the ecosystem can lead to cascading effects on others, often resulting in ecological imbalances. For instance, the extinction of a single species can disrupt food chains and habitat dynamics, ultimately affecting biodiversity and ecosystem stability (Hughes et al., 2008). Therefore, *Panch Bhoot Yajna* serves as a vital reminder of the delicate balance inherent in nature, advocating for a worldview where actions are taken promptly to rectify imbalances before they escalate and lead to a complete collapse of life on earth. This principle aligns with the ancient mantra *Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah, Sarve Santu Niramaya, Sarve Bhadrani Pashyantu, Ma Kashcid-Duhkha-Bhagbhavet*, which translates to *May all be happy, may no one fall sick, may all see auspiciousness, may no one suffer!* This holistic approach emphasizes the importance of collective well-being and ethical responsibility towards all forms of life, reflecting a deep-rooted cultural heritage that advocates for harmony and sustainability.

Conclusion

The theme of selfless action is a central tenet of the Bhagavad Gita, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings and the vital roles they play in maintaining cosmic order. In this context, every atom and creature possesses intrinsic significance, contributing to the overall balance of nature. For instance, scavenger fauna, such as vultures, may evoke disgust in humans due to their feeding habits, yet their existence is crucial for ecological health. By consuming decomposing matter, these creatures prevent the spread of disease and facilitate nutrient recycling, thus ensuring the sustainability of ecosystems.

This perspective underscores the importance of adopting a development model that prioritizes inclusivity and sustainability, extending consideration not only to present needs but also to future generations. Such an approach recognizes that true environmental stewardship cannot be achieved through selfish exploitation; rather, it requires a collective commitment to maintaining balance and harmony within the ecosystem. As Gandhi poignantly stated, *'The world has enough for everyone's needs but not for everyone's greed.'* This principle highlights the necessity for a paradigm shift in how we perceive and utilize natural resources. Moreover, this shift in the paradigm of progress that caters to our needs that are aligned to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 12.8, mainly hovering around the concept of responsible consumption will ensure that every single life on earth gets her due essential for a need based life. It is pertinent because the planet has already entered a phase of ecological devastation where choice is between our greed leading to sure shot doom and a life that is based on the principle of need and equitable distribution of resources which in her own right is a must for peace and harmony in the world (another important UNSDG).

In line with the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, the current generation is called to embrace practices that prioritize regeneration over exploitation. The metaphor of *milking* natural resources – utilizing them in a manner that allows for their renewal – contrasts sharply with unsustainable practices that deplete the environment without regard for future consequences. This shift towards sustainable action, grounded in the Gita's teachings, offers a path forward, advocating for a holistic approach that seeks to balance human needs with ecological integrity, ultimately safeguarding the planet for all life forms. It is better to curtail the anti-values of greed and uncontrolled desires for the good of present and future generations. Gandhi's own life is a testimony of how can we reduce our needs and simplify things. The ultimate aim of life is to realize God. To make things complex cannot contribute towards attaining the supreme goal. All humans aspire for peace and joy that comes from devotion. There is no other source for peaceful living.

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