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Deep Ecology: East and West

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Abstract

Deep ecology has come into light as a holistic environmental theory in contemporary times by critiquing traditional western speciesist attitudes towards nature that is responsible for present day eco-crisis. To overcome this speciesist attitude we need to focus on both the views one from the East and the other from the West. This paper concerns especially with Arne Naess' theory of Deep Ecology from Western side and from Indian side Gandhi's theory of Ahimsa, both of which to me are the genuine appeal to take place of criticizing human centered ethics and attitudes. Deep Ecology is a radical and holistic environmental theory that brings thinking, feeling, spirituality and action together in tackling the imminent eco-catastrophe. The other is Ahimsa (nonviolence) applies to all living beings including all animals to abstain from harming others. [Gandhi's](#) Ahimsa is a principle second in importance only to Truth. He also affirmed that non-violence was the first article of his faith and also the last article of his creed. However, the contemporary environmentalism in the form of deep ecology, very closely mirror Gandhi's philosophy. An attempt has been made in this paper to analyze Arne Naess' theory of deep ecology and to find out Mahatma's contribution to the intellectual development of Arne Naess, and also to show that these two thoughts go beyond speciesist attitudes and places intrinsic/ inherent value on non-human species, ecosystems and processes in nature.

Keywords: *Ahimsa, Ecology, Deep ecology, Ecosophy, Intrinsic/Inherent value, Self-realization.*

Introduction: The most influential environmental ethics and philosophy of nature in contemporary times so far is Arne Naess' (1912–2009), a Norwegian philosopher, Deep Ecology. Deep ecology is an ecological and environmental philosophy promoting the inherent worth of living beings regardless of their instrumental utility to human needs, plus a radical restructuring of modern human societies in accordance with such ideas. It is such an environmental theory which brings thinking, feeling, spirituality and action together in tackling the imminent eco-catastrophe. It goes against traditional speciesist attitudes (harming non-humans) towards nature in general, the attitude made on the basis of species memberships only and justifying it by morally arbitrary reasons. On the one hand, as a science Ecology has its methods, and gives us some information, and on the other hand, Philosophy gives emphasis on individual's own personal code of values and views of the

world which guides our own decisions. When applied to questions about ourselves and nature, we may call it ‘ecosophy.’ We take this opportunity to dwell upon some of my thoughts while analyzing Mahatma Gandhi’s (1869 – 1948) insights for the uplift of Arne Naess’ view and also to show that their thoughts go beyond speciesist attitudes and place intrinsic/ inherent value on non-human species, ecosystems and processes in nature, and in this endeavour, firstly, we shall take into account Arne Naess’ theory of Deep Ecology from the West, and then, from the East Gandhi’s theory of Ahimsa.

1. Ecology: Ernst Haeckel, a German biologist, who coined the term ‘ecology’ in 1866, refers to a science which studies the diverse interrelations of living beings, both to its organic as well as to its inorganic environment. The word comes from the Greek word ‘oikos’, meaning ‘household, home, or place to live’. Haeckel defined it as ‘the comprehensive science of the relationship of the organism to the environment’. Anyhow, ecology is the holistic and inclusive science that deals primarily with organisms and their environment. This ‘environment’ includes all other organisms and physical surroundings. The environment of an organism includes all other organisms’ physical properties, which can be described as the sum of local abiotic factors, such as sunlight, climate, and geology, and biotic ecosystems, which includes other organisms that share its habitat. A central principle of ecology is that each living organism has an ongoing and continual relationship with every other element that makes up its environment. Anyhow ecological knowledge, such as the quantification of biodiversity and population dynamics, has provided a scientific basis for expressing the aims of environmentalism and evaluating its goals and policies.

On Naess’ judgement, ecology as a science is concerned only with facts and logic alone. It can describe objectively about ecological crisis or doomsday, but cannot answer ethical questions about how we should live as member of the Earth community. We need moral principles and norms based on some ultimate philosophy of Nature and reality in order to overcome the crisis. That leads us to deep ecology of Arne Naess.

1.1 Deep Ecology: Deep Ecology comes out as the form of ecology movement which raises deeper questions concerning environmental matters. Here the adjective ‘Deep’ signifies the fact that this environmentalism asks ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions in a more comprehensive fashion, while other environmental theories fall short of it. If we make a survey of Deep Ecology environmentalism, we would find that it signifies at least three things. First, it leads into deeper questioning about environmental issues. It probes into the roots of environmental problems and the underlying world-views. The real solutions of these problems must involve a change at the fundamental level of our thought and action. It may here be mentioned that historian Lynn White, Jr. argued as early as in 1967 that the basic (theoretical) cause of environmental problems is rooted in our traditional western world-views. He writes, “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them.”¹ Deep ecology follows this orientation and reflects critically on the fundamental assumptions of these world-views. It thoroughly examines our deep-seated assumptions and views on nature, and proposes, at the same time, a radical alternative. Secondly, Deep Ecology refers, in addition, to a platform—Deep

Ecology Platform—for collective activities worldwide based on some minimum fundamental principles. The third and most common meaning of Deep Ecology is a philosophy of nature that goes in line with this Platform, but is more specific in exploring views and values. As a matter of fact, Deep Ecology refers to the notions, views and principles—in a word, a distinct philosophy of nature and environment, first integrated by Arne Naess, and then followed by a number of environmentalists, like Bill Deval, George Sessions, Warwick Fox and others.

There are two basic principles on the basis of which Deep Ecology is actually founded: *one* is a scientific insight into the interrelatedness of various systems of life on the Earth, together with the rejection of anthropocentrism as a misguided way of seeing things. According to Deep Ecology, the ecocentric attitude is more consistent with the truth about the nature of life on Earth. Instead of regarding humans as some beings completely unique, or as chosen by God, it sees all things and beings as integral threads in the fabric of planetary life. Arne Naess, the proponent of Deep Ecology, believed that we need to develop a caring—rather than dominating and aggressive—attitude towards the Earth, if the planet, including humans, is to survive. The *second* basic idea of Deep Ecology is the need for Self-realization. Instead of identifying with our small individual egos or merely with our immediate families, we should learn to identify ourselves with all animals, trees and plants—to say, ultimately with the whole ecosphere. This may require a pretty radical change in our consciousness, but it would make our behavior more consistent with what science tells us and is necessary for the well-being of life on Earth.

We get two basic normative principles from these above two principles² of Deep Ecology. *One* is that every life form has, at least in principle, a right to live and blossom. Naess holds that in some compelling situations we may not find better option than to kill some living beings in order to survive, but it is a basic intuition that we have no right to destroy them without sufficient reason, and that's why he reminds us that if there is no way to abide by the principle of deep ecology but to escape from realizing it in regard to satisfying the vital need of human beings, then he appeals to maintain that we should admit this deep ecological principle at least 'in principle.' Here Naess gives much important on 'in principle.' The *second* norm of Deep Ecology is that with maturity, human beings would experience joy when other life forms experience joy, and sorrow when other life forms experience sorrow.

Now we turn to a Deep Ecology Platform, which Arne Naess along with George Sessions and others have set up, which is based on the perception that some philosophers alone cannot make a significant change, and as such, we have to organize people from all walks of life and take into our fold scientists, activists, scholars, artists and other lay people. These eight points are:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes. (Intrinsic value is for a

being of its own sake, the value that a being is held to have in its own right, that is, independently of its usefulness to any other being, the experience of one's own happiness is intrinsically valuable. Inherent value is the value that an entity is held to have independently of the existence of valuers.)

2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs (the minimum need without which no beings can survive).
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
5. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.

These eight principles are endorsed by people from a diversity of backgrounds who share common concerns for the planet Earth, its various life-forms and ecological communities. Its supporters can broadly support the Platform-principles and work for solutions to our shared environmental crisis. The slogan is: 'Think globally, act locally.'³ He also reminds us: 'In order to participate joyfully and wholeheartedly in the deep ecology movement, you have to take your life very seriously.'⁴ That life should be 'a life simple in means but rich in ends.'⁵

2. Naess and Gandhi: In order to understand Naess' ecosophy we now come forward to Gandhi's vision towards the environmental in general. Naess explains that Gandhi made manifest the internal relation between self-realization, non-violence and what sometimes has been called biospherical egalitarianism, a principle which maintains that all animals are equal, and points out that he was inevitably influenced by Gandhi. Moreover, he said Gandhi's utopia is one of the few that shows ecological balance, and today his rejection of the Western World's material abundance and waste is accepted by progressives of the ecological movement, because of traditional western attitudes towards non-human world which in practical are alarming to us, and need to rethink. However, if we enter into the context of animal rights and liberation, we will see in a review of the Gandhian literature that if our sense of right and wrong had not become blunt, we would recognize that animals had rights, no less than men. Animal liberation and animal rights are now a day a major issue in contemporary environmental concern which Gandhi himself acknowledge when he says that there should not be any gap in between human rights and animal rights, and speaks

of equal consideration to animals. He also proclaims that he has a firm believe that all God's creatures have the right to live as much as we humans have, and further he advances by saying that we should feel a more living bond between ourselves and the rest of the animate world. Another way to illustrate Gandhi's concerns with the oneness of life is to look at his writings on ahimsa, can be seen as the fountainhead of Truth—the ultimate goal of life. When he was captured in the prison cell and from there in 1930, Gandhi wrote to his ashramites (persons who stay at in ashram) that Ahimsa and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like two sides of a coin. The environmental ethical principle like that all beings are equal and are fundamentally same with other is very much associated with the philosophy of Gandhi and Naess as well because the appeal come from both of them to realize and practice it.

To note that Gandhi allowed injured animals to be killed humanely to save them from unreasonable pain and at times even because they caused undue nuisance, his nonviolence encompassed a reverence for all life. In his hut at the Sevagram Ashram there is a large pair of wooden tongs which were used to pick up snakes so that they could be taken beyond the perimeter and released as an alternative to killing them. So a kind of duty should be initiated according to Gandhi which enables us to admit that non-human beings altogether have a better reverence of their lives and so accordingly makes room for them to survive.

For Gandhi, ahimsa means 'love' and is validated by holding on to what the world needs. He has a strong sense of the unity of all life which is the core of Hindu culture, and as Gandhi himself is a Hindu he grasps it well. For him, nonviolence meant not only the non-injury of human life, but of all living things. In Hindu culture, a human being is authorized to use natural resources, but has no divine power of control and dominion over nature and its elements. Here is a difference between the culture of Hindu and the culture of Christianity. On one hand where culture of Hindu believes in unity among various beings, on the other hand, Christianity believes in the domination of nature by men. In the *Holy Bible* we find such types of domination that 'God created men in his own image, and blessed them, and told them to have 'domination over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.'⁶

Hence from the perspective of Hindu culture, abuse and exploitation of nature for selfish gain is unjust and sacrilegious. Against the continuation of such exploitation, the only viable strategy appears to be *Satyagraha* for conservation. In this regard we may follow Gandhi's statement that nature had enough for everybody's need but not for everybody's greed. He was a great believer in drawing upon the rich variety of spiritual and cultural heritages of India. His *Satyagraha* movements were the perfect example of how one could confront and unjust and uncaring, though extremely superior power. And he said it is the way to Truth (with a capital 'T') which he saw as Absolute - as God or an impersonal all-pervading reality rather than truth (with a lower case 't') which is relative, the current position on the way to Truth.

Satyagraha, just stated above, is holding on to the truth, or truth force. Mahatma Gandhi; in his use of this concept, believed that the pursuit of truth does not entail inflicting violence on one's opponent, but convincing one's adversary of their error by patience and sympathy. For what appears to be the truth to one may appear to be error to the other. And patience means self-suffering. So the doctrine came to mean vindication of the truth not by the infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's self.⁷

Naess has a firm belief in advaita (non-duality) theory, admits a close relations between human and with the rest of the world, as in some of his works, Naess notes that nature conservation is non-violent at its very core and he quotes from Gandhi to this effect that I believe in advaita, I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that lives. Therefore, I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and, if one man fails, the whole world fails to that extent.

As this implies, for Arne Naess deep ecology is not fundamentally about the value of nature per se, rather it is about who we are in the larger scheme of things. He notes the identification of the 'self' with 'Self' in terms that it is used in the *Bhagavad Gita* (that is, as the unity which is one) as the source of deep ecological attitudes. In other words, he links the tenets of his approach to ecology with what may be termed self-realization. Through realization he believes of one's self is the way by which the unity among various beings and things is possible. The following points show Naess' systematization of Gandhian ethics:

- a. Self-realization presupposes a search for truth.
- b. In the final analysis, all living beings are one.
- c. Himsa (violence) against oneself makes complete self-realization impossible.
- d. Himsa against a living being is himsa against oneself.
- e. Himsa against a living being makes complete self-realization impossible.

3. Concluding Observation: We may conclude by taking into account that the maxim like 'unity in diversity', or 'live and let live' suggests a class-free society in the whole world, we can speak about morality, not only with regard to human beings, but also for animals, plants and landscapes, etc. This presumes a great emphasis upon the interconnectedness of everything and that our egos are integrated wholes, not isolated parts. Naess' personal identification with the nature comes through en route Gandhi's theory of Ahimsa, i.e. by which identification of one's self with other's self is attained. By identifying with greater whole, we partake in the creation and maintenance of this whole, we as an ego, have an extremely limited power within the whole, but it is sufficient for the unfolding of our potential, something vastly more comprehensive than the potential of our ego. So, we are more than our ego. The egos develop into selves of greater and greater dimensions, proportional to the extent and depth of our processes of identification. Naess developed his theory through this identification, when he says, 'I identify with the universe—the greater the universe the greater I am.'⁸ Therefore, to me Self-realization is fundamental embedded in both the theories, and through which the core of Gandhi and Naess' philosophy can be

grasped well. At last, it can be argued that speciesist attitudes towards nature may be necessary so long as to satisfy one's own vital and basic need, the need without which one's life is at stake! But one thing we should always keep in our mind that when we harm others, we also harm ourselves.

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