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# UNIT 13 GANDHI'S ASHRAMS: SEED BEDS OF ECOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

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## Structure

- 13.1 Introduction
  - Aims and Objectives
- 13.2 Ashrams as Community Living Centres
- 13.3 Gandhi's Ashrams
- 13.4 Role of Women
- 13.5 Significance of Gandhi's Advocacy
- 13.6 Summary
- 13.7 Terminal Questions
  - Suggested Readings

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## 13.1 INTRODUCTION

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In his work on Gandhi and His Ashrams, Mark Thomson observes that Gandhi's ashrams and his advocacy for an Ashram life were unique. They were seedbeds of Gandhi's communitarian ideas and experimentation. Most of the biographies on Gandhi and Gandhi's Autobiography have significantly concentrated on this aspect of life wherein the community life and brotherhood were widely encouraged. Gandhi himself maintained that ashrams were his finest achievements and whether these communities fostered the above feelings or not were merely a reflection of his own self. John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* was a major influence in this context as he himself acknowledged it time and again. Be it his establishment of ashrams in South Africa or India, Gandhi's emphasis was on understanding and inspiring brotherhood among one and all. The Phoenix Settlement, Tolstoy Farm, Sabarmati Ashram, etc., are all reflections of his way of thinking, living and advocating harmony between man and nature. This Unit dwells upon this aspect and acquaints the learner as to how Gandhi's ashrams inspired a smooth relation between the human being and nature.

### Aims and Objectives

This Unit would enable you to understand

- The concept of Ashram life
- The harmonious relation between man and nature
- a Gandhi's advocacy of ashram life and his experiments with the same.

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## 13.2 ASHRAMS AS COMMUNITY LIVING CENTRES

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According to the tenets of Hinduism, an ashram is a place where man would lead his life peacefully in its entirety- free of wants, desires and through adoption of self-discipline and self-purification. The concepts of grihasthashram and vanaprasthashram remain

important elements of the Hindu way of life. These were considered as crucial features, wherein an individual reins in his/her unwanted desires, wants etc., and leads a life of purity and sanctity. Further, it is suggested that along with other inmates of these small settlements, man should involve himself in positive activities that benefit society; good thoughts, words and deeds are supposed to be the mainstay of his/her life that would navigate one towards the goal of *moksha* or liberation from the worldly bonds, which is considered as the ultimate goal in an individual's life. The Ashrams were considered as the seedbeds on which the leading of such life was possible; they not only foster harmony between human beings but also between human beings and nature. Nature was always revered in the Hindu philosophy and the ashrams are generally regarded as the settlements that are closest to nature with an eco-friendly approach to life. The individuals, in a group, are said to follow this collective approach and lead a contented life.

Some of the activities that are usually taken up in such ashrams include promoting agricultural practices and growing vegetables, conserve resources like water, production of organic goods (to use the modern terminology), and so on. There would also be collective or group prayers; religious discourses, education- academic and creative, encouraging of craftsmaanship and imparting of vocational education thus leading to a simple life with high thinking. All these activities have certain aims: they encourage individual talent; they protect and conserve nature; they make the individuals realise the importance of natural resources; they also enable one to realise the significance of living in harmony with nature; and cultivate the feeling of oneness towards all living beings. Ashrams thus served the purpose of social/collective welfare of all living beings and develop a feeling of reverence towards God's creation.

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### 13.3 GANDHI'S ASHRAMS

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Mark Thomson aptly remarks on Gandhi's initiatives of ashram life thus: "The ashrams Gandhi established served as laboratories where he and his colleagues experimented with nonviolence as an alternative way of life. In these small monastic communities of men and women living according to absolute vows he sought to lay the ground-work for an egalitarian social organisation and economy, and to develop an education system that reflected the Indian genius. The ashrams provided economic and moral support as well as fostering the discipline and awareness necessary for their members to sustain grassroot civil disobedience. Gandhi saw the need in the tradition-bound, rigidly hierarchical Indian society, for a moral sanction able to inspire people to help themselves. He believed ashramic life, based on mutuality, simplicity and hard work, would nurture an asceticism that could be channelled through positive action to reform society" (p.4).

Apart from John Ruskin's work, Gandhi's ideas of ashram life thoroughly relied on his strict vows of vegetarianism and his religious outlook. While the family background and traditions helped him in being a vegetarian, it was the promise he made to his mother that saw him adhere to his moral principles although his life. This may be attributed to his non-violent approach too. To quote Thomson again, 'vegetarianism became for Gandhi much more than an individualistic practice. He interpreted it as a basis for mankind to attain a greater spiritual and moral unity' (p.12). To Gandhi, it was also a discovery of truth as it served altruistic purposes. Thomson also attributes the influence of Henry Maine's *Village Communities of the East and West (1881)* on Gandhi. This impressed on Gandhi the importance of simple and community living. Further, Tolstoy's works too had impressed upon Gandhi the need for an ascetic life. Tolstoy's courageous act of

repudiating the state and the church for a 'truly religious society, sustained by vegetarianism, celibacy and other forms of self-control' thoroughly impressed Gandhi. The former's ideas on small experimental communities coincided with the Eastern and Indian values of ashram life. The idea of cooperative communities was put to experiment by Gandhi in South Africa. By then, Gandhi was involved in the non-violent struggle against the racial discrimination in the Dark Continent. Therefore, his non-violence extended to all spheres of life. Further, community living provided him a great opportunity of taking along everyone in his life mission.

In his lifetime, Gandhi established few ashrams, notable among them include the Phoenix Settlement, the Tolstoy Farm, Sabarmati (or Satyagraha) Ashram and Sevagram. While the first two came up at the backdrop of his struggles in South Africa, the other two were set up at the background of Indian national freedom struggle movement. Surprisingly, the Phoenix Settlement was never called as ashram. Two aspects that Gandhi insisted were the purity of body and mind and economic equality. Gandhi viewed it primarily as a religious institution with an aspect of essential unity. He insisted on leading a simple life in the sparsely populated country. Even in Tolstoy Farm, Gandhi endeavoured to practise much of his doctrine by leading a life beset with simplicity. The two settlements became Satyagraha institutions and one important outcome of these was the beginning of the Indian *Opinion*. In these, Gandhi made common kitchen and prayers as main tools of community living. These would enable people to come together and share their experiences. Thomson remarks that it was an Order of Trappist monks living at Mariam Hill near Pinetown, sixteen miles from Durban, that provided him (Gandhi) with a functioning example of a micro-community living on the basis of voluntary poverty, self-renunciation and constructive work'. It is to be noted that all these are eco-friendly methods in themselves. These advocate limiting one's wants and placing less stress on the natural resources so that they are available to one and all in a community. In a way, the Trappist Settlement became the inspiring point for Gandhi to pursue similar life at a later stage. What impressed him most was the observance of strict vows of silence and chastity and as patterns of simplicity, virtue and gentleness. Perhaps the idea of giving training in various workshops originated from here. The workshops were undertaken to train people as blacksmiths, tinsmiths, shoemakers, carpenters and tanners while women were trained in ironing, sewing, straw-hat manufacturing and knitting. The printing press, oil press, flour mill were all part of these settlements. As Thomson observes, 'his (Gandhi's) conception of small communities of working men and women voluntarily devoted to self-realisation through the observance of absolute vows and service of the poor, is in many respects reminiscent of the monastic ideal of Trappists' (p.40).

Gandhi's idea of cooperative community was very much in consonance with the concept of ashram life in vedic age. His attempts to live according to high spiritual ideals often led him to memorizing The Gita and other religious scriptures; therefore, he inculcated truth and non-violence as the highest principles which need to be practised by one and all incessantly. One important aspect that Gandhi forever insisted on was the spirit of non-possession. This ideal is much easier in its proclamation but much more difficult to put into practice. Not to have possessions is humanly impossible and to follow it as a life-long principle, one needs to follow the path of spirituality persistently. These were important ideals not just for spiritual attainment but also living in contact with and close to nature.

One of the first requirements was to run the press in an ideal atmosphere, perhaps a farm, where the press could be located. Gandhi wanted to allot each of the staff a plot

to live and work on a cooperative basis. In contrast to today's way of life where affluence and unlimited prosperity rule the world, Gandhi appealed to his co-workers to join him in his revolutionary efforts to improve their quality of lives. As cited by Thomson, Gandhi insisted that 'living under such conditions, and amid the beautiful surroundings which have given Natal the name of the Garden Colony, the workers could live a simpler and more natural life, and the ideas of Ruskin and Tolstoy be combined with strict business principles' (p.47). Gandhi along with co-workers made the place habitable which was once surrounded by wild bushes and snakes. Gandhi persisted on manual labour and alternative natural treatments in case of illness.

At Tolstoy Farm, Gandhi avoided those inconvenient shortcomings that trapped the Phoenix Settlement. It was again the spirit of cooperation and bonding that primarily pervaded the environs at Tolstoy Farm. Unlike in Phoenix, here the 'accommodation was shared, and instead of each settler cultivating a separate plot of land, it was decided that the entire acreage would be cultivated jointly to ensure more efficient production of larger crops, and to enhance the cooperative spirit of the exercise. Gandhi viewed the experiment as an excellent opportunity to inculcate simple, non-materialistic values within the Indian community in South Africa'. It was a real settlers' endeavour in the Tolstoy Farm wherein they cultivated home-grown crops, taught children and ran school, did collective cooking, scavenging, observed vegetarianism and led a life of economy and simplicity. It was rather a model life that Gandhi envisaged in all spheres. This lived up to his expectations as the settlers were also satyagrahis, participating in the struggle against racial discrimination by the government and symbolising a spirit of unity and strength. Mark Thomson gives a detailed account of the community life as followed by Gandhi and his associates:

*The watchwords of the Tolstoy Farm community were industry, economy and self-sufficiency. Unused to the rigours of rural life, the settlers struggled in cold, hot and wet weather conditions to improve their quality of life. As Kallenbach knew something of gardening, it became obligatory for those not engaged in the kitchen, young and old, to devote some time to this pursuit. Of course, the young did the bulk of the work, digging pits, felling timber and carrying loads. Ample exercise, nourishing, regular food and clean air and water kept the settlers, and especially the children, in good health. When illness did strike neither a doctor was called nor drugs used, but at all times Gandhi persevered with nature cure, therapies such as earth, and water treatment, fasting and changes in diet. One of the rules laid down was that anyone who had to conduct business in Johannesburg on behalf of the community must travel by third rail class, and to discourage settlers from going to the city unnecessarily it was also stipulated that pleasure-seekers must travel there and back on foot. In fact many acquired the habit of walking as a result and greatly benefitted from the exercise, but most importantly precious money was saved by this one rule. Gandhi would often rise at two o'clock in the morning, walk the twenty-one miles to Johannesburg, attend to his law practice and other concerns, and walk back by evening. To ensure that money was not squandered in the city simple provisions were made available to day travellers. An iron handmill was purchased to grind wheat for home-baked wholemeal bread and groundnuts for butter. Marmalade was made from oranges grown on the farm.*

*Despite the large number of settlers, the farm was kept clean. All rubbish was buried in trenches, all waste water collected in buckets and used to water the trees, and all food refuse and excreta was covered in earth pits and later utilised as manure. These methods were not only hygienic but afforded a rich supply of organic*

fertilizer for the farm. Later, in India, Gandhi launched an extensive propaganda programme to teach the villagers the necessity of *efficient* sanitation and hygiene, and ways in which such practices could improve their crops. The settlers also made their own furniture, clothes and sandals, Kallenbach went to the Trappist monastery near *Pinetown* to learn sandal-making. All wore trousers and shirts made out of coarse blue cloth and fashioned after a gaol uniform, which were suitable for laboring. The food served was simple vegetarian prepared in Indian style and eaten with wooden spoons made at the settlement.

Similarly, in India, Gandhi established the **Satyagraha** Ashram (or more famously known as Sabarmati Ashram) in 1915 originally at **Kochrab**. It was later moved to Sabarmati, near Ahmedabad. As Gandhi put it succinctly, the object of this Ashram is that its members should qualify themselves for, and make a constant endeavour towards, the service of the country, not inconsistent with the universal welfare (MK Gandhi, Ashram Observances in action, p.65).

In order to fulfill the above objective, he laid down the rules for the following observances:

1. Truth
2. Non-violence or Love
3. Chastity (*Brahmacharya*)
4. Control of the Palate
5. Non-stealing
6. Non-possession or Poverty
7. Physical Labour
8. Swadeshi
9. Fearlessness
10. Removal of Untouchability
11. Tolerance

Gandhi recommended the following activities to fulfill the above observances. These were:

1. Worship
2. Sanitary service
3. Sacrificial spinning
4. Agriculture
5. Dairy
6. Tannery
7. National Education
8. **Khadi** Technical School

The setting up of the **ashram**, as in other places, was unique here too. It consisted of simple structures made out of *mud brick, tiles and wood, which was thickly painted with coal tar to seal it, were erected, including, in time, a school building, a dining hall and kitchen, a library, and the vanatshala, in which handlooms were installed.*

Gandhi emphasised the **activities** particularly related to spinning and khadi work. These were done to supplement the income as also to encourage the cloth production indigenous in nature. There were also experiments related to agriculture and labour was hired to tend to the crops. As **this** ashram set the precedent, all over the country, many people came forward to set up similar ashrams to re-dedicate their lives to simple ideals and at the same time, struggle **incessantly** to achieve independence **from** the colonial rule. Some such examples include **Jugatram** Dave's ashram in Vedcchi, **Vallabhbai Patel's** Ashram in **Bardoli**, **J.B.Kripalani's** Gandhi ashram in **Benares** and **Vinoba Bhave's** Satyagraha Ashram in **Wardha**.

While travelling through the country mobilising the masses towards struggle for independence, Gandhi **came** across Segaoon (or now called Sevagram) and conceptualised an ideal ashram life to spread the message of Sarvodaya and social awareness. Gandhi was always drawn **towards** villages in particular for he believed that the real India lives in its villages. Moreover, unlike cities, villages continue to retain the innocence, sanctity and tend to take care of customs, traditions **and** the precious nature as well. Sevagram, to him, in his own **words**, remained a laboratory for **his** experiments with ahimsa. It was his laboratory for **satyagraha** too. Gandhi wanted to get rid of the unhygienic conditions surrounding the ashrams and continuously strived to spread this message to one and all. In good humour, he **detested** the imminent adverse situations affecting the health and the inability to lead a **solitary** life that he was in search of. He also expressed his displeasure at the springing up of **new** buildings everyday in the surroundings.

Gandhi replicated many of the measures as had already been mentioned in the preceding pages so as to ensure self-discipline in the ashram premises. From agricultural practices to water cleansing **system**, Gandhi drew the attention of all to many a healthy practices of living and thereby **totally** avoiding unhealthy practices. Some of the measures Gandhi suggested included:

- Daily spinning so **as** to ensure manual labour and **encourage** the spirit of swadeshi
- Avoiding sitting idle or talking loudly so that peace may prevail
- Adopt simple **lifestyle** and avoid unnecessary wastage
- **Treat** one and all **with** courtesy and be considerate to all.
- Food must be **taken** like medicine, under proper restraint only for sustaining the body and keeping it a fit instrument for service.
- Bad or imperfectly cooked food should not be eaten.
- Not have more clothes than necessary, wear khadi and use village-made products.
- Everything must be kept in its proper place. All refuse must be put into the **dustbin**.
- Water must not **be** wasted. Boiled water is used for drinking purposes. Pots and pans are finally washed with boiled water. Unboiled water of the ashram wells is not safe to drink. .

- We should not spit or clean the nose on the road, but only in an out of the way place where no one is likely to walk.
- Hands should be washed with utmost cleanliness after using toilets so as to avoid unhygienic practices.
- The twigs should be used to clean teeth and these should not be thrown away after use. They should be collected in a pot.
- Waste paper, which cannot be used for writing on the other side, should be burned. Nothing else should be mixed with it.
- The fragments of the vegetables must be kept separate and converted into manure.
- Broken glass should be thrown into a pit at a safe distance from houses.

The above-mentioned measures have been carefully prescribed by Gandhi in order to ensure a safe and healthy living in and around ashrams.

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## 13.4 ROLE OF WOMEN

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Women, primarily, are seen as nurturers, especially of nature. In most of the countries and cultures, women are identified with protecting the natural resources and are perceived as being sensitive to the problems related to excessive utilisation of resources. Be it the Chipko movement or the Green belt Movement, women are at the forefront in conserving the nature and its abundant resources. Most of the movements related to ecology have women as the prime leaders, thereby resulting in the terminology and subject of eco-feminism. Gandhi too attributed these nurturing qualities to women and paid high tributes their motherly attitude to one and all. He considered to be morally superior and as having stronger character. Gandhi's advocacy of women empowerment and also his advocacy of non-violence towards one and all in thought, word and deed have been of immense appeal to the women in general. They found in him a champion of their rights and their innate identification with nature. Most of them who involved themselves in the movements related to ecology attributed their success to adherence to the principles of non-violence as propounded by Gandhi.

Two women from outside India were especially involved in the task of conservation of natural resources in India. Madeleine Slade, popularly known as Mirabehn and Catherine Mary Heilemann, known as Saralabehn have especially responded to the call of the Himalayas in India and dedicated themselves to the onerous task of social empowerment of women. The former set up a small centre near the Himalayan region where she undertook the task of promoting khadi and also started 'pashulok', with animal husbandry activities. She rendered immense service to the hill population by establishing her own ashram near Haridwar (now in the Uttarakhand state). She was immensely popular among the local population who realised the worth of her task and came forward to patronizing the same. Much of her contribution has already been discussed in one of the previous courses (Non-Violent Movements after Gandhi, Unit on Chipko Andolan).

Similarly, Saralabehn rendered an enormous amount of service by taking active interest in the Constructive Programme as forwarded by Gandhi. She was engaged in the real service of the deprived sections and helped in keeping the surroundings clean and hygienic. She also mastered the art of spinning, an activity to which Gandhi attached greatest importance. She was also engaged in the work related to the welfare of women and girls

in the mountain region. She also played significant role in the Chipko movement in the Himalayas. As Thomas Weber points out, 'her ashram was not merely providing an academic education and empowerment for women, but was also training social activists. Some of the young women who had grown up under her tutelage went on to form their own service centres in the hills from where they continued their social activities independently. In 1961, Sarala Devi founded the Uttarakhand Sarvodaya Mandal (Uttarakhand Welfare of All Association) dedicated to the uplift of the hill population and the protection of the hill environment' (p.303).

Gandhi's influence on women and their work was enormous. The above women were just two examples of selfless service, who lived the ashram life and carved out their niche in the arena of social work, especially among the hill areas/places they have chosen to work. They dedicated themselves to the task of implementing Constructive Programme in letter and spirit. There were many such unsung women whose contributions laid the foundation for social work and the conservation of the ecology.

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### 13.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF GANDHI'S ADVOCACY

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The significance of Gandhi's advocacy of a simple life had many dimensions. First of all, they conveyed the message of simplicity and the need for liberal and high thinking in everyday life. Secondly, his setting up of ashrams and the lifestyle he suggested therein was well within the human consumption limits and propagated avoidance of unnecessary wastage of any object that comes our way. For example, even the teeth cleaning twigs were not thrown away thus measuring their potential use or value. The lifestyle he suggested is what we can call today as eco-friendly or environment-friendly lifestyle wherein the natural resources are carefully used so as to store them for future usage. Gandhi himself said many a time that we have to fulfil our needs and not indulge in greed considering the limited resources available on earth. He was also against India taking up western lifestyle for it would put enormous pressure on the resources and considering its growing population levels, its resource consumption would be a menace to one and all. The very idea of setting up ashrams was to live close to nature as much as possible. Gandhi was thoroughly impressed by the vedic life and the life that was advocated by *rishis* of our ancient times. Further, the ideas drawn from Ruskin and Tolstoy's works have been immensely encapsulated by him in all spheres. The spirit of non-violence thoroughly impressed upon him and he adhered to it in thought, word and deed. To Gandhi, 'mere birth as a human being and the amassing of wealth by committing wanton destruction upon the environment does not entitle one to be called a civilized human being in the real sense of the term. As stated above, Gandhi saw humankind's role as trustee of all other living creatures and therefore, the human race has to earn this distinction by better thoughts, words, and deeds. Non-violence and compassion are not only for all living beings, but also towards inanimate materials. Overuse of the latter, motivated by greed and the desire to make profits, is also a form of violence, since it deprives others of the use of such materials' (Khoshoo and Moolakkattu, p.27). Gandhi consistently advocated morality towards one and all and this extended to nature as well. To him, morality is not only towards one another, but towards nature as well. The passion to have more and more at the expense of nature and members of our own species, and a lot of others in the system who are less fortunate, is indeed one of the root causes of the environmental problems. Gandhi categorically stated, I refuse to buy from anybody anything, however nice or beautiful, if it interferes with my growth or injures those whom nature has made my first care' (Ibid, p.29). In today's highly consumerist world, Gandhi and his advocacy



towards a simple life through his ashrams sends a message to the humanity that being compassionate to one and all would not only enable us to protect ourselves but also the God created nature as well. It is up to us, as the custodians of this precious resource, to take immense care and nurture it with utmost passion and respect.

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### **13.6 SUMMARY**

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Gandhi's ashrams personified an element of simple life and high thinking. By setting exemplary conditions, Gandhi sends message to the humanity about the respect and veneration one can extend to it. His ashrams were models of self-sufficiency, self-dependence and reverberated with the spirit of swadeshi. Gandhi was no mere advocate of simple life; he conveyed it through following it letter and spirit. His exemplary models inspired other prominent leaders and even the general masses to think and act in simple and respectful terms. His vows and conditions were difficult to follow but those who followed them became real satyagrahis and proponents of non-violence and truth. His ashrams gives us the message that we can all indeed live a life that is in tandem with nature and make world a better place to live.

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### **13.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

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1. What is an ashram? How well they can serve the purpose of community living?
2. How did Gandhi make his ashrams exemplary models of ecological friendly life?
3. Discuss in brief the significance of advocacy of ashram life by Gandhi.

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### **SUGGESTED READINGS**

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