



Goa's Ecological Conundrum: Lessons from Mahatma Gandhi's Environmental Thought

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Abstract:

Goa, with its stunning mix of forests, rivers, mangroves, and coastal wetlands, stands at a difficult crossroads. Decades of iron ore mining, a booming tourism industry, and rapid urban expansion have placed enormous stress on its fragile ecosystems. Hills have been scarred, rivers polluted, wetlands filled, and biodiversity threatened, all while local communities struggle to protect the landscapes that have sustained them for generations. This paper examines these challenges not just as technical or policy failures, but as ethical and moral questions about how we live with the land.

Mahatma Gandhi never called himself an environmentalist in the modern sense, yet his core ideas like non-violence toward all life, simple living, self-reliance, and the belief that the earth belongs to future generations as much as to us speak directly to Goa's situation. His often-quoted line that the earth provides enough for everyone's needs but not for anyone's greed feels especially relevant when luxury resorts and large projects encroach on water recharge zones while ordinary villagers worry about drying wells and polluted rivers.

This paper looks at specific recent struggles in places like Toyyar Lake, Palem-Siridao, and villages in South Goa, where people have taken to the streets in peaceful protests. It explores how Gandhi's concepts of Ahimsa, Swadeshi, Trusteeship, and Satyagraha can offer practical guidance for moving beyond short-term economic gains toward genuine, lasting harmony between people and nature. By weaving together current realities on the ground with Gandhian thought, the discussion aims to show that sustainable development in Goa does not require choosing between economy and ecology, but rather reimagining progress in more humane and rooted ways.

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Introduction

Anyone who has spent time in Goa quickly senses its special character. The state is small, but its landscapes shift dramatically from the dense Western Ghats in the east to the long sandy beaches and intricate mangrove systems along the Arabian Sea. Traditional khazan lands, reclaimed wetlands managed by local communities for centuries like rice fields, coconut groves, and fishing villages have shaped a way of life often described as relaxed and connected to nature. For many Goans, this connection is not romantic nostalgia but a lived reality tied to daily livelihoods, cultural festivals, and a sense of identity known locally as Goemkarponn.

Yet this balance has come under increasing strain. Since the 1990s, and more intensely after economic liberalization, large-scale iron ore mining transformed parts of the hinterland. Opencast mines left behind eroded hills, silted rivers, and dust-covered villages. Although the Supreme Court stepped in multiple times notably suspending operations and later cancelling illegal lease renewals the legacy of environmental damage lingers, and debates over new leases or auctions continue. Tourism, which now forms a major part of the economy, has brought jobs and infrastructure but also rapid construction of hotels, villas, and entertainment projects, often in ecologically sensitive areas.

In recent years, the pressure has become more visible. In early 2026, residents around Toyyar Lake in Chimbhel village rose in protest against a proposed high-rise and mall that threatened the lake and surrounding hills, which serve as vital groundwater recharge zones. Hundreds gathered, forcing authorities to reconsider the project. Similarly, in Palem-Siridao, villagers sat in protest for days against amendments to the Town and Country Planning Act (Section 39A), which they argued allowed large-scale rezoning of orchards, private forests, and green zones with limited consultation. Banners reading “Our water, we want it” captured the deep anxiety that losing these natural buffers could lead to serious water shortages in the coming decades.

Villages in South Goa, such as Loliem and Poinguinim, have written to central authorities asking for inclusion in the Western Ghats Eco-Sensitive Area (ESA) notification to protect their forests and water sources from unchecked development. The Goa State Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2025–2030, released in draft form in 2025, acknowledges rising sea levels, changing rainfall patterns, and threats to mangroves and khazan lands, yet implementation faces the familiar challenge of balancing conservation with economic ambitions.



These are not isolated incidents. They reflect a deeper pattern in which short-term gains for investors and political patronage sometimes overshadow long-term ecological health and community well-being. Political decisions in Goa, like in many small states, often involve complex alliances and transactional bargaining, making it harder for environmental voices to be heard consistently.

Mahatma Gandhi's thinking offers a different compass. Though he wrote in the context of colonial India and the freedom struggle, his critique of modern industrial civilization with its emphasis on endless consumption, centralization, and disregard for natural limits feels remarkably contemporary. Gandhi believed that real progress must respect all life and future generations. He warned against treating the earth as a commodity to be exploited without restraint. His life in ashrams, where he practiced simple living, manual labor, and community self-governance, demonstrated that another way is possible.

This paper brings Gandhi's ideas into conversation with Goa's present realities. It begins by mapping the key ecological pressures the state faces today, drawing on recent protests and official documents. It then outlines the main strands of Gandhi's environmental thought. The following sections explore how these principles might apply concretely in Goa from mining rehabilitation and community-led tourism to stronger local governance and non-violent resistance. Finally, it discusses practical pathways forward and the challenges involved. The goal is not to present Gandhi as a ready-made solution for every technical problem, but to show how his ethical framework can help reorient development toward greater harmony and justice.

Goa's Ecological Challenges: A Closer Look

Goa's environmental story is one of contrasts. On one hand, the state retains remarkable biodiversity, with parts of the Western Ghats recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Mangroves line the estuaries, supporting fisheries and protecting coasts from erosion. Traditional khazan systems demonstrate centuries of intelligent human adaptation to tidal landscapes. On the other hand, decades of intensive resource use have created visible scars.

Mining remains one of the most contentious issues. Iron ore extraction brought significant revenue in earlier decades but also widespread illegalities, as documented by commissions and civil society groups like the Goa Foundation. The Supreme Court's repeated interventions cancelling leases and emphasizing the need for fresh auctions under stricter rules highlighted how procedural lapses and environmental violations had become normalized. Even today, with operations curtailed, the long-term effects on soil, water quality, and



forest cover continue to affect local communities. Rehabilitation of mined areas has been slow, and debates over new mineral blocks raise fresh concerns about biodiversity corridors in the Ghats.

Tourism has emerged as both an economic lifeline and a source of new pressures. After the pandemic, visitor numbers surged, leading to a wave of construction. Luxury resorts, film cities, and high-density projects often target plateaus, hills, and areas near wetlands. In Toyyar Lake, locals pointed out that the hills above the lake act as natural sponges, recharging groundwater that supplies surrounding villages. A proposed large project there sparked weeks of protests in early 2026, with residents arguing that construction would accelerate runoff, reduce percolation, and increase flooding risks downstream. The government eventually agreed to notify protective boundaries around the lake, but activists noted that similar threats persist elsewhere.

In Palem-Siridao, protests focused on Section 39A of the Town and Country Planning Act. This provision allowed changes in land zoning with relatively limited public input, enabling conversion of orchards and no-development zones into settlement areas. Villagers, supported by local MLAs and groups from across the state, sat in demonstration at the TCP office and marched to Panaji, demanding withdrawal of notifications that affected nearly 100,000 square meters in their vicinity. Their core worry was straightforward: losing these green zones would threaten water security in a state already facing seasonal shortages.

Mangroves tell another worrying story. Once vital buffers against storms and nurseries for marine life, many now accumulate plastic waste carried by rivers and tides. Studies have documented high densities of microplastics and litter that disrupt tidal flows and harm biodiversity. Climate change compounds these problems. The draft Goa State Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2025–2030 notes that sea levels along the coast have risen at an average rate of about 1.45 mm per year in recent decades, with potential increases in heavy rainfall events and temperature. Khazan lands, already vulnerable to saline intrusion, face greater risks if protective mangroves and dunes degrade.

Urbanization adds another layer. Panaji and coastal towns have expanded, sometimes at the expense of wetlands and open spaces. The 2025 biodiversity plan highlights the need for climate-resilient strategies, yet competing priorities infrastructure, housing, and investor-friendly policies often slow progress. Small size makes these issues feel more immediate in Goa. With a dense network of villages and strong local identities, environmental damage quickly affects daily life, from fishermen noticing declining catches to farmers struggling with erratic water availability.



These challenges are not abstract. They touch questions of justice: who benefits from development, and who bears the costs? When large projects move forward with limited consultation, ordinary residents especially those dependent on traditional livelihoods feel pushed to the margins. Recent movements show that Goans are not passive. Peaceful protests, hunger strikes, court petitions, and village resolutions reflect a determination to protect what remains of their natural heritage. Yet sustained solutions require more than reactive resistance. They call for a deeper rethinking of the values guiding development.

Mahatma Gandhi's Environmental Thought

Gandhi's ideas about nature did not come from formal ecological science but from a lifetime of observing society, experimenting with simple living, and reflecting on moral questions. At the heart of his philosophy lies ahimsa or non-violence which he understood not merely as absence of physical harm but as active respect for all life. He extended this principle beyond human relations to include animals, plants, and the earth itself. Harming the environment through reckless exploitation was, in his view, a form of violence that ultimately harms humanity.

One of his most quoted observations captures this ethic beautifully: the earth has enough for everyone's needs but not for anyone's greed. This simple statement challenges the assumption that endless economic expansion and rising consumption represent progress. Gandhi saw modern industrial civilization as driven by unlimited wants, which inevitably lead to conflict over resources and destruction of nature. In contrast, he advocated simplicity and limitation of desires as paths to true freedom and harmony.

Swadeshi, or self-reliance, formed another pillar. Gandhi encouraged people to meet their needs as much as possible through local resources, skills, and industries. He believed that depending on distant, large-scale production often disconnects communities from the ecological and social consequences of their consumption. Village swaraj self-rule at the local level was his vision of genuine democracy, where communities manage their own affairs, including natural resources, with accountability and care. He emphasized "bread labour," the idea that everyone should engage in some manual work to stay grounded and respectful of the effort that sustains life.

Trusteeship was Gandhi's answer to the problem of wealth and power. Those who control resources should see themselves not as absolute owners but as trustees holding them for the benefit of society and future generations. This concept discourages both hoarding and wasteful exploitation. He warned that



deforestation leads to reduced rainfall and ecological imbalance, showing an intuitive understanding of interconnected systems long before modern climate science made such links explicit.

Gandhi's method of satyagraha holding firmly to truth through non-violent action has inspired countless environmental movements. When communities hug trees, block harmful projects peacefully, or demand accountability through public protest, they echo his approach. His ashrams served as living laboratories, where waste was minimized, water conserved, and daily life kept close to nature. Scholars have described Gandhi as offering an "economy of permanence" rather than one of endless growth, where social justice, ecological balance, and moral living reinforce each other.

What makes Gandhi's thought particularly valuable is its holistic nature. He did not separate environmental issues from questions of poverty, inequality, or political freedom. For him, true civilization meant living in harmony with nature and with one another. This integrated perspective feels especially useful in contexts like Goa, where economic ambitions, cultural identity, and ecological limits intersect daily.

Applying Gandhian Principles to Goa's Context

Gandhi's ideas gain concrete meaning when placed against Goa's specific struggles. Consider the distinction between need and greed in the context of tourism and real estate. When projects prioritize luxury developments that consume large amounts of land and water while promising high returns, they often satisfy a narrow set of wants at the expense of broader community needs for clean water, flood protection, and sustainable livelihoods. A trusteeship approach would require that any use of sensitive areas demonstrably benefits local populations and includes strong safeguards for ecological restoration. Profits from tourism or resource use could fund mangrove regeneration, wetland protection, and support for traditional fishers and farmers rather than flowing primarily to external investors.

Swadeshi and village swaraj point toward empowering Gram Sabhas and local biodiversity management committees. In villages like Loliem and Poinguinim, residents have already shown initiative by seeking ESA protection. Giving these bodies real decision-making power over projects in their vicinity rather than treating consultations as formalities would align with Gandhian self-governance. Community-based tourism models, such as village homestays, guided nature trails, and organic farming experiences, could generate income while keeping benefits circulating locally and minimizing ecological footprints.

The principle of simplicity encourages practical steps like stricter controls on single-use plastics, widespread rainwater harvesting, and reduction of wasteful construction practices. Gandhi's emphasis on

cleanliness (swachhata) supports community-led efforts to restore mangroves and clean rivers. His critique of rapid, unplanned urbanization suggests caution with high-density projects near recharge zones, as seen in the Toyyar Lake and Palem-Siridao cases.

Satyagraha offers a moral and practical tool for ongoing resistance. The peaceful protests in Chimbhel, Palem-Siridao, and other areas involving women, youth, and local leaders demonstrate non-violent determination in action. Rather than dismissing such movements as obstacles to development, policymakers could view them as valuable signals that help correct course toward more inclusive and sustainable paths. Integrating public hearings, referendums on major projects, and transparent environmental impact assessments that genuinely consider long-term ecological and social costs would strengthen democratic accountability.

Traditional knowledge systems, such as the community management of khazan lands, resonate with Gandhian respect for local wisdom. Reviving and supporting these practices, while adapting them to new climate realities, could form the backbone of resilient ecosystems. The draft Goa State Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2025–2030 provides a useful framework, but its success will depend on translating strategies into grounded action that involves local people as active partners rather than passive beneficiaries.

Education also matters. Introducing young Goans to principles of simple living, respect for nature, and community responsibility through schools, colleges, and cultural programs could build the inner transformation Gandhi considered essential for lasting change.

Challenges and Practical Pathways Forward

No discussion of solutions can ignore the real difficulties. Goa's economy remains tied to tourism and related sectors, and global market pressures make it tempting to prioritize immediate revenue over long-term caution. Political dynamics in the state, with their emphasis on alliances and patronage, sometimes sideline environmental concerns in favor of short-term gains. Climate change adds urgency, as rising seas and changing weather patterns threaten low-lying areas regardless of local decisions.

Yet several promising pathways exist. Full and effective implementation of the Western Ghats Eco-Sensitive Area notification, with meaningful community input, would provide a strong protective layer. Environmental assessments should move beyond formal checklists to genuinely evaluate impacts on water security, biodiversity, and local livelihoods, guided by an ethic of non-violence toward nature. Scaling up

successful community initiatives such as mangrove restoration, lake protection efforts, and organic farming clusters could demonstrate that conservation and decent livelihoods can go hand in hand.

Policy measures might include incentives for green building practices, stricter enforcement of wetland rules, and support for traditional occupations through skill development and market linkages. International sustainable development frameworks could incorporate Gandhian ethical dimensions to ensure goals serve both people and the planet equitably.

The growing public awareness visible in recent protests suggests that many Goans are ready for a different conversation about development. Bridging the gap between citizen aspirations and government action will require political will, transparent processes, and willingness to listen across divides. Gandhi's reminder that real change begins with individual and collective moral commitment remains relevant: we must be the change we wish to see.

Conclusion

Goa's ecological conundrum is not merely a list of damaged landscapes or threatened species. It is a question about the kind of society and future its people want to build. Rapid economic activities have delivered benefits but also created serious risks to the natural systems that underpin life and identity in the state.

Mahatma Gandhi's environmental thought, rooted in non-violence, simplicity, self-reliance, and trusteeship, offers a humane and grounded framework for addressing these tensions. His insistence that development must serve human needs without greed, and that communities should govern themselves in harmony with nature, provides both ethical direction and practical inspiration. The peaceful protests in Toyyar Lake, Palem-Siridao, and South Goa villages already echo Gandhian satyagraha in spirit where ordinary people are standing up for their water, land, and way of life.

Moving forward, Goa has the opportunity to blend its unique strengths i.e. Rich biodiversity, strong local traditions, and an aware citizenry with a more thoughtful approach to growth. By strengthening local governance, supporting community-led conservation, enforcing protective laws with care, and educating future generations in values of respect and responsibility, the state can chart a course toward genuine sustainability.



This does not mean rejecting all development or returning to some idealized past. It means choosing wisely so that economic activity enhances rather than erodes the natural and cultural heritage that makes Goa special. As Gandhi taught, true civilization is measured not by how much we consume or build, but by how harmoniously we live with the earth and with one another. For Goa, embracing these lessons is not nostalgia but a practical necessity if “Goemkarponn” and the landscapes that sustain it are to endure for generations to come.

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