



Gram swaraj and environmental sustainability: Relevance of gandhian decentralized development in the twenty-first century

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/ijssh.2026.8.3.8112>

Abstract

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented rise in environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, pollution and ecological degradation. These interconnected crises have raised serious concerns about the long-term sustainability of centralized and growth-driven models of development. Against this backdrop, Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj provides an alternative way of thinking about development by emphasizing decentralization, self-reliance, participatory governance, and a responsible relationship with nature. Although Gandhi did not develop an environmental theory in the modern sense, many of his ideas reflect principles that are closely aligned with contemporary debates on environmental sustainability.

This paper explores the relevance of Gram Swaraj in addressing present-day environmental challenges by examining its emphasis on local self-governance, sustainable resource management, ethical consumption and community participation. The study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach, drawing on Gandhi's major writings, including Hind Swaraj, Constructive Programme, Young India, and Harijan, together with recent scholarly literature on sustainability and decentralized development. The analysis suggests that Gram Swaraj offers a development framework that combines ecological responsibility with social justice by promoting local production, democratic decision-making, and responsible stewardship of natural resources. While the practical application of Gandhi's original vision faces challenges in an increasingly globalized and technology-driven world, its underlying ethical principles remain highly relevant. The paper argues that adapting these principles through appropriate technology, scientific innovation, and supportive public policy can help build environmentally sustainable, socially inclusive, and resilient communities. It concludes that a contemporary reinterpretation of Gram Swaraj can make a meaningful contribution to current discussions on sustainable development and environmental governance.

Keywords: Gram Swaraj, gandhian philosophy, environmental sustainability, decentralized development, sustainable development, ecological governance, climate change, local self-governance

Introduction

The twenty-first century is confronted with unprecedented environmental challenges, including climate change, deforestation, water scarcity, air and water pollution, biodiversity loss and the rapid depletion of natural resources. These interconnected crises are largely driven by industrialization, rapid urbanization and the forces of globalization, all of which have accelerated unsustainable patterns of production and consumption.

In recent decades, societies have increasingly embraced consumerism and materialism, fostering a culture of excessive consumption with little regard for ecological limits. This consumerist mindset has contributed to the overexploitation of natural resources and a growing insensitivity toward the environment. Although industrial and economic development has generated significant benefits for certain sections of society, it has simultaneously intensified environmental degradation and widened socio-economic inequalities, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities and future generations. Consequently, the prevailing development model has proven beneficial for a few while remaining environmentally and socially disruptive for many.

Mahatma Gandhi addressed the adverse consequences of industrialization, globalization and urbanization in many of his writings, speeches and public discourses. Although he did not explicitly frame his ideas in terms of

environmentalism, as understood today, his philosophy embodies principles that are inherently ecological and environmentally sustainable. Gandhi recognized that unchecked industrial growth, excessive materialism and the relentless pursuit of economic progress would eventually lead to social inequality, moral decline and ecological degradation. His critique of modern civilization was therefore not merely economic or political but also ethical, emphasizing the need to maintain a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature.

Long before environmental degradation and climate change became global concerns, Gandhi foresaw the destructive consequences of unrestrained industrialization and a consumerist way of life. He advocated a lifestyle based on simplicity, moderation and self-restraint, arguing that human needs should take precedence over limitless desires. Gandhi emphasized the mindful and responsible use of natural resources, encouraging local production and consumption to minimize exploitation and ensure sustainability. Through his vision of decentralized governance and Gram Swaraj (village self-rule), he argued that local communities should have the authority to determine how resources are utilized, what should be produced, and the extent to which resources should be consumed. Such decentralization, in his view, would not only promote social and economic justice but also foster ecological balance and sustainable living.

Although Gandhi never used contemporary terms such as "sustainable development," "environmental conservation," or "ecological sustainability," the ethical foundations of his philosophy strongly resonate with these modern concepts. His emphasis on self-sufficiency, local economies, responsible consumption, and respect for nature offers a valuable framework for addressing the environmental challenges of the twenty-first century. Consequently, Gandhi's ideas continue to inspire contemporary debates on ecological sustainability, climate justice and alternative models of development that prioritize both human well-being and environmental integrity.

As the global environmental crisis continues to intensify, scholars, policymakers and environmental activists are increasingly searching for sustainable alternatives to the prevailing growth-oriented development model. In this context, Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj emerges as a compelling framework for addressing contemporary ecological challenges. Rather than emphasizing centralized industrial development, Gram Swaraj advocates decentralized governance, local self-reliance and community-based decision-making as the foundation of sustainable development.

The philosophy of Gram Swaraj promotes local production, responsible and sustainable consumption, active community participation and the judicious use of natural resources. It encourages communities to utilize resources according to their genuine needs while preserving ecological balance for future generations. By prioritizing village self-sufficiency, participatory governance and environmental stewardship, Gandhi's vision seeks to establish a harmonious relationship between human society and the natural world.

These principles closely align with the contemporary concept of environmental sustainability, which emphasizes meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. In an era marked by climate change, resource depletion and environmental degradation, Gram Swaraj offers an alternative development paradigm rooted in ecological responsibility, social equity and ethical governance. Consequently, Gandhi's decentralized model remains highly relevant as a framework for promoting sustainable development and fostering resilient, environmentally conscious communities in the twenty-first century.

This paper argues that Gandhi's concept of decentralized development, embodied in the idea of Gram Swaraj, offers valuable insights for building sustainable and resilient communities in the twenty-first century. It contends that decentralized governance, local self-reliance, participatory decision-making and the responsible use of natural resources provide a viable alternative to the centralized, growth-driven development model that has contributed significantly to contemporary environmental crises.

By emphasizing local production, sustainable consumption, community empowerment and ecological responsibility, the Gandhian model fosters both environmental sustainability and social resilience. This paper therefore examines the continued relevance of Gram Swaraj as a framework for addressing present-day ecological challenges and argues that its principles can contribute meaningfully to the creation of environmentally sustainable, socially equitable and economically resilient communities in the contemporary world.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship has highlighted the enduring relevance of Gandhian thought in addressing contemporary environmental challenges. Gandhi's ashrams are increasingly viewed not merely as spiritual communities but as practical experiments in sustainable living, demonstrating principles of waste minimization, resource conservation and collective responsibility (Meena, 2025) ^[15]. By emphasizing local production, self-reliance and ethical patterns of consumption, these communities provide valuable models for rebuilding localized economies capable of resisting the ecological and social disruptions caused by industrialization. The Swadeshi principle, in this context, represents more than an ideological commitment to indigenous production; it offers a practical pathway towards ecological resilience through simplicity, moderation and responsible use of resources.

This decentralized vision also resonates strongly with contemporary debates on planetary boundaries and sustainable development. Rather than placing markets or industrial expansion at the centre of economic life, the Gandhian model prioritizes human well-being while recognizing the ecological limits within which development must occur (Aishwarya & Sagar, 2022; ^[1] Gandhi *et al.*, 2022) ^[11]. Such an approach encourages development that remains responsive to local environmental conditions and respects the regenerative capacity of natural ecosystems.

At the same time, Gandhian principles need not reject modern technology. Instead, the integration of appropriate technologies with supportive public policies and financial incentives can strengthen rural economies while significantly reducing the environmental costs associated with centralized industrial production and long-distance supply chains. This combination of technological innovation and community-based governance shifts the emphasis from extractive, growth-oriented industrialization to regenerative local production. Scientific planning within a decentralized framework can further enhance resource efficiency, improve waste management and promote sustainable livelihoods without encouraging excessive consumerism (Mallik, 2024 ^[13] Meena, 2025) ^[15].

Ultimately, when supported by effective policy interventions, this synthesis of Gandhian philosophy, appropriate technology and decentralized governance has the potential to transform rural communities into resilient centres of sustainable production. Such a model offers a meaningful alternative for addressing the complex environmental and developmental challenges of the twenty-first century while ensuring that economic progress remains closely aligned with ecological sustainability (Casaburi, 2024) ^[6].

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research approach to examine the environmental dimensions of Gandhian concept of Gram Swaraj. It primarily draws upon Gandhi's original writings including Hind Swaraj, Constructive Programme and his articles published in Young India and Harijan. These primary texts are complemented by a wide range of secondary sources, such as scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles and academic studies on Gandhian philosophy, environmental ethics, sustainable development and decentralized governance.

The analysis is based on close textual reading and conceptual interpretation of these sources. By critically engaging with Gandhi's ideas and contemporary scholarly debates, the study explores the ecological principles embedded within Gram Swaraj and assesses their relevance in addressing present-day environmental challenges. This interpretative framework enables a deeper understanding of how Gandhian thought can contribute to current discussions on sustainability, local self-governance and environmentally responsible development.

Objectives

The present study seeks to achieve the following objectives

- To explore the ecological aspects of Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj and understand how they contribute to environmental sustainability.
- To examine the relationship between decentralized governance, local self-reliance, and sustainable development.
- To assess the relevance of Gram Swaraj as a framework for addressing contemporary environmental issues, including climate change and resource depletion.
- To analyse selected environmental initiatives and practices that have been inspired by Gandhian ideas and evaluate their contribution to sustainable development.
- To critically examine both the possibilities and the challenges of applying the principles of Gram Swaraj in the context of the twenty-first century.

Gram Swaraj: A Decentralized Vision of Sustainable Development

Gram Swaraj occupies a central place in Gandhi's political and social philosophy. Literally meaning "village self-rule", the concept combines Gram (village) with Swaraj (self-governance) to describe a system in which villages function as independent, self-sustaining communities capable of managing their own affairs. For Gandhi, genuine freedom was not achieved merely through political independence from colonial rule; it also required local communities to possess the authority and capacity to govern themselves. Gandhi believed that democracy would remain incomplete if political and economic power continued to be concentrated in centralized institutions. Instead, he envisioned a decentralized social order in which village communities played the primary role in decision-making, economic production and resource management. By producing most of their basic necessities locally, villages could reduce their dependence on distant markets, large-scale industries and external economic forces. Such self-reliance, in Gandhi's view, would strengthen both social cohesion and economic resilience.

The idea of Gram Swaraj rests upon several interconnected principles. The first is decentralization, where authority and decision-making are dispersed among local communities rather than concentrated in state institutions. A second principle is self-sufficiency, which encourages villages to meet their essential needs through local production, traditional skills and cooperative labour. Equally important is participatory democracy, where every member of the community is expected to contribute to decisions that affect collective welfare.

Another defining feature of Gram Swaraj is its emphasis on ethical consumption. Gandhi argued that economic life should be guided by human needs rather than limitless

desires. He believed that moderation, simplicity and self-restraint were necessary for building a just and sustainable society. Closely linked to this idea is the principle of harmony with nature, which recognizes that economic activities must operate within ecological limits and safeguard natural resources for future generations.

Taken together, these principles present a development model that differs fundamentally from the dominant industrial paradigm. Rather than measuring progress solely through economic growth or expanding consumption, Gram Swaraj places human well-being, social justice, and ecological balance at the centre of development.

In the context of contemporary environmental challenges, Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj offers important insights for rethinking sustainable development. By relocating economic activities to the local level and encouraging communities to become more self-reliant, it reduces dependence on long and resource-intensive supply chains that contribute significantly to carbon emissions and environmental degradation (Mandal, 2026) ^[14]. The principle of Swadeshi, which advocates the use of locally produced goods and services, further strengthens local economies while reducing the ecological costs associated with globalized patterns of production and consumption.

Gandhi also regarded environmental responsibility as inseparable from moral responsibility. In his conception of Gram Swaraj, communities are not simply producers and consumers but custodians of the natural resources on which their livelihoods depend. Such an approach encourages people to recognize the environmental consequences of their economic choices and promotes a culture of responsible resource use instead of unchecked accumulation (Chowdhury, 2025) ^[8]. Consequently, development is understood not as the endless pursuit of material wealth but as the creation of self-reliant, equitable and ecologically balanced communities.

Viewed from this perspective, Gram Swaraj provides an alternative framework for addressing the environmental and social crises associated with industrial modernity. By integrating decentralized governance, local production, ethical consumption and ecological stewardship, Gandhi's model offers a holistic vision of development that remains highly relevant to current debates on sustainability, climate resilience and environmental justice.

Gram Swaraj and Contemporary Environmental Challenges

The increasing severity of climate change, biodiversity loss and resource depletion has exposed the limitations of centralized and industrial models of development. In this context, Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj offers an alternative framework that emphasizes local self-governance, ecological responsibility and community participation. Rather than relying exclusively on centralized institutions, Gram Swaraj advocates empowering villages to manage their own natural resources according to local needs and environmental conditions. Such an approach enables communities to combine traditional ecological knowledge with modern sustainable practices, making environmental management more responsive and context-specific than uniform, top-down policies (Banerjee, 2025 ^[4] Wright *et al.*, 2016) ^[25].

One of the major environmental concerns of the twenty-first century is the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. Gram Swaraj addresses this challenge by

encouraging local communities to take collective responsibility for the protection and regeneration of forests, water bodies, grazing lands and agricultural resources. Instead of treating nature solely as an economic asset, the Gandhian model promotes the idea of stewardship, where communities become custodians of their surrounding environment. This sense of shared responsibility not only strengthens ecological conservation but also contributes to long-term environmental resilience (Meena, 2025) ^[15].

The philosophy of Gram Swaraj also aligns with the contemporary idea of ecological balance. Gandhi's principle of trusteeship encourages individuals and communities to use natural resources responsibly while safeguarding them for future generations. By linking economic activities with ecological limits, Gram Swaraj challenges the dominant model of unlimited economic growth and advocates a development process that respects the regenerative capacity of local ecosystems (Chowdhury, 2025) ^[8]. Such an approach becomes increasingly relevant as countries struggle to reconcile economic development with environmental protection.

Rapid urbanization and industrial expansion present another significant challenge to the realization of Gram Swaraj. The expansion of cities often encroaches upon agricultural land, village commons and ecologically sensitive areas, weakening both local ecosystems and traditional systems of community governance. As common resources are increasingly privatized or diverted for industrial purposes, village institutions lose their capacity to manage resources collectively. Consequently, decentralized environmental governance becomes more difficult to sustain under growing urban and market pressures (Mandal, 2026) ^[14].

Although the constitutional recognition of Panchayati Raj Institutions has strengthened local governance in India, several institutional constraints continue to limit their effectiveness. Inadequate financial resources, limited administrative autonomy, bureaucratic control and insufficient technical expertise often prevent village institutions from implementing locally appropriate environmental initiatives. Furthermore, national environmental policies frequently overlook local ecological knowledge, reducing the effectiveness of climate adaptation measures at the grassroots level (Joseph, 2024 ^[12] Datta, 2019) ^[10].

Given the growing uncertainty associated with climate change, Gram Swaraj remains highly relevant in the twenty-first century. By promoting localized production, self-sufficiency and reduced dependence on long-distance supply chains, it offers practical pathways for lowering carbon emissions while strengthening local resilience. The Gandhian emphasis on restrained consumption also complements contemporary debates on sustainable lifestyles, circular economies and degrowth, all of which argue that environmental sustainability requires reducing excessive consumption rather than merely improving production efficiency (Shelef *et al.*, 2017 ^[21] Smith *et al.*, 2021) ^[22].

Advantages of Gram Swaraj for Environmental Sustainability

One of the greatest strengths of Gram Swaraj lies in its ability to integrate environmental conservation with local economic development. Since decision-making takes place at the community level, resource management becomes

more democratic, transparent and responsive to local ecological conditions. Villagers possess intimate knowledge of their natural surroundings, allowing them to adopt conservation practices that are better suited to local ecosystems than externally imposed policies (Wright *et al.*, 2016) ^[25].

Another significant advantage is the promotion of community participation. Gram Swaraj encourages citizens to become active participants in environmental governance rather than passive beneficiaries of government programmes. Collective decision-making enhances accountability and fosters a stronger sense of ownership over common resources. As communities become directly involved in protecting forests, water resources, and agricultural land, environmental conservation becomes a shared social responsibility rather than an administrative obligation (Meena, 2025) ^[15].

The Gandhian principle of trusteeship further strengthens environmental sustainability by emphasizing ethical responsibility over unrestricted ownership. It encourages individuals to view themselves as custodians of natural resources whose duty extends beyond personal benefit to the welfare of society and future generations. This ethical perspective discourages overexploitation and promotes responsible patterns of production and consumption (Chowdhury, 2025) ^[5].

Gram Swaraj also contributes to climate resilience by encouraging localized production systems and reducing dependence on resource-intensive industrial supply chains. The Swadeshi principle strengthens local economies while lowering transportation-related carbon emissions. At the same time, decentralized production reduces environmental pressures associated with large-scale industrialization and supports circular systems based on recycling, reuse and efficient resource utilization (Mandal, 2026) ^[14].

Another important contribution of Gram Swaraj is its emphasis on learning through community practice. Gandhi's ashrams demonstrated that sustainable living could be achieved through simplicity, cooperation, waste reduction and collective responsibility. These ideas remain relevant today, particularly when combined with appropriate technologies and scientific planning. Integrating traditional ecological knowledge with modern environmental innovations can significantly improve rural resilience while preserving ecological integrity (Meena, 2025) ^[15].

Critiques and Limitations

Despite its continuing relevance, Gram Swaraj faces several practical challenges in the contemporary world. Modern economies are deeply integrated into national and global markets, making complete village self-sufficiency difficult to achieve. Many rural communities depend on external markets, advanced technologies and government support for employment, healthcare, education and infrastructure. Consequently, the original Gandhian vision cannot be implemented without significant adaptation to present-day economic realities.

Institutional limitations also constrain the effectiveness of decentralized governance. Although Panchayati Raj Institutions have been constitutionally empowered, many continue to suffer from inadequate funding, limited decision-making authority, bureaucratic interference and shortages of trained personnel. These weaknesses often prevent local governments from effectively addressing

environmental challenges or implementing sustainable resource management programmes (Joseph, 2024 ^[12] Datta, 2019) ^[10].

Another limitation arises from the growing pressures of urbanization and industrial expansion. Increasing demand for land, infrastructure and industrial development frequently leads to the conversion of agricultural land and village commons into commercial spaces. Such changes weaken traditional systems of collective resource management and reduce opportunities for community-based environmental conservation (Mandal, 2026) ^[14].

Climate change itself presents additional challenges. While local knowledge remains valuable, rapidly changing environmental conditions require scientific forecasting, technological innovation and institutional coordination that extend beyond the capacity of individual villages. Without adequate technical support, climate information and financial assistance, local communities may struggle to respond effectively to increasingly complex environmental risks (Banerjee, 2025) ^[4].

Finally, some critics argue that Gram Swaraj idealizes traditional village life while overlooking historical inequalities based on caste, class and gender. Decentralization alone cannot guarantee social justice unless local institutions are inclusive, democratic and accountable. Therefore, the contemporary relevance of Gram Swaraj lies not in replicating Gandhi's model exactly, but in adapting its ethical principles of decentralization, self-reliance, participatory governance and ecological responsibility to meet the realities of the twenty-first century.

Reinterpreting Gram Swaraj for the Twenty-First Century

The changing social, economic and environmental realities of the twenty-first century call for a fresh interpretation of Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj. Relevance today does not require a literal return to the village economy envisioned during Gandhi's time. Instead, it involves adapting the core values of decentralization, self-reliance, ethical responsibility and ecological balance to contemporary conditions. In this sense, Gram Swaraj should be understood as a flexible framework that can coexist with technological innovation and global interconnectedness, provided these serve human well-being and environmental sustainability rather than unchecked economic growth.

Modern technologies can, in fact, strengthen the objectives of Gram Swaraj when they are designed to empower local communities. Renewable energy systems owned and managed by villages, decentralized water management, community-based waste recycling, and locally organized food production networks are examples of how technology can reinforce rather than undermine local self-reliance. Similarly, digital platforms can improve participatory governance by making decision-making more transparent and accessible while strengthening accountability within local institutions.

The principles of Gram Swaraj also resonate with emerging ideas such as the circular economy, sustainable urban planning, and community-led climate adaptation. Encouraging local production, reducing waste, promoting resource recycling and strengthening neighbourhood-level cooperation reflect Gandhi's broader vision of responsible living. Even in rapidly urbanizing societies, the values of community participation, environmental stewardship and

moderation in consumption remain highly relevant. Sustainable neighbourhoods, urban farming initiatives, renewable energy cooperatives and citizen-led conservation programmes illustrate how Gandhian ideals can be reinterpreted beyond the rural context.

Ultimately, reimagining Gram Swaraj for the present century is less about reproducing historical institutions and more about applying its ethical foundations to contemporary environmental governance. By combining scientific knowledge, appropriate technology and local participation, societies can develop more resilient and environmentally responsible models of development that remain faithful to the spirit of Gandhi's philosophy.

Conclusion

The environmental challenges confronting the world today—including climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion and ecological degradation—have raised serious questions about the long-term sustainability of centralized and growth-driven development models. These interconnected crises highlight the need for alternative approaches that place ecological balance, social justice and community participation at the heart of development. In this context, Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj offers a valuable framework for rethinking the relationship between society, economy and the environment.

Although Gram Swaraj emerged during India's struggle for independence, its underlying principles continue to hold significant relevance in the contemporary world. Its emphasis on decentralized governance, local self-reliance, ethical consumption, participatory democracy and environmental responsibility corresponds closely with present-day discussions on sustainable development, climate resilience and ecological justice. Rather than viewing nature as an unlimited source of economic growth, the Gandhian approach encourages responsible resource use and recognizes the interdependence between human well-being and ecological health.

At the same time, the study acknowledges that the original model of village self-sufficiency cannot be implemented in its traditional form within today's highly interconnected global economy. Nevertheless, the core values of Gram Swaraj remain adaptable. When combined with modern technologies, scientific innovation and supportive public policies, these principles can contribute to building communities that are environmentally sustainable, socially inclusive and economically resilient.

The continuing relevance of Gram Swaraj therefore lies not in replicating the past, but in reinterpreting Gandhi's vision to address contemporary realities. As the search for sustainable development models becomes increasingly urgent, Gandhian decentralized development offers both an ethical foundation and a practical direction for creating societies that respect ecological limits while promoting human dignity, collective responsibility and long-term environmental sustainability.

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