

## **Religion and Multiculturalism: Contextualising Gandhi's religious ideas in the contemporary times**

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### **Abstract**

*Modernity along with giving freedom and emancipation to the individual has led to the sharpening of identities on religious and cultural lines. This has been characterised by different religious and political differences and manifested in the form of ethnic and religious conflicts. Religious fundamentalism and communalism have been on the rise in the contemporary times which pose a serious threat to the social fabric of the country. The diversified nature of Indian society further problematizes the idea of multiculturalism because of the competing social and political identities. To realise the idea of peaceful coexistence and multiculturalism we need to hark back to the Gandhi's idea of religion and his worldview in context of the contemporary times. Gandhian idea of Sarvdharm Sambhav is very pertinent to realise the idea of multiculturalism and in order to ensure peaceful coexistence of communities and curbing ethno-religious conflicts. The precedent set up by Gandhian ideas in the political landscape of India still holds significance in addressing the contemporary political issues which will be discussed by virtue of this paper. This paper also analyses Gandhian praxis of multiculturalism during the Indian freedom movement. The paper is descriptive in nature and is primarily based on secondary sources of data.*

### **Introduction**

**T**he Indian society has been multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic since times immemorial. However, India has also encountered various kinds of divisiveness in the past. Starting from the Partition of India in 1947 the roots of communalism and fundamentalism have been getting entrenched in the social fabric of India. The communal riots in 1984, 2002 and the recent trends in the form of communal clashes and mob lynching are testimony to the fact that the struggle for ensuring a multicultural society in India is still on. Therefore the biggest challenge before India is to preserve the pluralistic tradition and to bring the various communities into the mainstream society by promoting the spirit of multiculturalism. Building bridges of solidarity among different religious communities in India is essential to preserve the pluralistic and multicultural credentials of the country.

### **Understanding the discourse on multiculturalism and its Indian Context**

The concept of multiculturalism emerged in the western society in the 1970s especially in the context of Canadian attempt to tackle the problem of immigrants. It soon became a part of Canadian official policy and even spread to Australia, USA, UK and some countries of EU. Subsequently it has become dominant political ideology in the west. Bhikhu Parekh(2000) argues that, "multiculturalism is not about difference or identity per se but those that are embedded in and sustained by that culture; that is, a body of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of people understand themselves and the world and organise their individual and collective life. According to him, it could be virtually taken as synonym for cultural diversity. He underlines three different types of cultural diversity: sub-cultural diversity, perspectival diversity and communal diversity. In his view, groups like lesbians, gays and the like could be put under sub-cultural diversity as they seek nothing more than to pluralise the existing dominant culture. Some other groups, like the feminists seek to reconstitute the dominant culture in their own

perspective. Hence, Parekh puts them under the category of perspectival diversity. But it is the communal diversity, Parekh emphasises which constitutes the core of multiculturalism. He illustrates it by referring to well established cultural groups like Jews, Gypsies and recent immigrant groups.

### **Gandhi's ontological understanding of religion**

Gandhi called himself a *sanatani* Hindu. The ethical and spiritual outlook of Hinduism had deep imprints in his mind. He explains, "The chief value of Hinduism lies in holding the actual belief that all life (not only human beings, but all sentient beings) is one, i.e., all life coming from One universal source, call it Allah, God or Parameshwara. This unity and oneness of all creation constitute the foundation of Gandhi's relational world view. Hinduism, for Gandhi, was not exclusive, but a broad and inclusive faith, a tolerant and open-minded religion, accommodating the best in other religions. He explains the quintessence of a *sanatani* Hindu in the following words, "In spite of being a staunch Hindu, I find room in my faith for Christian, Islamic and Zoroastrian. Teaching mine religion is a broad faith that does not oppose Christians- not even a polymath brother and not even the most fanatical Mussalman. It is a faith based on broadest possible toleration. I refuse to abuse a man for his fanatical deeds because I try to see them from his point of view. It is a somewhat embarrassing position, I know but to others, not to me. For him, the *Varnashrama* dharma was a universal law which has nothing to do with superiority and inferiority. As he himself put it, "My *Varnashrama* enables me to dine with anybody who will give me clean food, be Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, whatever he is. My *Varnashrama* accommodates Panchama families with whom I dine with greatest pleasure, to dine with whom is a privilege. Thus his faith in *Sanatana Dharma* and *Varnashrama* did not come in the way of his respect for diverse religious traditions and equality of all people irrespective of caste and creed. In his seminal work *Hind Swaraj*, he says, "Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter if we take different roads as

long as we reach the same goal? In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals. It is evident that from the very beginning of his public life he looked upon religion from a multicultural perspective. Though he was true to the essential teaching of Hinduism, but for him there was no religion higher than truth and righteousness. He declares his stand on religion in *Young India*(1920) "It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and whichever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost is too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself. This also reflects his incessant search for the quintessence of all religions.

### **Multiculturalism - A Gandhian Pursuit**

Gandhi's syncretic approach to religion, reflected in his idea of *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (Equal respect for all religions), one of the eleven vows prescribed for every inmate of his ashrams, goes much beyond secularism and multiculturalism. As pointed out by Mrinal Miri(2003), the liberal position on the problem of secularism is essentially related to tolerance of different religions which virtually amounts to a kind of indifference.

Gandhi's attitude towards religion was not of a patronising toleration, rather it sought to develop the spirit of a fellowship which helps a Hindu to become a better Hindu, a Mussalman to become a better Mussalman, and a Christian to become a better Christian. Firstly, by emphasising on the religion of truth he included the secular or even the atheist and the humanist in the realm of religion. Gandhi was familiar with the fact that atheists only disbelieve in God and not in the truth. Therefore there is no wonder why an atheist like Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (Gora) became a close associate of Gandhi. Gora himself said, "I cannot remove god, if god were truth. Secondly, religion was basic to Gandhi's life, thought and action. All his activities from spiritual to mundane including politics were governed by the spirit of religion.

Gandhi revolutionised the very notion of religion and politics. He underscored the ethical side of religion free from all kinds of creedal rites and rituals. Religion, morality and ethics for him are closely interwoven. Similarly, politics was nothing but a major instrument of service to the people totally free from all games of power politics. Gandhi realised that he couldn't do even social work without politics. At the same time he was also aware that he could not pursue politics without a deep religious sensibility. He unequivocally stated, "my devotion to truth has drawn me into the field of politics and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means. Thirdly, Gandhi was not in favour of a theocratic state patronising a particular religion or even all religions equally. According to him, the state should look after secular welfare, health, communications, and foreign affairs and so on but not one's religion which is purely a personal concern. Fourthly, Gandhi did not favour any particular religion or the need for conversion of people belonging to other faiths to a particular religion. He was aware of the danger of one single religion dominating the country or the world. Gandhi believed that each religion is valuable and one should find spiritual fulfillment in one's own religious tradition. He believed that every formula of religion should be subjected to the acid test of reason and he scrutinised every scripture, including The Gita, before acceptance. Scriptures cannot transcend reason and truth, they are intended to purify reason and illuminate truth. One should try to enrich one's religion by drawing out the best from other religions. However Gandhi was not against true conversion out of one's own inner conviction and he differentiated it from proselytization. "Conversion is a matter between man and his maker Fifthly, he believed that true knowledge of religions will break down the narrow barriers and also help to understand one's own religion better. He encouraged his followers to undertake the study of scriptures of other religions apart from those of one's own. In the prayer meetings of

the Ashram, Gandhi made it a practice to read a passage from scriptures from various religions to promote inter-religious understanding. He used to read the New Testament of the Bible with the students of Gujarat Vidyapith. In the face of public protest Gandhi wrote in Young India an article titled "Crime of reading Bible", which said, "I hold that it is the duty of every cultures man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religion is a sacred duty. Finally, Gandhi was not advocating the merger of all religions into one. He was trying to find out the commonalities on various religions and promote mutual tolerance. "The need of the moment is not one religion but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of different religions.

### **Praxis of Multiculturalism by Gandhi in Indian National movement**

Gandhi did not find it difficult even during his South African days to build up a cross-cultural religious support base. It is to be noted that business men mainly of the Muslim community and Tamil indentured labourers constituted the core of his Satyagraha campaigns. This trend continued in India which saw a further expansion of his inclusive support base, significantly the Muslim community. Despite some setbacks with the withdrawal of Non-cooperation and Khilafat movement and communal riots in the country in 1923-24, Gandhi never lost hope of building up an all inclusive national movement. He sat on a 21-days fast at Mohammad Ali's house in Delhi in 1924 and followed it up by persuading various political groups to set up a committee to formulate a constitution of India by reconciling the interests of different communities. It was this report which subsequently came to be known as Nehru Report. Unfortunately for India, the said report could not be made acceptable to All Parties Conference in Calcutta in 1928. Thus, India missed a great opportunity of communal harmony for Gandhi had worked incessantly. He picked up the thread again during the Civil

Disobedience movement. Gandhi was dead against the British policy of dividing the people of India on the basis of religion and the vivisection of the country. He emphasised on the diverse collective identities of Indians instead of their religious identities and promoted the spirit of multiculturalism. This point has been emphasised by scholars of eminence like Amartya Sen in his writings in his writings especially referring to the stand taken by Gandhi in the Second Round Table Conference in 1931, in which British govt. used various leaders representing different communities to question the credential of Congress of Gandhi to speak on their behalf. Gandhi on behalf of Congress contested the fact of his being described primarily as a spokesman for Hindus, in particular "caste Hindus". He also controverted the British assertion that the rest of communities were being represented by delegates chosen by the British prime minister. He asserted the right of the Congress to speak for every section of Indian society in the conference. In his address, Gandhi said, "I am but a poor humble agent acting on behalf of the Indian National Congress. It represents no particular community, no particular class, no particular interest. It claims to represent all Indian interests and all classes. It is a matter of greatest pleasure to me to state that it was first conceived in an English brain. From the very commencement the Congress had Muslims, Christians, Anglo-Indians above all, the Congress represents, in its essence, the dumb, semi-starved millions scattered over the length and breadth of the land in its 700,000 villages. This address was nothing but a reassertion of Gandhi's multicultural approach to Indian politics and society. Gandhi's multicultural approach was reflected during 1937 elections in which every community was accommodated and also in the formation of several provincial governments. At the time of the 2nd world war, Gandhi tried to align with Jinnah to present a united national front before the government but the government succeeded in creating a wedge in between prompting Jinnah to side with the government in opposing the Quit India Movement. But Gandhi was so persistent in his community inclusive

approach that he entered into a long dialogue with Jinnah again in September 1944 but to no avail. In the cabinet mission to lead India to independence without Partition, Gandhi was willing initially to support for a proposal for united India with some kind of autonomy to the provinces provided they were not compelled to join any grouping. The period from August 1946 to January 1948 marked most valiant effort on the part of Gandhi to keep India united by accommodating every Indian community in the new scheme of things. In the process, he went around Noakhali, Calcutta, Bihar and Delhi and used every instrument from his spiritual armory to lead India towards independence by keeping it united. Not only that, in this effort, he even went to the extent of offering the prime-ministership of India to Jinnah. Unfortunately in the prevailing situation of communal frenzy, there were no takers for Gandhi's proposal. Ultimately India became independent but with Partition. It is evident from the above survey that Gandhi throughout his political pilgrimage never flinched from his basic approach of positive multiculturalism. He even sacrificed his life while pursuing the goal of interreligious harmony.

### Conclusion

Gandhi made a major contribution to multicultural discourse both in terms of thought and action. It hardly matters that Gandhi did not use such terms as multiculturalism. It is also a fact that the theory and praxis of multiculturalism is facing a lot of critical attack in present times. Gandhi's understanding of religion and his multicultural approach has a great significance in the context of growing communal divide and religious fundamentalism in different paths of the globe including India. Gandhi's broad vision, his radical interpretations of various concepts in the sphere of religion can go a long way in promoting harmony among various religious faiths and communities across the world. It has a great value especially to preserve the composite culture of many countries.

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