



Gandhian Perspective on Communalism

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Communalism is one of the most serious problems that has raised a great challenge before the secular structure of India. India has witnessed a long record of communal riots since independence. In the name of religion many shameful, inhuman and immoral acts have been committed from time to time. In the context of the present situation there arises an imperative need to recapture the spirit and human touch of Gandhian perspective on communalism.

Mahatma Gandhi devoted his entire life for propounding communal harmony and led the country to the door steps of freedom through non-violence, the sacred human value. Gandhi was neither an Emperor nor a Military General. Moreover, he neither remained a President nor a Prime Minister of India.. Yet, he ruled and is still ruling over the hearts of millions of Indians. He deservedly earned the title of *Father of Nation* because he took care of India like a father and never favoured any particular community or religion.

He was a man who did what he said and led an exemplary and a transparent life. Not many people can claim "My life is an open book". He was a true Mahatma who led a pious life for the service of mankind. Gandhi encompassed the compassion of Lord Krishna, tolerance of Mohammed and the sanctity of Christ. Perhaps this prompted Albert Einstein to say that the forthcoming generations would not even believe that such a man walked on this planet in flesh and blood. In his life of truth and nonviolence, he could melt the differences between individuals and different communities. On August 9, 1942, in his weekly newspaper, Harijan, Gandhi laid emphasis on communal harmony in India when he quoted, Hindustan belongs to all those who are born and bred here and who have no other country to look to. Therefore, it belongs to Parsis, Beni Israels, to Indian Christians, Muslims and other non-Hindus as much as to Hindus. Free India will be no Hindu Raj, it will be Indian Raj based not on the majority of any religious sect or community, but on the representatives of the whole people without distinction of religion.

Gandhi was brought up in the true Hindu orthodox fashion. But his education abroad and deep study of the teachings of various religious leaders, thinkers and philosophers made him liberal towards all religions and show reverence for them. He asserted on *Satyagraha*. For him, there was no religion other than truth. Truth is Rama, Narayana, Ishwara, Khuda, Allah or God. These are like different shapes into which gold is beaten and assumed different forms and names; but ultimately it is all gold. This signifies that God is One.

Even before coming to India from South Africa, the Mahatma had sharpened his philosophy on communal harmony and political methods. When he returned, he saw that India was in the grip of religiosity and broad masses were part of the churning process due to the ongoing social and political upheavals. The root cause of all the problems was the communal differences among the followers of two principal religious communities- Hindus and Muslims. He faced the tough task of taking all the sections of society along to the path of Independence of the nation.

In mid- 1920s the communal riots swept the various regions of the country. Many regions of Kohat, Sambhal, Gulbarga and Amethi were amongst the worst affected areas. The news of ongoing communal disturbance pained Gandhi to great extent. He resorted to twenty-one days fast as a penance to bring malady under control. The venue of the fast was Maulana Mohamed Ali's residence in Delhi. Gandhi explained in his message to the nation:

The recent events have proved unbearable for me. My helplessness is still more unbearable. My religion teaches me that whenever there is distress which one cannot remove, one must fast and pray. I have done so in connection with own dearest ones....I respectfully invite the heads of all the communities, including Englishmen, to meet and end this quarrel which is a disgrace to religion and to humanity. It seems as if God has been dethroned. Let us reinstate Him in our hearts.

The fast had the desired effect although it was a temporary phase. The prominent political as well as religious leaders assembled in Delhi in a unity conference under the president-ship of Motilal Nehru. The resolution for the sustenance of communal harmony was unanimously approved in the conference.

Gandhi was critical of the element of hatred which he described as the container of poison as well as a destructive force which greatly affects religious, economic, cultural and political life of the communities. Communal hatred, according to Gandhi, retards progress and leads us to the path of backwardness. As a practical idealist, he wished his message of non-violence to reach each and every door of an Indian. He appropriately emphasized, The Hindu thinks that in quarrelling with the Mussalman he is benefiting Hinduism, and the Mussalman thinks that in fighting with a Hindu he is benefiting Islam. But each is ruining his faith. And the poison has spread among the members of the communities themselves.

Gandhi recognized that for the maintenance of communal harmony the **Press** always plays a dominant role in society. He felt much concern over the news based on sensitive communal issues. He always wished that communal hatred should be stopped through writings by responsible persons including editors and correspondents.

To maintain communal harmony, he showed consistent interest in the organization and management of the Jamia Millia Islamia which had shifted to Delhi, and was run on the lines of the chain of Vidhyapiths. This kind of patronage by him shows the extent to which he was prepared to enrich the cultural and educational heritage of the Muslim community.

Throughout his long political career in India, Gandhi sincerely tried to seek Hindu-Muslim unity and bring them on a common platform for successfully launching his anti-Raj movements. Since the Khailafat days, he directed his efforts to that end. Time and again he resorted to fasts whenever he realized the necessity of communal unity and harmony in any region of the country.

Gandhi played a central place in the freedom movement. But, unfortunately all he got was the hostile reaction from Muslim communalism and Hindu Communalism both. These formations projected him to be against their religion, while his opposition was not to religions but to the politics in the name of religion. Nothing could be more contradictory in the approach to religion, than the approach of communalists and Gandhi. The communalists, both Muslim and Hindu, used the religious identity of their religion. He saw religion mainly as a moral force, a set of values, which should guide the individual in her/his life.

While Muslim League wanted to create an independent Islamic Nation, **Pakistan**, the Hindu Mahasbha/RSS aimed at making a separate **Hindu** nation. But it was Gandhi who talked of secular India, articulating the aspirations of majority of the country. He wanted religion to be a private matter for the individual as he believed ,

Religion is not the test of nationality but is a personal matter between man and God, and, religion is a personal affair of each individual, it must not be mixed up with politics or national affairs.

It is clear that while communalists misused and exploited the word " religion" as the dividing institution, Gandhi in his unique way treated religion as the ground which united people. Gandhi contributed numerous articles in *Young India* and *Harijan* with the theme of

Hindu-Muslim unity and communal accord. Calling all Indians his brothers and friends he left no stone unturned to inculcate in them the feeling of universal brotherhood. He claimed , "*I consider myself as good a Muslim as I am a Hindu and for that matter, I regard myself as equally good a Christian or a Parsi*"

Gandhiji's concept of *Ramarajya* did not mean a rule of the Hindus. He said "*My Rama is another name for Khuda or God. I want Khudai raj, which is the same thing as the Kingdom of God on earth*" He further said, "*True Religion does not teach us to bear ill-will towards one another. It is easy enough to be friendly to one's friends. But to befriend the one who regards himself as your enemy, is the quintessence of true religion. The other is mere business.*" Undoubtedly, Gandhi's own unique definitions and practice of religion and definition of God as truth have their own matchless place in the history of human thought.

Today, many years after Gandhi's martyrdom, the communal forces are still active in the country. We must learn hard lessons from horrifying and shameful incidences of Bhagalpur, Godra, Malegaon; the ruthless burning of Graham Staines and his two minor sons in Orissa Gandhiji's teachings, philosophy and perspective on communalism deserve better perception and practical implementation for peace and prosperity of the Nation.

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