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Social Integration and Indian Muslims: The Gandhian Perspective

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The urgency of social integration is being felt today all over due to rising ethnic conflicts in the world at large and increasing caste and communal tensions in India. The problem of social integration of the India Muslims after partition with the rest of the people has once again become serious as manifested in the rising communal tensions and riots in the recent years.

Social Integration

Social integration is a process. It is harmonising and unifying as well. In this process various structural components of society are properly organised towards creating social cohesion. It does not require similarity of various structural components. Rather, it involves ordered functioning of similar or dissimilar/differentiated structural units of society in harmony.

There are two models of social integration, viz., accommodationist and assimilationist. In the accommodationist model of social integration, the structural components of society maintain their identity but interact with one another in such a manner that identity of all components is maintained and their interests served. In the assimilationist model of social integration, in contrast, structural units of society are homogeneous/similar in nature like bricks in a building. Here, the structural units possess no distinct identity or interest. They interact with one another in utmost harmony. There is no scope of generation of tension or conflict in their interaction. But the dissimilar nature and distinctive identities of structural components in the accommodationist model of social integration always contains the potential of inter-unit tensions and conflicts which becomes apparent when the terms of inter-unit interactions are not observed. Lack of mutual accommodation would lead to social integration in the society.

Hence, it is imperative that society moves from the accommodationist to the assimilationist process of social integration. This would entail increasing integration and harmony.

There are broad domains of social life. One is called 'political society'. It is the sphere of social life, which comes directly under the purview of the State. Laws, rules and regulations enacted by the state directly regulate social life in this realm. The other domain is known as 'civil society'. This zone of society does not function directly under the dictates of the State. The customs, traditions, norms and values of collectivities guide social life in this area.

However, there is no clear dividing line between the two domains of social life, i.e., civil and political. And the boundaries may shift from one point to the other making one domain broad and the other narrow.

Gandhi on Social Integration

Gandhi's idea of social integration of Muslims in India's civil society could be gathered from his views on the general issues like religion, God, Hindu-Muslim unity, toleration, and specific questions of Goseva, Urdu language etc. He had a broad vision of religion. His view of religion is universal in content and ethos. It contained the core of all customary religions of the world. It helped humans to come closer to the Creator. Gandhi maintained that, "*By religion, I do not mean formal religion, or customary religion, but that religion which underlines all religions, which brings us face to face with our Maker.*" (Excerpt in Rao 1978:34).

To him, religion did not mean sectarianism. Rather, it meant 'a belief in an ordered moral government of the Universe'. It represents a higher order operational at abstract place and hence not visible. It does not supersede the established religions like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. But it transcends them all. 'It harmonises them and gives them reality'. (*ibid*:35)

Gandhi was an ardent follower of Hinduism. However, he did not place Hinduism, above other religions. The universal religion, for him, involved a search for the Maker and appreciation of the correspondence between the Maker and humans. He holds,

"It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the *religion* which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the between the Maker and itself." (Excerpt in Bose 1957:254).

The essence of all particular religions, according to Gandhi, is the same. Their goal is the same i.e., to seek God. Only their outward form is different. Different particular religions are, Gandhi thought, like leaves of the tree of one universal religion. So, despite their distinct existence like leaves there was no tension and conflict between them as they had grown from the same source, or rather, they are manifestations of the same entity. Gandhi Affirms,

"All religions were at bottom one, though they differed in detail and outward form, even like the leaves of a tree. Each leaf has a separate and distinct existence but they are all sprung from and are organically related to the trunk. Again, no two leaves are alike. Yet they never quarrel among themselves. Instead they dance to the same breeze and emit a sweet symphony together" (Gandhi 1962:42)

The commonality of religions was also reflected in Gandhi's idea of an omnipresent universal God. He did not regard Him as a person. To him, 'God is Truth and Truth is God'. His experience taught that the nearest approach to reach Truth Was through the means of love-not human love in the sense of passion which might lead to degradation, but love in the sense of *ahimsa*. He regarded means and end as the ultimately convertible terms. Hence he believed that 'God is Love'. (see excerpts in Bose 1957:6,7). Gandhi held that 'God is an Idea, Law Himself'. God is omnipresent

and omnipotent. Gandhi asserts, “He and His Law abide everywhere and govern everything”. He literally believed that “not a blade of grass grows or moves without His will” (excerpt in Bose 1957:6).

However, Gandhi did not identify that omnipotent Great Power with the god of any particular religion, but with Truth. He avers, “I call that Great Power not by the name of *Allah*, not by the name of *Khuda* or God but by the name of Truth. For me, Truth is God and Truth overrides all our plans” (ibid:6).

Further, Gandhi did not regard any particular religion as perfect. He also considered human beings imperfect in the sense that they had not achieved yet ‘the full vision of Truth’. If we had attained that ‘we would’ he argues, ‘no longer be mere seekers, but would have become one with God; for ‘Truth is God’. And if humans are imperfect, he asserts, ‘religion as conceived by us (them) must also be imperfect’. Obviously, ‘if all faiths outlined by men are imperfect, the question of comparative merit does not arise,’ he rightly affirms (see, excerpts in Rao 1978:35). Hence, he advocates the principle of equal reverence to all religions with conscious realization of the fact that they contained both elements of truth and error. They contained elements of truth as they were manifestations of the supreme universal religion, and also embodied untruth and error because they were conceived by imperfect humans. Gandhi observes, “The principal faiths of the world constitute a revelation of truth, but as they have all been outlined by imperfect man, they have been affected by imperfectness and alloyed with untruth. One must therefore entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as one accords to one’s own” (Gandhi 1963:42). Moreover, he emphasised the need of making efforts to overcome the imperfections of one’s religion. And this requires not only looking at all religions with an equal eye but also considering one’s duty to blend into one’s faith every acceptable feature of other faiths (see excerpt in Rao 1978:36).

Gandhi saw a very strong bond between true religion and true morality. In his opinion, ‘Religion is to morality what water is to the seed that is sown in the soil’. The moment moral basis is lost, ‘we cease to be religious’. He categorically said, ‘There is no such thing as religion overriding morality’. For example, one could not claim to have God on one’s side and be at the same time untruthful, cruel and incontinent. He considered all selfish desires immoral. Being truly moral involved improving oneself for the sake of ‘doing good to others’. He states, ‘The highest moral law is that we should unremittingly work for the good of mankind’ (see excerpts in Bose 1957:255).

Gandhi was a firm believer in Hinduism, but not a blind follower. He did not accept ancient traditions if they were not consistent with morality and reason. He declared, ‘I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality’ (see excerpt in Bose 1957:255). He did not believe that everything ancient was good because it was ancient. He did not advocate ‘surrender of God-given reasoning faculty in the face of ancient tradition’. Rather, he held, ‘Any morality, however ancient, if inconsistent with morality, is fit to be banished from the land’, e.g., untouchability (ibid:260). In fact, he was ‘a reformer through and through’.

Further, in respect of inter-(religious) community relation in general and Hindu-Muslim relation in particular, Gandhi propounded the principle of peaceful and loving co-existence. He opined,

Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling (Gandhi 1962:50).

He argued that India had a rich faculty for assimilation. The Hindus and Mohammedans fought against one another. But they ceased fighting long back, before the advent of the British. The Hindus flourished under Muslim sovereigns and Muslims under the Hindu. They recognised that mutual fighting was suicidal. Hence, they decided to live in peace. And only with the English advent quarrels recommenced. Moreover, he reminded, 'should we not remember that many Hindus and Mohammedans own the same ancestors and the same blood runs through their veins?' (*ibid*). He also reminded us of 'deadly proverbs as between the followers of Shiva and those of Vishnu, yet nobody suggests that these two do not belong to the same nation'. It is observed that 'the Vedic religion is different from Jainism, but the followers of the respective faiths are not different nations'. Hence, he rightly asks: 'How, then, can there be any inborn enmity' between the Hindus and Muslims?' (*ibid*:49). He firmly believed: 'The Hindus, the Mohammedans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own interest' (*ibid*).

Gandhi was a great votary of the principle of religious toleration. Essentially he did not like the word tolerance, but used it due to lack of better term. He suspected that 'tolerance may imply a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faith to one's own.' His view of tolerance was embedded with the spirit of ahimsa, which 'teaches us to entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as we accord to our own, thus admitting the imperfection of the latter' (see, excerpt in Rao 1978:35).

Gandhi argued for religious toleration on many bases. He firmly held that 'there is one true and perfect religion'. However, it acquired many forms with certain imperfections as it is interpreted differently by imperfect humans. 'Everybody is right from his own standpoint...Hence, the necessity of tolerance...' Moreover, tolerance gives spiritual insight, which is pole apart from fanaticism. Cultivation of tolerance also imparts a true understanding of one's own religion. In addition, all religions were based on common fundamentals and were all helpful to one another, hence the need for mutual toleration (see, excerpt in Rao 1978:37)

Gandhi also opined that theoretically one could think of only the God and one religion. But in practice, religious pluralism was inevitable. No two persons he knew had the same identical conception of God. 'Therefore, there will, perhaps, always be different religions answering to different temperaments and climatic conditions' (see in Rao 1978:37). Obviously, he pleaded for the broadest toleration. India of his dream sparkled with the peaceful coexistence of religious pluralism and unity in diversity. He affirmed, "I do not expect India of my dream to develop one religion, that is, to be wholly Hindu or wholly Christian or wholly Mussalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another... The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions. We want to reach not the dead level, but unity in diversity"(*ibid*).

Gandhi observed that the need of communal unity in India was realised by many people. But everybody did not know 'that unity does not mean political unity which may be imposed' (Gandhi

1948:8). For achieving this unity, he advised every Congressman to develop a multi-religious identity i.e. 'to represent in his own person Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Zoroastrian, Jew, etc., shortly, every Hindu and non-Hindu'. A Congressman has to 'feel his identity with every one of the million of the inhabitants of Hindustan'. And to realise this, he has to cultivate personal friendship with other religionists and to accord the same regard for the other faiths as he has for his own (*ibid*). He averred that the 'soul of religions is one' and Hinduism, Islam and other religions of India had 'many points of contact and very few points of difference' (*ibid*:38). Therefore, Gandhi advocated the need of International Fellowship in religious domain. His notion of toleration was not confined only to giving equal reverence to all religions. It also demanded a feeling of Fellowship, which meant 'help(ing) a Hindu to become a better Hindu, a Mussalman to become a better Mussalman, and Christian a better Christian'. He regarded the attitude of 'patronising toleration' as false to the spirit of International Fellowship (see excerpt in Bose 1957:259).

Forging communal unity and harmony is an integral part of Gandhi's constructive programme. Gandhi considered *Goseva* i.e. improvement of cattle (as phrased by him) another item worth inclusion in this programme when he was so suggested by Shri Jivanji Desai in 1946 (Gandhi 1948:30). This phrase (also) meant protection of cow. It was a sensitive religious/communal issue as Hindus worship cow but Muslims eat beef. Gandhi was against animal sacrifice in general and killing of cow in particular. He had great respect for the cow. He looked upon her with 'affectionate reverence'. He regarded cow as the protector of India, as India, being an agricultural country was dependent on the cow. He hoped that Mohammedan brethren would admit that the cow is the most useful animal in hundreds of ways. She gave milk and made agriculture possible. She was the best companion and 'the mother to million of Indian mankind'. Protection of the cow, to him, meant 'protection of the whole dumb creation of God' (Gandhi 1954:62).

Despite his great reverence and affection for the cow, Gandhi did not opt for a confrontationist policy for her protection. Instead he argued with all sincerity in favour of a policy of persuasion and humility. He respected the cow, so did he respect his fellowmen, be it a Hindu or a Muslim. A human being was 'just as useful as a cow'. He never thought of fighting with or killing a Mohammedan in order to save cow. Doing so, he believed, would make him an enemy of the Mohammedan as well as of the cow. The only way to protect the cow, he held, was that 'I should approach my Mohammedan brother and urge him for the sake of the country to join me in protecting her' (Gandhi 1962:51). And if the brother did not listen to him he thought it proper to let the cow go for the simple reason that the matter was beyond his ability. Moreover, he reasoned that if a blood brother was on the point of killing a cow whether he should kill him or fall down at his feet and implore him. And, if the latter course was suitable in this case, he said, 'I must do the same to my Moslem brother (*ibid*).

On the question of Urdu language his advice (to students) was that they should learn the national language. Hindustani, in its present double dress i.e. two forms of speech-Hindu and Urdu and scripts-*nagari* and urdu script – so that they might feel at home (Gandhi 1948:27). He also suggested that they should not impose *Vande Mataram* or the National Flag on others in the struggle for freedom of the country. He advised them to 'cultivate real friendship with students of other faiths' (*ibid*).

Thus, Gandhiji advocated a peaceful and loving coexistence of the followers of all religions in general and of Hindus and Muslims in particular in India, he highlighted the basic commonality of all religions. But he accepted their distinct identity and desired and argued for mutual regard and also give and take of the good elements in different religions. So, he propounded an accommodationist model of social integration of the followers of different religions in general and of Hindus and Muslims in particular in the sphere of civil society in India.

State and the Indian Muslims

Though fully appreciating the ennobling role of religion in civil society and also himself being a devout Hindu, Gandhiji advocated a policy of strict religious neutrality in the domain of political society i.e., the State in independent India. He did not support the Indian State adopting the policy of *sarvadharmasambhava* in the sense of equal respect to all religions or similar attitude towards all religions i.e., Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism etc. In fact, he held the European notion of secularism in the sphere of political society in India, i.e., a complete separation between the State and religion. On August 28, 1947, he categorically stated in the columns of the *Harijan*,

The State should undoubtedly be secular. Everyone living in it should be entitled to profess his religion without let or hindrance, so long as the citizen obeyed the common law of the land. There should be no interference with missionary effort, but no mission could enjoy the patronage of the State as it did during the foreign regime (see excerpt in Bose 1957:256)

He wished, 'If I were a dictator, religion and State would be separate'. He considered religion an entirely personal affair of individuals. While answering a question asked by a missionary friend whether in Free India there would be complete religious freedom and whether religion will be separate from the state. Gandhi unequivocally affirmed. 'I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The State has nothing to do with it' (*ibid*). He further clarified, 'the State would look after your secular welfare, health, communication, foreign relations, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern' (*ibid*:257). In the sphere of education, he wanted the State to give no room to religious consideration. He clearly stated, 'There would be no separate rooms or pots for Hindus and non-Hindus in schools and colleges, no communal schools, colleges and hospitals' (Gandhi 1948:8).

Further, Gandhi's vision of Indian *Swaraj* was of secular variety. It was non-discriminatory in religious term. It was never to be rule of the majority religious community, i.e., the Hindus. Rather, it meant the rule of all people, the rule of justice. Shriman Narayan (1971:31) rightly observes that any talk of 'Hindu-Rashtra' in the context of Gandhi is 'wrong and unfair'. In fact, Gandhi stood dead against any notion of such nation. He emphatically proclaimed, "it has been said that India *Swaraj* will be the rule of the majority community, i.e., the Hindus. There could not be a greater mistake than that. If it were to be true, I for one would refuse to call it *Swaraj* and would fight with all the strength at my command, for to me Hind *Swaraj* is the rule of all people, the rule of justice" (cited in Narayan 1971:30).

He firmly asserted that India's independence would be complete only if it provided equal opportunities to all the religious community, including Muslims, in India. So, Louis Fisher (1983:400) aptly opines that 'Gandhi, wholly religious, wanted a secular state.'

In his vision of democracy, Gandhi conceived of only 'a narrow application' of the rule of majority. It would, in his view, be a sign of slavery 'to be amenable to the majority, no matter what its decisions are'. Democracy meant 'individual liberty of opinion and action'. And he firmly held that under democracy 'the minority has a perfect right to act differently from the majority of long as it does not act in the name of the Congress'. In August 1920, in the columns of *Young India* he declared, 'In matters of conscience the law of majority has no place' (Gandhi 1954:72).

He also advised the Hindus to desist from opposing the Muslim demand of certain concessions like job quota from the British colonial government to promote communal amity and brotherliness and reduce distrust between the two communities. This was his broad position even though he criticised the introduction of separate electorate for the Muslims in the Imperial and Provincial Councils under the Morley-Minto Act of 1909 as an example of 'monkey justice'. In this issue of divide and rule policy of the British he held that the Hindus, who were in majority had to be broad-minded towards the Mohammedans and shield themselves from attack on their amicable relations with the latter. He did not believe that a third party would be able to separate two brothers who want to live in peace.

For removing inter-community distrusts Gandhi wanted Hindus to cultivate cordial relations at both personal and political levels. The Khilafat movement in India was not concerned with the fate of Indian citizens. It involved the fate of an alien Islamic State. The Muslims of India got enraged against the British government who were the oppressor in this case. Their anger on this issue was purely based on religious consideration. Gandhi took a leading part and mobilised all the country persons in the Khilafat movement. After the imprisonment of the Ali Brothers in this case, he was invited and addressed the session of the Muslim League at Calcutta exhorting the organisation to work for their release. Then, he was taken by his Muslim friends to the Muslim College at Aligarh where he invited the young men to be '*fakirs*' in the struggle. In fact, his basic understanding regarding participation in this movement was that 'if I would become a true friend of the Muslims, I must render all possible help in securing the release of Ali Brothers, and a just settlement of the Khilafat question' (Gandhi 1976:334). In the process, he also found that 'the Muslim demand about the Khilafat was...not against any ethical principle...(as) the British Prime Minister had admitted the justice of the Muslim demand'. Hence, he thought it necessary to do his best 'in securing a due fulfillment of the Prime Minister's pledge (*ibid*).

Gandhi always considered the Muslims in India as constituting a single homogenous community both in civil and political spheres of life. And this provided, in essence, the socio-political base and moral justifications for the ultimate separation of the country. His views expressed in this matter particularly in the last phase of his life illustrate this point adequately. During his most crucial talks with Mohamed Ali Jinnah in 1944, he essentially accepted in principle the formation of Pakistan, a separate state for the Muslims carved out of undivided India, after achieving independence through a joint struggle of the Congress and the Muslim League.

At personal plane, Gandhi did not think that the communal division of India was inevitable. Nor did he believe that such division would solve the communal problem. However, despite criticising the Congress and the League, he fully accepted the existence of Pakistan as a fact after its formation. In July 1947 he wrote in the columns of the *Harijan*, 'I do not all suggest the undoing of Pakistan. Let that be treated as an established fact beyond dispute or discussion (Bose 1957:23). Yet he advised the representatives of the Congress and the League to sit together and 'undertake not to part till they have reached an agreement' (*ibid*). Unfortunately, nothing of that sort happened and India got painfully partitioned into two.

Conclusions

The discussions in the preceding section shows that Gandhi's views on social integration of diverse religious communities in general and of Muslims in particular were mainly of the accommodationist type. He conceived of religion at the most abstract level as 'that religion which underlines all religions, which brings us face to face with our Maker'. God, to him, mean Truth and Love, which he believed all the religions, contain besides certain impurities and defects in them.

So, he envisioned limited social interactions between the Muslims and Hindus in the sphere of civil society. He makes no mention of developing an intense and intimate interaction between these communities, for instance, inter-community marriage and dining so that more socio- cultural assimilations between the two would have been encouraged and, thus, society getting more integrated.

Further, in the domain of political society in free India Gandhi advocated a policy of complete neutrality on the part of the State towards different religionists, including Hindus and Muslims rather than that of *sarvadharmasambhava*. It meant a complete separation of the state from religion. His notion of complete *Swaraj* implied as much the rule of Hindus as much of Muslims and as much of the followers of other religions. It involved no discrimination on religion ground. He envisaged a completely secular State in free India. So, in the domain of political society all the Indian people had to have the modern identity of a citizen irrespective of their different religious affiliations.

Thus, it is observed that Gandhi supported a religious civil society but a secular political society, even though he, in practice, very reluctantly accepted under the force of circumstances the partition of the county on religious lines. His vision of society in India presents a dichotomy between the religions and secular principles operational in the civil and political spheres of society respectively. The dynamics this dichotomous scenario provides, conceptually speaking, two possible directions of change in the Indian society, viz., communalisation of the political society and secularisation of the civil society. Presently, the former process i.e. communalisation of the political society is in ascendance as reflected in the increasing communal tensions and conflicts in the recent years in the country. This is the result of the accommodationist model of social integration being operational in the country before and after independence.

The need of the hour is to go for a rapid process of secularisation of the civil society in India so that the normative dichotomy between the state and civil society is resolved. This may require

promotion of an intense and intimate multiple inter-community interactions and relationships, i.e., between Hindus and Muslims in civil matters leading to the development of the assimilationist variety of social integration giving little scope for communal tensions and conflicts in the country. Obviously, this vision is different from that of Gandhi, which would not be of much relevance today in the country.

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