

Opinion

Gandhi and Minorities

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“India is a big nation composed of different cultures which are tending to blend with one another; each complementing the rest. If I must await the completion of the process, I must wait. It may not be completed in my day. I shall love to die in the faith that it must come in the fullness of time. I shall be happy to think that I have done nothing to hamper the process subject to this condition, I would do everything to bring about harmony”.

-Gandhi-

Tolerance and broadmindedness has been the chief characteristic of the Indian mind. It clearly reflected in the personality and philosophy of Gandhi. He deployed a profound knowledge of human nature in asking people not to give up their traditional faith but to broaden and liberalise it so as to bring it nearer to universal human religion. His maxim that everybody should adhere to his own religion but value and assimilate all that is good to other religions is nothing but a practical form of communal harmony. Gandhi's own solution to the problem of religious pluralism in India was learned from the ancient Jain tradition of his native Gujarat. This held that all religious awareness is inevitably partial and incomplete, so that different traditions can complement and enrich one another rather than being mutually exclusive rivals. Gandhi regarded religious pluralism in connection with the practical exigencies of living together peacefully. His own experience of living in a multi-religious society provided the constant reminder that the discussion of religious truth is not a mere theoretical matter but has a direct bearing on how men behave towards each other. Gandhi's fundamental values with respect to majority-minority relations were rooted in his childhood experiences. In his family, friendships with Muslims, Jains and Parsis were part of natural order of life. While addressing the Congress working committee meeting in 1942, Gandhi reiterated these fundamental values as a basis for designing a new independent India: While at school, made it a point to cultivate friendship of Muslim and Parsi co-students. I believed at that tender age that Hindus in India if they wished to live in peace and amity with other communities should assiduously cultivate the virtue of neighbourliness.

Gandhi's firm belief that all religions expressed truth enabled him to win the respect and confidence of diverse religious groups during the Indian national movement. During the Second Round Table Conference, Gandhi circulated a memorandum which inter alia, demanded that the new constitution should include a guarantee to the minorities, of protection of their culture, language, script, education, profession and practice of religion, and religious endowments, personal law, political and other rights of minority communities. In 1946, when a Constituent Assembly was established to frame a constitution for free India, the congress party under the

guidance and inspiration of Gandhi readily accepted the commitment that 'its primary duty and fundamental policy was to protect the religious cultural linguistic and other rights of the minorities in India so as to ensure for them, in any scheme of government to which the congress was the party, the widest scope for their development and their participation in the fullest measure in the political economic and cultural life of the nation'. Gandhi's views found their place in the rights relating to the religious and the cultural and educational rights in the constitution, the relevant part of which read as follows:

Rights relating Religion - (13) All persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience, and the right freely to prefer, practice and propagate religion ... (14) Every religious denomination still have the right to manage its own offers in matters of religion and subject to the general law, to own, acquire and administer property movable and immovable and to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes (15) No person may be compelled to pay taxes, the proceeds of which are specifically appropriated to further or maintain any particular religion or denomination (16) No person attending any school maintained or receiving aid out of public funds shall be compelled to take part in any religious worship held in the school or in premises attached thereto (17) conversion from one religion to another brought about by coercion or undue influence shall not be recognized by law.

Cultural and Educational Rights -(18) Minorities in every unit still he protected in respect of their language script and no laws or regulations may be enacted that may operate oppressively or prejudicially in this respect (2). No minority whether based on religion, community or language shall be discriminated against in regard to the admission into state educational institutions, nor shall any religious instructions be compulsory imposed on them. 3(a) All minorities, whether based on religion community or language shall be free in any unit to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice (b) the state shall not, while providing state aid to schools, discriminate against schools under the management of minorities whether based on religion, community or language. In fact Gandhi's whole concept of secularism, which according to him, was an essential aspect of the non-violent states found expression in these rights.

Significantly throughout Indian freedom struggle Gandhi who knew the pulse of the people remained firm about secularism as the national ideology while fully respecting religion. He was a firm believer in religion and at the same time great votary of secularism. It was not a mere strategy for him but of deep rooted conviction. It was such a political approach which brought the various communities together despite strong communal trend in the country. It was a wise approach which is needed even today for making India stable and strong. Deeply religious as he was, Gandhi rejected the idea of a state religion for India. He was opposed to state aid to religious bodies. "Religion is a personal matter, he affirmed and if we succeed in confining it to personal plane, all would be in personal life. Gandhi wanted India to be a secular state. It was his deep religiousness that made him adverse to the ideal of a religious state in India. He knew that under the present conditions, a religious regime was bound to make some denominational faith the state religion and patronize its missionary activities. It might even deny the freedom to belief and practice or at least of preaching, to other religions. This he could never tolerate as it was a negation, not only of ahimsa but also of his doctrine of essential unity of all religion which he regarded as the very soul of the universal religion of man. He wrote in 1947: 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 should enjoy the patronage of the state as it did during the foreign regimes. Gandhi declared that he did not believe in state religion even though the whole country had one religion.

Gandhi was deadest against communalism and fought gallantly against this evil. The last fast of his life shortly before his death took place in Delhi as a means of stopping communal violence in that city. He dictated a message while fasting in which he said .. From Cape Comarin to Kashmir and from Karachi to Dibrugarh in Assam, all Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians and Jews who people this vast subcontinent and who have adopted it as their motherland have an equal right to it. No one has a right to say that it belongs to the majority community and that the minority commonly can only remain there as the underdog.. Therefore, anyone who wants to drive out of Delhi all Muslims as such, must be set down as its enemy number one and therefore, enemy number one of India. We are rushing towards that catastrophe. It is the bounden duty of every son and daughter of India to take his or her full share in averting it". Gandhi ended his fast after members of peace committee got signatures from leaders of all communities to a document stating the conditions which Gandhi had laid down. He fully sacrificed his life for communal amity and harmony. The manner of his death assassination at the hands of a Hindu fanatic is evidence of the fact that the persons most intensely irritated by him were those among the majority community who saw him as deviant.

The sense of social injustice which is one of the characteristics of India today is undoubtedly a part of what India has inherited from Gandhi. Therefore, though the government and people of India have often stayed away from Gandhi's message they are very much alive to the great heritage which they have come to acquire. Gandhi's spirit still lives and will continue to live in India because it is so much in tune with the thoughts and feelings of Indian masses the traditions of this ancient land and the political culture of this vast country. If a minority in India, minority on the score of its religious profession is made to feel small on that accent, Gandhi could only say that this India was not the India of his dreams. In the India for whose fashioning Gandhi had worked all his life, everyone enjoyed equality of status, whatever his religion was. The state was bound to be wholly secular. Religious freedom and educational freedom are the very soul of civil liberties in a state. Liberty of conscience, mind and thought is directly involved in these two freedoms. They are acid tests.