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Gandhi on Minority Issues

Dr. Amita Valmiki

Associate Professor and Head,
Department of Philosophy,

Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College of Arts, Science and Commerce (Autonomous),
[Affiliated to University of Mumbai],
Ghatkopar (West), Mumbai – 400 086.

“Many people, especially, ignorant people, want to punish you for speaking the truth, for being correct, for being you. Never apologize for being correct, or for being years ahead of your time. If you’re right and you know it, speak your mind. Even if you are a minority of one, the truth is still the truth.” - M. K. Gandhi¹

Gandhi emphasized on the concept of ‘justice’ in his philosophy. And his views on the marginalized minority issue in India are revolving around his concept of ‘justice’. Therefore, more than equality, Gandhi emphasized on ‘egalitarian society’. This has been echoed repeatedly on his comments on the issue; and this leads to the debate and dialogue with Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

Gandhi was explicitly clear about the fact that ‘the deserving person must get the deserving post’; therefore, supposedly there are five posts, and all five deserving Muslims are qualified, they should be appointed. Just being in majority or in minority does not qualify an individual to be appointed to the post. Only in matter of ‘education’ the backward communities deserve special favours. On the other pole, Gandhi strictly kept to opportunities to be given to deserving candidates. According to him, giving special benefits to selected minorities would jeopardize the basic human value of ‘justice’. In a just society, strict egalitarianism must be practiced. Reserving position at work place will instigate the feelings of communal divide. And therefore Gandhi out rightly rejected reservation at work place. In *Young India*, Gandhi writes, “Independent India cannot afford to have communal representation and yet it must placate all communities, if the rule of independence is not based on coercion of minorities.”²

Gandhi was therefore in debate and dialogue with Ambedkar on the same issue. Though both the stalwarts were avert to caste discrimination, both aspired to have egalitarian society, but their teleos differed. Ambedkar can be considered a teleologist where he had a good goal as he himself suffered the atrocities inflicted on the *dalits*. But Gandhi came from the upper strata of the society and therefore addressed people of upper caste to not to treat ‘anyone’ low. Again the teleos of Gandhi differed from Ambedkar. While Ambedkar was fighting against unjust treatment to the oppressed communities, Gandhi’s fight was in fact for *swaraj*. But rights of minorities for him were one of the important agendas befitting his struggle for freedom. He said, “My fight against untouchability is a fight against the impure in humanity.”³ Therefore, here are two giants in their own rights, both fighting for the rights of minorities, those which are marginalized – be it religious, caste, class, race or gender, one coming from the oppressed community itself, and the other from the upper caste of the society; therefore it was but obvious that their rendering to the issues of minorities in India was completely different. When Ambedkar emphasized on the concept of ‘equal rights’ and ‘justice’ to the *dalits*; Gandhi emphasized on ‘justice’ and ‘shame to the upper caste for inflicting atrocities on the *dalits*.’ The difference always remained between them. But both fought for the ‘minority rights’.

One more similarity that can be found between Gandhi-Ambedkar debate was - both were highly influenced by Buddhism. “Ambedkar stood for an opposition to the ideas of Manu. Manu codified rules, norms and regulations designed to oppress two categories of human beings – the shudras and women. It is alarming but true that, in accepting Buddhism, Ambedkar was accepting a version of Hinduism which belonged to the Shudras and which went against the ideology and institutions of Brahmanical Hinduism. We should also note that Buddha exercised an equally great influence on Mahatma Gandhi in his life.”⁴ [Though Gandhi was highly influenced by Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and indeed philosophy of Nishkāmakarma, the Bhagavad Gita; Gandhi at the same time was highly motivated by heterodox schools of Indian philosophy, Buddhist axiology of karuṇā (compassion) and more particularly Jaina principle of ahimsā (non-violence). But Gandhi was a proud Hindu, at the same time Buddhist ethics that belonged to non-Vedic, heterodox and atheistic Indian school of Philosophy was highly upheld by Gandhi. He considered Buddhist axiology of non-violence, self-purification,

truth and compassion to be an apt solution to the issues of minorities. Though there has been severe criticism of Gandhi about his position on dalit minority. Especially his take over 'Harijan' was under suspicious lens. Gandhi's well known Yeravada fast forced Ambedkar and dalits to accept their subordinate position to Hindus; and it is epic incident when a complete diversion took place between Gandhi and Ambedkar's position on matter of dalit minority. But at the same time Gandhi writes in Harijan, "I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The State has nothing to do with it. The State would look after your secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern."⁵ The quote exemplifies how Gandhi desperately wished for complete equality in social and political front of minorities in India. But in matter of his personal take on religion, he was a 'proud Hindu'. Gandhi therefore believed in complete kinship with other fellow human beings; this kinship with arouse the indignation among the people to redress that which is unfair and unjust and establish that which is right and just. This was his remedial measure for the oppressed classes from the majority Hindu community of the society.

Gandhi strongly supported the view that to maintain harmony and peace in India, it was actually inevitable for the majority Hindus to have explicit faith in the minority communities. In this matter Gandhi's adoption of Satyagraha (holding firmly to Truth), Ahimsā (Non-violence), Sarvodaya (Universal Uplift) and Swadeshi (Producing in one's own Country) was to have complete egalitarian society. Gandhi strongly felt India belongs to her people who are born and brought up here itself. Therefore he was quite avert to the idea of "Hindu-Raj". In fact he aspired for "India-Raj". Gandhi notes in Harijan, ".....I can conceive of a mixed majority putting the Hindus in a minority. They would be elected for their record of service and merits. Religion is a personal matter which should have no place in politics. It is the unnatural condition of foreign domination that we have unnatural division according to religion. Foreign domination going, we shall laugh at our folly in having clung to false ideals and slogans."⁶ Gandhi believed in inter-faith harmony. He was driven by the power to bring Hindus and Muslims together. It is known in history that to fight against the discriminatory laws in South Africa, the meetings to discuss the course of action to be taken against these laws were held in mosques. His fasts and long distance journeys that he undertook in India were to bring reconciliation in the differences between Hindus and Muslims. The whole movement undertaken by Gandhi was to have independent and united India. Indeed India got its independence, but lost its unity due to partition. But Gandhi's efforts were not wasted. Independent India was secular and Indian constitution completely prohibited discrimination on the basis of religion. Also that Gandhi respected other religions as his own religion that is Hinduism. [Though this point is highly debatable and controversial as when he uses the words, 'his own Hinduism'.]

Gandhi's non-violence and satyagraha automatically inculcated values of 'tolerance' and 'peace'. These were the pathways leading to 'unity in diversity'; where minority and majority divide is dissolved. In Young India Gandhi writes, "If we want to cultivate a true spirit of democracy, we cannot afford to be intolerant. Intolerance betrays want of faith in one's cause."⁷ The same point Ramachandra Guha reiterates in his book Gandhi before India that Gandhi's dream of an inclusive and tolerant India was jeopardized by the far right, mainly by the Hindu organizations, those who emphasized on a theocratic state; and far left, especially the Maoist who adopted violent means to bring about social change in India. But Gandhi's ideas of tolerance and all-inclusiveness survived as a quintessential ideology. But the praxis of his ideology was far then as it is now.⁸

Gandhi was constantly at work in 1947 not to divide the nation into two based on religion. But later due to British policies and Muhammad Ali Jinnah's stand, and the violent riots, he accepted the partition though unwillingly. Gandhi was of the idea, if it were not of British rulers, India would not have got divided. As mentioned in Encyclopedia of World's Minorities, "Through most of his life, Gandhi believed that British rule had driven a wedge among the disparate groups in India. If British were removed, Indians, Gandhi believed, would solve their communal differences."⁹ So Gandhi from the time he was in South Africa till his death always thought of empowering the minorities – be it religious, class, caste, race or gender. His life was absolutely his 'experiments with truth'. In fact Gandhi's take on the minorities was not limited to Indian society; but it is global in nature that has transcended spatiotemporal boundaries. As noted earlier Gandhi never compromised with two of the basic human valuable paradigm – one is 'truth' and other is 'non-violence' till his last breath. Especially in Western world, to bring about social change, the reformers often took recourse to

violent measures to restore equality and justice. Gandhi on the other hand never did so. For him, therefore, truth, non-violence, social welfare and world solidarity (in form of Loksaṅgraha) freedom, equality and justice, all lead towards an 'egalitarian society'.

According to Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh, there are three basic aspects in relation to religion that has to be implemented, particularly in contemporary times; namely – intra-religious dialogue, inter-religious dialogue and dialogue on conflicts between religious groups having complex causes. Gandhi exactly addressed all the three aspects what professor Parekh has mentioned, that too in his time; and those which are equally relevant in contemporary times.¹⁰

In relation to minority rights, Gandhi says, "The rule of majority does not mean that it should suppress the opinion of even an individual if it is sound. The opinion of an individual should have greater weight than the opinion of many, if that opinion is sound on merits. That is my view of real democracy."¹¹

To conclude, Gandhi's philosophy rendered tremendous influence on giants like Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Einstein, Nelson Mandela and many more. Martin Luther King Jr. once mentioned about Gandhi, "Gandhi was inevitable. If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore Gandhi at our own risk."¹²

If Gandhi was inevitable in his time, the relevance of his thought is equally important in contemporary times. Therefore twenty-first century needs to revitalize, revive and restore Gandhi's thoughts as it is the urgent need of the hour. Gandhi believed, "Even if I am killed I will not give up repeating the names of Ram and Rahim, which mean to me the same God. With these names on my lips, I will die cheerfully."¹³

Salute to this great soul, the legendary Mahatma Gandhi!

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Principal
Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College,
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