

Gandhi and Vivekananda on Religion

Souribandhu Kar

The story of Indian civilization and culture is the story of an ocean where waves, currents and cross currents have remained in a state of a serene equilibrium, in the midst of new developments, intrusions, movements, adaptations, mutation, disturbances, and even storms. Conflicts, contradictions, and aggression did not, therefore, form the dominant strains of India's diversity of faiths, belief systems and practices while synthesis, harmony, and wholeness of life remained integral to its secular cultural growth and development.

There is a growing tendency all over the world to identify and segregate people along religions, ethnic and linguistic lines. This growing division raises a real threat to the peaceful co-existence of divergent human civilization. However, among these challenges, it is the religious divide which adversely affects the normal and tranquil life of people of many countries. A number of thinkers are seriously concerned about finding ways and means to tackle this growing peril confronting mankind. Multiculturalism is being looked upon as the only practical option before humanity for responding to the challenge of diverse cultural, ethnic and religious identities. It is much more than mere toleration of group diversity. In essence, it stands for treating, accommodating and recognizing all members as

equal citizens whether they belonged to minority or majority groups.

Multiculturalism could be virtually taken as synonym for cultural diversity. It is interesting to note that among all countries of the world, India has a very rich and varied experience in dealing with cultural diversity. The Indian society has been multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic from time immemorial. However, India has also encountered various kinds of divisiveness. Therefore, the biggest challenge before countries like India to preserve the pluralistic tradition and to bring the various communities in to the mainstream society by promoting the spirit of multi-culturalism. Concerned citizens in India are worried over the alarming situation of current communal disharmony and there is fear that it might ultimately result in the disintegration of the nation. Building bridges of solidarity among different religious communities in India is essential to preserve the secular, pluralistic and multi-cultural credentials of the country. In the context of such a challenge, the initiative and concerted effort made by Gandhi and Vivekananda may provide a framework for thought and action.

Gandhi was born in a Hindu Vaishnava family. His father Karamchand Gandhi and mother Putli Bai were very religious. Though born in such

a religious environment young Gandhi exhibited no signs of proclivity towards any kind of religious belief. However, he got an early growing in religious tolerance from the acquaintance of his family with different facts of Hinduism, close contacts of his parents with Jain monks, friendship of his father with Muslims and Parsis and discussions on religious matters in the family. All these factors inculcated in the mind of young Gandhi the seeds of religious tolerance and a multi cultural approach. The sojourn in England was a turning point in Gandhi's life as it provided him an opportunity to get acquainted with various religions. His association with many prominent theosophists prompted him to undertake study of scriptures of different faiths including his own. His reading of religious scriptures left him with an impression that much was common to the religion. During his long stay in South Africa, Gandhi's synergetic faith partook many elements from various religious traditions giving it a deep and abiding form. He made several spiritual experiments including ashram living (Phoenix settlement and Tolstoy farm) and the vow of *brahmacharya*. All these experiments and influences greatly contributed towards his living faith, which remained a driving force throughout his life.

It is noted that Hinduism according to Gandhi was not an exclusive religion. It was rather a broad and inclusive faith accommodating the best in other religions. For him it is the most tolerant and open minded religion. Gandhi looked upon religions as pathways to the same ultimate reality. Gandhi in his seminal work *Hind Swaraj* or *Indian Home Rule* (1909), expressed his view on religion eloquently. "Religion 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? In reality, there were as many religions as there are individuals." (M.K. Gandhi,

Hind Swaraj) (Ahmadabad: Navajivan,2004) P.44.

Thus it is evident that from the very beginning of his public life he looked upon religion from a multi cultural perspective.

Though Gandhi was loyal to the teachings of Hinduism, but for him there was no religion higher than truth and righteousness. He declared his stand on religion in young India in 1920. He wrote, "Let me explain what I mean by religion. 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 whichever 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 maker and itself." (Young India, 12.5, 1920, P.2).

In January 1935, Dr. S.Radhakrishnan put three questions before Gandhi in connection of his study of religion. These questions were, 1. What is your religion? 2. How are you led to it? 3. What is its bearing on social life? The answers to these questions constitute the essence of Gandhi's understanding of religion.

"My religion is Hinduism which, for me is religion of humanity and includes the best of all the religions known to me. I take it that the present tense in the second question has been purposely used instead of the past. I am being led to my religion through Truth and Non-violence, i.e. alone in the broadest sense. I often describe my religion as religion of truth, of late, instead of saying God is Truth. I have been saying Truth is God, in order more fully to define my religion. I used one time to know by heart the thousand names of God

which a booklet in Hinduism gives inverse form and which perhaps tens of thousands recite every morning. But now a days nothing so completely describes my God as Truth. Denial of God we have known. Denial of Truth we have not known. The most ignorant among mankind have some truth to them. We are all sparks of Truth. The sum total of this spark is indescribable, as yet unknown Truth which is God. I am being daily led nearer to it by constant prayer”.

“The bearing of this religion on social life is, or has to be, seen in one’s daily social contact. To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life. Realization of Truth is impossible without complete merging of oneself in and identification with this limitless ocean of life. Hence, for me, there is no escape from social service; there is no happiness on earth beyond or about from it. Social service here must be taken to include every department of life. In this scheme there is nothing low, nothing high. For, all is one, though we seem to be many. (Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan et al., (Ed.) Contemporary Indian -philosophy, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), P.21.)

It is clear from Gandhi’s answer that his perception of religion has no trace of dogmatism and fundamentalism.

Gandhi’s synergetic approach to religion is primarily reflected in his idea of Sarva Dharma Samabhava (Equal respect for all religions). It is central to his philosophy of life, being one of the eleven vows, primarily described for every inmate of his *ashrams*. Gandhi’s attitude towards religion was not of patronizing toleration, rather it thought to develop the spirit of 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. He believed in the fundamental equality of all religions.

His approach to religion goes far beyond religious pluralism and secularism. Firstly, by emphasizing on the religion of truth he included the secular or even the atheist and the humanist in the realm of religion.

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.

Third, Gandhi, while establishing a close linkage between religion and politics, was not in favour of a theocratic state patronizing a particular religion or even supporting all religions equally.

Fourthly, Gandhi did not favour any particular religion or foresee the need for conversion of people belonging to other faiths to a particular religion.

Fifthly, he believed that true knowledge of religions will break down the narrow barriers and also help to understand one’s own religion better.

Finally, Gandhi was not advocating the merger of all religions into one. He was trying to find out commonalities in various religions and promote mutual tolerance.

The equality of all religions or Sarva Dharma Samabhava of Gandhi provides a foundation for building healthy and enriching relation between religions. The spirit of Gandhi’s religion not only could promote religious tolerance, but also provided scope for religious dialogue which will narrow down the difference between various faiths.

This approach has great significance in the contemporary world which is plagued by religious fundamentalism and communalism.

Vivekananda is the spiritual giant in Indian history who before Gandhi came into picture

talked that truth is the higher thing to achieve in life. Everything can be sacrificed for truth, but truth cannot be sacrificed for anything. (cw. Vol. V. page-410).

Narendranath or Swami Vivekananda as known to the world was born in Calcutta on Monday, January 12, 1863 to Viswanath Dutta who was an attorney at law in the High court of Calcutta. Viswanath, a man of liberal attitude had allowed Narendranath to take interest in western knowledge and culture, encouraged openmindedness, questioning spirit, uprightness and manliness in conduct. He gave him training both in vocal and instrumental music by engaging two well known musicians Ahmed Khan and Bani Gupta.

Narendra was born and brought up affluently. He had inherited the deep spiritual and religious attitude of her mother Bhubaneswari Devi who was a pious lady and she used to tell the stories of Ramayan and Mahabharat to Naren.

His inclination to monastic life was marked from his childhood as he became delighted seeing a Sadhu at the door. And he used to tell his friends that he would become an ascetic or *sanayasin* in future. While reading in the college, he was attracted towards poetry, particularly Shelly whose 'Hymn to intellectual beauty' brought to his mind the spiritual unity of the universe. He was drawn to Sri Ramakrishna, knowing from principal Hastie that the vision which Wordsworth experienced in his poem 'Excursion' is similar with the illiterate priest by Dakshineswar. And that ultimately led him to experience ultimate and unseen reality.

Swami Vivekananda attended the Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 and delivered his message which was charged with irresistible spiritual power. He stood there on the

platform of the Parliament as the living embodiment by universality and harmony.

The religion that Swami Vivekananda brought to the West did not mean simply the worship of a Divine Being, it was a way of life - a matter by 'being and becoming'. Viewed in this light, religion can never cause discord or strife. He says:

"Religion is neither words nor doctrines nor theories; nor is it sectarianism. Religion cannot live in sects and societies. It is the relation between the soul and God. How can it be made in to a society? Religion is the relation between one's soul and God. It was in realization, not in words, or in joining religious bodies, or in the performance of the drill - like ritual". (cw IV.p.59)

Vivekananda's theory of religion depends on two factors. Firstly, he incorporates a psychological pedagogical explanation, suggesting that the difference among religions are attuned to the needs of different kinds of people:

"Religions manifest themselves not only according to race and geographical position, but according to individual powers. In one man religion is manifesting itself as intense activity, as work. In another, it is manifesting itself as intense devotion, in yet another, as mysticism, in others as philosophy and so forth." (cw.iv.pp61-2.)

Second, he again beats the power of religions in one's encounter with a truly realized, renunciant master who is a true teacher and not merely an expert about religions.

Vivekananda's religion taught him to search through multiplicity and duality for the ultimate unity which is the unchanging base of an ever-changing world. This religion is scientific, for science is nothing but finding of unity. To reach the universal religion, recognition of the necessity of variation is as important as that of underlying unity.

Vivekananda believed that all religions are true and accepting all religions meant worshipping God with each of them.

“I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christians church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the light which enlightens the heart of everyone.” (cw. Vol.II.p.374).

At the final session of the Parliament of Religions he declared:

‘The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth. Upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: ‘Help and not Fight’, ‘Assimilation and not Destruction’, ‘Harmony and Peace and not Dissension’. (cw. Vol-I, p.24.)

This prophetic message of harmony and tolerance of Vivekananda reflected the best mind of the time as told by Romain Rolland:

“Vivekananda’s constructive genius may be summed up in two words, equilibrium and synthesis. He embraced all the paths of the spirit: the four Yogas in their entirety, renunciation and service, art and science, religion and action from the most spiritual to the most practical. Each of the ways that he taught had its own limits, but he himself had seen through them all, and had made

each one of his own. As in a quadriga he held the reins of all four ways of truth, and travelled along them all simultaneously towards unity. He was the personification of the harmony of all human Energy.” (Romain Rolland, Prophets of the New India, London: Cassell and Company, 1928, p.457.)

Vivekananda cautioned against the hope for ‘exclusive survival of one religion’ and ‘destruction of others’. But can pluralism solve the problems of religious hostilities and resist the tendency of destroying one by another? Some believe in pluralism from the conviction that it provides a wider range of alternatives, a greater freedom of choice and consequently greater opportunities of self-expression and self-realisation. Some believe in it as a convenient and respectable strategy for the maintenance of social harmony and communal peace, particularly in a multi-religious society like India. Whether one learns to accept the validity by all religions out of faith and conviction, as Gandhi did, or whether one learns to treat another person’s religion with tolerance out of an understanding of the historical bonds between the community and that religion, as Nehru did - the future of human society has hardly any other option.

Souribandhu Kar, Plot No.5012/5853, Gajapatnagar, Bhubaneswar-751005.