



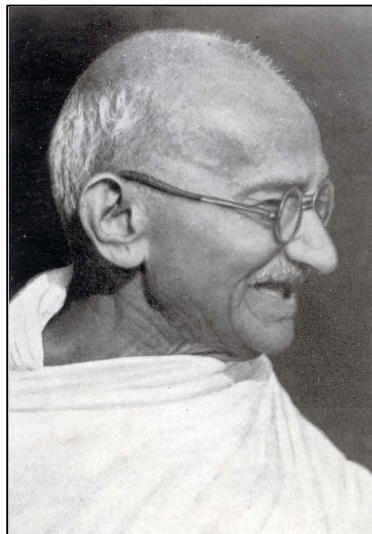
Gandhian Strategies for combating Communalism

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Introduction:

Communalism is the political assertiveness of a community to maintain its identity in a plural society which is undergoing modernization. (Modernization and politics of communalism – a theoretical perspective – the American Political Review, vol.64). Communalism is generally associated with “a narrow, selfish, divisive and perspective aggressive attitude on the part of a religious group.” It is a type of blind loyalty of the people towards the community which is placed above their loyalty to the State to which they belong. In a negative sense, it is a kind of hostile attitude shown towards "other communities or religions, while living within the same body-politics.”

Communalism exploits both religion and politics. Communalism is the enemy of progress, revolution, democracy and of federal nation-state building on rational scientific lines. Hence, in its totality, communalism is a “political strategy opposed to nationalism as an aggression on multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual community.”



During freedom struggle two leaders— Mahatma Gandhi and M.N. Roy – took serious note of communalism and the Hindu Muslim question. Almost all other leaders under the Congress umbrella, including Jawaharlal Nehru maintained that once the British left, this problem

(as also the question of human right violation caused by the hierarchical system) would be solved in no time. Gandhiji, however, often said, in most unambiguous terms, that unless these two evils are done away with, India has no right to Independence from British Raj. Ultimately he fell a victim to an intolerant cult-nationalism. Gandhiji was a religious man, and he had the same respect for other religions that he gave to his own, Hinduism. And he wanted the Hindus, as also other Indians, to follow his example and solve the

Hindu Muslim question. Regrettably this approach has not helped in combating communalism.

M.N. Roy wrote a book, while in Jail in 1930-36, Historical Role of Islam with a view to solving the Hindu Muslim question. He wrote: “although Islam came to India after it had played out its progressive role, and its leadership had been wrested from the learned and cultured



Arabs, the revolutionary principles of the days of its origin and ascendancy were still inscribed on its flag.” A critical study of history would reveal that Brahmanical orthodoxy having overwhelmed the Buddhist revolution; India of the eleventh and twelfth centuries must have been infested with multitudes of persecuted heretics who would eagerly welcome the message of Islam”. Roy maintained that we must be clear as to the causes of the Muslim conquest of India so that we get rid “of the prejudices that makes the orthodox Hindu Look upon his Muslim neighbour as an inferior being. Unless a radical change of attitude is brought about by a sober sense of history, the communal question will never be solved.”

Addressing the Muslims, Roy wrote: “few Muslims of our days may be conscious of the glorious part played on the stage of History by the faith they profess.” Roy therefore urged upon both Hindus and Muslims to revive the positive aspects and the creative heritage of Islamic culture. “Indians, both Hindus and Muslims”, Roy concluded, “could profitably draw inspiration from ... [the] knowledge of Islam’s contribution to human culture and a proper appreciation of the Historical value of that contribution would shock the Hindus out of their arrogant self satisfaction, and cure the narrow- mindedness of the Muslims for our day by bringing them face to face with the true spirit of the faith they profess”. Our government and opinion makers must take Gandhi’s approach minus the mystique and Roy’s scientific approach to a solution of the problem seriously.

Gandhi fought for communal harmony and at last laid down his life for it. He was a devout Hindu but held equal respect for all religions and upheld the right of all the religious minority groups to profess and practice their respective religions freely at footing with the majority group. Gandhi was not opposed to the Varna or caste based

system in Hindu society, but, he insisted that it must carry no connotation of pollution or purity, which generated into the evil and offensive practice of untouchability. Another evil of the Varna system he castigated was the consignment of some castes to manual labour, carrying with it lower social esteem reserving the socially esteemed intellectual work for the others. Gandhi felt that by removing this individual distinction, a socially useful reconstruction of the caste system was possible.

Communalism has been a serious threat to national integration in India. It has destroyed other three elements of modern India, such as, secularism, democracy and fraternity unity. Religious fanatic has taken the ugly shape of communal tension and riots in India, leading to the partition of India (1947), killing of Mahatma Gandhi (1948) and Smt. Indira Gandhi (1984), riots in Meerut (1987), Aligarh and Muzafarnagar (1988) and Bhagalpur (1989). Issues like Babri-Masjid and Ramjanmabhumi. Godhra incident have formed communal tension and threatened national integration badly. The secular Indian polity has failed to check obscurantism, religious fundamentalism and communal fanaticism which have taken the worst shape of communal violence/ riots frequented between 1947 and 2002.

Gandhian Strategies:

Though Gandhi was an orthodox Hindu even he went against the sentiments or the feelings of the Hindus in order to maintain communal harmony. The famous Vande Mataram’ song had proved an inspiration during those days. Bengali community almost worshipped the song. But when Jinnah, the president of Muslim League and a handful of his follower Muslims objected, disregarding the nationalist sentiment of the song, Gandhi put a ban on it and forced the whole nation to abandon it. In 1940, Congress announced a decision that the words Vande Mataram’ should not be used by Congress members in any public



speeches and announcements. Gandhi also put a ban on Shiv Banvani. Shiv Banvani is a small inspiring poem by poet Bhushan. The poet had written that if Shivaji had not been born, entire India would have been converted to Islam. The poet had used exact words to correctly depict the fierce fanaticism and intolerance preached within Islam. Gandhi imposed a ban on this poem to keep the sentiments of his Muslim brothers’.

Khilafat movement was an attempt by the Indian Muslim community to unite together in support of the Turkish Empire ruled by the Khalifa. The Muslims considered the Khalifa as the custodian of Islam. Under the leadership of prominent Muslim leaders, the Khilafat movement was launched in most parts of North India. Gandhi suggested the Muslims -

“If the peaceful non-cooperation movement does not succeed in getting justice, then, they have the right to follow the path shown in the Holy Books of Islam and I whole-heartedly support this path.”

Gandhi whole-heartedly supported the Khilafat Movement in order to bring Hindu-Muslim unity. When the Indian Muslims invited the Amir of Afghanistan to attack India and to convert this Darul Harb into Darul Islam, Gandhi supported this move also.

Once, when he went to Delhi he held his prayer meetings in a Hindu temple in the sweeper’s colony. Ignoring the strong protests of the priests he adamantly read few passages from the Koran as part of the prayer meeting inside the Hindu temple.

In 1947, millions celebrated the independence that they had won through decades of struggle. But the year was also marked by a holocaust of violence and ethnic cleansing that accompanied Partition. Seventeen million people were forced to migrate and 1 million people were killed. Hundreds of thousands of corpses littered

the streets of cities like Calcutta and Delhi. There are descriptions of train cars arriving full only of dead people.

While riots raged in Punjab, Gandhi told a leader of the Muslim League: I want to fight it out with my life. I would not allow the Muslims to crawl on the streets in India. They must walk with self-respect.

At the time of India-Pakistan partition violent Hindu-Muslim riot took place. Millions were uprooted from their ancestor’s territory and massive violence and slaughter occurred on both sides of the border. At the lowest estimate, one million people perished and fourteen million became homeless. When hundreds of thousand Hindu and Sikh refugees entered India, Gandhi showed utmost sympathy for them. Gandhi said—

"I am grieved to learn that people are running away from the West Punjab and I am told that Lahore is being evacuated by the non-Muslims. I must say that this is what it should not be. If you think Lahore is dead or is dying, do not run away from it, but die with what you think is the dying Lahore. When you suffer from fear you die before death comes to you. That is not glorious. I will not feel sorry if I hear that people in the Punjab have died not as cowards but as brave men."

Gandhi, in his late seventies, personally journeyed to areas where communal violence had broken out and did his best to persuade people to stop, walking barefoot through the riot-torn slums and threatening “to fast unto death.” His moral authority was able to stop the violence sometimes, but when he left, all the social and economic problems that led people to see another religious group as their main enemy were still in place.

Furthermore Gandhi presented an Ahimsa formula to the Hindu refugees. He advised the Hindus, “The Hindus not to die helplessly. But



they are to die without a murmur. Only then the riots will stop.”

In another incident, Gandhi addressed the homeless Hindus at the end of one of his Prayer Meetings and said, “After all, who are the killers ? They are our Muslim Brethren, none other. Does a converting into another religion break the bond of brotherhood ?”

In a speech on April 6, 1947; Gandhi again advised the destitute Hindus, Even if Muslims decide to wipe out the Hindu race, there is no point in Hindus getting angry on Muslims. Even if they slit our throats, we should be patient and accept death. Let them rule the world, we will pervade the world and merge with it. At least we should not be afraid of death. The providence is made of life and death. Why feel unhappy about it ? We will enter a new life if we face death with a smile. We will create a new Hindustan [India].

On September 23, 1947, during a prayer speech, Gandhi said, “[Even if Muslims] killed our relatives, our people, why should we be angry with anyone ? Those who got killed met with a proper end. We should know that they attained heaven. Let this happen with Gods’ wish with each one of us. God should grant us this kind of death. If you want to ask God for anything, let it be this.”

On Muslim slaughter of Hindus and Sikhs, Gandhi elsewhere said. “I would tell the Hindus to face death cheerfully if the Muslims are out to kill them. I would be a real sinner if after being stabbed I wished in my last moment that my son should seek revenge. I must die without rancor. ... You may turn round and ask whether all Hindus and all Sikhs should die. Yes, I would say. Such martyrdom will not be in vain.”

Gandhi died for upholding Muslim equality, assassinated in 1948 by a Hindu fascist. The killer, Nathuram Godse, had been trained as an organizer in the RSS in the 1930s.

Conclusion:

In our country people belonging to various religions live in harmony, but there are occasions when the communal fabric gets disturbed, often on trivial issues. It is the responsibility of all sections of society to ensure peace and brotherhood so that all round development of the country takes place rapidly. To eliminate communalism must be our first and top priority. All Indians as a true sons and daughters of motherland must come forward to untiringly fight the forces of communalism which have been putting a grave strain on the health of our nation.

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