Gandhi's Views on Secularism

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Most Hindus can see no problem in worshipping two deities at the same time. This polytheistic nature of popular Hinduism helps Hindus to be pluralist and open to other religions as well. Gandhi viewed secularism from a religious perspective. He believed that religion and the State are inseparable, that irreligiosity encouraged by the State leads to demoralization of the people and that, therefore, the State's religious policy should be pluralistic with equal respect to all religions. Mahatma Gandhi believed that all deities were manifestations of the One and all religions led to the same goal. It was this kind of a pluralistic approach to religion that made him to oppose religious conversions.

Though claiming to be liberal, Gandhi opposed religious conversions, especially of the Untouchables, on arguments based on religious pluralism. This, however, caused a lot of agitation among the leaders of the Untouchable community. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was against this pluralistic perspective of Gandhi. He said that Gandhi opposed religious conversions for political reasons. In his Writings and Speeches, he wrote:

> 'That Mr. Gandhi is guided by such factors as the relative strength of the Mussalmans and Christians, their relative importance in Indian politics, is evident....'

However, Gandhi said that his opposition to conversions, especially Christian conversions, originated from his own position that all religions were fundamentally equal and that equal respect, (*Sarva-dharma-samabhava)* not mutual tolerance, was the need of the hour. He also accused Christian Missions of using social services to net in converts. He argued that the Harijans had 'no mind, no intelligence, no sense of difference between God and no-God' and that they could no more distinguish between the relative merits than could a cow. Thus, the Gandhian pluralistic perspective of secularism disfavors conversions, especially among the Harijans for at least two reasons:

1. Since no religion can claim absolute truth and since all religions are fundamentally equal, conversions (or the use of the right to freedom of conscience) are out of question.

2. The secularism that provides freedom of religion to all people alike without considering their intellectual ability is unjust. Bluntly put, the Harijans do not qualify to exercise their right to freedom of religious conversion.

After going through all such arguments of Gandhi against religious conversions, Ambedkar concluded that they were all invalid arguments based on false premises. Following are the arguments that Ambedkar advanced:

Regarding the argument that all religions are fundamentally equal and, therefore, religious conversions unwanted

> '...If I have understood him correctly then his premise is utterly fallacious, both logically as well as historically. Assuming the aim of religion is to reach God – which I do not think it is – and religion is the road to reach him, it cannot be said that every road is sure to lead to God. Nor can it be said that every road, though it may ultimately lead to God, is the right road. It may be that (all existing religions are false and) the perfect religion is still to be revealed. But the fact is that religions are not all true and therefore the adherents of one faith have a right, indeed a duty, to tell their erring friends what they conceive to be the truth.'

Regarding the argument that the Untouchables were no better than a cow

> 'That Untouchables are no better than a cow is a statement which only an ignoramus, or an arrogant person, can venture to make. It is arrant nonsense. Mr. Gandhi dares to make it because he has come to regard himself as so great a man that the ignorant masses will not question him in whatever he says.'

Regarding the argument that the Christian Missions were baiting native converts by means of social services

> 'It is difficult to understand why Mr. Gandhi argues that services rendered by the Missionaries are baits or temptations, and that the conversions are therefore conversions of convenience. Why is it not possible to believe that these services by Missionaries indicate that service to suffering humanity is for Christians an essential requirement of their religion? Would that be a wrong view of the process by which a person is drawn towards Christianity? Only a prejudiced mind would say, Yes.'

Laxminarayan Gupta has pointed out that Gandhi had perceived that in an intellectually developing society, segregations over castes will only result in depopulation of Hindus in

India. Gandhi also said that if the Harijans were to be kept from joining the Christian fold, the Hindus themselves must embrace them.

Ambedkar, the leader of the Dalits, as has been seen, was sceptical towards the absolute claims of any religion. The impossibility of equality and absoluteness of any religion, according to Ambedkar, makes the propagation of religious beliefs even more necessary. Plurality of religions necessitates choice of religion on the basis of rational and secular analysis. Ambedkar's choice of Buddhism itself was based on purely secular reasons, namely the liberation of the lower castes.

Contrary to the contention of Ambedkar and other pure secularists, Hindu pluralists still believe that pluralism is the only solution of religious plurality in India. For instance, in the preface of his Modern Myths, Locked Minds, T.N. Madan states the thesis of his book:

> 'Throughout Modern Myths, Locked Minds runs the conviction that participatory pluralism, rather that a hegemonic and homogenizing secularism, is what will serve India's interests best.'

Of course, secularism that claims hegemony over all facets of the people and tries to bring every aspect of the citizen's life under its supervision cannot be acceptable to the Indian context. Secularism in India simply has to be a non-intermingling of religion and politics.

In his article Religious Tolerance and Secularism in India, Sudheer Birodkar argues that secularism has become possible in India only because of the pluralistic and unorganized nature of Hinduism, the religion of the majority in India. However, it has already been shown that secularism in India is a concept borrowed from the West and that it could never have been possible if the Colonialists had not contributed towards education, laws, unification, and reforms in India. It was the religious interference in politics by Hinduism that stipulated the dharma of Brahmins to be priests, of the Kshatriyas to be warriors (politics), of the Vaishyas to be traders, and of the Shudras to be servants of all. The State and religion were never, therefore, separate in Hindu politics. Secularism, contrary to the Hindu pluralist's contention, has never been a characteristic of Hinduism.

Cox has rightly said of India that '…India's vast variety of sects and religions, beside which North America's so-called pluralism must appear dully homogeneous, can survive only within a secular state. Also, since the deeply divisive castes represent remnants of kinship and tribal groupings, only further secularization will release Indians from the social fetters that caste imposes.'

Thus, pure secularism based on a humanistically and scientifically directed mutual tolerance and respect, not pluralism, is the solution for religious plurality. India cannot be united religiously; however, it can stand united politically and secularly. The scientific and rational mind needs to become the deciding factor in Indian democracy, not a pluralism based on blind-faith. However, the atavistic perspective of Gandhi was far from accepting any notion of pure rationality in matters of religion. Nirad Chaudhuri has explained that this inherent deficiency of civilization and reason in Gandhism led to its 'descent towards the old rancorous and atavistic form of Indian nationalism.'

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