

Religious Conflicts in Pre- Independence India and the Remedial Measures Suggested by M.K. Gandhi

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Abstract— Religious conflict is one of the most common conflicts in India. Its origins are not new in the present day, many traces of it have been found in ancient India. Even in ancient times, it sometimes took such a terrible form that it resulted in loss of many lives and much damage. As examples, some of the most serious religious riots in pre-independence India are: Parsi- Muslim riots of October 1851, May 1857, February 1874 and November 1885, Salem riot in 1882, from 1921-1922 Hindu-Muslim riots in Bengal, Punjab and Multan, Kohat riots in 1924, Nagpur riots in 1927 and Noakhali riots in 1946. As a result of these peace and order in the country were disrupted. In view of this situation, the famous twentieth century personality as well as philosopher M.K. Gandhi recommended two paths to follow, which are: (1) Tolerance and (2) Respect towards all religions

Keywords — Conflict, Religious riot, Pre-independence India, Tolerance, Respect towards all religions.

Introduction

Religious conflicts occur when people of a particular religion disrespect the religion of another and try to impose their own religion on others. The main causes of religious conflict are intolerance against another religious beliefs and religious discrimination. Sometimes, it takes the form of serious riot. India has cited several examples of various religious conflicts that escalated into religious riots which resulted in many deaths, maiming and injuries. It has also led to political repression, widespread disruption of economic activity and a negative impact on productivity. Moreover, it has been blamed for the destruction hundreds of temples, mosques, churches and various national properties like vehicles, private homes and others since ancient times. To solve the religious problems of his time, Gandhi pointed out the way to tolerance and respect for all religions.

The objective of this research paper is to make a critical analysis on the religious conflicts in pre-independence India along with remedial suggestions offered by M.K. Gandhi

The method of the present research work is critical and analytical in nature. The work is theory oriented and so no field work is necessary for the work. But I had to depend on different books, journals and articles available in different libraries of India. In addition to this, I attended different seminars, conferences and workshops that were available on the relevant subject.

Discussion

Religious conflict is a situation that in most cases turns into riot. The history of religious riots in India is very ancient. It was found that from 1671-1681, Benares and Narnaul were in religious insurrection due to Aurangzeb's anti Hindu religious policy and destruction of temples. Parsi-Muslim riots took place in October 1851, May 1857, February 1874 and November 1885. In 1882 Salem riot took place in Salem, Tamil Nadu when Muslims raised objections to Hindu religious procession through Mosque. In Bengal, Punjab and Multan from 1921-1922 many riots took place between Hindu and Muslim. Indeed, in the 1920s the relationship between the Hindu and Muslim communities

deteriorated. From 1923 to 1937 there were incessant religious riots in different parts of India. Some of them are particularly noteworthy. In 1924 in Kohat, North-West Frontier Province, Kohat riots occurred because of the publication and circulation of a pamphlet containing a virulently anti-Islamic poem. As a result terrible riots broke out and Hindus and the Sikh communities in the place were completely wiped out. The number of casualties among Hindus and Sikhs was three times higher than that of Muslims. Even many Hindus and Sikhs were killed in the surrounding villages, their properties were destroyed, a large quantity of goods was looted and because of that they were compelled to flee from the region. To resist this kind of hostility in October 1924 Gandhi went on 21 days fast for Hindu-Muslim unity. Other notable riots called Nagpur riots cropped up on 4 September 1927. It was the day of Lakshmi Puja and like every year the Hindus took out a procession. When they were passing in front of a mosque in the Mahala area of Nagpur, the Muslim stopped the procession and did not allow it to pass through the area. After the morning procession, when the Hindus were resting, the Muslim youths armed with weapons like, javelins, daggers, and knives, marched out shouting Allahu Akbar. The situation was riotous and lasted for three days. Eventually the government ordered the troops to restore peace in the city. Before Indian independence another serious issue was Noakhali riots in 1946. During this time Muslims looted Hindu property and forcibly converted many Hindus to Islam. Thus, we can say that peace was disrupted in India for a long time due to religious riots. Gandhi suggested two approaches for solving religious problems: (i) Tolerance (ii) Respect towards all religions.

(i) Tolerance: Generally, the word “tolerance” means to be sympathetic to beliefs and practices that is differing from or conflicting with one’s own. By the word “tolerance” M.K. Gandhi did not mean indifference to one’s faith but a more sensible and purer love for it. Gandhi felt the need for tolerance as he believed that everyone is right in their own standpoint. Here we find that Gandhi’s philosophy was particularly influenced by Jaina doctrine of Anekāntavāda or many-sidedness of reality and he applied this theory to his concept of religion. Comparing religion with soul as well as tree Gandhi said:

“The soul is one, but the bodies which she animates are many. We cannot reduce the number of bodies; yet we recognize the unity of the soul. Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, there is one Religion, but any number of faiths.”¹

According to Gandhi, true religious knowledge breaks down barriers between religions and evokes a spirit of tolerance. He believed that although the truth is revealed in all faiths, they all are partial and flawed. If all faiths are imperfect, then there is no question of comparison in between them. However, in order to make our faith flawless it is our duty to take on the good sides of other faiths without any hesitation. Gandhi said: “... religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality”²

So we should have equal respect for other religions as our own. Gandhi advocated mutual tolerance as the golden rule of conduct, which certainly does not cause any problem in distinguishing between right and wrong or good and evil. Moreover, he said: “Tolerance gives us spiritual insight, which is as far from fanaticism as the North Pole is from the South.”³

(2) Respect Towards All Religions: In addition to tolerance, another way to resolve religious conflict is to inculcate in people a sense of equal respect for all religions. Gandhi thought that it is possible through people’s awareness that all religions are the same (*Sarva dharma sama bhava*). During the end of British Raj in September 1930 Gandhi first used the term “Sarva dharma sama bhava” when communicating with his followers with the intention of bridging the Hindu-Muslim divide. Gandhi compared different religions to the beautiful flowers in the same garden and branches of the same majestic tree. In fact, all religions are different ways identical to the same point and thus equally true. But at the same time they all are imperfect as they are received and interpreted by imperfect people. In his word: “I believe that all the great religions of the world are true more or less. I say more or less because I believe that everything that the human hand touches, by reason of the very fact that human beings are imperfect becomes imperfect.”⁴

That is why, Gandhi did not want only one religion to flourish in India. In his own word: “I do not expect India of my dream to develop one religion, i.e. to be wholly Hindu or wholly Christian or wholly Musalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another”⁵

According to Gandhi, only God is characterized by indescribable and untranslatable perfection. God is the keystone of all religions. But despite the essence of all religions is one, they are described in multiple forms. This is because the same truth has been narrated differently from different perspectives. Thus, Gandhi said about unity in diversity. Moreover he believed that Allah in Islam, God in Christianity and the Ishwara in Hinduism are the same. In this case, there is no question of disrespecting other religions and wanting to convert people of other religions to one's own religion. However, Gandhi emphasized on morality and said that without morality worshiping in a church, mosque or temple is ineffective. So it must be accepted that all religions are true, of equal value and lead to the same destination. Thus we should have equal respect for all religions.

Conclusion

To resolve the religious issue Gandhi suggested tolerance and respect towards all religions. Being influenced by Anekāntavāda, the Jaina doctrine about metaphysical truths, he applied this doctrine to his concept of religion. According to him, religion is one, but faiths are many. He compared religion with soul and tree. He mentioned that the soul is one, but it enlivens many bodies. In the same way, a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves. He opined that true religious knowledge breaks down barriers between different religions and awakens a spirit of tolerance. Moreover, although truth is revealed in faith, every faith is partial and imperfect. So it is necessary to take the good side of different beliefs and for that people need to have respectful attitude towards every religion. They have to realize that all religions are one, which means unity in diversity.

Notes and References

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* <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/575512>