

Gandhi and the Muslims of India: A Study on the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi

Dr. Amarjit Singh

Professor of History, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, India

Abstract

This research paper is essentially selections from the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi regarding the approach of Gandhi towards the Muslims of India and his constant efforts for the maintenance of the Hindu-Muslim unity. This present paper also throws ample light on the relationship which existed between the Indian National Congress and the All India Muslim League and the events leading to the partition of India. This paper covers the period since the involvement of Gandhiji with the Khilafat Conference until that of the martyrdom of Gandhiji at the altar of the Hindu-Muslim unity. It has been argued in this research paper that the speeches, writings, correspondences, and statements of Gandhiji clearly reveal his deep understanding of the Islam, his love towards the Muslims of India, his heartily desire for the maintenance of the Hindu-Muslim unity and, above all, his love towards humanity. This is without considering the distinction of class, caste, religion, and even nationality.

Keywords: Humanity, Tolerance, Hindu-Muslim Unity, Khilafat

Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi, was a religious genius, who had genuine tolerance and respect for all of mankind's faiths. His commitment to religion did not mean a commitment to Hinduism alone i.e. his own religion. However, he also shows respect and tolerance towards all other faiths with an attitude of full freedom and complete equality to the followers of all the religions on this earth. His prayer meetings were not just about his beloved *Gita*, but there was space for *Holy Quran*, *the Bible*, and the *Guru Grantha Saheb* as well. In his introduction to the sayings of Prophet Mohammed by Abdullah Suhrawardy, Gandhiji emphatically declared that there will be no lasting place on earth unless one learns not to merely tolerate, but also to respect the other faiths as one's own. Time and again, Gandhiji had declared that Allah of Islam is the same as the God of Christians and Ishwar of the Hindus. Mahatma Gandhi used to say that,

although there were numerous names of God in Hinduism, there were also many names of God in Islam and as well as in Christianity. Gandhiji declared that the names of God do not indicate individuality but attributes. However, little man has tried in his humble way to describe the Almighty God by giving him attributes, even though He is above all attributes. Living faith in this God means equal respect for all religions. Mahatma Gandhi, thus, declared that he was as much a Muslim, a Christian, a Sikh, a Jain and a Zoroastrian, as much he was a Hindu (Amarjit Singh, 2014).

Subsequently, it appears that Mahatma Gandhi possessed a sound knowledge of Islam and of the life and teachings of Prophet Mohammed. Gandhiji himself had declared that he had read the holy Quran and the life of Prophet Mohammed many times. Muslim friends and clients of Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa as well as his Muslims friends in India provided him some literatures on Islam and on the life of Prophet Mohammed. Mahatma Gandhi had claimed to read all those literatures very carefully. In addition, he also claimed to have understood those literatures to a great extent. Mahatma Gandhi had read the translation of the Holy Quran and other Islamic literatures produced by Thomas Carlyle, Maulana Shibli Numani, Maulana Syed Amir Ali, Abdullah Suhrawardy, Dr. Mohammed, and Sir Ross Massod. Also, Mahatma Gandhi regularly carried on sympathetic debates with eminent Islamic scholars like Maulana Mohammed Ali, Maulana Shaukat Ali, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Dr. M.A. Ansari, Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Mohammed Mujeeb, Syed Abid Hussain, Dr. Zakir Hussain and others. Gandhiji believed that Prophet Mohammed was a seeker of truth. He was God fearing and he suffered endless persecution. Time and again, Mahatma Gandhi had asserted that Islam has not been kept alive by the sword, but by the many sufi saints and scholars with high sense of honour whom it has produced. Therefore, he firmly believed that the Holy Quran stresses mercy and patience as the essential human virtues. Keeping in view his understanding of Islam and the Holy Quran, it appears that Mahatma Gandhi, more or less, lived an Islamic life.²

I wish to suggest, on the bases of the present selections from the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, that Gandhiji was immensely in love with the Muslims of India. Mahatma Gandhi spent his childhood and his school life amongst a large number of Muslim friends and Muslim neighbours, who were frequent visitors to his house. Gandhiji went to South Africa as a Lawyer for a Muslim firm that had family connections with some of his old Muslim friends. During his stay in South Africa, his feelings of common brotherhood with Muslims were further strengthened. Mahatma Gandhi himself stated that while he was in South Africa, he came in close touch with the Muslim brothers there. Also, he was able to learn their habits,

thoughts and aspirations. He had lived in the midst of Muslim friends for twenty years, and his Muslims friends in South Africa treated him as a member of their family. In addition, they had told their wives, daughters, and sisters that they needed not to observe purdah with him.³ Once he returned to India, his long association with Maulana Mohammed Ali, Maulana Shaukat Ali, Hakim Ajmal Khan, and Dr. M.A. Ansari provided him another opportunity to move among the Muslims of India at large. However, Mahatma Gandhi's unconditional support to the Khilafat Conference provided him the ample opportunities to move and to mix with each and every class, section, and clan of the Muslims of India. It was during the course of the Khilafat Movement that Mahatma Gandhi was provided an opportunity to address an exclusive Muslim women gathering at Bombay. It was a gathering where the Muslim women were invited to interact with Gandhiji without observing any purdah. This was indeed a rare honour bestowed upon Gandhiji alone. Therefore, such a honour was not enjoyed even by any of the male Muslim leader of the Khilafat Conference.⁴ Later on, his long association with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and Dr. Zakir Husain further widened the bases and influence of Mahatma Gandhi among the Muslims of India. The ample writings and, as such, the activities of Gandhiji, throughout his life period has very vividly expressed his love, affection, care, and respect for the Muslims of India.

I wish to put it emphatically on the basis of the study of his enormous correspondences, writings, and speeches that the attainment of complete communal harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims was more important for Mahatma Gandhi than the attainment of Swaraj and the Independence of India. Gandhiji never visualized and imagined the achievement of freedom from the British yoke at the cost of the loss of Hindu-Muslim unity. Once, while making a speech at a public meeting at Abbottabad in July 1939, Gandhiji stated that if one could dissect his heart, one would find that the prayer and spiritual striving for the attainment of Hindu-Muslim unity goes on there unceasingly all the twenty-four hours without even a moment's interruption, whether he was awake or asleep.⁵ Unfortunately, during the last years of his life, Mahatma Gandhi was made to witness a great amount of communal violence between the Hindus and the Muslims. Gandhiji indeed lived his final years in the midst of a sort of hell on earth. However, there can scarcely be any worse kind of hell than that of the outbursts of malicious violence among the very persons one has given one's life serving.

Gandhiji has never cherished the achievement of the Independence of India along with the emergence of communal passions and communal holocaust between the Hindus and the Muslims. The frail old man went from place of place, seeking to establish peace and goodwill while there were

enmity and strife. He went to Noakhali to soothe the Hindus who had suffered from Muslim atrocities. He went to Patna to heal the sufferings of the Muslims who had suffered from the hands of Hindus. He went to Delhi and he proposed to visit Pakistan. Everywhere and each day, he preached love and communal amity.⁶ Lastly, Mahatma Gandhi had to sacrifice his life at the altar of the achievement of Hindu-Muslim unity when he was shot dead by a Hindu fanatic, Nathuram Godse, in the evening of January 30, 1948. This seventy-eight year old man took three bullets in his chest while standing. This he did in order to shun hostility and establish love, peace, and harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims.

In this research paper, I have made a humble attempt to study the efforts made by Mahatma Gandhi for the achievement of Hindu-Muslim unity right from the days of the Khilafat Conference up to the last day of his life. Based on my understanding, this entire period may be divided into five phases. During the first phase i.e. from 1919 to 1924, Mahatma Gandhi was successful enough to achieve the Hindu-Muslim unity to a larger extent. It was the phase when thousands of Hindus and Muslims marched together for the courses of Khilafat Movement and Non-Cooperation Movement. From 1925 to 1936, which may be called the second phase, the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi for the course of the Hindu-Muslim unity were hampered. Thus, this is because of the new founded agenda of the Provincial Muslim Political Organizations and of the All India Muslim League. During the third phase, i.e. from 1937 to 1942, while Mahatma Gandhi was more concerned with the war issues and the Quit India Movement, the All India Muslim League and M.A. Jinnah had further weakened his mission regarding the maintenance of the communal harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims. From 1943 to the middle of 1946, which may be called the fourth phase, Mahatma Gandhi reached out in every possible measure and every possible negotiations with M.A. Jinnah. Thus, this was done with the All India Muslims League and with the British in order to achieve his life long mission of Hindu-Muslim unity. However, he could not succeed. During the last phase, Mahatma Gandhi was the most sadden and unfortunate person on the earth. Hence, he had to witness a serious communal holocaust between the Hindus and the Muslims.⁷

During the first phase, Mahatma Gandhi was well able to achieve the Hindu-Muslim unity. His keen interest in Islam and love for the Muslims of India took a political turn during this phase when he himself lent full support to the Khilafat movement and exhorted the Hindus and Muslims to take active parts in it. Later on, he tackled the non-cooperation movement and enlisted the full support of the Muslims of India for this course. The message of the Khilafat movement and non-cooperation movement reached out to every nook and cranny of India. Consequently, Indian Muslims joined the

non-cooperation movement in large numbers as Gandhiji had linked it to the demand to restore the Caliph to his pristine spiritual glory. For the first time in the political history of modern India, thirty thousand Hindus and Muslims went to jail in thirty days. For the first time in the political history of India, twenty-lakhs of Hindus and Muslims left their houses at the bidding of Mahatma Gandhi. While speaking at a public meeting in the middle of 1922, Mahatma Gandhi said that it would not be an exaggeration to say that the unity which prevailed between the Hindus and the Muslims at that time was unparalleled in that age. During this phase, Gandhiji not only successfully achieved the mission of Hindu-Muslim unity, but he was also well able to lay down the path of non-violence and Satyagraha among the Hindus and Muslims alike.⁸

During the second phase, communal riots between the Hindus and the Muslims were reported from the different parts of India. While speaking at a public meeting at Mymensingh in May 1925, Gandhiji said that the Hindus and the Muslims were fighting not even for leaves and fishes, but for stones and not for vital interests. As a result, he advised both communities not to endanger their unity on the ground of selfishness. Furthermore, Gandhiji said that until they had cleansed their heart and purified their soul, they would not be able to live as brothers. Optimistic as Mahatma was, he believed that God would show mercy on this blessed land and enable them to live as brothers.⁹ During this phase, Gandhiji did his best possible efforts at the platforms of All Parties Conference, Calcutta and Round Table Conference, London, for the attainment of the Hindu-Muslim unity. However, he produced no major success. In an article in *Young India* of December, 1927, Gandhiji wrote that his method and approach on the issue of Hindu-Muslim unity has changed. Formerly, he tried to achieve it by addressing meetings and joining them in promoting and passing resolutions. Nevertheless, he now had no faith in these devices or methods. In an atmosphere, which was surcharged with distrust, fear and hopelessness, he would rely upon prayer to God and such individual acts of friendship as were possible. Gandhiji further wrote that his interest and faith in Hindu-Muslim unity remained, however, as strong as it ever was.¹⁰

However, even in these circumstances, Mahatma Gandhiji was able enough to muster the support of some sections of the Muslims of India. Also, there are majority of the Muslims of the North-West Frontier Province for the course of the Civil-Disobedience Movement. In this concern, Gandhiji vehemently condemned the policies of the British Raj and, while speaking at the Plenary Session of Round Table Conference in December 1931, he said that the quarrel between the Hindus and Muslims was not an old one. Also, the Hindus and the Muslims were not at war when there had been no British Rule. He was of the view that the Hindus and the Muslims will live together

in peace again after the departure of the British. In the year 1935, Gandhiji even encouraged Babu Rajendra Prasad, the then President of the Indian National Congress, to negotiate with M.A. Jinnah, President of the All India Muslim League at that time. Thus, this negotiation is based on an agreed political settlement between the Hindus and the Muslims. Nevertheless, the negotiations brought no tangible results.¹¹

During the third phase i.e. from 1937 to 1942, the happenings moved very fast at the political level such as the elections of the Provincial Legislative Assemblies, formation of the Congress Government at the eight British India Provinces, beginning of World War II and the new found relationship between the British Raj and the All India Muslim League, resignations of the Provincial Ministries of the Congress, adoption of the Lahore Resolution by Muslim League in March 1942, Cripps Mission, and the Quit India Movement. Although, during this phase, Mahatma Gandhi, as usual, kept on his business of public meetings, speeches at the evening prayers, articles in the *Young India*, and numerous correspondences with the individuals on the issue of the maintenance of Hindu-Muslim unity. In fact, the political space among the Muslims of India was occupied by the All India Muslim League to a larger extent. No doubt that the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi during this phase successfully challenged the very existence of the British Rule through the Quit India Movement. At the same time, the complete aloofness of the Muslims of India against the Quit India Movement, notwithstanding the exception of the North-West Frontier Province, posed a serious challenge to the issue of the Hindu-Muslim unity. Mahatma Gandhi called to the Muslims of India to join the Congress. The Congress, which was representing the whole of India in its uphill fight for independence, was making no major political influence on the Muslims of India.¹²

Reacting to the Lahore Resolution of the All India Muslim League, Mahatma Gandhi retorted that the two-nation theory was untruth. He said that the vast majority of the Muslims of India were converts of Islam or where descendants of converts and that they did not become a separate nation as soon as they became converts. He further argued that he had found it difficult to distinguish by outward sign between a Bengali Hindu and a Bengali Muslim, and between a Punjabi Hindu and a Punjabi Muslim. Iqbal and Kitchew were the names common to Hindus and Muslims. He concluded that the Hindus and Muslims of India were not two nation, but those whom God had made one. As such, man will never be able to divide them. While speaking at a public meeting in early 1942, Mahatma Gandhi said that the political and communal pacts between the Hindus and the Muslims, whilst they were good if they could be achieved, were valueless unless they were backed by the unity of hearts. Without it, there could be no

peace in India. Gandhiji further argued that even Pakistan would bring no peace, if there was no unity of hearts. Therefore, this unity of hearts would come only by mutual service and co-operation.¹³

During the fourth phase, Mahatma Gandhi now realized that, from then hence, the Hindu-Muslim unity would be achieved only through conducting some negotiations and pacts with M.A. Jinnah, All-India Muslim League, and the British Raj. The nature of the Quit India Movement had already convinced Mahatma that the political space among the Muslims of India, to a great extent, was enjoyed by the All India Muslim League under the leadership of M.A. Jinnah, who was now hailed as Quaid-e-Azam. Thus, it was as early as in may 1943, while Mahatma Gandhi was under detention at Aga Khan Palace, that he wrote to M.A. Jinnah on the reason they should not both approach the great question of communal unity as men determined on finding a common solution. Thus, it was during this phase that the Gandhi-Jinnah negotiations, Bhaulabhai Desai-Liaquat Ali Khan Pact, Simla Conference, and Cabinet Mission proceeding were conducted. This is in order to achieve the Hindu-Muslim unity and also to achieve a political pact between the All-India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress.

The Gandhi-Jinnah negotiations were held at the residence of M.A. Jinnah in Bombay in September 1944 on the basis of the C. Rajagopalchari Formula. While talking to the Press during the course of this negotiation, Gandhiji said that their goal was the attainment of independence for the whole of India. It was for that they prayed and were pledged to lay down their lives. Subsequently, it was only during the course of these negotiations that Mahatma Gandhi in principle accepted the demand of Pakistan. Gandhiji had suggested that the Muslim majority provinces or areas under the British India will be demarcated. However, the Muslim League and the Congress would put up a joint struggle against the British Raj. Gandhiji further elaborated that once after the withdrawal of the British, a general plebiscite would be held in the Muslim majority areas on the basis of the adult franchise. Thus, if the general plebiscite would favour the demand of separate Muslim State, then Pakistan would be established. M.A. Jinnah, on the other hand, remained adamant on the basis of the Lahore Resolution of March 1940 and his Two-Nation theory. However, he simply declined to accept this offer of a maimed and mutilated Pakistan. Thus, the Gandhi-Jinnah negotiations collapsed. However, a detailed study of this valuable negotiation once again revealed the immense love of Mahatma Gandhi towards M.A. Jinnah and towards Muslims of India. It also shows his lifelong desire regarding the achievement of Hindu-Muslim unity.¹⁴

Subsequently, it appears to me that the Desai-Liaquat Pact, Simla Conference and Cabinet Mission Proceedings all were significant tests for Mahatma Gandhi in terms of his long standing desire to achieve the Hindu-

Muslim Unity. In addition, this was now to be established only at the political platform. Based on the issue of the formation of an interim ministry and parity between the Congress and the League, Gandhiji had asserted that the more he thought, the more he became convinced that if the Congress tried to select as many Hindus that were Muslims, then the communal poison would spread throughout the country. He further argued about the harm if Congress was reduced from a majority to a minority and would not the Congress become a communal organization by selecting as many Hindus as there were Muslims? After meeting Cabinet Mission for several times and while speaking at a prayer meeting in New Delhi in June 1946, Gandhiji had stated that a true Hindu-Muslim unity would not be achieved while the third party was there. Mahatma Gandhi further argued that although the Cabinet Mission was trying to bring together the Congress and the League, their task was difficult. He further stated that the Congress, the League, and the British were all laboring under unnatural conditions.¹⁵

On the issue of the Hindu-Muslim unity, the last phase of his life was quite a miserable and saddening one. Every day, Mahatma Gandhi would have to hear the news of the communal holocaust between the Hindus and the Muslims and others from the other parts of India. While speaking at a prayer meeting in New Delhi in October 1946, Gandhiji said that ever since he had heard the news of Ioakhali, he had been wondering where his duty lay. God would have showed him the way. However, what he wanted to tell them and through them to the wider public was that it was the duty of every Hindu not to harbour any thoughts of revenge on Muslims in spite of what they had done in Noakhali. Similarly, while addressing a Muslim gathering at Calcutta in November 1946, Gandhiji said that whether they believed him or not, he wanted to assure them that he was a servant of both Hindus and Muslims. He had not come there to fight Pakistan. Thus, if India was destined to be partitioned, then he could not prevent it. He further said that he only wished to tell them that Pakistan could not be established by force.

Lastly and unfortunately, after making all efforts toward the achievement of Hindu-Muslim unity throughout his life, Mahatma Gandhi had to accept the partition of India on the basis of the religion. He conceded the *Mountbatten Plan* of 3rd June 1947 which envisaged the establishment of two nations i.e. India and Pakistan. However, Lord Mountbatten, in an interview with Mahatma Gandhi, had asserted that Plan should be really christened as the *Gandhi Plan*, since all the salient ingredients were suggested to him by Mahatma Gandhi and since there was no other option left out.¹⁶ With reference to the severe communal violence and speaking at a prayer meeting at New Delhi in July 1947, Gandhiji said that in 1944, he trudged his way under the sun in eighteen successive days to the Quaid-e-Azam house in Bombay. After then, he was performing his duty. Had Jinnah

accepted what he went to offer him at that time, all that blood that had been shed would never have been shed. Also, all that poison would not have been spread.¹⁷ It is indeed wonderful that Mahatma Gandhi, till the last day of his life, happened to meet and address the Muslim delegations and unceasingly spoke for the course of the Hindu-Muslim unity. However, one fails to understand why Mahatma Gandhi did not provide an elaborate programme to the Indian National Congress under his leadership, which may have broadened its political and social bases among the Muslims of India. In addition, there is a space to debate on this issue.¹⁸

References:

- Amarjit Singh (ed.), *Gandhi And The Muslims Of India: Selections From The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi, 2014, pp. i-ii
Ibid. p. iii
Ibid. p. iv
Government of India, *The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XX, Ahmedabad, Reprint 1993, pp. 396-98
Ibid., Vol. LXX, pp. 22-24
Ibid., Vol. XC, pp. 532-33
Amarjit Singh(ed.), op.cit., pp. 5-6
Ibid. pp.50-51
The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XXVII, pp. 126-27
Ibid., Vol. XXXV, pp. 352-54
Bimal Prasad, *Pathway To India's Partition: A Nation Within A Nation*, Vol.II, New Delhi,2005,pp. 360-67
Amarjit Singh (ed.), op.cit., pp. viii-ix
The Collected Works Of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. LXXV, pp. 377-78
Ibid., Vol. LXXVIII, pp. 87-143
Ibid., Vol. LXXXIV, pp. 465-90
Ibid., Vol. LXXXVIII, pp. 481-82
Ibid., pp. 313-14
Amarjit Singh (ed.), op.cit., p. xiii