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Abstract Plural India: The Gandhian Path of Secular Democracy and Peace Building

This paper aims to delineate various aspects of a plural society and how it operates in India through multifaceted forms and how the Gandhian projection of secular democracy and peace building becomes a propitiation for this dilemma. Issues pertaining pluralism, religion, and secularism are very much frequent in contemporary heterogeneous societies. In particular the study of their interactions will prove that each of them is strongly influenced by the others. The extensive literature on these concepts is testimony to their importance. There is continuing disagreement regarding definitions of each; without standard definitions, efforts to measure the extent and the social locations of behavior related to them will inevitably lead to controversy; so it is pertinent to analyse these snags in various societies and how they are accommodated in a multi cultural society like India.

The numerous and subtle nexus among pluralism, religion, and secularism call for careful analysis. Using the qualitative method of research this study tried to approach these issues from various corners and concludes that secularism which was the vision of Gandhi is the formula for peace building. The conflict can be reduced only by transferring the issue entirely into the secular arena. That is to say, there is an important connection between pluralism and secularism. Pluralistic societies that do not have a substantial amount of secularism are generally unable to develop the mutual tolerance which religious diversity requires. If there are secular interests the members of different religious communities can share a basis for mutual respect and accommodation in religious matters also.

Gandhi through non violence and Satyagraha became a pioneer for the Indian bands to tackle the hurdles in front of them. A decentralized polity, a positive attitude towards cultural pluralism, and a genuine concern and respect for human rights are the best guarantors of Indian secularism, understood as interreligious understanding in society and the state policy of non-discrimination and of equal distance from the religious concerns of the people.

Key Words: plurality, Gandhi, secularism, democracy, peace building, India, religion, nonviolence.

What is plurality and how it is in India?

Plurality is the existence of a multitude of communities who differ in their beliefs, language, and cultural and social norms, as well as in their geographical locations, covering hills, mountains and river valleys on the one hand, and sandy deserts to seas on the other. (Dadhich, 2014) India is, of course, abundantly diverse in all senses. It has several faiths and religions, many languages and racial groups, different geographical and climatic regions, etc. It, therefore, satisfies the necessary condition of multifarious heterogeneity for plurality. This heterogeneity has arisen on several counts. One, it has a vast land expanse of continental proportions, which makes it impossible to be singular and uniform. Two, as a society, it is very ancient and that equips it with an adaptability that can accommodate and absorb the difference and heterogeneity in its fold. In the process, it enlarges its cultural and social canvas. Three, it had very strong interaction with the rest of the world through flourishing trade and business on the one hand, and invasions and campaigns on the other. The former facilitated absorption of heterogeneity through a process of osmosis and tolerance dictated by economic interests, while in the case of the latter it was rather forced. Either way, there was propagation of heterogeneity and adaptation of difference. Over a long period of time, it all gets assimilated and becomes a part of the mainstream norm and behaviour.

India, in its all multifarious magnificence, beautifully celebrates this plurality with its "unity in diversity". Plurality is by no means superficial, euphoric or surrealistic; it is sublime, yet solid and concrete. It is one wholesome cultural and social entity with definitive content. This is the identity of inclusivity and plurality, and that is what forms the kernel of India as a cultural, social and intellectual being. This is because any one or even a group of the different constructs cannot truthfully represent India's core in its entirety. India is, therefore, quintessence plural and inclusive. It is not to say that it is all very rosy and sweet between different communities and religious groups. There are certain tensions on account of economic, political, social, educational and developmental aspirations of different communities. As we see them presently in good measure and quite open, yet there can be no alternative prescription but a plural and inclusive one.

It should however be stressed that plurality does not mean a collection and sum of various diversities, but it is rather a synthetic whole that is born out of mutual engaging interactions. For that, it is imperative that one is not only respectful of the other's faith and belief, but also that this respect is rooted in knowledge and an informed appreciation of it. This is what determines the measure and strength of the plural mind. Apart from the visible reasons of conflict between various groups, one of the reasons could very well be that plurality is not strong enough. That people of one faith or community have not assimilated and appreciated well in an informed way to other's faith and beliefs. It is, therefore, necessary to always keep on charging continually the plural mind's batteries. This is the basic and primary requirement for the health of the plural mind. We should all be very conscious of it and should invest due care and effort in strengthening deeper and truer understanding between various groups and their faiths and beliefs. This will give rise to a meaningful and engaging synthesis which is so essential for a healthy

plural mind. Plurality in this engaging and interactive mode could, in fact, provide a true and faithful barometer of society's peacefulness. Plurality is, therefore, organically knit together like a patchwork design. The greater the interaction and resonance between its constituents, the richer and stronger would be a plural society.

The other is the fact that India had all through its history an absorption of all those who came in as invaders or otherwise, with the sole exception of the Europeans, whether British, French or Portuguese. How do we understand this? It is, again, perhaps because of the plural mind. Unlike the definitive European mind, the Indian mind is not driven by the force of civilising and bringing them all to one right order. This is simply because the plural mind does not offer one path, it instead offers multiple and different paths, each being equally valid and acceptable. Hence, the addition of one or few more is quite easily accommodated. It is, perhaps, ultimately the plural mind which the Europeans found difficult to cope with. It was so intense and all-encompassing that they could neither completely isolate themselves, nor could they live with it.

It is thus; abundantly clear that for a heterogeneous society that has of necessity a plural mind, secular democracy is not only natural but the only option for a harmonious and peaceful way of life. The plural mind, therefore, promotes peace, harmony and democracy. It is a matter of mind that Gandhi could not only envision non- violence as a supreme value but also marshal it as an effective political and social tool to fight the British colonial power. Thus, plurality is a natural innate trait of the Indian mind; else it would not have survived this long.

Coming of Gandhi through non violence and *Satyagraha*

After the violent uprising of 1857 against the British occupation of India, the Indian freedom struggle rarely resorted to violence. Until the 1920s, the Indian struggle used the techniques of petitions, appeals and court actions; later came the use of the agitational methods of marches, demonstrations and protest meetings. In the 1920s the Gandhian leadership transformed the freedom struggle into a genuine mass movement that used the methodologies of *Satyagraha* (nonviolent struggle) in the forms of nonviolent non-cooperation and civil disobedience. *Satyagraha* used peaceful strikes, marches, demonstrations, sit-ins, hunger strikes and courting imprisonment.

The principles and the practices of *Satyagraha* produced multifarious effects. Firstly, by avoiding violence and military means, *Satyagraha* develops rational debate and emphasizes political process. Secondly, by undermining the power of the police and by avoiding the politicization of the military, *Satyagraha* prepared the grounds for the acceptance of "civilian supremacy," a basic condition of democracy. Thirdly, *Satyagraha* built among the masses the habits and behavioural patterns of peaceful discussion, compromises and nonviolent settlement of disputes. These methods of conflict resolution are indeed the methods of secular democracy. Fourthly, *Satyagraha* demanded the avoidance of psychological violence, i.e., prejudice, hatred, disrespect towards those who disagree or who oppose. (Naidu, 1989) *Satyagraha* believes that because human beings are not evil by nature, S*atyagrahis* should not hate individuals while

fighting social institutions; (Naidu, 1989) they should win their opponents through love, service and sacrifice; (Naidu, 1989) they should build bridges between all human beings. Thus *Satyagraha* stands firm on the principles of equality of all, freedom for all and fraternity among all human beings. Because secular democracy demands respect for differences and cooperation of all citizens, *Satyagraha* prepared the Indian masses for accepting the rules and regulations of secular democracy. Finally, while violent struggle needs a small and clandestine group of young and physically fit people (mostly men) who are equipped with weapons, *Satyagraha* depends upon open and active participation of the masses consisting of all types of men and women, who possess self-confidence, courage and goodwill to carry on nonviolent campaigns in non-cooperation and civil disobedience. The national Congress movement under Gandhi involved millions working at all levels—village, district, province and nation—and organized through democratic structures and functions.

Secularism, religion and India

The term 'secularism' carries different shades of opinion and meaning: multi-religious state, no-religious state, religiously-neutral state, anti-religious state, or a state with established church having an attitude of impartiality towards all other religions etc. (Luthera, 1969)

Secularism as a concept has its origin in western countries and relates to the separation of the church from the state, giving the state a position of neutrality between different religions, amounting to even while at indifference of state towards religion, while the same time guaranteeing all citizen the right to profess any religion. In some ways the word 'secular' was used as a contrast to the word 'religious', which sometimes led people to believe that secularism is opposed to religion. But broadly speaking it was used not as opposed to religion but as divorced from all religion or religion having nothing to do with the conduct of state affair.

In India the concept has been used not as state's indifference meaning towards religion(s) but as treatment of all religions in an equal fashion and ruling out discrimination of any Indian on the ground of his religion. Use of 'secularism' in this sense has been characterised by Ashish Nandi as "Indianisim" which has no place in Oxford English Dictionary or in the Webster Dictionary. The long practice and peculiar conditions have given a distinct meaning to secularism in Indian context. It has come to be interpreted in a positive sense, unlike its negative connotation in the western world. The state is indifference but equal respect and distance towards all religion.

Most of the Indian political leaders have differed on this issue. Gandhi believed that state while giving fair treatment to all religions, could still maintain equal distance from all religions as well as religious communities. Nehru as a social engineer wanted a secular state where no community or group or party was permitted to usurp the rights of others. (Nehru, 1949) S. Radhakrishna exhorted that, "The religious impartiality of the Indian state is not to be confused with secularism or atheism. Secularism is in accordance with the ancient religious tradition of India." (Radhakrishnan, 1964) B. R. Ambedkar also remarked: It is all very good to say that we proposed in our Constitution a secular state. I have no idea whether members understand when

they use the world. 'Secular state' really means what the Constitution is intended to mean. (Ambedhkar, 1951)Contemporary Indian secularism intends to restrain all-pervasive religions to private matters on the basis of certain underlying mystical notions of equivalence of all religions (*sarva dharma samabhava*) or non-sectarianism.

But in India religion did not allow the state to come up independently, and perform its secular functions. Only the British rulers, in succession to their western tradition, tried to govern India on the lines of a religiously neutral state. But they made full use of religious differences existing among the Indian people as the basis of their policy of divide and rule. They withdrew after dividing the country in 1947, leaving its major part in the hands of Indian leaders who were equally close to religiosity of the masses, and were superficially acquainted with the nature of modern state.

A state is characterised as "secular" when it has no official established religion and it does not discriminate among its citizens on the basis of religion. There is general argument over this characteristic of secular state. However with regard to the purpose and object of a "secular state" there is hardly any unanimity among the scholars and practioners of secularism. A secular state as defined scientifically means a state, which recognises every citizen as equal and does not recognise any social or religious stratification as vehicles for exercising political rights, which is tolerant towards all religions with special emphasis on the protection of minorities and preservation of communal harmony. The essence of secularism, however, rest on two basic principles: (a) Separation of religion from politics (b) Acceptance of religion as purely and strictly private affair of individuals having nothing to do with the state.

Gandhi was the most powerful impulse of secularism in our country. He was of the view that the religiosity of our society was its great strength, which should be utilised at the political platform. Religion in the best sense of the term was the strongest part of the value system of our society. In 1928 Gandhi declared: After long study and experience I have come to these conclusion that (i) all religions are true (ii) all religions have some error in them (iii) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism. My veneration for other faiths is the same as for my own faith. (November, 28,1936) Gandhi was of the view that there should not be any state religion. "Even if the whole community had one religion, state interference would probably always be unwelcome". He opined that the state should be secular in the sense that everyone living in it should be entitled to profess his religion without let or hindrance so long as the citizens obeyed the law of the land. There should be no interference with missionary effort but no mission could enjoy the patronage of the state. Nehru also described, Mahatma Gandhi as "essentially a man of religion, a Hindu to the innermost depths of his being". In a famous passage in his Autobiography Gandhi wrote, "I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means". (Gandhi, 1948) Gandhi and Nehru, the master and disciple approached the problem of the relation between religion and politics from very different angles, but essentially their positions were not so far apart as far as the nature of the Indian state as concerned. Gandhi, a deeply religious man saw merit and truth in all religions and he "felt that any form of political

association based exclusively on adherence to a particular religion was worse than undemocratic".

Talking with a Christian missionary in September I946, Gandhi said: 'If I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate. I swear by my religion, I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. The state would look after your secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern!' (Iyer) He was totally against the idea of a state religion or state support for any religion. 'A society or group', he said, 'which depends partly or wholly on state aid for the existence of its religion, does not deserve or, better still, does not have any religion worth the name'.

Peculiarities of Indian secularism

In India, the existence of deep religious diversity has ensured a conceptual response to problems not only within religions, but also between them. Without taking it as a blueprint, other societies might examine the Indian conception. Several features of Indian secularism can be identified that distinguish it from other variants. First, multiple religions are not mere extras added on as an afterthought, but were present at the starting point as part of the foundation of Indian secularism. Deep religious diversity is an integral part of India's social and cultural landscape. Second, this form of secularism has a commitment to multiple values, namely, liberty, equality and fraternity – not conceived narrowly as pertaining to individuals, but interpreted broadly to cover the relative autonomy of religious communities and their equality of status in society – as well as other, more basic values such as peace, toleration, and mutual respect between communities. The acceptance of community-specific rights brings to the third feature of Indian secularism. Since it was born in a deeply multi-religious society, it is concerned as much with inter-religious domination as it is with intra-religious domination in the aftermath of the horrors of Partition. Fourth, Indian secularism does not erect a wall of separation between religion and state. There are boundaries, of course, but they are porous. This situation allows the state to intervene in religions in order to help or hinder them without the impulse to control or destroy them. This intervention can include granting aid to educational institutions of religious communities on a non-preferential basis, and interfering in socio-religious institutions that deny equal dignity and status to members of their own religion or to those of others – for example, the ban on untouchability and the obligation to allow everyone, irrespective of their caste or gender, to enter Hindu temples. Fifth, Indian secularism is not entirely averse to the public character of religions. Although the state is not identified with a particular religion or with religion more generally, official, and therefore public, recognition is granted to religious communities. Sixth, this model shows that in responding to religion, we do not have to choose between active hostility and passive indifference, or between disrespectful hostility and respectful indifference. We can combine the two, permitting the necessary hostility as long as there is also active respect. The state may intervene to inhibit some practices as long as it shows respect for other practices of the religious community, and does so by publicly lending support to them. Seventh, by not

fixing its commitment from the start exclusively to individual or community values, and by not marking rigid boundaries between the public and the private, India's constitutional secularism allows decisions on these matters to be made either within the open dynamics of democratic politics or by contextual reasoning in the courts. Eighth, one might say that Indian political secularism shows a marked preference for morally grounded secularisation in each of the senses mentioned above. There is no process out there which cannot be brought partially under human (democratic) control. Nor must an attempt be made for a blanket, morally insensitive restriction, privatisation, or decline of religion. Ninth, it opens up the possibility of different societies working out their own secularisms. In short, it opens out the possibility of multiple secularisms. Tenth, it breaks out of the rigid interpretative grid that divides our social world into the Western modern and the traditional, indigenous non-Western. Indian secularism is modern, but departs significantly from mainstream conceptions of Western secularism. Finally, the commitment to multiple values and principled distance means that the state tries to balance different, ambiguous, but equally important values. (Bhargava, 2013)

How India tackled the shackles of democracy

Indian democracy has lasted for the last sixty eight years without violent disruptions, while all its neighbouring sister states— Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka—have suffered from military coups, civil wars, dictatorships, territorial disintegration or political instabilities. Why has Indian democracy survived and flourished while 70 - 80% of countries in the world today are being run by anti-democratic autocracies. While addressing this question; the significance of Gandhi comes into our mind. He defines democracy as "the rule of unadulterated non-violence." (October, 13, 1940) Increasing coercion, militarization and authoritarianization can undercut existing democratic structures and processes, and can eventually lead to an atrophy of the democracy. Through all its structures and functions, democracy relies heavily upon nonviolent conflict resolution that invariably results in peace building.

A land of more than 1600 languages and dialects, India could not avoid linguistic conflicts. In many parts of the world linguistic parochialism has caused untold prejudice, hate and violence. However, in India such conflicts were avoided or dissolved and settled through democratic solutions and peaceful adjustments. First of all, the Indian Constitution acknowledges the equality and importance of 22 languages. Second was a dramatic and far reaching solution— the map of India was redrawn on linguistic lines. No other country in the world tried such radical and peaceful reorganization of its political units. Thirdly, a bilingual language formula was devised for official purposes—Hindi is to remain the national language and English is accepted as the official and administrative language. Fourthly, for educational purposes, a trilingual formula was devised. Education could be in the national language or in English or in the regional language. However, educational institutions are expected to encourage students to learn at least one language of another region. The peaceful coexistence of the constitutionally reorganized 22

languages of India is nothing short of a modern miracle performed through nonviolence and secular democracy.

As the most multiracial, multireligious and multilingual nation in the world, India has faced the violent challenges of multiculturalism. While bicultural Canada is facing a potential break-up, tricultural Bosnia has suffered the cruelties of ethnic cleansing and the multicultural Soviet Empire has already broken up into 22 new states and their ethnic conflicts, India has maintained, since independence, its territorial integrity, its political sovereignty, and its democratic existence. In the earlier phase, when the Tamils and the Telugus in South India developed some separatist tendencies, they were quickly won over through democratic compromises and peaceful reorganization of the state on linguistic-cultural lines. Next, the tribal conflicts in the Northeast region of India raised the slogans of separatism, inspired and encouraged by neighbouring Bangladesh, China, Myanmar, and some Western Christian missionaries. After its initial military response, New Delhi sought a peaceful and democratic solution. The region was reorganized into six new states of the federal union.

For an objective appreciation, the achievement of Indian democracy should be compared with what happened in other multicultural nations. East Pakistan broke away to become Bangladesh, Eritrea separated from Ethiopia, and Singapore was thrown out of Malaysia. Yugoslavia broke up into six new states and Czechoslovakia into two new states. The separatism of Katanga in Congo, of Biafra in Nigeria, of eastern Cyprus, of Northern Ireland, and of Tamils in Sri Lanka has caused mass massacres and vast devastations.

A serious challenge to Indian democracy came from the terrorism of peasant guerrillas, organized in 1948 by the Indian Communist Party along the lines of Maoist guerrillas in China, in the Telangana district of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. The Telangana terrorism was later re-enacted by the Indian Maoists in Naxalbari in West Bengal and some other regions during the 1960s. This challenge of peasant violence against feudalism was met in India through two approaches: one, Bhoodan, the nonviolent "land gift" movement; the other, democratic legislation to end landlordism. Bhoodan, organized by Vinoba Bhave, a disciple of Gandhi, appealed to the conscience of landlords and collected and distributed among the landless peasants more than five million acres of land. This nonviolent process was furthered and supplemented by democratic decision-making in state legislatures that acquired from the feudal and absentee landlords millions of acres of surplus lands for free distribution among the landless peasants and the rural poor. The nonviolent abolition of Indian feudalism was one of the most significant economic revolutions of history. Losing their guerrilla wars, the Communist movements were driven to seek a role in democratic politics. India was the first country where a Communist revolutionary movement felt compelled to abandon terrorism and violence in favour of electoral politics. Thus Indian democracy proved its unique capability of transforming Communist terrorism and peasant revolution into peaceful electoral politics for conflict resolution and peace building

Only a nonviolent revolution can establish a nonviolent democracy. The nature of a revolution predetermines the nature of the political system that the revolution establishes. A

violent revolution cannot establish a non-violent polity. In other words, the values, the tools and the techniques of the pre-revolutionary phase continue to colour and characterize the post-revolutionary concepts, structures and functions. History provides ample evidence that dogmatism, hatred and violence that shape a violent revolution continue and undermine all attempts to build an effective and peaceful democracy at the end of the revolution.

Ending feudalism (landlordism) and distributing land among the landless peasantry have produced blood baths, civil wars and military coups in every country. India is only one exception where feudalism was eliminated and peasants were liberated from slavery and exploitation through peaceful Gandhian methods. Equipped with a piece of land and the democratic vote, the Indian peasantry shunned guerrilla wars and civil wars and became highly politicized and involved in the democratic process.

The Gandhian impact was holistic. The Gandhian movement was not only agitational but also "constructive", laying the foundation for future democracy. Gandhi designed the so-called "Constructive Programme" that included literacy campaigns, health and hygiene, cottage industries, *Khadi* production, animal husbandry, ending untouchability and religious bigotry and inculcating the spirit of self reliance, community service and peaceful settlement of disputes. These programmes prepared the way for democratization and peace building. Of course, all the followers of Gandhi and all the *Satyagrahis* did not all the time follow the way of nonviolence that Gandhi had prescribed. In other words, all the people of India were not strict adherents of nonviolence; many did not agree with Gandhi's ideas of political unity, religious harmony, caste elimination, women's liberation, limited industrialization and so on. Against all his preaching and pledging, the country was partitioned in the end. Yet the facts remain that millions followed Gandhi and participated in nonviolent struggles; many more, though politically inactive, admired and appreciated, and accepted Gandhian ideas and methods of nonviolence. Thus the Gandhian nonviolent revolution paved the way for post-revolution secular democracy. This was a unique achievement.

Conclusion

As a test case in conflict resolution and peace building, Indian democracy leads us to the following conclusions: First nonviolence can be psychological, structural and physical. The practice of nonviolence can shape intellectual, social, economic, environmental and political aspects of human existence. In its essence, democracy is a system that rests on nonviolence. As such, nonviolent democracy is the best guarantee for conflict resolution and peace-building. As the opposite of democracy, dictatorship is least conducive for peaceful resolution of disputes and is more prone to militarism, war, political instabilities and disintegration. Second, violent revolution cannot lead to or sustain meaningful democracy in the post-revolution phase. The values, tools and techniques of revolutionary violence linger on for a long time. Third, dictatorship, however benevolent and well-intentioned, cannot develop democracy or nurture nonviolence.

Finally, Indian democracy has been largely successful in practicing nonviolent conflict resolution and in building peaceful civil society, as vindicated by unique experiments and unprecedented policies—nonviolent revolution, peaceful ending of feudalism, combining democracy and industrialization, adoption of universal adult franchise in a highly illiterate society, conducting the world's largest elections every five years, defusing the Cold War through nonalignment and sustaining, without military coups, civil wars or political disintegration for 68 years, the world's largest democracy with the most multiracial, multireligious, and multicultural population on the planet Earth. In spite of all possible criticisms and defects, thoughtful and objective commentators must admit the unique and the overall achievements of Indian democracy through peaceful policies and secular democratic development.

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