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## **GANDHI AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION**

*In a time, when the complex and emotionally charged issue like conversion has been exploited by fundamentalists, confused by liberals, not being comprehended by many what all the fuss is about, revisiting Gandhi's view on conversion is in itself a great significance so far as India's multi cultural and pluri-religious society is concerned. Gandhi's views on religious conversion are being characterized by communal harmony. His definition of conversion means a definite giving up of the evil of the world, adaptation of all the good of the new and a scrupulous avoidance of everything evil in the new. Conversion should, therefore, mean a life of greater dedication to one's own country, greater surrender to God and greater self purification. For him, conversion is a heart process known only to and by God. It must be left to itself.... Those who believe in it have a perfect right to follow their own course without let or hindrance, so long as it is kept within proper limit. In this sense, he was not against right to conversion (convert's right). But he was against right to conversion so far as it means missionary right to convert people. He was against such conversion since it leads to mutual decrying of rival faiths which gives rise to mutual hatred. This is why, he was against any kind of propagation. To him, propagation of religion is nothing but the negation of toleration and the best way of dealing with such propaganda is to publicly condemn it. He was not only against conversion by missionaries, but also against shuddhi by Arya Samaj. Regarding shuddhi (reconversion) he is of the opinion that there is no such thing as proselytism in Hinduism, as it is understood in Christianity, or to a lesser extent in Islam. The Arya Samaj has, he thinks, copied the Christians in planning its propaganda. To him, the real shuddhi movement should consist in each one trying to arrive at perfection in his or her own faith. This paper is just an elaboration of this theme.*

**Key Words:** Conversion, Atmaparivartan, Dharmantara, Propaganda

It is Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi whose inclusiveness places him in opposition to conversion to a religious tradition other than one's own. Here he seems to typify the mainstream Hindu position. In fact, religious fundamentalists and nationalists have co-opted him to their own purposes on the issue of religious conversion. However, on the issue of religious conversion, neither Gandhi nor Ambedkar can be ignored. The starting point and ending point of both are quite opposite. Gandhi was a reformer in the sense that he was in favor of *atmaparivartan* but not a proselytizer since he was against *dharmantara* (a change of religious tradition). Gandhi along with Ambedkar has remained a powerful critique of Christian missionaries. In deed to both converters and converts Gandhi represents a most genuine challenge to deeper and most honest introspection. Hence, revisiting Gandhi's view on conversion is in itself becomes a great significance.

It is Gandhi "I am against conversion, whether it is known as *shuddhi* by Hindus, *tabligh* by Muslims or proselytizing by Christians..." (Cited in Rao 1994, P. 56). It seems from the above statement that Gandhi was against religious conversion but the real fact is that he had a different kind of mind set. His definition of conversion means a definite giving up of the evil of the world, adaptation of all the good of the new and a scrupulous avoidance of everything evil in the new. Conversion should, therefore, mean a life of greater dedication to one's own country, greater surrender to God and greater self purification (*Young India*, 20 August 1925).

## **GANDHI AND PROSELYTIZERS**

For Gandhi, conversion is a heart process known only to and by god. It must be left to itself... Those who believe in it have a perfect right to follow their own course without let or hindrance, so long as it is kept within proper limit, i.e., so long as there is no force or fraud or material inducement and so long as the parties are free agents and of mature age and understanding. According to him, the cases of real honest conversion are possible. He was of the opinion that "if some people for their inward satisfaction and growth change their religion, let them do so..." (*Young India*, 19 January 1928). Gandhi believes that oppression within one's religious tradition was not sufficient reason for abandoning it. In fact he supports intelligent conversion but at the same time he knew that the so-called untouchables and *shudras* are not converted by an appeal to reason because of his own choice of being a *Harijan*. To place his actual words "having become a *Harijan* by choice, I know the mind of the Harijans. There is not a single *Harijan* today who can fall in that category (change of faith out of heartfelt conviction and spiritual urge) what do they understand of Islam? Nor do they understand why they are Hindu... they are what they are because they are born in a particular faith. If they change religion, it would be merely from compulsion or some temptation held out to them in return. In present atmosphere, no voluntary change of faith should have any validity" (Cited in Rao 1994, P. 62).

Gandhi's opposition to conversion is located within the context of his unique understanding of religion. His understanding of religion transcends religiosity. It is essentially a spiritual quest for *moksha*, but one rooted in the reality of service to the last and

least in this world. For him, religion is a personal concern, not a matter of labeling but of belief and action. It is thus a quest for a moral and spiritual identity. To quote him “I believe that there is no such thing as conversion from one faith to another in the accepted sense of the term. It is highly a personal matter for the individual and his god. I may not have any design upon my neighbor as to his faith, which I must honor even as I honor my own. For I regard all the great religions as true, at any rate for the people professing them, as mine is true for me...And seeing that it takes all my resources in trying to bring my practice to the level of my faith and in preaching the same to my co-religionists, I do not dream of preaching to the followers of other faiths” (*Harijan*, 28 September 1935). Gandhi moves on to say that a quest for religious identity is moral and spiritual and within the context of one’s Varna and dharma. Both are ascribed at birth, hence, Gandhi cannot see people making a change of identity either. It would be against the social and moral responsibility of the convert towards his own Varna. His understanding of *varnashrama* dharma does not allow for a *dharmantar*. For him, there can be no changing your *dharma*. This would amount to *adharma*. It is much like changing your mother. Your mother may be bad so you may try to reform or improve her, but you do not, or rather cannot, ever change her for another. For even an adopted mother can never ever become the birth mother. This colored his whole attitude to caste and conversion.

## GANDHI AND CONVERTERS

Gandhi’s understanding of conversion as prevails in India is that “it is the transference of allegiance from one fold to another and the mutual decrying of rival faiths which gives rise to mutual hatred” (Cited in Rao 1994, P. 57). For Gandhi, religious proselytization and conversion has the potential to further heighten tensions and precipitate destabilizing consequences: “it is impossible for me to reconcile myself to the idea of conversion after the style that goes on in India and elsewhere today. It is an error which is perhaps the greatest impediment to the world’s progress towards peace. ‘Warring creeds’ is a blasphemous expression. And it fitly describes the state of things in India, the mother-as I believe her to be-of religion or religions. If she is truly the mother, the motherhood is on trial” (*Harijan*, 30 January 1937). In this sense, he was totally against Christian conversion. He understands Christian conversion as forcible conversion. To him “to change one’s religion under threat of force is no conversion but rather cowardice. A cowardly man or woman is dead weight on any religion. Out of fear they may become Muslim today, Christian tomorrow and pass into a third religion the day after...” (Cited in Rao 1994, P. 63). At the same time he has also said that religion cannot be forced upon an unwilling heart. It will mean death to the three religions. He continues by saying that “I do not know a single writer on Islam who defends the use of force in the proselytizing process” (ibid. 59). “There is nothing in the Koran to warrant the use of force for conversion. The holy book says in clearest language possible: there is no compulsion in religion. It is therefore, up to the leaders of the Muslims to declare that forcible repetition of a formula cannot make a non Muslim into a Muslim. It only shames Islam...” (ibid). One who is forcibly converted to Islam ceases to be a man. To recite the *kalma* through fear is meaningless... I would never mind if a Hindu recites the *kalma* willingly and with full heart. But, if he does so out of fear of losing his life or possessions, then he takes the name of god in vain.

Christian conversion, for Gandhi, is an outside intervention to the personal matter of converts. To Gandhi, conversion to Christianity seems to involve an unfortunate change of identity, an Europeanization of the convert, an awkward cultural alienation to the point of disowning his past. He notes “As I wander about throughout the length and breadth of India I see many Christian Indians almost ashamed of their birth, certainly of their ancestral religion, and of their ancestral dress” (*Young India*, 20 August 1925). Further this leads to a certain political alienation that he decried “The moment a person here turns to Christian, he becomes a Saheb log. He almost changes his nationality...and begins to fancy himself a limb of the ruling class. What the Christians are afraid of losing, therefore, are not their rights but anomalous privileges...” (*Harijana*, 13 January 1940). In an address to foreign missionaries, Gandhi is convinced that “Every nation considers its own faith to be as good as that of any other. Certainly, the great faiths held by the people of India are as adequate for her people. India stands in no need of conversion from one faith to another” (*Young India*, 23 April 1931). Gandhi would urge missionaries to live rather than preach their faith. He holds that “proselytizing under the cloak of humanitarian work, is, to say the least, unhealthy...Conversions have nowadays become a matter of business, like any other. I remember having read a missionary report saying how much it cost per head to convert and then presenting a budget for the next season” (*Young India*, 24 September 1931). What Gandhi demands is the purity of motivation in missionary service and informed consent from the converts.

Gandhi feels that missionaries are unconsciously exploiting the vulnerability of the untouchables in converting them. Gandhi’s intention may well have been to protect such people, whom he saw as all too vulnerable from over-eager proselytizers. Gandhi has demanded for them that “no matter what may be their (missionaries) policy under normal circumstances, they must withdraw from the indecent competition to convert the *Harijans*” (cited in Kumarappa ed. 1941: 147). However, his paternalism towards *dalits* seems to deny them any agency in such matters. Today he has come to be resented more by the *dalits* themselves than the missionaries against whom his criticism was directed in the first place. However, overtly at least Gandhi here is protecting *Harijans* and not so much Hinduism, which he feels confident can stand on its own. His tolerance is unbounded: “I do not expect the India of my dream to develop one religion, i.e. to be wholly Hindu, or wholly Christian, or wholly Mussalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another” (*Young India*, 22 December 1927).

So far as *shuddhi* (reconversion) is concerned, he was of the opinion that, “there is no such thing as proselytism in Hinduism, as it is understood in Christianity, or to a lesser extent in Islam. The Arya Samaj has, I think, copied the Christians in planning its propaganda...” (Cited in Rao 1994, P. 58). The Arya Samaj preacher is never so happy when he is reviling other religion... My Hindu instinct tells me that all religions are more or less true. All proceed from same god but all are imperfect because they come down to us through imperfect human instrumentality. The real ‘suddhi’ movement should consist in each one trying to arrive at perfection in his or her own faith. In such a plan character would be the

only test. What is the use of crossing from one compartment to another, if it does not mean a moral rise? What is the meaning of my trying to convert to the service of god, when those who are in my fold are everyday denying god by their action? In addition to it he had said that, unless those who have been converted are brought back to Hindu fold quickly, the cleavage between the Hindu and Muslim may become permanent... (ibid. 61).

So far as propaganda is concerned he is of the opinion that “no propaganda can be allowed, if the *Malkanas* wanted to return to Hindu fold, they had a perfect right to do so whenever they liked. But no propaganda can be allowed which reviles other religions” (Cited in Rao 1994, P. 58). For that would be negation of toleration. The best way of dealing with such propaganda is to publicly condemn it. He says “if I had the power and could legislate, I should stop all proselytizing. In Hindu households the advent of a missionary has meant the disruption of the family coming in the wake of change of dress, manners, language, food and drink” (*Harijan*, 5 January 1935). The reason behind his opposition, as Gouri Viswanathan points out, Gandhi still “believed Christian conversions were the instruments of British colonialism and therefore must be resisted as vigorously as ‘British rule’” (Viswanathan 2001: xii). His judgment was very harsh: “Christianity has been inextricable mixed up for the last one hundred and fifty years with British rule. It appears to us synonymous with materialistic civilization and imperialistic exploitation by the stronger white races of the weaker races of the world. Its contribution to India has been; therefore, largely negative (*Young India*, 21 March 1929).

However, in his later stage of life when Gandhi has been asked that “Will you under Swaraj allow Christians to go on with their proselytizing activity without any hindrance? He paused for a reply. ‘No legal hindrances’, replied Gandhi, ‘can be put in the way of any Christian or anybody preaching for the acceptance of his preaching’” (*Harijana*, 13 January 1940). In fact, he feels that in independent India, there is no longer any need to forbid religious conversion or have been legally banned, even though he remain opposed to them.

Theologically, Gandhi does not privilege any one religion over another, not even his own. He is emphatic about giving them all equal respect. He is a Universalist who cannot reconcile himself to conversion: “For me the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are the branches of same majestic tree. Therefore they are equally true, though being received and interpreted through human instruments equally imperfect. It is impossible for me to reconcile myself to the idea of conversion...” (*Harijan*, 30 January 1937). Though not a converter himself, Gandhi has a remarkable effect on others. He is so open and close to other religious tradition that he compels them to an internal self-critique, at least when they are receptive to the challenge he represents. Even when he opposes them, the missionaries could not but respect him. They are most appreciative of Gandhi’s integrity.

Gandhi’s view on conversion and propaganda is because of his distinct understanding of religion and secularism. For Gandhi, in nature, there is a fundamental unity running through all the diversity we see about us. Religions are given to mankind so as to accelerate

the process of realization of fundamental unity. He continued by saying that when you look at these religions as so many leaves of a tree, they seem so different but at the trunk, they are one. Unless and until we realize this fundamental unity, wars in the name of religion will not cease. For him the only way to avoid this war is the toleration. To put him, "Hindu -Muslim unity requires the Musalmans to tolerate, not as a virtue of necessity, not as a policy, but as a part of their religion...even so is it expected of the Hindus to extend the same tolerance as a matter of faith and religion to the religions of other" (Cited in Rao 1994, P. 40). He continues by saying that the need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions. They must be brave enough to love one another, to tolerate one another's religions, even prejudices and superstitions. This requires faith in oneself. And faith in one self is faith in god. Difference of religious opinion will persist to the end of time; toleration is only thing that will enable person belonging to different religions to live as good neighbors, friends and cousins. That's why, he is of the opinion that no propaganda can be allowed..., as it was against toleration. For him, all worship the same god although under different names.... it is wrong for anyone to say that his god is superior to that of another. Religion is more than life. Remember that his own religion is the truest to everyman even if it stands low in the scale of philosophic comparison. It is a misfortune that, today... they (religions) have become a potent cause of strife and mutual slaughter. Religion is dragged down to the low level of crude materialism to lure people into which the most cherished sentiments of millions of human beings are trodden under foot. In such a situation Gandhi had suggested that, "we can only pray, if we are Hindu not that, a Christian should become a Hindu, or if we are Muslmans, not that a Hindu or Christian should become a Musalman, nor should we even secretly pray that any one should be converted but our innermost prayer should be that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim and a Christian a better Christian. At the same time he was in favor of reformation of Hinduism. He was of the opinion that, "for reform of Hinduism and for its real protection, removal of untouchability is the greatest thing... if this, the blackest spot on Hinduism, is removed, you have automatically all that *shuddhi* and *sangathan* can be expected to yield" (Cited in Rao 1994, P.105). So long as the poison of untouchability remains in the Hindu body, it will be liable to attacks from outside. He says that, removal of untouchability is a spiritual progress and also warns Hinduism that "let us not shut our eyes to the plain fact, the 'untouchables', and the scheduled classes are target because they are the weakest point of Hinduism... I maintain that caste, as it is understood, must go if Hinduism is to survive" (ibid.106). When the poison of untouchability entered Hinduism, the decline began... if untouchability live, Hinduism must die. The Hindu wants Swaraj in India and not a Hindu raj. Even if there is a Hindu raj and toleration one of its feature, there will be place in it for the Muslmans as well as the Christians (ibid. 394). However for him, religion is not a test of nationality but a personal matter between man and god... it must not be mixed with politics or national affairs. He had a strong view that the so-called majority community has no right to impose itself on others... the minorities must be made to realize that they are as much valued citizens of the state they live in as the majority.

Though Hindu fundamentalist takes opportunistic supports from Gandhi so far as his understanding is concerned, yet, Gandhi must not be wrongly understood. There was no

Hindu temple in the ashrams Gandhi founded. There was a prayer hall welcoming all faiths. He was a deeply religious person who was truly inter-religious. Yet, if we disagree with him even on many religious issues, he inspires us on others. Gandhi's stance on conversion is founded not on the denial of any rights, e.g., the freedom of choice and freedom to preach; but on his concept of duty, the obligation imposed by one's dharma. For him duty is first and must constrain rights. Hence the obligations of duty limit the exercise of rights. Gandhi's opponents, both the converts and converters, position themselves on the basis of their rights. For them rights comes first and defines duty.

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