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Mahatma Gandhi and Turkish War of Independence

As the title suggests, the main objective of this paper is to highlight the contribution of Mahatma Gandhi in the Turkish war of independence. Gandiji is an apostle of non-violence and peace. He kept trying to reach the depths of nonviolence, beginning with his own heart and soul. Along with it he introduced a new method of social change, which he called "Satyagraha" (truth force), it means resisting untruth by truthful means. His example and teachings inspire us to apply the same in our pursuit of an end to war, nuclear weapons, environmental destruction, violence, hunger, poverty and injustice, and the creation of a culture of peace, justice and nonviolence. Mahatma Gandhi's contribution includes not just the struggle against racism in South Africa, the independence movement of India, but his contribution was significant and memorable in Turkish war of independence or revolution (1919-1924). Mahatma Gandhi was one of the biggest moral supporters of the Turkish cause when the victorious Allied powers were bent on partitioning Turkey. The important question, which comes to our mind in this contest, is why and how Mahatma Gandhi championed the Turkish independent movement. In order to deal with this argument I focus on the historical events and happenings of that period of time in Turkey and India in my paper. The paper also deals with Gandhi's role in the Khilafat and Non-cooperation movement and the extent to which he went on to champion the cause of Turkish war of independence and the sentiments of Indian Muslims towards the Holy places of Islam and Sultan-Khalif. The main objective of the paper is to highlight upon ideas of non-violence and peace of Mahatma Gandhi which he propagated and practiced till the end of his life and is still relevant in the contemporary world order which is so conflict laden.

Key Words: Non-violence, peace, Khilafat movement, Non-cooperation movement, Muslims, Turkish war of independence, Islam

Introduction

The contemporary world is a victim of all kinds of social evils, violence and corruption. The present world scenario lacks peace, stability and order. At this backdrop it is important for us to emphasize the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi on peace and non-violence. Mahatma Gandhi is the apostle of peace and non-violence as he always propagated the idea of peace and the use of non-violence to transform the society, politics and culture. He propagated the first widespread application of nonviolence as the most powerful tool for positive social change. Gandhi's idea of nonviolence was rooted and grounded in political and spiritual dimensions. This is the reason why he is not just relevant and significant in India's political stage, but also on the world stage, for all times. Gandhi's conscience motivated him to challenge injustices, and doing so, he made a great impact on the world, even during his own lifetime. He was one of the few people widely known around the world in his time.

Mahatma Gandhi kept trying to reach the depths of nonviolence, beginning with his own heart and soul. Along with it he introduced a new method of social change, which he called "Satyagraha" (truth force), it means resisting untruth by truthful means. His example and teachings inspire us to apply the same in our pursuit of an end to war, nuclear weapons, environmental degradation, violence, hunger, poverty and injustice, and the creation of a culture of peace, justice and nonviolence. Gandhi studied the New Testament and the Bhagavad Gita in depth. His reading of the religious scriptures, particularly of the Sermon on the Mount, deepened his convictions and gave him a moral and spiritual framework that determined the rest of his life. Mahatma Gandhi's contribution includes not just the struggle against racism in South Africa, the independence movement of India, but his contribution was significant and memorable in Turkish war of independence or revolution (1919-1924). Mahatma Gandhi was one of the biggest moral supporters of the Turkish cause when the victorious Allied powers were bent on partitioning Turkey. The important question, which comes to our mind in this contest, is why and how Mahatma Gandhi championed the Turkish independent movement. In order to deal with this argument I focus on the historical events and happenings of that period of time in Turkey and India.

During the First World War the Muslims of India were in very painful dilemma. They were confused between their duty as loyal citizens of the British Empire and as the followers of their religious chief, the Sultan-Caliph of Turkey. Initially the Indian Muslims agreed to help England when she promised not to attack the Caliph's sovereignty and prevent the disintegration of Turkey. This was promised by the British Premier Lloyd George and the Viceroy of India. The Muslim contention was that the Jazarat-ul-Arab including Mesopotamia, Arabia, Syria and Palestine, with all the holy places situated therein must always remain under the direct suzerainty of the Khalifa.¹ These promises were forgotten once the war was over. The Allied powers under the British dictates were determined to partition Turkey. This betrayal of promise acted as a catalyst at the root of the Muslim sentiments in India. They were convinced to fight against the unjustified Treaty of Sevres, but the main problem faced by the Indian Muslims was that who

¹ R. K. Sinha. 1994. *The Turkish Question Mustafa Kemal and Mahatma Gandhi*. Delhi. Adam Publications. P.54

would lead the Indian Turkish protest in order to ensure justice for Turkey. At this juncture, Mahatma Gandhi took up the responsibility to lead the movement on behalf of the Indian Muslims. Gandhideclared: “It would be morally wrong and an act of injustice to keep company with all those who have been unjust to Turkey and we should keep away from such an evil course at any cost”. At the same time he also challenged the Government of India, saying: “His Excellency should resign if the Peace Terms are not revised”. Mahatma Gandhitermed this agitation as ‘peace terms with Turkey’, which was an open non-violent revolt against the false promises which he considered as immoral and irreligious. There were many other political changes and complexities of the period after the First World War, instead of expected positive reforms and more freedom there came repressive measures in the form of Rowlatt Bills to suppress the revolutionary movements in India, followed by the massacre of The JallianwalaBagh of Amritsar and the martial law in Punjab. All these events in the post-war period had antagonized the Hindus with the same vigor as Muslims had over the possible humiliation of Turkey. Hence, this was the political atmosphere of India when some Muslim leaders formed themselves around mid-1919 into a Khilafat Conference. The help from the Hindus came in a prominent way under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi who championed the Turkish cause soon after his arrival from South Africa.²

On May 9, 1919, at a special meeting of the AnjumanZiaul Islam at Bombay in the presence of Gandhi, Maulvi Abdul Raof moved the following resolution regarding the issue of Turkey: to settle the question of the Khilafat in accordance of the wishes of the Muslims in India; to desist from the proposed dismemberment of the Turkish Empire; that Constantinople , which has been the seat of the Khilafat for four centuries and which is predominantly Muslim by faith and Turkish by race must remain the capital of Turkish Empire. It was proposed that the fulfillment of the above questions entirely will bring about the restoration of the normal feelings among the Muslims of India.³ Gandhi was always in contact with the government and used all the peaceful and non-violent measures to bring about a resolution to the grievances of the Muslims of India on the Turkish issue.

Gandhi was convinced that the question of Turkey was an Empire question which concerned millions of Muslims in India and abroad. Therefore in a huge meeting held at Sonapur Masjid, Gandhi proposed a vow of Hindu-Muslim unity. He claimed that Hindus would give enthusiastic support to Muslims in their just claims regarding the retention of Turkey as a sovereign State with full regard for their feelings as to the holy places and the Khilafat. Further he warned the Muslims to present their case before the world firmly, unflinchingly and peacefully.

Gandhi himself wanted to protest against the government but lawfully. His every step was meaningful and had a strong moral support and firm determination. According to Gandhi the Khilafat question or that of the peace terms with Turkey was important and he believed that on the satisfactory solution of this problem depended the peace of India and he launched speech

²R. K. Sinha. 1994. *The Turkish Question Mustafa Kemal and Mahatma Gandhi*. Delhi. Adam Publications. p. 56

³ Young India, May 14, 1919 (Mahatma Gandhi’s first English Weekly in India, 1919-1923).

campaigns for mobilizing the people. All the above mentioned steps taken by Gandhi were guided by his idea of non-violence and peace, Gandhi had a firm belief that, “*Changing the world begins with changing yourself; you have to become the change you want to see in the world.*” For him, every individual must try to bring positive changes in oneself and the efforts of each one can bring changes to the world in totality. This thought is relevant in the present day conflict laden world where nations are using all sorts of violent measures against the other.

The major shock came by with the publication of the Treaty of Sevres on May 14, 1920, in India. This treaty announced the terms of dismembering Turkey and this particular event crossed the limits of Gandhi’s humiliation and he completely lost his confidence and faith in the British sense of justice. He made the biggest decision of his life to refuse to cooperate any longer with the British government until their demands were fulfilled. The great apostle of co-operation of 1919 became the great apostle of non-cooperation of 1920. The great peaceful but rebellious revolt began with Mahatma Gandhi as the leader of Hindu-Muslim unity.⁴

Gandhi’s non-cooperation program was adopted by the Khilafat Committee at Bombay on the 28th May, 1920, as the only means now left to the Muslims. The only important aim of Gandhi at this hour was to persuade the Congress to launch the non-cooperation. He also decided to go on an extensive tour of the country to rally the people behind the Turkish cause.⁵ His idea of combining Khilafat movement along with non-cooperation movement is one of the biggest proofs of his dedicated commitment towards the Turkish war of independence and protecting the sentiments of the Indian Muslims linked to their holy places.

Along with the Congress committees, the Khilafat committees too were established in different parts of the country. The Hindus displayed great enthusiasm in raising the Angora Fund and they willingly subscribed to the fund. The Muslims had chosen to starve for some days in order to contribute to the Khilafat fund meant for the safety of Turkey. These collected funds were sent to Constantinople from time to time where it was received by the representatives of Mustafa Kemal Pasa.⁶

Gandhi protested against the British and Their policies peacefully with determination. He told the people: “I am not anti-British, I am not anti-government, but I am anti-truth, anti-humbug and anti-injustice and as long as the government spells injustice, it may regard me as its enemy, implacable enemy.” In the process of civil disobedience or non-cooperation, he warned the nation of any kind of violence and indiscipline. He gave more importance to prayer and fasting and peaceful demonstration of their demands.

On the other hand, the defeat of the Greeks in the first battle of Inonu which forced Britain and its allies to reconsider the Treaty of Sevres and soften its provision to some extent. But, Gandhi did not want a limited revision but a total revision of the unjust treaty. The year 1921 ended with mass arrest, repression, atrocities and joyful news of the victory of the Turks over the Greeks at the Sakarya River. This victory proved the strength of the Turks under

⁴R. K. Sinha. 1994. *The Turkish Question Mustafa Kemal and Mahatma Gandhi*. Delhi. Adam Publications. pp. 83-84.

⁵ B. R. Ambedkar. 1946. *Pakistan or the Partition of India*. Bombay Thackers. p.141.

⁶R. K. Sinha. 1994. *The Turkish Question Mustafa Kemal and Mahatma Gandhi*. Delhi. Adam Publications. p. 109.

Mustafa Kemal. According to some eminent scholars, this victory was interpreted separately by the nationalists and khilafatists. For the nationalists saw it as a first major blow to the imperialist powers and the khilafatists found in it the grand victory of Islam. They adored Mustafa Kemal as the “sword of Islam” and the Turkish Grand National Assembly gave him the title of “GAZI”, the fighter of Islam.

But this victory did not bring an end to the Turkish struggle for independence. In the beginning of 1922, Gandhi made it clear to the British government and their allies that “If the Treaty of Sevres is not revised to our satisfaction, the Turkish or the Khilafat agitation is not finished. The virtue lies in India’s determination not to be satisfied with anything less than her demands.” This speech of Gandhi and some other speeches of this period puzzled the Viceroy and he ordered to arrest Gandhi. On 10th of March, 1922, Gandhi was arrested. The British government was faced with lot of disorder in this period and so they proposed that the Allies should evacuate Constantinople, giving back to the Sultan his former suzerainty over Holy places, and also restore Thrace and Smyrna to Turkey.

After his arrest too, Gandhi’s voice for the Turkish cause was believed to be remain in the hearts and minds of Indians. He told people that, “you are not fighting to sustain any wrong or even misuse. You are backing the Turks, because they represent the gentlemen of Europe, and because the Europeans, especially the English prejudiced against them is due, not to the Turks being Mussalmans and not assimilating the modern spirit of exploitation of weaker people and their lands. In fighting for the Turks, you are fighting to raise the dignity and purity of your own faith.”⁷

By August 30, the main battle was over. Hence, after three and a half year of enemy occupation reached India, all India shared the news with great celebration. The main reason behind their jubilation was the frustration and defeat of Britain’s design to partition Turkey and wipe out the Turks from Constantinople. On July 24, 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed to the entire satisfaction of the Turkish people. As Mustafa Kemal remarked: “This treaty is a document expressing the final failure of the plot against Turkey, a plot laid centuries ago, a plot which was to have succeeded with the Treaty of Sevres. It is a diplomatic victory the like of which is not recorded in the Ottoman history.” This treaty was the outcome of the famous Turkish swords backed by India’s unforgotten memorable moral support provided by Mahatma Gandhi who was, at that time, in the British prison due to the Turkish agitation.⁸

In conclusion it can be stated with ample justification that Gandhi is an apostle of non-violence and peace. Be it in the struggle against racism in South Africa, the independence movement of India, and his contribution in Turkish war of independence (1919-1924), Gandhiji kept his principles of non-violence and peace intact. He was a selfless person who could embrace people belonging to any part of the world. He worked all throughout his life fighting against injustice, racism, evil and his ideas are relevant in the contemporary world order which is conflict laden.

⁷ Young India, September 29, 1921.

⁸R. K. Sinha. 1994. *The Turkish Question Mustafa Kemal and Mahatma Gandhi*. Delhi. Adam Publications. p.128