

The Road to Communal Harmony:

The vision of an India that was free, prosperous and united, an India wherein the people-irrespective of their religious persuasion - lived in total amity and concord, was a dream that Gandhiji fondly cherished. The realisation of this dream was the mission for which he laboured with unmatched firmness untiring zeal and unbounded enthusiasm. He devoted his energy and efforts to create an India, wherein, the barriers that were attempted to be erected to divide people on considerations of religion, were dismantled and boundaries of distinction based on religious consideration were erased. For Gandhiji, the nurturing and maturing of communal amity, was verily 'an article of faith'.

While elaborating on the Gandhian 'approach' to communal amity, any researcher must take cognisance of the limitations set by Gandhiji himself.

My writings should be cremated with my body. What I have done will endure, not what I have said and written ... Let no one say he is a follower of Gandhi. It is enough that I should be my own follower. I know what an inadequate follower I am of myself.

Gandhiji's approach to any issue can best be understood

by studying his actual handling of a situation. His ideas can be garnered from his reaction to events and circumstances. He was, by his own admission, a man of action. Thus, the broad principles of his approach to any subject can be threaded together from his statements and reaction in an actual situation. This paper attempts an analysis of the approach that Gandhiji adopted to realise and sustain communal amity in the course of his life. Further, the communal problem that Gandhiji addressed himself to was one relating basically to the Hindus and Muslims.

For Gandhiji, the stepping stone to success, was unquestioned and unwavering faith in the approach one adopted, principles one adhered to and the cause one espoused. 'A man without faith is like a drop thrown out of the ocean bound to perish'. His approach to the communal question had its roots in his fundamental and total adherence to the principles of truth and non-violence. He was convinced that communal amity could be sustained only when people adhered to the truth and accepted the path of non-violence. For him, Truth and Non-violence were time tested principles. His efforts were in the direction of experimenting with them.

An appeal issued by Gandhiji for Hindu - Muslim Unity in April 1919, clearly spelled out his approach to the problem of communal strife and tension. Every Hindu and Muslim he felt, should take a vow publically, reaffirming his resolve to live in amity.

The principal features of this vow and the appeal for Hindu-Muslim Unity made by Gandhiji can be summed up in the following words:

- (a) Hindus and Muslims were required to cultivate the feeling of brotherhood towards each other.
- (b) This feeling of brotherhood would blossom into a bond of mutual friendship resulting in sharing their joys and sorrows.
- (c) The nurturing of the feeling of mutual friendship required the creation of an environment wherein there was

no room for mutual distrust.

(d) Mutual distrust could be wiped out by developing the spirit of sacrifice, inspired by a feeling of pure love. This pre-supposed the acceptance, without any reservations, the principle of non-violence. This Gandhiji believed, was true satyagraha-or equity, wherein:

"If I want my brother to redress a grievance, I must do so by taking upon my head a certain amount of sacrifice and not by inflicting injury on him. I may not demand it as a right. My only right against my brother is that I can offer myself as sacrifice."

(e) Developing the spirit of sacrifice, also involved moderation and restraint in the use of language. Members of one community should desist from using unbecoming language while referring to the other.

(f) Hindu-Muslim Unity would be further cemented when practitioners of one religion respected the religion and religious sentiments of the other. Such mutual respect was an important confidence-building measure, that would create congenial conditions, so vital, for the promotion of Hindu-Muslim amity. As mentioned earlier, Gandhiji's approach to the entire issue of Hindu-Muslim Unity revolved around his passionate adherence to truth and non-violence. It was the nucleus on his philosophy. The practise of true religion, for him, lay in steadfastly accepting and scrupulously implementing these twin principles, in day to day life. He was convinced that implicit adherence to the truth implied being true to one's own religion. No religion when strictly followed' encouraged developing feelings of hatred towards the practitioners of other faiths. Gandhiji compared the followers of different religions to the 'countless leaves on one tree'. True Hindu-Muslim Unity rested on each:

'remaining true to his own religion and yet being true to each other. For, we are thinking of Hindus and Mohamedans even of the most orthodox type being unable to regard one another as 'natural enemies'.

Thus he emphasised and added in this connection that:

we believe all the great religions of the world to be true. If, therefore, every community follows its religion, diligently, it will come to have faith in and consequently to cherish nothing but the truth. If we practise our religion, in its proper spirit we shall not squabble among ourselves but remain united.

Further, Gandhiji opined that the cause of Hindu-Muslim Unity could best served by professing a purity of intentions. He emphasised:

our motto should be Truth and nothing but the Truth. With the aid of Truth we shall be able to cross even oceans of misery. No action undertaken with a sincere motive ever goes unrewarded. Therefore work for the community, with purity of motive..

The progressive development of pure and sincere intentions would pave the way, for building bridges of trust between the two communities. Gandhiji was well aware that the cultivation of mutual trust was no easy task. It required a sustained effort dogged determination and inexhaustible patience. The edifice of mutual trust had to be erected on firm and steady foundations. Gandhiji identified the features of this foundation.

Mutual trust would become a reality when Hindus and Muslims accepted and understood the problems of each other. Such an attitude would promote good-will between the two communities. Gandhiji's championing of the Khilafat cause was a step in this direction. Gandhiji emphasised that:

"If Muslims come forward to sympathize with Hindus in what concerns the latter alone, if Hindus do the same... will there be any one so bereft of reason as to seek to come in the way of affection development among them."

The spread and acceptance of mutual toleration also plays a critical part in fostering mutual trust. Gandhiji viewed the attempts of some people to compel the followers of other religions to accept their view point as the great disservice to the cause of Hindu-Muslim amity. Fostering unity implies

tolerating the views of others. Gandhiji practised this through example he said:

"It is not necessary for toleration that I must approve of what I tolerate. I heartily dislike drinking, meat-eating and smoking' but I tolerate all these in Hindus, Mohammedans and Christians even as I expect them to tolerate my abstinence from all these although they may dislike it.

For mutual toleration to become a reality, it needs to be supplemented by encouraging the cultivation of the spirit of compromise. The conflicting groups need to climb down from their extreme view points to arrive at a solution to a problem. For Gandhiji communal problems could not be resolved by political measures, but, "it can be done by a compromise, for compromise is the essence of life, in as much as it does not touch the roots of the principles of life". Each religious group must be prepared, to yield to the other on non-essentials. Compromise, in this context did not imply a compromise of principles. As a Hindu, Gandhiji felt that the art of compromise lay in:

"agreeing with our Mussulman brethren on all non-essentials and ceasing, to subject them to pin-pricks ... there can be no bargaining in friendship. I yield to my Mussulman brethren in every non-essential, because it is natural for me to do so..."

Gandhiji asserted that friendship and goodwill between Hindus and Muslims was neither a bargain nor a matter for a businessman's calculation. Assistance in such a case (between Hindus and Muslims) should not be for a reward or with pre conditions attached. Friendship rises above petty sectarian considerations. Gandhiji appealed to both Hindus and Muslims in the following words:

"When a Hindu or a Mussulman does evil, it is evil done by an Indian to an Indian and each one of us must personally share the blame and try to remove the evil. There is no other meaning to unity than this. Nationalism is

nothing, if it is not atleast this."

The bedrock of Gandhian philosophy as applied to Hindu Muslim Unity, is the emphasis on non-violence. Violence in any form - in thought, word or deed will only stoke the fires of mistrust and misunderstanding. Gandhiji viewed the use of violent techniques to achieve any goal as a crime against religion and god. Violence breeds violence. Gandhiji referred to this as the lynch law. Unity becomes a living reality when both Hindus and Muslims remain unperturbed at the mistakes of the other. If both groups are not spoiling for a fight, violence is impossible. The acceptance of peaceful methods of conflict resolution is basic to Hindu - Muslim Unity. Gandhiji felt that the pledge to abhor violence will help society survive any shocks of misunderstanding. He eloquently summed up the logic of this argument in his own characteristic style:

The Hindus as also the Mussulmans, whenever one of them goes mad, have two courses left open. Either to die valiantly without retaliation, that will at once arrest the progress mischief; or to retaliate and live or die ... Hindu-Muslim Unity is nothing, if it is not a partnership between brave men and women. We must trust each other always, but in the last resort, we must trust ourselves and our God.

Critics of Gandhi, have viewed his approach to Hindu - Muslim unity as the approach of appeasement. They fault Gandhi for pandering to the minority sentiments. Time and again Gandhi appealed to the Hindus to be brave enough to trust the Muslims and be content with what is left over after the minorities have been satisfied. As early as in 1909, he wrote:

As a Satyagrahi, I am emphatically of the view that the Hindu should give to the Muslims, whatever they ask for, and willingly accept whatever sacrifice this may involve.

Gandhi believed that a civilization is judged by the treatment it meets out to the minorities. While addressing himself to the demands of the Muslims he was even willing to sign 'a blank paper' and hand it over to the Muslims to fill in what they thought was the truth and he would accept it. To prevent the Indian partition, Gandhiji is reported to have suggested the formation of an Interim Govt. headed by Jinnah. This approach of Gandhiji has to be viewed in the context of his sincerity and earnestness to preserve the Unity and integrity of the nation. Gandhiji was never convinced that Hindus and Muslims could not live together. When sincerity was reciprocated by both Hindus and Muslims, Gandhiji felt that whichever community was in a majority, in a part of India, be it Muslims or Hindus, they should be willing to accomodate the minorities.

Gandhiji dedicated his entire life to the cause of Hindu - Muslim amity. His numerous fasts for this cause are a case in point. He viewed his penance as 'the prayer of a bleeding heart for forgiveness of sins, unwillingly committed'.

Towards the end of his life, he realised that he had not achieved the measure of success that he had anticipated on the question of Hindu - Muslim Unity. He felt that he had not been able to convince Indians of the wisdom of non violence on this score. He viewed himself as a spent bullet. Though despondent his despondency was tinged with optimism. Gandhiji's solution to the communal problem involved sacrifice, patience, understanding and above all large heartedness. Given human nature, this was possibly too much to expect of ordinary mortals. The idealism of Gandhiji could not be transformed into a reality. Gandhiji lived and struggled for the cause of Hindu - Muslim amity. The Mahatma laid down his life too, fighting non-violently for the same cause.