
UNIT 5 HINDU- MUSLIM AMITY

Structure

5.1 Introduction

Aims and Objectives

5.2 Gandhian Approach to Hindu-Muslim Unity

5.2.1 Efforts for Communal Unity

5.2.2 Khilafat Movement

5.2.3 Rights of Minorities

5.2.4 Composite Nationalism

5.3 Issues Affecting the Hindu-Muslim Amity

5.3.1 Cow Protection

5.3.2 Music Before Mosques

5.3.3 Urdu-Hindi Controversy

5.3.4 Communal Riots: Causes and Social Implications

5.3.5 Failure of Coalition in Uttar Pradesh

5.4 Critical Assessment of Gandhian Approach

5.5 Summary

5.6 Terminal Questions

Suggested Readings

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Two most important goals of Mahatma Gandhi's public life were the Hindu-Muslim unity and the liquidation of untouchability. Gandhi repeatedly declared that these two goals were dearer to him and even prior to the goal of *swaraj*, i.e., freedom. He believed that the Hindu-Muslim unity is a prerequisite for India's independence and nationhood. He did not want *swaraj* without Hindu-Muslim unity. He wanted that in independent India both the communities should not suppress each other. He had said that if this unity is established, unity with other religious communities could be easily strengthened. He was successful to a large extent in undermining, if not completely eradicating untouchability, as many constitutional and administrative provisions/measures were enshrined for its abolition and to improve the lives of these people. By contrast, Hindu-Muslim unity evaded Gandhi throughout his life except for a brief period during the *Khilafat* agitation. Despite his efforts to prevent it, the country had to accept partition and experience post-partition communal killings as the price of freedom. There is more to it. Even after independence, Gandhi continued to make gigantic efforts to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity. He became a martyr in the process.

Notwithstanding this it must be acknowledged that no other leader has devoted so much time and attention to the problem of Hindu-Muslim unity as Gandhi did. Unity between Hindus and Muslims was almost an article of faith with him. He left no stone unturned in his efforts to bring about that unity. He preached, he wrote, he negotiated, he fasted and prayed for this unity, which eluded him.

Gandhi wanted to address this problem in a different manner, i.e., on the principle of “give and take”. Give and take, he said, is possible only when there is some trust between the respective communities and their representatives. If the Hindus and Muslims love each other, the gulf between them will disappear and it will lead towards unity; because this unity does not exist, he said, the 17,000 Englishmen were able to rule over three hundred millions of Indians.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand

- The efforts made by Gandhi to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity.
- His views on the issue of communalism and the rights of minorities.
- Major criticisms of Gandhian approach to Hindu-Muslim unity.

5.2 GANDHIAN APPROACH TO HINDU-MUSLIM UNITY

Throughout his political life, Gandhi worked for Hindu-Muslim unity. For building up this unity he supported the *Khilafat* movement; the rights of minorities, the idea of composite nationalism; and condemned the communal riots. Let us elaborate these.

5.2.1 Efforts for Communal Unity

Gandhi said, “I am striving to become the best cement between the two communities. My longing is to be able to cement the two with my blood, if necessary. But, before I can do so, I must prove to the Mussalmans that I love them as well as I love the Hindus” (*Young India*, 25 September 1924, in Compiled & Edited by Rao, 1963, p.5). He called Ali brothers as blood brothers. Hindu-Muslim unity does not mean unity only between these two communities, but it means unity between all those who believe India to be their home, no matter to what faith they belong. This unity will have a message for the world. Like late poet Iqbal, Gandhi too believed that the Hindus and the Muslims have lived together long under the shadow of the Mighty Himalayas and have drunk the waters of the Ganges and the Yamuna. Despite having different religions, they lived for centuries in peace. In defence, he quotes a line from Iqbal’s famous song: *Majhab nahin sikhata apasmen bair rakhna*, meaning, religion does not teach us to bear ill-will towards one another.

Hindu-Muslim unity was likened by Gandhi as a marriage, where both the Hindus and Muslims should love each other with unconditional love. At another occasion, he called Hindu-Muslim unity as a growing plant in its delicate infancy, requiring special care and attention. Gandhi also advocated inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue for achieving Hindu-Muslim amity. His theory of religious pluralism and the principle of equality of all religions, which requires the tolerance of diversity of religions, was also part of his efforts towards communal unity.

5.2.2 *Khilafat* Movement

Gandhi supported *Khilafat* movement to enlist Muslim support for *swaraj*. In fact, it was *Khilafat* which introduced Gandhi to Indian Muslim masses. It led to the use of non-violent cooperation movement for the first time in India due to *Khilafat* issue. This led

to a new era of Hindu-Muslim cooperation. Slogans of “*Hindu-Musalman ki jai*” and “*Hindu-Musalman ek hai*” resounded through the air. Although undoubtedly this was an unprecedented effort for unity, it did not last for long. A detailed study of *Khilafat* movement was covered in one of the preceding courses.

Addressing the students of Aligarh Muslim University, Gandhi made an impassioned appeal to the University students to produce servants of the country and Islam like Gokhale. Recalling the simplicity of the second Caliph Umar, he urged the students to emulate the Caliph by shunning the use of soft silk garments and advised them to wear khadi. This way, he said, they would establish a living bond between themselves and the millions of India’s paupers. He asked them to consider themselves as custodians of India’s honour and makers of Hindu-Muslim unity. He saw *Khilafat* as an issue of “just religious cause” in addition to a major plank for Hindu-Muslim solidarity; he provided national leadership to the movement and asserted that “a gesture of good will on the part of Hindus over *Khilafat* was destined to procure a reciprocal response on the part of the Muslims” (CWMG, Vol.22, 1966, pp.304-305).

The demise of the *Khilafat* hastened the breakdown of the precariously balanced harmony between Muslims and Hindus, leading to the eruption of Hindu-Muslim riots. The Mopalla (Muslim) rebellion (against Hindus and Christian landlords) in the Malabar region and the Kohat riots are instances of political agitations degenerating into communal violence owing to the mixing of religion with politics.

Many of Gandhi’s contemporaries and some scholars criticised the launching of *Khilafat* movement as it emphasised pan-Islamism to an extent that Muslim’s identity was bound to suffer (Jhingran, 2004, p.311). While some of them opined that only the Indian Muslims got agitated and despondent at the fate of Turkey and *Khilafat*, others opined that “the *Khilafat* Movement had been idealized as an anti-colonial movement. But its main “achievement” was the turning away of Indian Muslims from a secular understanding of politics, towards a religious and communalist one” (Jhingran, 2004, p.318). B.R. Nanda’s observation highlights that communal unity due to *Khilafat* was not worth appreciating, as the two campaigns – the restoration of *Khilafat* and the achievement of India’s independence – were though joined, they never really merged into an integrated struggle. The Indian National Congress and All India *Khilafat* Conference had separate networks, two separate funds; they held their meetings separately and Gandhi is said to have had no control over the *Khilafat* committees.

5.2.3 Rights of Minorities

Gandhi fought for the rights of minorities during freedom struggle. He said that without the problem of minorities being solved, there is no *swaraj* for India. After Partition also he appealed for Hindu-Muslim amity and asked both the communities not to swear by the past, but turn the searchlight inwards and settle down to the fact that in Pakistan as well as in Hindustan both Hindus and Muslims had to live together as common citizens. He felt that it would be shameful indeed, if the majority in India thought that they have the upper hand over minorities, “If the minority in India ... is made to feel small on that account, I can only say that this India is not the India of my dreams. In the India of whose fashioning I have worked all my life, every man enjoys equality of status whatever his religion is ... What I wish India to do is to assure liberty of religious profession to every single individual. Then only India can be great, for it is perhaps the one nation in the ancient world which has recognized cultural democracy, whereby it is held that the

roads to God are many, but the goal is one, because God is one and the same" (*Harijan*, 31 August, 1947). For Gandhi the only non-violent solution to Hindu-Muslim question is to let the minority communities take what they like. He even said that he would not hesitate to let the minorities govern the country (Bakshi, 1987, p.58).

5.2.4 Composite Nationalism

Gandhi believed in composite nationalism. In his earliest writing, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Gandhi had declared in 1909 that:

India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners [i.e., Muslims] does not necessarily destroy the nation; they merge in it. ... That country must have a faculty for assimilation. India has ever been such a country. In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals; but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere in one another's religion. If they do, they are not fit to be considered a nation. If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland. The Hindus, the Mahomedans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own interest. In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms; nor has it ever been so in India [Gandhi, 1938, pp.42-43].

On the question of inborn enmity between Hindus and Muslims, he further elaborated that the phrase inborn enmity has been invented by the British. He wrote in *Hind Swaraj* that the Hindus and Muslims lived in peace for centuries. Hindus flourished under Muslim sovereigns and Muslims under the Hindus. Both the communities recognized that mutual fighting was suicidal, and that neither party would abandon its religion by force. Their peaceful living was disturbed by the British who made both of them quarrel (Gandhi, 1938, p.43).

Gandhi opposed the Partition of India. He declared "Vivisect me before you vivisect India. You shall not do what even the Moghuls who ruled over India for over two hundred years, did not do" (*Harijan*, 22 September 1940, p.294). According to him the "two-nation" theory was an untruth. The vast majority of Muslims of India is converts to Islam or is descendents of converts. They did not become a separate nation as soon as they became converts. He further argued that a Bengali Muslim speaks the same language that as a Bengali Hindu does, eats the same food, and has the same amusements as his Hindu neighbour. They dress alike. He said it was often difficult to distinguish between both of them. Some had common names like Iqbal. Again he said, when he first met Jinnah, he did not know that he was a Muslim. He came to know his religion when he learnt his full name. His nationality was written in his face and manner. At one point he offered a sort of separation: "The Muslims must have the same right of self-determination that the rest of India has. We are at present a joint family. Any member may claim a division".

It must be noted that it is to the credit of Gandhi that Maulana Abul Kalam Azad could serve as the President of Indian National Congress during its most crucial phase, 1940-1946, a period during which "partition debate" crystallised. The selection of Maulana Azad was not merely a political pragmatic choice to contain the influence of Muslim League but was rooted in his conviction that the nation does not belong to religious majority alone. As Gandhi, while fasting, shortly before his death against the communal outbreak in Delhi in 1948, clearly observed:

From Cape Comorin to Kashmir and from Karachi to Dibrugarh in Assam, all Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and Jews, who people this vast subcontinent and who have adopted it as their dear motherland, have an equal right to it. No one has right to say that it belongs to the majority community and the minority community can only remain as the underdog.”

5.3 ISSUES AFFECTING THE HINDU-MUSLIM AMITY

Many important and serious issues affected the goal of achieving Hindu-Muslim unity despite Gandhi's sincere efforts. Let us study these in some detail.

5.3.1 Cow Protection

Cow protection or anti cow-slaughter was another major issue which divided the Hindus and Muslims during Gandhi's life time as much as it troubles in contemporary India. This issue even led to inter-community riots. Gandhi considers that cow protection is central to Hinduism. Hindus worship cows. To him the cow is the protector of India because, being an agricultural country, she is dependent on the cow. The cow is also a most useful animal in many ways. For him, “cow-protection means the protection of the weak and the helpless.... Cow protection means brotherhood between man and beast”.

With the former being cow-worshippers and the latter being the beef-eaters, Gandhi exhorted the Muslims to understand the religious sensibilities of Hindus and voluntarily refrain from beef-eating. Gandhi also opposed the killings of cow-killers because such an act is against the tenets of Hinduism, which believes in *ahimsa* or non-violence. We should respect both the cow and our fellow-men. He considered that by fighting or killing a fellow human being in order to save the cow, we become the enemy of the cow as well as of the humankind. Gandhi sought voluntary Muslim support for cow protection. It is gratifying to note that during the *Khilafat* agitation the Muslim League, under Hakim Ajmal Khan's Presidentship, carried a cow protection resolution at Amritsar. In 1921, thousands of cows were saved by the willing efforts of Muslims. The Ali brothers, for the sake of their Hindu countrymen, gave up eating beef in their homes. Gandhi highly appreciated such measures. The Islamic law does prescribe the rites of sacrifice of animals to be performed on the occasion of Id-ul zuha but nowhere does it prescribe that only cow will be sacrificed for the same. More recently, Darul-Ulum Deoband (world famous Sunni Islamic seminary in Uttar Pradesh) has issued a fatwa (religious opinion) not to sacrifice cows on the occasion of Id-ul Zuha in the larger interest of communal amity, thus echoing the Gandhian position on the subject.

5.3.2 Music before Mosques

In Gandhi's opinion the question of music before mosques was as sore a point with the Muslims as the cow-slaughter was with the Hindus. For the sake of communal amity, Gandhi appealed to both the communities to respect the feelings and sensibilities of the other and urged them to refrain from hurting each others' sentiments on the basis of “give and take”. He sought a spirit of cooperation and accommodation between both the communities and asked them to refrain from playing music before the mosques. Gandhi did not favour the use of force to stop music before the mosque or the cow-slaughter. These cannot be stopped at the point of sword but only through voluntary measures, he opined.

5.3.3 Urdu-Hindi Controversy

The attitude of Gandhi towards the Hindi-Urdu controversy also caused much resentment among the Muslims. The Congress Constitution, mainly drafted by Gandhi, recognised that Hindustani, written in both Hindi and Urdu scripts, would be the country's language. But on 14 July 1927, he veered around to the view that so long as the Hindu-Muslim tension lasted, there would be two scripts, but eventually there would be only one universal script for the whole country. While presiding over the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan in 1935, he said that Hindi or Hindustani should be the lingua franca of India and that Devanagiri script was to be used for all Indian languages. Next year, at the Bhartiya Sahitya Parishad he reiterated the same view, and also added erroneously that Urdu was the religious language of the Muslims. When there were loud protests from Muslims against Gandhi's partisan stance, he modified his stand and reverted to the original formulation that India's national language would be Hindustani, written in both Devanagiri and Urdu scripts. But later he also clarified that he had agreed to the use of two scripts "only as a temporary measure – ultimately one script would be acceptable to all".

5.3.4 Communal Riots: Causes and Social Implications

As to the causes of Hindu-Muslim riots, Gandhi said, "In my opinion, the riots are due to the idiocy of both the communities (*Harijan*, 2 September, 1947). As to Hindu-Muslim unity, he said that "Only when the Hindus and Muslims shed their fear and mutual suspicion can unity of heart come" (*Harijan*, 26 January, 1947).

5.3.5 Failure of Coalition in Uttar Pradesh (UP)

When Gandhi attended the Second Round Table Conference, he was not only the sole spokesperson for the Congress, but also he claimed to speak for the whole country. When Nehru stated, "In the final analysis there are only two forces in India – British imperialism and Congress representing Indian nationalism", Jinnah strongly contested this statement and said that there was a third force also, and that was the Muslim League. This attitude of the Congress not only offended the Muslim League, but also it was a challenge to the identity of the vast majority of the Muslims who were not with the Congress and constituted only 3% of the total Congress members.

The Congress formed the Ministry in 1937 after the Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh. The League had won 26 seats against 134 by the Congress. Jinnah, still a liberal, had proposed an experiment of Congress-League Coalition in UP. An informal understanding was reached that two ministerial berths would be offered to the League. Nehru and Azad were opposed to this coalition. Nehru wanted only one berth to be offered to the League. Ultimately it was decided that the League could be included in the ministry on the condition that its MLAs would join the Congress Parliamentary Party and function under the Congress discipline. Further, it was suggested that the Parliamentary Board of the League in UP should be dissolved and the League members work for the success of the Congress candidates in future election. These conditions were perceived as aiming at the liquidation of the League in UP. There was widespread resentment among the Muslims over this episode. This resulted in the increased membership of the League that stood at 1,330 in 1937, but which rose to one hundred thousand within a year, and two million in 1944. This reflected the fears of uncertain future for Muslims in independent India.

Further, in Bombay, the Congress did not get an absolute majority and B.G. Kher, the Congress Chief Minister designate, was in favour of inducting one Muslim League

Minister. Jinnah too favoured the same but it was eventually turned down further intensifying the fears of Muslim isolation (See CWMG, Vol. 65, p.231).

5.4 CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF GANDHIAN APPROACH

Many of Gandhi's contemporaries as well as other scholars were very critical of his approach to Hindu-Muslim unity. Let us look at these criticisms.

Gandhi heavily depended on moral and ethical force to achieve the unity between these two religious communities. Although the question of Hindu-Muslim relations was a very complex issue requiring a carefully designed and sensitive strategy for their proper handling, Gandhi adopted a rather simplistic approach towards the two communities together. He relied heavily on symbolic gestures, the "brotherhood" approach to promote communal amity. He read the *Gita* and the *Quran* together at his prayer meetings, observed purificatory fasts to remove communal venom, and propagated the belief that true religion can only join people and not divide them. His reliance on prayers, fasts, penance, appeal to common interests and higher sentiments did not appeal much for the Muslims as these practices were rooted in Hindu religious tradition. Therefore, his "Ram-Rahim", "Hindu-Muslim bhai bhai", and "heart unity" approach did not yield positive results.

According to some scholars, Gandhi failed to solve the communal problem because he lacked historical perspective (Khan, 1978 and Shah, 1970). He did not take into account the hold that religion with its dogma, tradition, custom, ritual and historical memories, has on the minds of men, in a pre-modern society. Gandhi assigned only a derivative role to the cultural factor. He did not grasp the deeper social and cultural roots of the Hindu-Muslim conflict. According to them, Gandhi placed the whole blame for the communal problem on the British. He thus overlooked the fact that the British did not create separatism. Gandhi's approach to the communal problem also failed because he overlooked the emergence of Muslim nationalism along with Indian nationalism. A more valid criticism of the Gandhian approach by this group of authors is that it "was saintly in the main and precisely on that account it was bound to fail" (Shah, 1970). Gandhi thought that the Hindu-Muslim problem was essentially religious and so missed the social aspect of the problem.

Gandhi's use of Hindu symbols and legends as metaphors (such as *tapasya*, *ahimsa*, *Ram Rajya*, *maths*, *ashrams*, *bhajans* etc.) in his public discourse did not go well with the Muslims, though this approach reinforced his image as a Mahatma in the eyes of the Hindu masses. In South Africa he had shown a rare sensitivity to this issue when he turned down the suggestion to name his Farms *maths* or *ashrams*, as these words had a "particularly Hindu connotation". But his approach was different in India. Gandhi was aware of the unfavourable Muslim reaction to his use of the Hindu idiom and told them, "I warn my Muslim friends against misunderstanding me in my use of the word Ramraj. By Ramraj I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by Ramraj Divine Raj, the Kingdom of God. For me Rama and Rahim are one and the same deity" (*Young India*, September, 1924). This sort of assurance may be all right for an educated, liberal minded person, but did not go well with the Muslim masses, especially when their leaders and the clergy considered Gandhi as an advocate of Hindu interests (Gill, 2001, p.172).

Many times Gandhi appealed to Muslims in the name of Hindu religion, which caused misgivings among the Muslims. Some of his appeals for unity only strengthened this impression. For instance, in 1924, when large-scale riots followed the withdrawal of Non-Cooperation Movement, he wrote, "We shall have to go for *tapasya*, for self-purification, if we want to win the hearts of Mussalmans". Here the word "we" shows that he is speaking as a Hindu, trying to win the hearts of the "other" party. Also it implies that Hindu hearts are in right place and only Muslim hearts need to be won over. On an earlier occasion he said, "...Hinduism will captivate Muslims by the power of its compassion, which is its very essence.... We can win over the Muslims this very day if we are sufficiently imbued with the spirit of brotherly love" (Rajmohan Gandhi, 1995, p.97). Here he is relying on Hinduism's power of compassion to win over the recalcitrant Muslims. Simultaneously, he was also working as a social reformer of Hinduism to pug it from the evil practice of untouchability. Therefore his passion for reforming Hindu society made Muslims get an impression that he was a leader of Hindus only.

One of the criticisms of Gandhian approach is that in a deeply religious Indian society he politicised religion by making politics a handmaid of religion. This produced many baneful consequences. According to Ashish Nandy, India had a long tradition of solving many local and social problems outside the political arena by such sub-systems as family, panchayat, caste and community. Gandhi encouraged the politicisation of all these sub-systems, and thus eroded their moral authority. It is true that by injecting religion into politics Gandhi wanted to serve moral ends and wanted to bring ethical norms in public life. But in the hands of lesser men and the masses, it produced dangerous results. Judith Brown made a very cryptic remark in this regard: "Once religion let loose in politics, it became uncontrollable and self-perpetuating; fear and violence bred fear and violence, and prominent All India politicians could not contain it". Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru attributed communalisation of Indian politics to "too much religiosity". S.S. Gill writes that "Gandhi's attempt to use the religiously inspired movement of Khilafat to promote Hindu-Muslim unity ended up not only in communalizing politics, but also widening the gulf between the two communities, and reviving the declining influence of Muslim clergy" (Gill, 2001, p.171).

As declared by himself, Gandhi was a devout *sanatani* Hindu. On rare occasions when he was under great stress of grave provocation or acute despair, his religious preference did break through his nearly impenetrable armour of secularism. His pro-Hindi and pro-Devanagiri script did great damage to his standing with the Muslims. As early as 1921 he said, "I can wield no influence over the Mussalman except through a Mussalman". In 1924 he acknowledged that he could longer claim with any truth that he was a spokesman for the Indian Muslims. The next year he wrote "I have ceased to regard myself as an expert or an authority on the Hindu-Muslim question". In 1940 he wistfully recalled, "There was a time when there was not a Muslim whose confidence I did not enjoy. Today I have forfeited that confidence and most of the Urdu press pours abuse on me". These were very depressing reflections for a man who never lost heart even against the heaviest of odds. And much more distressing was his admission made in 1927: "*I dare not touch the problem of Hindu-Muslim unity. It has passed out of human hands and has been transferred to God's hands*" (italics added). The fact of the matter is that except for a brief *Khilafat* period, Gandhi could never establish much of a rapport with the Muslims, and this had serious repercussions on the growth of Hindu-Muslim relations (Gill, 2001, p.176).

The deteriorating Gandhi-Jinnah Relations was another important reason which did not

allow the Gandhian dream of forging Hindu-Muslim unity. Their relations were not cordial. It must be noted that Gandhi started the *Khilafat* Non-Cooperation on 1 August 1920 without consulting the Congress. Tilak died a day before this event, and Gokhale passed away few years before. The leadership mantle came to Gandhi. Having already acquired the title of Mahatma helped him in commanding a great following and consolidated his leadership in a short span of time. This came in clash with Jinnah's ambitions. In December 1920, at the Nagpur session of Congress, Gandhi got endorsement of his Non-Cooperation movement. In fact, Jinnah deplored the *Khilafat* agitation which had brought the conservative element to surface. The *Khilafat* leaders were also attacking Jinnah for his "anti-Muslim" stand. In 1928, Jinnah fully supported the boycott of the Simon Commission and attended the All Parties Conference to draft a new constitution by a sub-committee under Motilal Nehru. At the Calcutta session of the Conference, Jinnah proposed four amendments to the Nehru Report. These pertained to some reservations and safeguards for the Muslims. He also made a passionate appeal for unity and said, "If we cannot agree, let us at least agree to defer, but let us part as friends. Believe me there is no progress for India until the Musalmans and Hindus are united, and let no logic, philosophy or squabble stand in the way of coming to a compromise, and nothing will make me more happy than to see a Hindu-Muslim union". For his extraordinary efforts in this regard, Sarojini Naidu used to describe Jinnah as the "Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity". Regrettably, neither Jinnah's amendments were accepted, nor the matter deferred. "This is parting of the way", he remarked later (Gill, 2001, p.188). All these factors are perceived as alienating the minority and led to wide-ranging differences between both the communities.

5.5 SUMMARY

Gandhi was the tallest leader of India who advocated Hindu-Muslim unity as a pre-requisite for achieving *swaraj*. His approach to Hindu-Muslim amity was considered by some scholars/ leaders (his contemporaries) as too saintly, moralistic and devoid of historic realities. Some of the criticisms were no doubt harsh, but his intentions to achieve communal unity cannot be faulted. His excessive reliance on religious appeal was criticised by many. Gandhi was blamed for invoking religious sentiments for political purposes, which allowed the space for fundamentalist elements to rise in the political system.

Gandhi had supported *Khilafat* movement with the sole purpose of bringing Indian Muslims to the mainstream political struggle for independence. He appealed to both the Hindus and Muslims to respect the religious sensibilities of each other. He advocated the rights of minorities and believed in composite nationalism. He opposed partition of the country on the basis of two-nation theory saying that Hindus and Muslims are not two separate nations (*qawms*). This unit has discussed the reasons for the failure of achieving communal amity, despite Gandhi's sincere efforts. Notwithstanding Gandhi's failure to achieve Hindu-Muslim amity, in conclusion it can be said that his views on composite nationalism, inter-faith dialogue and cooperation, ideas on cow slaughter and music before mosques are relevant for resolving Hindu-Muslim tensions in contemporary India.

5.6 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What were the efforts made by Gandhi to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity?
2. What were Gandhi's views on the issue of communalism and the rights of minorities?

3. What were the reasons for Gandhi's failure to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity?
4. What are the major criticisms of Gandhian approach to Hindu-Muslim unity?
5. Is Gandhian approach relevant to solve the contemporary tensions / problems between Hindus and Muslims of India?

SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 6 COMMUNALISM

Structure

6.1 Introduction

Aims and Objectives

6.2 India's Communal Problem in Historical Perspective

6.3 Gandhi on India's Communal Problem

6.4 Swaraj First, Unity Later

6.5 Gandhi and the Partition of India

6.6 Summary

6.7 Terminal Questions

Suggested Readings

6.1 INTRODUCTION

No other leader in the history of freedom struggle aspired for the Hindu-Muslim Unity as did Gandhi. It meant for him the unity of all, and a new beginning for a peaceful and non-violent society. Gandhi took up the issue with a missionary zeal, trying to bring about unity and integrity of the communities. This, he felt, was a necessary prerequisite for achieving the larger goal of India's independence. Nevertheless, he tried to balance the viewpoints of the Hindus and Muslims through his unique approach, i.e. by trying to bridge the differences between both the communities in the most amicable way and where necessary, through his fasting. It was a peculiar method he adopted as atonement to the sin of communal disharmony. Gandhi would be remembered as one of the messiahs, who constantly strove for the communal unity in one of the most significant periods of the nation's history.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- India's communal problem from a historical point of view.
- Gandhi's views on the communal problem of India.
- Gandhi's opposition to the partition of India.

6.2 INDIA'S COMMUNAL PROBLEM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

For centuries, the Hindus and Muslims in India had lived in peace and harmony. Before the advent of the British, religion and religious community had no political salience. The society was divided into the ruling class and the subject class. It was the British who accentuated the religious and cultural differences between the communities and tried to pit one against the other. They maliciously designated the entire period from 1200 AD to 1757 AD as the period of Muslim rule over the Hindus whereas the fact was that the

business of the state was carried on together by all communities whether immigrant or indigenous. Moreover, the European historians portrayed this long period as one of the subjugation and oppression of the Hindus. Thus, after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, they claimed that the British rule was a Divine Providence for the Hindus as it had delivered them from the tyranny of the Muslim rulers.

The accentuation of the religious and cultural differences between the Hindus and Muslims and the consolidation of separate communal identities were aided not only by the aggressive religious revivalist movements during the nineteenth century but also by the deliberate British policy of promoting one community and downgrading the other, particularly after the Revolt of 1857. After the failure of the Revolt, the Hindus had taken full advantage of opportunities of modern education and employment created by the British and improved their lot whereas the Muslims followed a policy of aloofness from the British and suffered from degradation and backwardness. The huge imbalance created between the two communities was one of the reasons for the alienation of Muslims from the Indian National Congress. When the British saw a challenge to their supremacy from the growing nationalism of the Hindu middle class, they applied the traditional policy of divide-and-rule and the counterpoise of the natives by the natives. The grant of certain safeguards (separate electorate and weightage) to the Muslim community under the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 began a new era of Hindu-Muslim conflict as the majority community considered any gain of the minority community as the loss of the majority. A measure of the Hindu-Muslim political unity and cooperation was brought about by the Congress-League Lucknow Pact of 1916 and the Khilafat and Non-cooperation Movement, the movement that had joined together the Khilafat Committee, the Muslim League, the Jamiat-ul-Ulama and the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. However, the collapse of the Khilafat and Non-cooperation Movement, the growth of extremist politics and a series of Hindu-Muslim skirmishes on petty issues embittered the inter-community relations. A turning-point in Indian politics came with the Montague Declaration of 1917 which changed the approach of the majority towards the minority entirely as became evident later with the abandonment by the Motilal Nehru Committee Report (1928) of the Congress-League pact of 1916. Then came the next crucial phase in 1937 when the Indian National Congress won the first general elections held for the provincial legislative assemblies under the Government of India Act, 1935. Its steadfast and outright refusal to take the minority party into its ministries heralded an era of full-fledged Congress-League confrontation and consequently, the worsening of Hindu-Muslim relations. It was perhaps at this stage that the term communalism was coined to describe the inter-party and inter-community antagonism. During the period 1937-1947 no efforts could lead to an inter-party understanding and a communal settlement. As a result, India got independence with the Partition of the country in 1947.

6.3 GANDHI ON INDIA'S COMMUNAL PROBLEM

Before the ascendancy of Gandhi in the Indian politics almost all the prominent Congress leaders including Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Motilal Nehru, Lala Lajpat Rai, Muhammad Ali Jinnah and others had fully acknowledged the multicommunal character of the Indian polity and therefore believed in the Hindu-Muslim unity as a perquisite of any political advance in India. This realisation had led to the conclusion of the Lucknow Pact in 1916 which became possible because all the liberal leaders of both parties were behind it. Gandhi, a disciple of the liberal Gokhale, too was a great

champion of Hindu-Muslim unity and a believer in a composite plural Indian nation. There can be no greater testimony of his universal liberal nationalism than Chapter X of his *Hind Swaraj*. The following statement has been cited in the previous lesson, which needs mention again in this context:

“In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous term; nor has it ever been so in India. India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation, they merge in it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. That country must have a faculty for assimilation. India has ever been such a country. In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals, but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another’s religion. If they do, they are not fit to be considered a nation. If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland. The Hindus, the Mahomedans, the Parsees and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow-countrymen, and they will have to live in unity if only for their own interest”.

About the alleged inborn enmity between Hindus and Muslims he wrote:

“That phrase has been invented by our national enemy [the British]. Before coming of the British both parties ceased to quarrel and settled down to live in peace and realized that neither party would abandon its religion by force of arms. With the advent of English the quarrels recommenced. Hindus and Muslims originated from the same stock. All religions are different roads leading to the same God. Wherein is the cause for quarrelling?”

When the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement fizzled out during 1923-24, the reactionary forces were out to spread the rumour that Khilafat people’s real objective was not the attainment of *swaraj* but inviting the Afghans to invade India and establish Muslim raj/rule here. It was in 1923 that the All-India Hindu Mahasabha embarked upon a radical programme of *Shuddhi* and *Sanghatan* which created much apprehension and unrest among the Muslims. These people were believed to be in the forefront during communal riots that took place in different areas of north India during 1924-1927. As Sarkar points out, ‘communal bodies proliferated, and political alignments were made increasingly on a communal basis’ (Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, 1983, p.233).

Gandhi became very perturbed at the turn of the events and the worsening of inter-community relations. Gandhi retaliated by announcing a 21-day fast [18 September 1924 to 6 October 1924] as a measure of self-penance and prayers to end the Hindu-Muslim strife. In an article published in the *Young India* of 5 June 1924, he tried to point out the causes of recent spurt of Hindu-Muslim rioting which, according to him, were:

1. The revolt of the Mopla tenants in Malabar against their caste Hindu landlords;
2. Mian Fazl-i-Husain’s policy in the Punjab of giving government jobs to the Muslims which provoked Hindu opposition;
3. The *Shuddhi* and *Sanghatan* movement launched by the All-India Hindu Mahasabha;
4. Slaughter of cows by the Muslims and playing of music by Hindu processions before the mosques [during prayers] which provoked each other;
5. During the inter-community rioting the Muslim “bullying” of the Hindus and Hindu “cowardice” alienated the Hindus from the Muslims;

6. The feeling among the backward Muslims that Hindus will not deal with them fairly.

He then proceeded to propose the following measures to lessen the Hindu-Muslim tensions and curb inter-community riots:

1. Replacement of the rule of the sword by that of arbitration, that is, inter-community disputes should be settled not by violent but by peaceful means;
2. The spirit of non-violence should prevail over that of violence;
3. The leaders of Hindu and Muslim communities should shed mutual distrust;
4. Muslims should stop “bullying” and Hindus should cease to be “cowards”;
5. Muslims should voluntarily give up cow slaughter to appease the Hindus;
6. Recruitment to government jobs should be on the basis of merit and not on the basis of communal quotas;
7. Hindus and Muslims should voluntarily give up their respective *Shuddhi* and *Tabligh* [preaching] movements;
8. The communally-biased [Arya Samajist] section of the Punjab press should stop its [provocative] communal writings.

Continuing this line in the *Young India* of 27 February 1930, he impressed upon the satyagrahis [his followers] not to take part in communal rioting, to remain neutral or take that side which appeared to be on the right, and try their best to restore communal harmony as an integral part of the Gandhian Constructive Programme. Infact, Gandhi reiterated this view by including the communal unity as one of the points in the agenda of the Constructive Programme. For Gandhi, communal unity does not confine to the political unity; it had much wider connotations. He called it as the unbreakable unity of hearts.

6.4 SWARAJ FIRST, UNITY LATER

During his political career Gandhi appears to have approached the communal problem in two definite ways. On the one hand he was disturbed by the deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations and wanted to restore trust and communal harmony because without communal unity *swaraj* was not possible. But on the other hand, ignoring the other mighty factors behind the Hindu-Muslim divide, he laid the entire blame for the communal conflict on the British policy of divide-and-rule. The British had established themselves in India by taking the advantage of communal cleavages and by keeping them alive [*Harijan*, 2 December 1939]. He openly declared “I dare not touch the problem of Hindu-Muslim unity. It has passed out of human hands, and has been transferred to God’s hands alone” [*Young India*, 13 January 1927]. Again, he wrote: “God did not want me to take my credit for the work and so I have now washed my hands. I am helpless. I have exhausted all my effort” [*Young India*, 27 January 1927]. Again, he observed: “This unity which I fondly believed in 1922 had been nearly achieved has, so far as Hindus and Mussalmans are concerned . . . suffered a severe check. Mutual trust has given place to distrust” [Tendulkar, *The Mahatma*, Vol. II, p.164]. In 1929 he wrote to Sarojini Naidu that he wished to “realize her hope of realizing Hindu-Muslim union. But the wizard has lost his wand. He feels helpless” [*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 40, p.426]. Addressing the Minorities Committee of the Second Round Table Conference in

London he said: "The solution of the communal tangle can be the crown of the Swaraj Constitution and not its foundation". This remained the Gandhi-Congress line throughout. At the Second Round Table Conference, he came forward with a new thesis: *Swaraj* to be won first and when India becomes free the communal problem will be solved of its own.

Gandhi's was a simplistic reading of the communal divide. More than British imperialism, it appears, socio-economic disparity between the two was at its root. Gandhi looked at it as merely a game of British imperialism. [See *Young India* of 13 June 1927; 27 June 1927; and the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, volume 40, p.426]. According to Tendulkar, Gandhi said in 1942 that "I want freedom immediately. Freedom cannot wait for realization of communal unity" [G.D. Tendulkar, *The Mahatma*, Vol. VI, pp. 154-164]. Accordingly, the Congress did not consult the Muslim League before launching the "Quit-India" movement. In an interview with the special correspondent of the Reuters, he said: "It would be a good thing if the British were to go today—thirteen months [i.e. from then till the promised deadline of June 1948 for the transfer of power] means mischief to India. . . . I have never appreciated the argument that the British want so many months to get ready to leave. . . . I have often said before that the British will have to take the risk of leaving India to chaos or anarchy. . . . The communal feuds you see here are partly due to the presence of the British. If the British were not here, we would still go through fire, but that would purify us" [Durga Das, ed., *Sardar Patel's Correspondence 1945-50*. Vol. IV. Ahmedabad, Navjivan, 1972, pp. 348-349]. To Gandhi, Hindus and Muslims were one community with subtle differences. He often preached to them to have a change of heart towards each other for better in order to live harmoniously and as one undivided community. His faith in this was unflinching and he is said to have brushed aside, to quote Sarkar's words, 'the very idea of Hindus and Muslims belonging to different nations with a gently-deprecating smile' (Sumit Sarkar, 1983, p.438).

6.5 GANDHI AND THE PARTITION OF INDIA

For almost 30 years before 1947, the history of the Indian National Congress was woven with the personality and theory and practice of Mahatma Gandhi. During his stay in South Africa (1893-1914) he had already formulated his theory of Indian independence to be attained through Satyagraha. Coming back to India in 1915 he renounced material life and donned the mantle of an ascetic. This proved to be an asset in the sense he could instantly connect to the masses, understand their mind, speak their language and mobilise them for the national freedom cause. He did not don the mannerisms and modern approach of his counterparts in the Congress. He relied more on the traditional outlook, spiritual growth and the code of conduct he laid down for the Satyagrahis and others encouraging them to work for communal unity.

Gandhi was opposed to the idea of Pakistan and the entailing Partition of India since the day it was pronounced by the Muslim League in 1940. Many observers and analysts have held that the so-called "two-nation" theory and the demand for a separate homeland for the Muslim majority areas was merely a political weapon invented by Muhammad Ali Jinnah to pressurise the Congress leadership and to extract maximum concessions from them. Had Jinnah been really bent upon the division of India he would not have accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan in 1946 without reservations. The Congress had accepted this Plan with its own interpretations, not of its authors. The Congress had not merely serious reservations about it but was against the very idea of a loose federal structure with

regional autonomy to units and sharing of power at the centre and the provinces. The Plan was wrecked beyond doubt by the Congress and subsequently their hard line made any rapprochement almost impossible. Thus the leadership on both the sides failed to realise the merits of unity.

In the *Harijan* of 6 April 1940, Gandhi declared that his earlier statement that "there is no swaraj without communal unity holds good today as when I first enunciated it in 1919." In the issue of 4 May 1940, he wrote: "The partition proposal has altered the face of Hindu-Muslim problem. I have called it an untruth. There can be no compromise with it...." Again, in the issue of 22 September, he wrote: "Vivisect me before you vivisect India." The Congress in 1942 adopted *Akhand Hindustan* and fought the election of 1945-46 on this basis and won an overwhelming majority of the general seats. As late as on 8 May 1947, Gandhi wrote to Mountbatten that "It would be a blunder of first magnitude for the British to be a party in any way whatsoever to the division of India." [*Transfer of Power*, Volume X. p.667].

How and why did Gandhi climb down? Let us go back to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the veteran Congress leader and the close confidante of Gandhi, Nehru and Patel. In his *India Wins Freedom* (1988 edition), he narrates the whole story of Mountbatten thrusting his Partition plan upon the Indian leaders and converting both Patel and Nehru to his idea. Then all the three persuaded Gandhi to accept it. Azad tells that when he informed Gandhi about the readiness of Patel and Nehru to accept it, Gandhi's reaction was: "What a question to ask! If the Congress wishes to accept partition it will be over my dead body. So long as I am alive I will never agree to the partition of India. Nor will I, if I can help it, allow Congress to accept" [A.K. Azad, *India Wins Freedom* (1988 edition), pp. 202-203]. But eventually he succumbed to the pressure of the arguments as put forward by the leadership and not only surrendered but also lent his support to the Resolution on the acceptance of the Partition put for the endorsement of the All-India Congress Committee in its meeting held on 14 June 1947. But for Gandhi's decisive stand, Congress would have become a house divided against itself.

Why did Gandhi surrender over the issue of partition? It is widely believed that after 1945 when prospects of the transfer of power in India became confirmed Gandhi with his agitational politics had become irrelevant in the eyes of his successors who were keen to take hold of power as soon as possible and at whatever the price. That is why when Gandhi was away in 1946 in the Eastern Bengal, the Congress leadership had behind his back and without his consent passed a resolution proposing the partition of Punjab into two parts to solve the communal problem there. That formula also implied the partition of Bengal. So when in May 1947 a deal was made with the last Viceroy again behind the back of Gandhi, he became aware of his own irrelevance. As a realist and a power-politician, he had no option but to submit to the wishes and interests of his disciples.

What happened during and after partition made Gandhi a sad and lonely person. On humanitarian grounds, he had risen up against the massacre of Muslims in Delhi and opposed their forcible eviction from their homes and hearths. He advised the Indian Muslims to become the loyal citizens of the Indian Union and live in peace with their neighbours. In the last year of his life he had expressed himself unequivocally in favour of a secular state and had ruled out the introduction of religious instruction in public schools and colleges. Towards the end of his life he had realised that perhaps communalism in India was linked with casteism. Communalism cannot be eradicated unless casteism is

eradicated first [*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 94, p. 113]. His last fast in the defence of humanity and international morality was immediately successful in attaining its objectives but did not please his reactionary detractors who blamed him solely for partitioning the country. They unashamedly had forgotten their own role in the unfolding of a political deadlock which was broken only by the acceptance of partition.

6.6 SUMMARY

This unit discussed the Gandhian approach to the communal problem. The liberal approach of Gandhi towards the national and communal problem in British India, as outlined in his *Hind Swaraj*, has been discussed briefly. He had been successful in uniting the Hindus and Muslims under his leadership during the days of the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movement. But the subsequent collapse of the non-cooperation movement and the abolition of Khilafat by the Turkish Grand National Assembly in 1924 had depressed both the communities. The reactionary forces took full advantage of this disarray and tried their best to drive a wedge between the two. Further, personalities, political forces and their ideologies, and the intervention of a third party all played their respective parts in the drama of Partition played during the period 1937-1947. Partition was neither inevitable nor desirable. It was an unnatural partition resulting in the loss of a million lives, displacement of millions of others, changing forever the equations between the majority and minority communities and leaving behind a delicate issue that remains unresolved to this day.

6.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Evaluate Gandhi's analysis of India's national and communal problem as outlined in his *Hind Swaraj*.
2. Do you agree with the Gandhian thesis that but for the British imperialist policy of divide-and-rule Indian communities would not have quarreled?
3. Critically examine Gandhi's analysis of communal conflict in British India.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 7 REFORMS IN RELIGIONS

Structure

7.1 Introduction

Aims and Objectives

7.2 Sources of Gandhi's Religious Thought

7.3 Gandhi's Concept of Religion

7.4 Gandhi and the Reconstruction of Hinduism

7.5 Gandhi and Other Religions

7.5.1 Gandhi on Buddhism

7.5.2 Gandhi on Christianity

7.5.3 Gandhi on Islam

7.6 Religious Pluralism: Equal Respect for All Religions

7.7 Summary

7.8 Terminal Questions

Suggested Readings

7.1 INTRODUCTION

“If a man reaches the heart of his own religion, he has reached the heart of the others too”. Gandhi

M.G. Polak, *Mr. Gandhi: The Man*, London, 1931, p.41

“Personally, I think the world as a whole will never have, and need not have, a single religion”. Gandhi

The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), Vol. 12, 30 May 1913, p. 94.

Religion was central to Mahatma Gandhi's life, thought and work. Gandhi's political philosophy and political techniques are only two corollaries of his religious and moral principles. It is a strange paradox that though Gandhi's attitude to religion holds the key to the understanding of his life and thoughts, its nuances and significance have been often missed or underestimated by his admirers and critics. He has been often misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented by his political opponents. On Gandhi's seminal contribution to religious and political thought, Sir Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, eminent philosopher and the second President of India, wrote in 1939 that *“The greatest fact in the story of man on earth is not his material achievement, the empires he has built and broken, but the growth of his soul from age to age in its search for truth and goodness. Those who take part in this adventure of the soul, secure an enduring place in the history of human culture. ...The greatness of Gandhi is more in his holy living than in his heroic struggles, in his insistence on the creative power of the soul and its life-giving quality at a time when the destructive forces seem to be in the ascendant [italics added]”*(Radhakrishnan, 1998 edn, p.1).

Gandhi's “religious message” holds key to the solution of many contemporary socio-

religious and political crises the world over. If we adopt the Gandhian approach to religion in our political system, the world (particularly India) will hopefully remain free from religious and ethnic conflicts. “What made Gandhi the centre of so powerful a field of spiritual force was the fact that his ideas were always incarnated in his actions” (John Hick, Foreword to M. Chatterjee, 1983, p.ix). He lived his religion, i.e. Hinduism. Gandhi does not believe in dogmatic, sectarian and ritualistic religion and was opposed to institutionalised / organised religion. He interpreted the Hindu religious scriptures in rational manner. He said “Nothing can be accepted as the word of God which cannot be tested by reason or capable of being spiritually experienced”. Every formula of every religion had to be subjected to the acid test of reason; no scriptural sanction was valid if it resulted in unjust or inhuman practices, like the practice of untouchability or animal sacrifices. Every claim made on behalf of revelation should be capable of being tested “on the anvil of truth with the hammer of compassion”. Moreover, religious doctrines must appeal to one’s conscience. His agenda of reforms was not confined to Hinduism alone. It applied to other religions also – Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. His faith in religious pluralism springs from the fact that he considers all religions as imperfect. In 1930 he said “... if we are imperfect ourselves, religion as conceived by us must also be imperfect.... Religion of our conception, being thus imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and reinterpretation”. Every living religion, he says, must have within itself the power of rejuvenation if it wants to survive, otherwise it will become part of history. In his quest for religious harmony, Gandhi advocated reforms in all religions.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- The sources of Gandhi’s thoughts on reforming religions.
- Gandhi’s reconstruction of Hinduism.
- His belief in religious pluralism and principle of respect for all religions.

7.2 SOURCES OF GANDHI’S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Gandhi grew up in a devout and educated Vaishnavite family in a religious atmosphere and in formative years, was exposed to strong Jain influences. Gandhi’s father being a public official had numerous visitors to the house – Muslim, Jain, Christian, and Hindu; Gandhi’s closest companion in early experiments with truth was a Muslim classmate. Gandhi was administered vows by a Jain monk, who was a close acquaintance of Gandhi’s, while he was leaving for England. His mother belonged to a Pranami sect, followers of the Gujarat saint, Mahamati Prannath, who taught equal respect for Hindu and Muslim beliefs, synthesising the two. The Pranami temples had no images and worshipped God without form. An 18th century report indicates that the centre of worship for Pranamis was a bed with a turban on it and on either side a stool with the Quran and a stool with the Puranas. Till the age of twenty, his knowledge of Hinduism was extremely limited and read the *Gita* on persuasion to do so in England by theosophists, when they invited him to read Sir Edwin Arnold’s, *The Song Celestial*, the English rendering of *Gita*. Sir Edwin’s *The Light of Asia*, the story of Buddha’s life, renunciation and teachings, his introduction to the Bible, The New Testament, particularly, the *Sermon on the Mount*, went straight to his heart. In his autobiography, he said that “the idea of returning love for hatred and good for evil captivated me”. Gandhi acknowledged the

influence of three 'moderns'— Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin and Raichandra (Gandhi called him as Rajchandrabhai) in shaping his religious thinking. Rajchandrabhai, a Gujarati Jain, had given a sense of direction to Gandhi's religious quest. Gandhi admired him for his renunciation and the former was Gandhi's mentor on his conception of religions. He taught him that it is the way a man lived, not the recital of a verse or the form of a prayer which made him a good Hindu, a good Muslim or a good Christian. Though he was a Jain, he restored Gandhi's faith in Hinduism. He also explained "the doctrine of the many sidedness of religious truth". He regarded different faiths like any walled enclosures in which men and women confined themselves. On the meaning of religion he said "*Dharma* does not mean any particular creed or dogma. Nor does it mean reading or learning by rote books known as *shastras* (sacred texts) or even believing all that they say"; rather *Dharma* is the quality of the soul present in every human being. *Dharma* is the means by which we can know ourselves. No organized religion is a special repository of dharma. We may accept this means from wherever we get it whether from India or Europe or Arabia" (CWMG, Vol. 32, p.11). So, Rajchandrabhai enabled Gandhi to find the answer to the question he had been struggling with since his childhood, i.e. "Which was the one true religion that he could adopt and reject the other as false". To answer this Rajchandrabhai said "Religion is not an 'ism' and it is not merely intellectual knowledge or belief in any set of doctrines, but an innate attribute of the soul. It enables to define the human duties in life and establish correct relationship with the fellow beings. Religion is the means of the self realization or realization of the true nature of self" (Anju Jhamb, 2006, p.292). He used to say that the real test of spiritual progress was the extent to which one could translate one's belief in day to day life. His influence on Gandhi was greatest as far as his concept of religion was concerned. In fact, Gandhi's idea of "religion which underlies all religions" has its source in him (Gandhi, 2006, p.42).

7.3 GANDHI'S CONCEPT OF RELIGION

Gandhi's notion of religion was unique. It transcended all historical religions.

Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion, which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself [CWMG: Vol.17, p.406].

This Gandhian manifesto on religion contains five main points: religion transforms our nature, it binds us with Truth, it purifies us, it establishes the "correspondence" between us and our "Maker", and it transcends all historical religions. Gandhi's idea of religion transcends sectarian boundaries. It is a living spiritual experience which cannot be conceptualised or verbalised. "The one religion," writes Gandhi "is beyond speech" (Parel, 2006, pp.100 and 102). In essence, to Gandhi "true religion is not narrow dogma. It is not external observance. It is faith in God, and living in the presence of God, it means faith in future life, in truth and in ahimsa. There prevails today a sort of apathy towards these things of the spirit. Our temples appear today to be meant only for the simple and the ignorant. Few visit the real temples of God. *Let the educated class take up the work of reform in this direction*" (Young India, 28-8-1928). Thus Gandhi expands the horizons of religion with an endless vision of the 'All Serene' and advises to nurse the

living spirit of God present within each one of us in the society. *The central focus of Gandhian framework of religion is always man. The wellbeing of man is the touchstone of effectiveness of religion.* He went so far as to say that the only way to find God was to “see Him in His Creation and be one with it”. If religion is an awakening, it embraces humanity.

7.4 GANDHI AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HINDUISM

Before Gandhi, many eminent persons like Raja Rammohan Roy (founder of Brahmo Samaj) and Dayanand Saraswati (founder of Arya Samaj) attempted to reform Hinduism. Gandhi appreciated the Brahmo Samaj movement for its crusade against sati and polytheism and the campaign for the widow remarriage. He felt that it brought all the good from the Christianity and the Islam. In fact, it rationalised and liberalised Hinduism. It has cultivated toleration for the other faiths (*Young India*, 30-8-1928). Gandhi was highly critical of Arya Samaj movement. He wrote:

“I have read *Satyartha Prakash*, the Arya Samaj Bible.... I have not read a more disappointing book from a reformer (Dayanand Saraswati) so great. He had claimed to stand for truth and nothing less. But he has unconsciously misrepresented Jainism, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism itself. One having even cursory acquaintance with these faiths could easily discover the errors into which the great reformer strayed. He had tried to make narrow one of the most tolerant and liberal faiths on the face of the earth. And an iconoclast though he was, he has succeeded in enthroning idolatry in the subtlest form. He has idolised the letter of the *Vedas* and tried to prove the existence in the *Vedas* of every thing known to Science” (CWMG, Vol. 19, p.153).

He was critical towards Arya Samaj although its success was greater; he felt that its appeal was limited by its very belligerence and sectarianism.

But Gandhi’s reformist agenda was far more comprehensive than that of any of his predecessors. He was very radical in certain matters. He was convinced that Hindu society needed moral regeneration, “a new system of ethics” and was certain that this new framework of ethics could not be developed out of the available resources of Hindu traditions alone. Some of its fundamental values were sound and represented its greatest contribution to mankind. However, they have been traditionally defined in negative, passive and asocial terms and required reinterpretation and reform. According to Gandhi, Hinduism could, therefore, greatly benefit from the moral ‘insights’ and ‘truths’ discovered by other religious traditions including Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity (Parekh, 1999, p.23). Thus Gandhi adopted a liberal, rational method to radically redefine, deconstruct and reconstruct the orthodox Hindu traditions.

Gandhi makes a distinction between the idea of religion, which is timeless, and religion as institution, which is time-bound. It was the institution of religion which he wanted to reform as it had evolved many social practices like the practice of untouchability, animal sacrifice, lower status to women etc., which had no scriptural sanction. He reshaped and redefined the time-honoured concepts of Hinduism.

It must be kept in mind that Gandhi does not recognise the *sole* authority of the modern-day interpreters of the traditional Hindu scriptures. He did not think that they were meeting the criterion of “experiencing the truth” that they were interpreting. In his view

they did not practice the necessary virtues- truth, non-violence, celibacy, and detachment in sufficient degree. Their status as gurus therefore could no longer be recognised. It was a rare thing today, he remarked, to find in them a combination of purity of life and depth of learning. The “millions” therefore have to go without their help (CWMG, Vol.21, p.246).

Gandhi's first major attack on Hinduism was with regard to the practice of untouchability. He considered it as a heinous crime against humanity. He emphasised that caste had nothing to do with religion. It was a later excrescence on what originally been basically the principle of division of labour and of duties. For him untouchability had no sanction in Hindu scriptures. When B. S. Mooneji, the Mahasabha leader, tried to prove that untouchability was an integral part of Hinduism, Gandhi retorted: “Happily for me, my Hinduism does not bind me to every verse because it is written in Sanskrit... in spite of your literal knowledge of the Shastras, yours is a distorted kind of Hinduism. I claim in all humility to have lived Hinduism all my life” (Singh, 2003, p.56).

Similarly, on the position of women, his views were far ahead of his time and brought a large number of women into public life. “Woman is the companion,” he affirmed as early as 1918, “with equal mental capacities... and she has the same right of freedom and liberty.” He advocated equal legal status and the right of vote for women. The oft-quoted text, “for women there can be no freedom”, ascribed to Manu, he dismissed it as an interpolation, and if it was not an interpolation, he could only say that, in Manu's days, women did not have the status they deserved (Nanda, 1995, p.132).

Gandhi also opposed animal sacrifices and described it as irreligious. Wherever popular religion was on the wrong track in his opinion, Gandhi did not hesitate to speak out boldly. On the occasion of the Calcutta Session of the Congress Party in 1901 he visited the Kali temple and was repelled by the sight of goats being slaughtered leading to “rivers of blood”, saying that he considered this to be “positive irreligion” and that he did “not consider it to be part of Hinduism” (Chatterjee, 1983, pp.28-29).

The most innovative interpretations of Gandhi pertain to his understanding of *Gita* or the story of *Mahabharata*. His interpretations were novel, unorthodox and based on reasoning, morality and common sense. No book, however sacred, he said, could be limited to a single interpretation irrespective of time and place; the meanings of great writings were subject to a process of evolution. Gandhi put forward the view that the great epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* were allegorical and not historical works. The real object of the *Gita*, as he understood it, was to point to the goal of self-realisation and to show that *Nishkama karma* (detached activity) was the way to achieve the goal. He did not accept the traditional interpretation of the *Gita* as the poetic presentation of Lord Krishna's exhortation to Arjuna, the warrior, to go forward and meet his cousins in combat; the battlefield of Kurukshetra was only a symbol of the battle between good and evil which rages in every human heart, Duryodhan and his associates being the baser impulses in man, Arjuna and his party the higher impulses, and Krishna “the dweller within”. To those who insisted on taking the story of *Mahabharata* literally, Gandhi pointed out that if the story was taken at its face-value, the *Mahabharata* had demonstrated the futility of violence: the war had ended in universal devastation in which the victors had been no better off than the vanquished. Thus Gandhi does not agree with the interpretation that *Gita* believes in violence (Nanda, 1995, pp.130-31).

Gandhi challenged the age-old notions and prejudices with impunity. He did not believe

in miracles and never encouraged superstition in any form. On miracles he said, “What was the good of overturning nature? He did not think of God in anthropomorphic terms as Truth for him was God” and God’s law and God were not different things or facts in the sense that an earthly king and his law were different (Singh, 2003, p.58).

When Gandhi’s interpretations were called in question, he dismissed his critics by suggesting that the text on which they relied could be an interpolation. However, he did not make any claim that his interpretations are infallible. He wrote: “The opinions I have formed, and the conclusions I have arrived at are not final. I may change them tomorrow” (Nanda, 1995, p.135).

In sum, Gandhi’s concept of religion had little in common with what generally passes for organised religion: dogmas, rituals and rites, superstitions and bigotry. It is interesting to note that Gandhi rarely visited temples and did not build any temples in his ashrams. Indeed, his religion was simply an ethical framework for the conduct of daily life. He considered Hinduism as having some fundamental beliefs like the supreme reality of God, the unity of all (life) and the value of ahimsa (love) as a means of realising God. In this bedrock religion, there was no scope for exclusiveness or narrowness.

7.5 GANDHI AND OTHER RELIGIONS

For Gandhi all the major religions in the world are equal in the sense that they are all true. They are supplying a felt want in the spiritual progress of humanity. He assigns divinity to all religions. No religion is perfect. He said: “... if we are imperfect ourselves, religion as conceived by us must also be imperfect.... Religion of our conception, being thus imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and reinterpretation” (Chatterjee, 1983). Gandhi advocated reforms in other religions of the world. He wanted that the followers of different religions should reinterpret the precepts of their beliefs in the light of rationality and should get rid of any interpolations that have crept into their faiths. He rejects the claim of *maulvis* (Muslim theologians) and Christian clergy to give final interpretation to the messages of Islam and Christianity. Both these messages have to be interpreted in the lives of those who are living these messages in silence and in perfect dedication. Let us study how Gandhi perceived / interpreted the other religions.

7.5.1 Gandhi on Buddhism

Gandhi does not regard Buddhism as an independent religion but considers it as a part of Hinduism. In his view Buddha did not give the world a new religion; he gave it a new interpretation. Buddha taught not to take life (as in animal sacrifice) but to give life. True sacrifice was not of others but of self. Gandhi considered the Buddha as the greatest preacher of peace. He wrote: “I have the greatest veneration for the Buddha. He is one of the greatest preachers of peace. The gospel of the Buddha is the gospel of love” (*Harijan*, 28-8-1938). Buddha understood *Nirvana* (salvation) in a different way. “*Nirvana* is undoubtedly not utter extinction. So far as I (Gandhi) was able to understand the central fact of Buddha’s life *Nirvana* is utter extinction of all that is base in us. *Nirvana* is not like the black dead peace of the grave, but the living peace, the living happiness of a soul which is conscious of itself and conscious of having found its own abode in the heart of Eternal” (*Young India*, 24-11-1927). The Buddhist contribution to humanity lies in its teaching to regard for all life. Sanctity of life-whether human or animal- was upheld by Buddhism.

King Ashoka sent missionaries to different lands for the propagation of Buddhism, and spread that religion in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), China; Burma (Myanmar); and other countries. A distinctive beauty of Hinduism was revealed during this process: no one was converted to Buddhism by force. People's minds were sought to be influenced only by discussion and argument and mainly by the pure conduct of the preachers themselves. The reformation that Buddha attempted was remarkable. He taught us to defy appearances and trust in the final triumph of Truth and Love. According to Gandhi, this was his (Buddha's) matchless gift to Hinduism and to the world (Iyer, 1991, pp.139-40, 144-45).

7.5.2 Gandhi on Christianity

Gandhi tells us in his autobiography how certain aspects of Christianity- the life and death of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount and the crystalline purity of some Christians appealed to him. The verses of New Testament, concerning the Sermon on the Mount, went straight to his heart, which read: "But I say unto you that ye resist not evil but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law and take away the coat, let him have thy cloak also". He appreciated the beauties of Christianity. He called Jesus the "Prince of Satyagrahis" (Nanda, 1995, p.140), as he employed non-cooperation against the hypocrites, the liars and men drunk with pride. He opposed, all alone, the mighty Roman Empire for the sake of moral principles. Christianity has had a very considerable influence as they imparted education of a high order.

Despite his great love for Christianity, Gandhi had many objections to the prevailing orthodox understanding of this belief. He reinterpreted and rediscovered the original creed of Christ. He could not subscribe to the view that Jesus was the only begotten Son of God and only those believing in him could attain salvation. He said God cannot be the exclusive father and that he cannot ascribe exclusive divinity to Jesus. According to him, Jesus was one like Krishna or Rama, the Buddha or Mohammed and the belief that Jesus was the *only* son of God is an invention of the theologians. Gandhi says that this invention contradicts Jesus' own teaching implied in the words spoken to his hearers: "I go to your Father and my Father", and the emphatic declaration of John: "Now are we the sons of God" (Wynne-Tyson, 1961, p.234).

Gandhi's criticisms of Christianity were influenced by his readings of the works of Tolstoy, Edward Maitland and Anna Kingsford. Like Tolstoy, Gandhi does not accept the immoral doctrine of vicarious atonement. He does not think that it was ever taught by Jesus. There is no basis whatever for moral responsibility in the belief that one's sins can be forgiven through the suffering of someone else and such an idea implies injustice in the Godhead we are supposed to worship. Voicing his objection, he wrote in his autobiography: "If this be the Christianity acknowledged by all Christians, I cannot accept it. I do not seek redemption from the consequences of my sin. I seek redemption from sin itself, or rather from the very thought of sin. Until I have attained that end, I shall be content to be restless" (Gandhi, 1929, p.104).

Gandhi also opposed the doctrine of proselytisation. He chided Christian missionaries for their "irreligious gamble" for converts. He opposed conversion from one religion to another. Mirabehn (Miss Slade) was never converted to Hinduism. Similarly, Richard Gregg, who wrote extensively on non-violence and stayed in his ashram, was called Govind, but never became a Hindu. He disallowed conversions in his Ashrams. The reason why he opposed proselytisation was because he recognised that all faiths are true and divinely inspired. Gandhi believed that Jesus and his message did not belong *only* to

Christians or to any community; He and his lessons belonged to the whole world. Once he had told Mrs. Polak that to be a good Hindu was to be good Christian and that there was no need to “become” a Christian in order to be “a believer in the beauty of the teachings of Jesus or to try to follow his example” (Chatterjee, 1983, p.52).

7.5.3 Gandhi on Islam

Gandhi appreciated Islam for its two distinctive contributions to India’s national culture – firstly, for its unadulterated belief in the oneness of God and secondly, for its practical application of the truth of the brotherhood of man for all believers. Gandhi read a translation of the *Quran* and the life of the Prophet Mohammed, and was struck by the humiliations and hardships heaped upon him and his followers. In fact, Gandhi had advised Mirabehn, his English disciple, who had been reading the Upanishads, to read the Quran, and assured her that she would find many “gems” in it.

When Gandhi was told that Islam and its Prophet had prescribed the use of sword in certain circumstances, Gandhi replied: “I suppose most Muslims will agree. But I read religion in a different way. Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan derives his belief in non-violence from the Koran... I derive my belief in non-violence from the Gita, whereas others who read violence in it. [Even] if I came to the conclusion that the Koran teaches violence, I would still reject violence.... It is enough that my non-violence is independent of the sanction of scriptures” (CWMG, Vol. 64, p.399). At another place Gandhi expressed his view that in the Quran, “non-violence is enjoined as duty, violence is permitted as a necessity” (Nanda, 1995, p.140).

7.6 RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: EQUAL RESPECT FOR ALL RELIGIONS

Religion was viewed by Gandhi as the cementing foundation of the human community, for he believed that various religions were beautiful flowers from one garden or branches of the gigantic tree that all of them were equally true. “The Allah of Islam”, Gandhi wrote in 1938 in *Harijan*, “is the same as the God of the Christians and the Isvara of the Hindus. Living faith in this God means equal respect for all religions. It would be the height of intolerance – and intolerance is a species of violence – to believe that your religion is superior to other religions”. He said institutional religions were *roads* that led to the same destination (Parel, 1997, p.53). Or, they were the *rivers* that flowed into the same ocean (CWMG, Vol.7, p.338).

Gandhi was highly influenced by the Jain theory of *anekantavada*, the many-sidedness of the reality. He applied this theory to his concept of religion. That is why he said that many religions exist because there is many-sidedness of truth. All of them are equal in the sense that no single religion has the absolute or exclusive truth. Gandhi quoted the saint Narasimha that the different shapes into which gold was beaten gave rise to different names and forms; but ultimately it was all good. God’s grace and revelation were not the monopoly of any race or nation; they descended equally upon all who waited upon God. The one true religion, he asserted, subsequently became many “as it passed through the human medium” (CWMG, Vol. 44, p.166). In other words, God had revealed himself to the whole of humanity. At the same time, humanity expressed the meaning of the received revelation differently, depending on language and culture. The unity of religious truths was guaranteed because of their divine source, but their diversity became unavoidable because of culture, and the philosophical or theological systems that arose from them (Parel, 2006,

p.108). So, no religion was “absolutely perfect. All are equally imperfect or more or less perfect” (Cited in Singh, 2003, p.63). Gandhi says that religious pluralism is part of Indian culture, as we read in *Rig Veda*: “To what is One, sages give many a title”. According to the *Gita*, humans could approach God by different paths: “In whatsoever way any come to Me, in that same way I grant them favor” (Parel, 2006, p.108).

Equal respect for all religions recognises the equality of all religions (*sarvadharmā samānātva*). Gandhi saw two great values in the theory of religious pluralism. In the first place, it provided an objective basis for religious toleration within the state, and in the second place it supplied the foundation for the dialogue between religions (Parel, 2006, p.108). Moreover, as Gandhi wrote “Looking at all religions with an equal eye, we would not only not hesitate, but would think it our duty, to blend into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths” (Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir*, Ahmedabad, 1935, p.55). “My approach to other religions”, he wrote, “therefore, is never as a fault-finding critic but as a devotee hoping to find the like beauties in other religions and wishing to incorporate in my own the good I may find in them and miss in mine” (Iyer, 1986-87, Vol.1, p.544).

According to Gandhi, all religions are essentially identical because (a) it is the truth / God that inspires all religions; (b) all seek truth; they are different paths to the same goal; (c) all believe in moral order / a universe governed by moral law; this law is truth / God; (d) all affirm the same fundamental morality; and religion is essentially morality (non-violence, truth, love); (e) all respect a higher power; (f) all religions have served in embellishing mankind, all have produced great saints - i.e. self-sacrificing persons. The Buddha, Christ, Mohammad, Guru Nanak all lived lives of self-sacrifice and renunciation. So, there was an underlying unity in all religions. Gandhi said, “I don’t believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas. I believe the Bible, the Koran and the Zend Avesta to be as much divinely inspired as the Vedas (Jhamb, 2006, pp.300-301).

Critique of Gandhi’s Concept

Gandhi had many critics. Among the British critics were Archbishop Cosmo Lang and Lord Reading, the Viceroy of India. The former described him, in a letter to Lord Irwin, as “a mystic, fanatic and anarchist”, and the latter wrote after his first meeting with Mahatma that “Mr. Gandhi’s religious and moral views are... admirable, but...difficult to understand the practice of them in politics” (Nanda, 1995, p.127). The leaders of the Muslim League, the protagonists of the two-nation theory, disliked Gandhi’s insistence that the function of religion was to unite rather than divide people, and religion was an unsatisfactory basis for nationality. Three left-wing critics M.N.Roy, R.P.Dutt and Namboodiripad- have accused Gandhi of exploiting religion to rouse the masses, and then deliberately curbing their political consciousness in the interest of the Indian bourgeoisie. Many of his own supporters were uncomfortable with the moral constraints he imposed on the struggle with the British.

7.7 SUMMARY

Gandhi was one of the outstanding religious pioneers of all times. Several Christian leaders have spoken of him as the greatest since the time of Jesus (Keithahn, 1949, p.86). M. N. Roy, a communist and Radical Humanist, who had been sharply critical of Gandhi’s ‘religious approach to politics’, confessed later that he had failed to detect the secular approach of the Mahatma beneath the religious terminology and that essentially Gandhi’s message had been “moral, humanist, cosmopolitan”. The greatest contribution of Gandhi

is that he strengthened the concept of secularism in India. Though he was deeply religious, he was against any proposal for a State religion even if the whole population of India had professed the same religion. He looked upon religion as a personal matter: “The State would look after your secular welfare, health, communications, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody’s personal concern” (*Harijan*, 22-9-1946).

His first biographer, Joseph Doke, wrote that his religious views were too closely allied to Christianity to be entirely Hindu, and too deeply saturated with Hinduism to be called Christian. His sympathies were so wide and catholic that the formulae of sects appeared meaningless (Parel, 2006, p.110). In his lifetime he was variously labelled, a Sanatanist Hindu, a renegade Hindu, a Buddhist, a theosophist, a Christian and a “Christian Muhammadan”. He was all these and even more.

7.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What were the sources of Gandhi’s thoughts on reforming religions?
2. Why and how did Gandhi reconstruct Hinduism? How did he try to reconcile the concept of “violence” in *Gita*, justification of *varna* system and the practice of untouchability?
3. What reforms Gandhi suggests in other religions of India, especially Christianity, Islam and Buddhism?
4. Why did he believe in religious pluralism and in the principle of respect for all religions?

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UNIT 8 TRUTH IS GOD

Structure

8.1 Introduction

Aims and Objectives

8.2 'God is Truth' to 'Truth is God'

8.3 Absolute Truth and Relative Truth

8.4 Truth in Thought, Speech and Action

8.5 Means of Achieving Truth

8.5.1 Non-violence (Ahimsa)

8.5.2 Satyagraha

8.6 Summary

8.7 Terminal Questions

Suggested Readings

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'Truth is God' is central to Gandhi's philosophical, spiritual and political thought. It is one of those profound ideas which reflect the essence of Gandhian thought. Gandhi was deeply influenced by various religious traditions in India like Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism where the search for truth was common. It is widely held that Gandhi was not a systematic philosopher but one who could read the pulse of the people, capture the imagination of masses and visualise the implications of his ideas and actions. Like in all his other concepts, here too, one may witness interconnectedness between ideas, utterances and action. His experiments with truth were not meant to be inward-looking exercises in search of God, as was often the case with religious people in India. His search was conducted in the public domain, practised in community living, and was as connected to the world outside as to complex beliefs within him. Gandhi adhered to truth in his everyday life and involved other people in his experiments. His 'truth was a unique combination of a personal style of life and a technique for tackling injustices....' (Chatterjee, pp.58-59). Gandhi's exposition of truth carries this logic of his thought forward when he says that truth must be adhered to in one's thought, speech and action. Gandhi never questioned the existence of truth; it only had to be discovered.

The importance of truth in Gandhi's life and ideas can be gauged from the fact that truth is the basis of moral law and religious order. But it cannot be subordinated to any *particular* religious order; nor is it a substitute for God. For him, it helps in understanding what God means (Chatterjee, p.58). It is also the axle that hinges his constant search for right action. The assertion 'Truth is God' establishes the preeminence of truth over a particular religion. Truth is seen as the basis of all religions and hence more fundamental, morally absolute and in essence supremely irrefutable (Pradhan, pp.36-37). Although Gandhi equates truth with God, his concept is devoid of theological implications, for he does not intend to confine truth to any particular religion.

Gandhi places importance on truth as an ontological category. In fact, Gandhi's entire set of ideas have ontology as their basis and is reflected in the centrality accorded to the question of human existence (Alam, p.2). In his formulation *Truth is God*, he is making both an ontological as well as epistemological point. Ontologically, truth sustains all existence and being (sat = being), it means that the essence of God consists of truth. Epistemologically, the essence of God can be captured through truth, and that the only way to approach God is through truth (Sayeed, p.99). In fact, 'Truth is God' is similar to the ontological equation *Satya – Brahman* of the Upanishads, although Satya in the Upanishads is much more than an ontological term; it was a philosophical truth. For Gandhi, 'the search for truth is the *dharma* of Hinduism, that Truth is God, and that God is the essence of the Vow' (Rothermund, pp.97-99).

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand the essence of Gandhi's concept of Truth;
- know the reasons for Gandhi's reformulation of God is Truth to Truth is God;
- understand the features, facets and moral basis of the concept of Truth ;
- appreciate the practice of Truth in thought, speech and action; and
- know about the means of attaining truth – *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha*.

8.2 'GOD IS TRUTH' TO 'TRUTH IS GOD'

Truth is not independent of our moral values. Likewise, truth is not merely a cognitive notion; it is much more than that. Gandhi had initially stated that God is Truth. Gandhi reversed his statement God is Truth to Truth is God sometime in 1929. Gandhi evolves as a thinker when he moves from God is Truth to Truth is God. He explains that it is a culmination of his relentless search for Truth. He initially approached Truth through love but found soon enough that human love in terms of passion may have a tendency to degrade because it sometimes involves association with flesh. He also felt uneasy with the formulation of God as love because the latter can have varied meanings in different situations but the meaning of Truth did not suffer from such inconsistencies. There is more consensus and clarity on what is truth than what love means. Truth spontaneously resonated with everyone, even the atheists who were passionate seekers of Truth themselves. His exposition of the idea of Truth struck a chord with the followers of every religious sect, and non-followers as well, because it is the basis of one's quest that no one can deny. It is the inclusiveness of the idea Truth is God that enabled Gandhi to make a distinction from his earlier statement God is Truth and he explains that this earlier statement excluded atheists who did not believe in God but were staunch votaries of truth. Truth as an equivalent of God was an unacceptable proposition for atheists because of their conviction, but there was a certain kind of moral earnestness that made them serious seekers of truth in the same manner as those who believed in the existence of God. The moment one expresses Truth as an attribute of God, it is construed to be a dispassionate search for reality, devoid of any religious connotations – dogmatic or otherwise. He refers to an atheist acquaintance and says how he disarmed the latter by referring to him as a 'truth-fearing man, and not a God-fearing man' (Gandhi's address in Lausanne, Switzerland, 31 December 1931, reproduced in Ramana Murti, pp.73-74). Pandit Nehru also

acknowledged himself to be a follower of religion if it meant search for truth though he was impatient with the religious systems when they brought conflicts in their wake (S.K.George, 1949, p.97). The notion Truth is God includes everyone, agreed to by all, and disagreed by none as it reflects Truth's undivided quality.

Secondly, there are a number of difficulties in describing God no matter how we attempt it. But in many religions (Hinduism and Islam) God alone is and nothing else exists. 'Nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why *sat* or *satya* is the right name for God. In fact, it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say that God is Truth... On deeper thinking, however, it will be realized that *sat* or *satya* is the only correct and fully significant name for God.' Hence, he believes that the definition Truth is God is most satisfying and appropriate without excluding those who may approach God differently (Ramana Murti, 1970).

Thirdly, Truth has most qualities that God exemplifies: fearlessness, conscience, beyond sensory perception. Yet Gandhi believes that God is Truth leads in a way to the rejection of truth itself. In Hinduism, God alone exists and nothing else whereas etymologically the meaning of the term Truth, derived from the word *Sat*, is the one that exists. "The word *satya* comes from *sat*, which means "to be", "to exist". Only God is ever the same through all time. A thousand times honour to him who has succeeded, through love and devotion for *satya*, in opening out his heart permanently to its presence. I have been but striving to serve that truth." (Gandhi, cited in Ramana Murti, p.61). The expression God is Truth eliminates the possibility of the existence of Truth if one were to believe in Hinduism and Islam. Hence, the expression Truth is God is more appropriate as it does not exclude the existence of Truth or does not conflict with our belief in the oneness and exclusive existence of God. In fact, since God alone represents eternal being - the fundamental reality - He is the truth. Here, Gandhi releases his concept of Truth from theological connotations so that it is not sucked into any single religious system.

Fourthly, Sayeed gives a philosophical explanation to the reformulation of the idea of God is Truth by Gandhi. He claims that this reformulation was not a casual or more elegant expression preferred by Gandhi. It was to represent a deeper insight in the sense that the "assertion 'Truth is God' was an attempt to express an insight which sought to state a substance-attribute relation". In God is Truth, Truth becomes an attribute of God, one of the many attributes that God may represent. In this proposition, God is the substance, the fundamental core, and Truth is the attribute, one of the ways in which that substance can be understood. To thus "relegate truth to just one of the attributes of God is to fail to understand the nature of reality in question". When the assertion is reformulated to Truth is God, Truth becomes the primary attribute, the fundamental core. In fact, Truth is the essence of God (Sayeed, pp.97-99).

8.3 ABSOLUTE TRUTH AND RELATIVE TRUTH

Gandhi thought that there is an absolute Truth¹, which he identified with God, devoid of all imperfections and inconsistencies. Absolute Truth is total and all-embracing. But this absolute Truth is indescribable, neither easily cognisable nor easily attainable. In fact, what we ordinarily realise is relative truth and not absolute Truth. But at any given point of

¹ When Gandhi refers to absolute truth or the ultimate reality and equates it with God, he uses Truth with a capital T. In references to relative truth or individual's understanding of truth, it is written with a small t.

time, that (relative truth) becomes the whole truth. If we do not easily understand the absolute truth in our normal course of thought, it does not mean that it does not exist. Since absolute Truth is very difficult to reach, one must constantly and relentlessly strive towards realising it by acting in accordance with the truth as we see it. Since our efforts are imperfect in nature, Gandhi calls them (those efforts) as experiments with truth (Sayeed, p.87).

For Gandhi, truth is not a monolithic concept. It is plural in its essence, many-sided in its facets and is given to varied interpretations. Truth has spiritual, moral and metaphysical dimensions. Since our understanding of truth is relative, incomplete and fragmentary, our vision of truth is partial. Reality can be cognized in many different ways all of which are equally valid (Richards, p.7). Therefore we must respect others' understanding of truth, truth as they see it, which might be different from our own perception of it. Our imperfection in understanding absolute Truth warrants us to be tolerant towards others' perception of truth and their actions based on it. This tolerance towards others having a different point of view later becomes the source of Gandhi's insistence on non-violence as a means of achieving truth. Akeel Bilgrami believes that Gandhi believed in moral judgement but did not wish to extend or advocate his judgement or action as *the* correct method to attain truth in a given situation. He did not believe in formulating it as a principle to be followed by others. However, Gandhi's rigour in following what he held to be the morally correct path often set an example for others and was far more effective in practice.

Many have argued that Gandhi's notion of truth is not merely an epistemic issue or of theoretical concern alone. He transformed absolute truth of the philosophical sat to the relative truth of ethical principle capable of being tested and applied (Joan Bondurant, cited in Erikson, p.413). His idea of truth has moral and spiritual dimension of relevance to both individual and collective action. It is the overarching moral law that rules every other positive or man-made law enacted by the state (see Alam, pp.6, 9). If a man-made law is seen as contradicting the moral law, disobedience to such state law would be perfectly legitimate. The characteristics of Truth are that it is absolute, eternal, objective, beyond our sensory perceptions and difficult to reach the perfection. It is for this reason that Gandhi calls his search for truth as experiments. Absolute Truth is objective in nature, one that does not change with the changing perceptions. On the other hand, actual truth or relative truth is subjective in nature; it is not the same for each one of us and it changes according to our perception. Absolute Truth is central to a faith but it is not unique to any one religion or religious tradition. It is a universal value equated with all religions because it is God. If Truth is a superior value, then it is an objective to be attained, not an expediency to be employed.

Truth is to be attained and achieved in both private and public realm, at the level of the individual and the collective. In fact, as a logical extension of this reading of Gandhi's notion of truth, it is held that politics was the most natural vocation chosen by Gandhi as it lent him space in public domain within which he could experiment with truth. He saw religion (*dharma* here connotes both religion and one's sense of duty towards moral law) and politics as inseparable when he said, 'I do not believe that the spiritual law works in a field of its own. On the contrary, it expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, the social and political fields' (Gandhi, *Young India*, cited in Rothermund, p.98) Gandhi saw a natural unity and interconnectedness in spiritual, moral and political dimensions of his experiments with truth. If truth is the highest morality in itself then it is apparent that for Gandhi this was the essence of *dharma*.

8.4 TRUTH IN THOUGHT, SPEECH AND ACTION

Gandhi said that God appears not in person but in action. He advocated truth in thought, truth in speech and truth in action. Truth for him was not merely a philosophical concept; it was the basis of moral life and acted as a link between moral principles and our actions so that moral life can be attained in practice. His quest for truth involved ‘not only bhakti yoga, that is the discipline of prayer and devotion, but also karma yoga that is, the discipline of action’ (Richards, p.13). The primacy of putting moral principles (those that we hold as of paramount importance) into practice is to drive home the fact that truth as the moral law is to be adhered not in thought alone but that it has to be translated into action. Only then can one say that one has tried to live a moral life. There is an inevitable connection between thought, speech and action insofar as truth is concerned. “Truth is taken by Gandhi as the supreme principle of moral life since it is the law that regulates all human actions. All actions are judged as morally good if they are based on truth... Gandhian morality could be called the morality of truth.” (Pradhan, p.37). In our thoughts and intentions, in our words and gestures and in our decisions and actions there is no scope for straying from the path of Truth as we perceive it. However, what we can comprehend as truth is only partial truth. We cannot see beyond it but by following the path of partial truth, gradually, we will be able to experience the complete, absolute truth.

Since truth is the basis of all moral principles and actions, it is the supreme law and higher than any man-made law. Moral law based on truth is the **trump law** that overrides every other law in the same way as, say in a game of cards, the trump card overrules (trumps) every other card. Since truth as moral law is never wrong, ahimsa as a moral principle derived from it can never be wrong or unsuccessful. Truthful action, for Gandhi, was “governed by the readiness to get hurt and yet not hurt – action governed by the principle of *ahimsa*” (Erik Erikson, p.412) to which we will now turn.

8.5 MEANS OF ACHIEVING TRUTH

8.5.1 Non-violence (Ahimsa)

Satyagraha and non-violence are paths to realise truth. These methods may or may not succeed in empirical terms but they are corollary of truth and hence they can never be wrong. For Gandhi, non-violence is not merely a strategy to be employed to seek success in political action; it is rather the only moral method possible to attain relative truth. Non-violence is not only a moral method but is also a moral principle derived from truth. If ahimsa is seen merely as a tactic, it would make us believe that violence is right but cannot be employed as a tactic. Gandhi believed non-violence as the law of the universe, of every species and therefore, it cannot go wrong or be unsuccessful. Gandhi’s contention was that a means based on the natural law of the universe cannot run counter to our idea of truth. Truth is the end (goal) and non-violence is the means. Since ends and means are controvertible, a truthful person, by definition, is a non-violent person and *vice versa*. Non-violence automatically flows from truth. ‘While truth is the bed-rock principle, non-violence follows as a corollary’ (Pradhan, p.38). He believes in non-violence as the supreme duty and understands it in the broadest sense.

The need for ahimsa as a means for realising truth has two bases. Firstly, a seeker of truth must be a humble person and humility forbids the use of force. One cannot impose one’s will on others; or make others alter their perception of truth by sheer verbal or other force. Himsa or violence runs counter to love, compassion and humility which are

the attributes of truth. Ahimsa is an eternal principle because human existence depends on it. Secondly, ahimsa should be adopted not because it is a means to achieve truth but because it is the *only* method in arriving at truth and the most effective one too. It is in conformity with the law of the universe and hence bound to be successful. Non-violence fortifies the principle of existence because of its moral character. "Non-violence is the greatest force man has been endowed with. Truth is the only goal he has. For God is none other than truth. Truth cannot be, never will be, reached except through non-violence" (Iyer, p. 240).

Non-violence here is not to be understood as not killing alone; it means abstinence from any evil thought, hatred, vengeance, and wishing ill to others. Non-violence here is not only a refusal to inflict physical harm on others; it was also 'a determination not to violate another person's essence' (Erikson, p.412). Positively, ahimsa would involve love and goodwill towards others. Non-violence inheres and subsumes mutual love and respect for human life. It makes allowance for human progress. Adopting the path of non-violence will aid the realisation of truth because it respects others' life and instills a sense of love towards all existence. Ahimsa is the moral law that defines human existence in the same manner as violence is the law of the brute. Non-violence is meant to be practised not by the weak and infirm but by the strong for 'only the strong knows the limits of the physical strength'. One needs to know the boundaries of violence to realise non-violence. 'The might of non-violence is far superior to the total strength of violence in the world' (Pradhan, p.44).

Gandhi believed that non-violence required self-discipline of the body and mind since it might entail suffering and stretch one's patience to the limit in its wake. He prescribes that those who make individual search for truth must go through several vows or 'five restraints' to strengthen one's mind and body to be able to realise truth. They are: the vow of truth or satya, the vow of brahmacharya (celibacy), of non-violence, of non-stealing (asteya or poverty), and of non-possession (aparigraha). Although these vows were sacrosanct for a satyagrahi, Gandhi allowed non-observance of some of those vows if he felt that it was done in good faith. There are instances where he allowed his Bengali friends to eat non-vegetarian food when strict vegetarianism over an extended period of time affected their health and efficiency. Non-stealing and non-possession were interpreted as allowing oneself to possess the bare minimum that was needed for survival. Having anything more than what minimum needs warranted would amount to stealing. Gandhi felt that through such rigorous self-control and abstinence, a satyagrahi (the civil resister) must be able to 'compel reverence and love even of the opponent by the purity of his life, the utter selflessness of his mission and the breadth of his outlook' (Cited in Rothermund, p.105). In fact, he says that when someone lied before him he felt more angry with himself rather than with the offender because it made him realise that untruth still existed somewhere deep in him. It also made him aware of his own incompleteness, and inability in perfecting the path of satyagraha, that there was still an element of untruth remaining in him, so as not to be able to compel the offender to speak the truth.

8.5.2 Satyagraha

Satyagraha had a broader meaning than one can see in its literal translation. It was to mean both the insistence on truth and a method of holding on to that truth. Satyagraha for Gandhi meant fighting oppression through voluntary suffering. It was not physical force. One who believes in and lives by satyagraha should harbour no ill-will towards anyone,

should not utter harsh word about anyone, should not inflict harm on an adversary, and not seek destruction of opponents. This would be observance of satyagraha in thought, speech and action. At no time and in no circumstance can the use of arms be permitted in satyagraha; the struggle must be a constant reminder that it is based on truth and highest form of non-violence (Iyer, pp.309, 314-315). In fact, where conditions of satyagraha like non-violence, insistence on truth, selfless suffering were not met, Gandhi termed it as *duragraha* (dur = evil and agraha = insistence). *Duragraha* is defined as the abuse of satyagraha. It involves both the use of force or coercion and ‘the persistence of wrong doing’. “Whatever is done with a selfish motive cannot be called *satyagraha*. That would be like insisting on untruth. ...two things are essential for *satyagraha*. One is that the point on which we insist should be truth and another that our insistence should be necessarily non-violent” (Iyer, p.328.)

Satyagraha is premised on voluntary self-control, discipline and restraints as its prerequisites. Since Gandhi regarded Truth as a moral duty of every person, insistence on truth (satyagraha) at every stage was important. Just as non-violence involves the vow of truth, satyagraha involves non-violence, love, sacrifice and the like. Satyagraha must be followed in private and public domain, in political and non-political sphere, so that there is no sphere or space left where actions based on untruth may occur. One who follows the path of truth does so in every action and at every stage and in all circumstances. Since the path of truth is full of suffering, satyagraha is understood to be suffering, struggle and sacrifice for which a satyagrahi must for ever prepare himself. If need be, he must be ready to lay down his life for truth. When satyagraha is used as a political weapon, it has the inherent ability to succeed but it must never be used to force and coerce the opponent to fall in line. The moment an element of coercion finds its way into satyagraha, it ceases to be a means of achieving truth.

A seeker of truth, one who serves truth with utmost humility, will never suffer defeat because truth always triumphs. Even when it appears that a satyagrahi has failed, it is only an appearance. The result may not be a desired one but it is a victory in itself. Satyagraha is an infallible remedy. Eventually, it is the truth that prevails over untruth. Therefore, even in the face of difficulties, a satyagrahi must never give up his path of truth, for this path is only for the brave and never for a coward. Many, who aspire to follow truth scrupulously, hardly succeed in doing so even in the limited sphere of speech. So vow of truth is no easy matter.

8.6 SUMMARY

Let us briefly recapitulate here the main aspects of Gandhi’s conception of truth. It is now fairly clear from what has been discussed in the preceding pages that truth is central to his entire thought and life. There is a logical interconnectedness in all his ideas which is reflected in his notion of truth as well. It is a moral and religious idea but is devoid of any theological connotations. Truth, for Gandhi, is the basis of all religions and it is not specific to any single or particular religion.

Truth has both ontological and epistemological connotations. Truth is the only means that helps us to be cognisant of God and truth is also the only means that allows us to access Him. However, truth is an important and an irrefutable category even for those who do not believe in God, but are earnest seekers of truth, because it is not merely a way of reaching God but is a moral value that must be pursued and achieved. Gandhi makes a distinction between absolute truth and relative truth. Absolute truth is objective, unchanging,

neutral, and independent. Relative truth is subjective, particular, mutable and person-specific. Gandhi accords importance to both these categories in that absolute truth is not easily attainable and therefore, one must constantly endeavour to reach it through relative truth as we see and understand it.

Gandhi began with the formulation 'God is Truth' and moved to 'Truth is God' later on. He assigns many reasons for this shift such as the need to include atheists who are seekers of truth, God as love being problematic because love is subjective (one that means different thing to different people) besides having a tendency to degrade due to its association with flesh, and that in Hinduism and Islam, God alone is and nothing else exists.

Gandhi identifies non-violence (ahimsa) and satyagraha as the two means of achieving truth. Truth is to be attained in thought, speech and action. Since non-violence is the law of our species, it is always in accordance with nature. What is natural can never be against truth. A non-violent person must be a humble man and must exercise five restraints to discipline his mind and body. Satyagraha as the other means of attaining truth advocates speaking truth at all times and is related to non-violence as a practice. Satyagraha can never fail. It is bound to succeed although in the short run the results may seem to be to the contrary. Satyagraha and non-violence are predicated upon each other. One cannot work without the other.

8.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Highlight the importance of the concept of truth in Gandhian thought.
 2. Discuss the various reasons as to why Gandhi believes that Truth is God is a better formulation than God is Truth.
 3. What is the difference between absolute truth and relative truth?
 4. How do you relate truth in thought, speech and action to the concept of ahimsa?
 5. Define satyagraha and underline its importance as a means of achieving truth.
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GLOSSARY

Epistemology – It is the theory of knowledge concerned with the nature, sources and limits of knowledge. 'What can we know and how do we know it?' The question about knowledge can be divided into four main groups – concerning its nature, its types, what is known and its origin.

Metaphysics (Ontology) – The question of metaphysics arise out of, but go beyond, factual and scientific questions about the world. A central part of metaphysics is ontology that is used to refer to philosophical investigation of existence, of study of being. Ontology borders on philosophy of religion with questions like: Does anything exist necessarily? Ontology helps us in seeking clarity about the nature of reality.

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