

Gandhi, Religion and Multiculturalism: An Appraisal

Siby K Joseph

ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism has become a dominant theme in the political discourse all over the world. But there is no unanimity among scholars about its exact meaning and implications. It is important to understand multiculturalism in the context of the changing character of Nation States which is marked by the absence of any single national identity. Today multiculturalism is being looked upon from both the positive and negative angles. Some scholars view it as a panacea for the growing menace of divisiveness in the world, whereas others take it as a challenge for their dominant culture and nationhood. More than any other country, India needs to grasp its full implications in view of its multi cultural and multi religious character. This paper primarily attempts to place Gandhi in the ongoing multicultural discourse by analysing his concept of religion and its significance in the present day context of growing religious divide in India as well as in the world. It argues that Gandhi's concept of Sarva Dharma Samabhava (Equal respect for all religions) goes far beyond the concept of multiculturalism. In fact, it could very well be taken as a positive and constructive multicultural approach which offers a way out of the present cultural, religious and ethnic conflicts and cleavages. This paper also analyses the Gandhian praxis of multiculturalism during India's struggle for independence.

THERE HAS BEEN a growing tendency all over the world to identify and segregate people along religious, ethnic and linguistic lines. This growing divide raises a real threat to the peaceful co-existence of divergent human civilizations. However, among these challenges, it is the religious divide which adversely affects the normal and tranquil life of people of many countries. So much so that social scientists like

January–March 2012

Samuel P. Huntington have started talking about the clash of civilizations.¹ What has given further momentum to this line of thinking is the fundamentalists' attempt to use religious identity to spread the venom of hatred and conflicts among various communities. They even go to the extent of waging war against many nations which do not go along their way. The attack on world trade centre on September 9/11 in 2001 and subsequent attacks in different parts of the globe have brought the issue of religious fundamentalism to the centre stage of international affairs. To overcome this precarious situation, the western countries under the leadership of United States of America declared war against certain countries with the avowed purpose of containing and eliminating religious fundamentalism and its concomitant cross national terrorism. Their all out attempts have failed to contain the menace of religious fundamentalism. In fact, it has further exacerbated the situation leading to mushrooming of such elements.

A number of thinkers are seriously concerned about finding ways and means to tackle this growing peril confronting mankind. Samuel P Huntington looks at the whole problem in terms of clash of civilizations. He is of the firm opinion that in the coming years there would be a serious conflict between the western civilization and the Islamic civilization. He further avers that an idea like multiculturalism could hardly meet the challenge. In fact he argues that multiculturalism is essentially an anti-western, particularly anti-American, ideology. Huntington's primary grouse against multiculturalism is that it denies the existence of a common American culture and it promotes racial, ethnic, and other subnational cultural identities and groupings. He looks upon multiculturalism as a challenge to American identity.² However, his thesis has been widely debated and contested by a number of scholars who look at multiculturalism as the only real antidote to religious fundamentalism and cross national terrorism. Multiculturalism is being looked upon as the only practical option before humanity for responding to the challenge of diverse cultural, ethnic and religious identities. It is much more than mere toleration of group diversity. In essence, it stands for treating, accommodating and recognising all members as equal citizens whether they belong to minority or majority groups. A brief and succinct discussion on multiculturalism is a necessary prerequisite for its proper evaluation and understanding.

Understanding Multiculturalism

The concept of multiculturalism emerged in the western society in the 1970s especially in the context of the Canadian attempt to tackle the problem of immigrants. It soon became an integral part of Canadian

official policy during the premiership of Pierre Elliot Trudeau in the 1970s and 1980s. Soon it spread to Australia, USA, UK, and some other countries of the European Union. Subsequently, it has become a dominant political ideology in the West. It would not be out of context to describe some of the factors which significantly contributed to the emergence of multiculturalism as a dominant policy of various governments. The failed attempts at assimilation and homogenisation of various Nation States created a situation conducive to a search for a new policy which could preserve and promote the diverse identities without adversely affecting the overall unity of the social fabric. In fact, the old policy of assimilation had created conflict situations in various countries. Not only that, there was also a new awakening among different groups towards their primordial consciousness and relative deprivation. What gave a new impetus to this trend was the predominance of human rights approach in the arena of public policy. Perhaps the bitter memories of ethnic cleansing during the holocaust, collapse of colonialism and totalitarian regimes also contributed towards the development of multiculturalism. It is also relevant to mention that in a number of western countries ethnic studies were introduced primarily with a view to underline the significant contributions made by the minority groups. As a result, there was growing self confidence and consciousness among the minorities about their distinct identities. All these factors made multiculturalism a dominant theme of political discourse towards the end of the 20th century.

The term multiculturalism has been used in different contexts with varying connotations. Will Kymlicka in his work *Multicultural Citizenship* uses the term multiculturalism in a restricted sense focusing on ethnic groups and national minorities and not marginal or disadvantaged groups like gays, the poor, women et al. According to him, "a state is multicultural if its members either belong to different nations (a multination state), or have emigrated from different nations (a polyethnic state), and if this fact is an important aspect of personal identity and political life."³ In the context of multiculturalism, Charles Taylor emphasises the necessity for developing a "politics of recognition" in favour of minority cultures. By the supposed links between recognition and identity, Taylor argues that there is urgency for the demand for recognition in the case of multiculturalism. "The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition

or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being".⁴ Amartya Sen, while discussing the term multiculturalism, makes a subtle distinction between multiculturalism and "plural monoculturalism." According to him genuine multiculturalism is marked by the existence of a diversity of cultures, which tend to interact and even intermingle among themselves. On the other hand, existence of various cultural traditions co-existing side by side, without the twain meeting, could be nothing more than plural monoculturalism.⁵ Andrew Heywood underscores two forms of multiculturalism - descriptive and normative. According to him, the former refers to cultural diversity whereas the latter implies a positive endorsement of such diversity.⁶ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes multiculturalism as an umbrella term to characterise the moral and political claims of a wide range of disadvantaged groups, including African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and the disabled. Most of the theorists of multiculturalism tend to focus their arguments on immigrants who constitute ethnic and religious minorities (e.g. Latinos in the U.S., Muslims in Western Europe), minority nations (e.g. Catalans, Basque, Welsh, Québécois), and indigenous peoples (e.g. Native peoples in North America, Maori in New Zealand).⁷

Bhikhu Parekh, one of the prominent political theorists, and who has researched extensively on multiculturalism, in one of his books entitled *Rethinking Multiculturalism* defines it as follows: "multiculturalism is not about difference and identity *per se* but about those that are embedded in and sustained by culture; that is, a body of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of people understand themselves and the world and organize their individual and collective life."⁸ According to him multiculturalism could be virtually taken as synonym for cultural diversity. It is entirely of a different genre from other types of differences. He underlines three different types of cultural diversity viz. subcultural diversity, perspectival diversity and communal diversity. In his view, groups like lesbians, gays and the like could be put under subcultural diversity as they seek nothing more than to pluralise the existing dominant culture. Some other groups like the feminists seek to reconstitute the dominant culture in their own perspective. Hence, Parekh puts them under the category of perspectival diversity. But it is the communal diversity, Parekh emphasises, which constitutes the core of multiculturalism. He illustrates it by referring to well established cultural groups like Jews, Gypsies and recent immigrant groups.⁹ Parekh's view on multiculturalism has been widely accepted as a major contribution

towards political discourse. However his critics like Joshua Broady Preiss contest it by saying that it is his ambiguity of views which enables him "to avoid the sort of charges he levels against other responses to diversity ,including those of such authors Rawls, Habermas, Kymlicka and Raz."¹⁰ Another line of attack on the concept of multiculturalism has been that in its attempt to replace the simile of "melting pot" by "flower pot" it creates a very congenial ground for all kinds of conflict situations. This is so because multiculturalism goes against the Nation State's attempt to cultivate ultimately a distinctive national identity.

Multiculturalism in the Indian Context

The need for promoting the idea of multiculturalism could hardly be over- emphasised particularly in many eastern societies which are rich in various kinds of diversity. It is interesting to note that among all countries of the world, India has a very rich and varied experience in dealing with what Parekh calls cultural diversity. The Indian society has been multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-racial , multi- ethnic and multi-linguistic from time immemorial. However, India has also encountered various kinds of divisiveness. Therefore, the biggest challenge before countries like India is to preserve the pluralistic tradition and to bring the various communities into the mainstream society by promoting the spirit of multiculturalism. Concerned citizens in India are worried over the alarming situation of current communal disharmony and there is fear that it might ultimately result in the disintegration of the nation. It is unfortunate that unscrupulous politicians with an eye on vote banks are indirectly supporting the forces promoting narrow religious sentiments, and linguistic and regional identity. Building bridges of solidarity among different religious communities in India is essential to preserve the secular, pluralistic and multicultural credentials of the country. In the context of such a challenge, the initiative and concerted effort made by Gandhi may provide a framework for thought and action.

In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse Gandhi's approach to religion and its implications for promoting multiculturalism. Some of the important themes discussed here are Gandhi's concept of religion including his attitude towards Hindu religion, his vision of *Sarva Dharma Samabhava*, and the significance of Gandhi's constructive multiculturalism. This paper also deals with a brief history of Gandhi's praxis of multiculturalism especially during the struggle for Indian independence.

Gandhi's Concept of Religion

Gandhi was born in a Hindu *Vaishnava* family. His father Karamchand Gandhi was an intensely religious man. His mother Putlibhai too was staunch in religious observances, being closely associated with Pranami faith of Shri Pran Nath which stood for amity among different religions. Though born in such a religious environment young Gandhi exhibited no signs of proclivity towards any kind of religious belief. However, he got an early grounding in religious tolerance from the acquaintance of his family with different sects of Hinduism, close contacts of his parents with Jain monks, friendship of his father with Muslims and Parsis and discussions on religious matters in the family. All these factors inculcated in the mind of young Gandhi the seeds of religious tolerance and a multicultural approach. The sojourn in England was a turning point in Gandhi's life as it provided him an opportunity to get acquainted with various religions. His association with many prominent theosophists prompted him to undertake study of scriptures of different faiths including his own. His reading of religious scriptures left him with an impression that much was common to these religions. In the words of Joseph Doke, the first biographer of Gandhi, "These different influences helped to quicken and mature his thought, and at any rate, to sweep away the fragments of his boyish atheism. God had become a reality."¹¹ The religious spirit awakened in Gandhi during his London days was further enriched by his frequent discourses with Rajchandra, a profound Jain philosopher.¹² During his long stay in South Africa, Gandhi's syncretic faith partook many elements from various religious traditions giving it a deep and abiding form. He made several spiritual experiments including ashram living (Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm) and the vow of *brahmacharya*. All these influences and experiments greatly contributed towards his living faith, which remained a driving force throughout his life.

Gandhi called himself a *sanatani* Hindu. The ethical and spiritual outlook of Hinduism had deep imprints in the minds of Gandhi. He explains: "The chief value of Hinduism lies in holding the actual belief that all life (not only human beings, but all sentient beings) is one, i.e., all life coming from the One universal source, call it Allah, God or Parameshwara."¹³ This unity and oneness of all creations constitute the foundation of Gandhi's relational world view. Gandhi often acknowledged the profound impact of Bhagavad-Gita on his life. However, he considered the Mahabharata war in this great epic as allegorical and not historical. His interpretation of the Gita as – *anasaktiyoga* – selfless action as the quintessence of the work differed

from the traditional understanding of the book. It is to be noted that Hinduism according to Gandhi was not an exclusive religion. It was rather a broad and inclusive faith accommodating the best in other religions. For him it is the most tolerant and open minded religion. Gandhi explains the quintessence of a *sanatani* Hindu in the following words. "I know that friends get confused when I say I am a *Sanatanist* Hindu and they fail to find in me things they associate with a man usually labeled as such. But that is because, in spite of my being a staunch Hindu, I find room in my faith for Christian and Islamic and Zoroastrian teaching, and, therefore, my Hinduism seems to some to be a conglomeration and some have even dubbed me an eclectic. Well, to call a man eclectic is to say that he has no faith, but mine is a broad faith which does not oppose Christians-not even a Plymouth Brother—not even the most fanatical Mussalman. It is a faith based on the broadest possible toleration. I refuse to abuse a man for his fanatical deeds because I try to see them from his point of view. It is that broad faith that sustains me. It is a somewhat embarrassing position, I know-but to others, not to me!"¹⁴ He also believed in the *Varnashrama Dharma* of Hinduism. But for him it was a universal law and it has nothing to do with superiority and inferiority. As he himself put it, "My *Varnashrama* enables me to dine with anybody who will give me clean food, be he Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi, whatever he is. My *Varnashrama* accommodates a *pariah* girl under my own roof as my own daughter. My *Varnashrama* accommodates *Panchama* families with whom I dine with the greatest pleasure, to dine with whom is a privilege."¹⁵ Thus his faith in *Sanatana Dharma* and *Varnashram* did not come in the way of his respect for diverse religious traditions and equality of all people irrespective of their caste and creed.

Gandhi's concept of religion was a unique one. Gandhi looked upon religions as pathways to the same ultimate reality. Gandhi, in his seminal work *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (1909), expressed his view on religion eloquently. "Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal? In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals."¹⁶ Thus it is evident that from the very beginning of his public life he looked upon religion from a multi cultural perspective. Though Gandhi was loyal to the essential teachings of Hinduism, but for him there was no religion higher than truth and righteousness. He declared his stand on religion in *Young India* in 1920. He wrote, "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 Hinduism, which changes 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."¹⁷ This also reflects his incessant search for the quintessence of all religions. Evidently Gandhi's vision of Hinduism is entirely of his own and differs radically from the commonplace view. Gandhi retained his eclectic view on religion throughout his life.

In January 1935, in connection with his study of religion, Dr S. Radhakrishnan placed three questions before Gandhi. These questions were: 1. What is your religion? 2. How are you led to it? 3. What is its bearing on social life? The answers to these questions constitute the essence of Gandhi's understanding of religion.

" My religion is Hinduism which, for me, is religion of humanity and includes the best of all the religions known to me.

I take it that the present tense in the second question has been purposely used instead of the past. I am being led to my religion through Truth and Nonviolence, i.e. love in the broadest sense. I often describe my religion as religion of Truth, of late, instead of saying God is Truth, I have been saying Truth is God, in order more fully to define my religion. I used at one time to know by heart the thousand names of God which a booklet in Hinduism gives in verse form and which perhaps tens of thousands recite every morning. But nowadays nothing so completely describes my God as Truth. Denial of God we have known. Denial of Truth we have not known. The most ignorant among mankind have some truth in them. We are all sparks of Truth. The sum total of this spark is indescribable, as yet unknown Truth, which is God. I am being daily led nearer to it by constant prayer.

The bearing of this religion on social life is, or has to be, seen in one's daily social contact. To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life. Realisation of Truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in and identification with this limitless ocean of life. Hence, for me, there is no escape from social service; there is no happiness on earth beyond or apart from it. Social service here must be taken to include every department of life. In this scheme there is nothing low, nothing high. For, all is one, though we *seem* to be many."¹⁸ It is clear from Gandhi's answers that his perception of religion has no trace of dogmatism and fundamentalism. It was not in any way connected with denominational religion.

Sarva Dharma Samabhava – Beyond Multiculturalism

Gandhi's syncretic approach to religion is primarily reflected in his idea of *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* (Equal respect for all religions). It is central to his philosophy of life, being one of the eleven vows, primarily prescribed for every inmate of his ashrams. It needs to be emphasised that the idea of *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* goes much beyond secularism and multiculturalism. As pointed out by Mrinal Miri, in his book *Identity and the Moral Life*, the liberal position on the problem of secularism is essentially related to tolerance of different religions which virtually amounts to a kind of indifference. But Gandhi's *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* is premised on the understanding that the truth underlying all religions is one and the same though their pathways may be different. Therefore, Miri asserts, Gandhi's vision could lead to a state of international fellowship of all religions.¹⁹ Gandhi's attitude towards religion was not of patronising toleration, rather it sought to develop the spirit of fellowship which help a Hindu to become a better Hindu, a Mussalman to become a better Mussalman, and a Christian to become a better Christian. His respect and veneration for other faiths was the same as that of his own faith. He believed in the fundamental equality of all religions. However, while accepting the doctrine of equality he distinguished between religion and irreligion. He refused to tolerate irreligion in the name of reverence for other religions.

On several counts, Gandhi's approach to religion goes far beyond religious pluralism and secularism. Firstly, by emphasising on the religion of truth he included the secular or even the atheist and the humanist in the realm of religion. Gandhi's approach to religion was so broad that it could very well accommodate even the atheists. Gandhi was familiar with the fact that atheists only disbelieve God and not the truth. Therefore, there is no wonder why an atheist like Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (Gora) became a close associate of Gandhi. Gora himself said "I cannot remove god, if god were truth."²⁰ On another occasion Gora further stated: "Atheists regard truthfulness as a social necessity. Truth binds man to man in association. Without truth there can be no social organization."²¹ Gora knew that Gandhi was not averse to atheism if it tended to civilize humanity. Thus Gandhi's approach to religion moves from religious pluralism to positive or constructive multiculturalism.²²

Secondly, religion was basic to Gandhi's life, thought and action. All his activities from spiritual to mundane including politics were governed by the spirit of religion. Gandhi revolutionised the very notion of religion and politics. But his conception of religion was

entirely different as it underscored the ethical side of religion free from all kinds of creedal rites and rituals. In Gandhi's scheme of things religion, morality and ethics are closely interwoven and they cannot be separated. "Religion is to morality what water is to the seed that is sown in the soil."²³ That is why Gandhi's religion is often referred to as ethical religion. One's religion is reflected in the day-to-day activities of an individual. One can understand Gandhi's religion by observing his life in general. Gandhi wrote: "You must watch my life, how I live, eat sit, talk, behave in general. The sum total of all those in me is my religion."²⁴ Similarly, for him politics was nothing but a major instrument of service to the people totally free from all games of power politics. Gandhi realised that he couldn't do even social work without politics. At the same time he was also aware that he could not pursue politics without a deep religious sensibility. He unequivocally stated: "That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means".²⁵ Gandhi introduced the values of religion and deep religious sensitivity into the political realm.

Thirdly, Gandhi, while establishing a close linkage between religion and politics, was not in favour of a theocratic State patronising a particular religion or even supporting all religions equally. According to him the State should look after secular welfare, health, communications, foreign affairs and so on and not one's religion. Religion is purely a personal concern. "If I were a dictator, religion and State would be separate. I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The State has nothing to do with it".²⁶ Thus it is clear that he was contemplating a secular state in free India which would give freedom to its citizens to express religious, atheist or any other identity.

Fourthly, Gandhi did not favour any particular religion or foresee the need for conversion of people belonging to other faiths to a particular religion. He was aware of the danger of one single religion dominating the country or the world. Gandhi believed that each religion is valuable and one should find spiritual fulfillment in one's own religious tradition. Gandhi drew the following conclusions from a reverential study of all religions. "1) all religions are true; 2) all religions have some error in them; 3) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to one as one's own close relatives."²⁷ The religions are conveyed through a human medium and there are imperfections in them, and they are liable to error. Therefore, they should always

subject themselves to “a process of evolution and reinterpretation”. He believed that every formula of religion should be subjected to the acid test of reason and he scrutinised every scripture, including the Gita, before acceptance. “Scriptures cannot transcend reason and truth. They are intended to purify reason and illuminate truth.”²⁸ He also underscored the value of faith, which may not conform to reason. He believed that it is the duty of a person to point out the defects in one’s own religion in order to purify and keep it pure. There is no need to renounce one’s religion because of imperfections in it and embrace another. On the contrary, one should try to enrich one’s own religion by drawing the best from other religions. However Gandhi was not against true conversion out of one’s own inner conviction and he differentiated it from proselytization. “Conversion is a matter between man and his maker who alone knows His creatures’ hearts. And conversion with out a clean heart is, in my opinion, a denial of God and religion.”²⁹

Fifthly, he believed that true knowledge of religions will break down the narrow barriers and also help to understand one’s own religion better. Gandhi encouraged his followers to undertake the study of the scriptures of other religions apart from one’s own religion. In the prayer meetings of the Ashram, Gandhi made it a practice to read a passage from scriptures of various religions to promote inter-religious understanding. He used to read the New Testament of the Bible with the students of Gujarat Vidyapith (an educational institution founded by him in the wake of non-cooperation movement in 1920.) In the face of public protest Gandhi wrote in *Young India* an article entitled “Crime of Reading Bible”, which said: “I hold that it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others’ religions as we would have them respect our own, a friendly study of the world’s religions is a sacred duty...I regard my study and reverence for the Bible, the Koran and the other scriptures to be wholly consistent with my claim to be a staunch *sanatani* Hindu . . . My respectful study of other religions has not abated my reverence for and my faith in the Hindu scriptures. They have broadened my view of life. They have enabled me to understand more clearly many an obscure passage in the Hindu scriptures.”³⁰

Finally, Gandhi was not advocating the merger of all religions into one. He was trying to find out commonalities in various religions and promote mutual tolerance. “The need of the moment is not one religion but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of different religions. We want to reach not the dead level but unity in diversity. Any attempt to root out traditions, effects of heredity, climate and

other surroundings is not only bound to fail but is a sacrilege. The soul of religion is one but it is encased in a multitude of forms. The latter will persist to the end of time. Wise men will ignore the outward crust and see the same soul living under a variety of crusts."³¹

Praxis of Multiculturalism in Gandhian Movement

It is clear from Gandhi's various writings including his *Autobiography* that, from the very beginning, he had a very liberal eclectic view of religion. That is why he did not find it difficult even during his South African days to build up a cross cultural - religious support base. It is to be noted that businessmen mainly of Muslim community and Tamil indentured labourers constituted the core of his *Satyagraha* campaigns. This trend continued even when he shifted to India in 1915. His initial *Satyagrahas* in Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad further expanded his all inclusive support base. But it was Rowlatt Satyagraha followed by Khilafat and Non-cooperation movement which put him on the all India political map of the country. Muslim community provided a significant base of his campaigns. Despite some setback with the withdrawal of Non-cooperation - Khilafat movement and communal riots visiting the country during 1923-24 - , Gandhi never lost hope of building up an all inclusive national movement. In the process, he sat on 21 days fast at Mohammad Ali's house in Delhi in 1924 and followed it up by persuading various political groups to set up a committee to formulate a Constitution for India by reconciling the interests of different communities. It was this report which subsequently came to be known as the Nehru Report. Unfortunately for India the said report could not be made acceptable to All Parties Conference in Calcutta in 1928. Thus India missed a great opportunity of communal harmony for which Gandhi had worked incessantly. He picked up the thread again during the Civil Disobedience movement. Gandhi was dead against the British policy of dividing the people of India on the basis of religion and the vivisection of the country. He emphasised on the diverse collective identities of Indians instead of their religious identities and promoted the spirit of multiculturalism. This point has been emphasised by scholars of eminence like Amartya Sen in his writings especially referring to the stand taken by Gandhi in the Second Round Table Conference.³² It needs to be mentioned that this Conference was called by the British government in 1931 to discuss the question of a fresh constitutional framework for India. The British Government used various leaders representing different communities to question the credential of Congress and

Gandhi to speak on behalf of all the communities. Gandhi on behalf of Indian National Congress contested the fact of his being described primarily as a spokesman for Hindus, in particular “caste Hindus.” He also controverted the British assertion that the rest of the communities were being represented by delegates chosen by the British prime minister. He asserted the right of the Congress to speak for every section of Indian society in the Conference. In his address to the Federal Structure Committee meeting of the said Conference held on September 15, 1931, Gandhi said, “I am but a poor humble agent acting on behalf of the Indian National Congress.... It represents no particular community, no particular class, no particular interest. It claims to represent all Indian interests and all classes. It is a matter of the greatest pleasure to me to state that it was first conceived in an English brain: Allan Octavius Hume we knew as the father of the Congress. It was nursed by two great Parsis, Pheroze Shah Mehta and Dadabhai Naoroji, whom all India delighted to recognize as its Grand Old Man. From the very commencement the Congress had Mussalmans, Christians, Anglo-Indians—I might say all the religions, sects, creeds—represented upon it more or less fullyAbove all , the Congress represents, in its essence, the dumb, semi starved millions scattered over the length and breadth of the land in its 700,000 villages...”³³ This address was nothing but a reassertion of Gandhi’s multicultural approach to Indian politics and society. Elaborating on the same theme at the Plenary Session of the Round Table Conference on December 1, 1931, he went a step further by stating that “I said at one of the preliminary meetings of the Federal Structure Committee that the Congress claimed to represent over 85per cent of the population of India, that is to say, the dumb, toiling, semi-starved millions. But I went further: that the Congress claimed also by right of service to represent even the Princes, if they would pardon my putting forth that claim, and the landed gentry, the educated class. I wish to repeat that claim and I wish this evening to emphasize that claim .All the other parties at this meeting represent sectional interests. Congress alone claims to represent the whole of India, all interests. It is no communal organization; it is a determined enemy of communalism in any shape or form. Congress knows no distinction of race, colour or creed; its platform is universal.”³⁴ Subsequently, the Communal Award came in August 1932 which was nothing but a dubious attempt to separate and snatch away the depressed classes from Hindu fold by providing a separate electoral system for them. This was a kind of promoting identity politics by the British in the name of depressed classes.

As promised during the Round Table Conference, Gandhi sat fast unto death on 20th September 1932 which ultimately led to the Poona Pact on 26 September 1932. The same multicultural approach on the part of Gandhi and Congress was reflected during 1937 elections in which every community was accommodated and also in the formation of several provincial governments. Meanwhile came the Second World War in September, 1939 and Gandhi tried to align with Jinnah to present a united national front before the Government. However the Government succeeded in creating a wedge between Congress and Muslim League which prompted Jinnah to oppose the Quit India Movement by siding with the Government. But Gandhi was so persistent in his all community inclusive approach that he entered into a long dialogue with Jinnah again in September 1944. But nothing much came out of it as Jinnah was not prepared to take anything less than Pakistan. The Cabinet mission of 1946 tried to lead India to independence without partition. Gandhi was willing initially to support a proposal for united India with some kind of autonomy to the provinces provided they were not compelled to join any grouping. Jinnah went back and called for direct action day during August 1946. The period from August 1946 to January 1948 marked most valiant effort on the part of Gandhi to keep India united by accommodating every Indian community in the new scheme of things. In the process, he went around Noakhali, Calcutta, Bihar and Delhi and used every instrument from his spiritual armoury to lead India towards independence by keeping it united. Not only that, in this effort, he even went to the extent offering the prime ministership of India to Jinnah. Unfortunately in the prevailing situation of communal frenzy there were no takers for Gandhi's proposal. Ultimately India became independent but with partition. It is evident from the above survey that Gandhi throughout his political pilgrimage never flinched from his basic approach of positive multiculturalism. He even sacrificed his life while pursuing the goal of interreligious harmony.

Concluding Remarks

In the preceding sections an attempt has been made to deal with enunciation and evolution of the idea of multiculturalism as well as Gandhi's concept of religion and his praxis in various fields especially in the freedom movement. It is evident from the above that Gandhi made a major contribution to the multicultural discourse both in terms of thought and action. It hardly matters that Gandhi did not use such terms as multiculturalism but the

above survey amply illustrates that all that he was thinking and doing could be interpreted and elaborated in the present dialogue on multiculturalism. It is also a fact that theory and praxis of multiculturalism is facing a lot of critical attack. The recent violent incidents in some of the western countries including Norway are illustrative of this trend. Besides, even some of the heads of the governments are openly questioning the multicultural policy of their governments. It is quite clear that Gandhi's understanding of religion and his multicultural approach has great significance in the context of growing communal divide and religious fundamentalism in different parts of the globe including India. The broad vision of Gandhi, the radical interpretations of the various ideas and concepts in the sphere of religion can go a long way in promoting harmony among various religious faiths and communities not only in India but also in the entire world. It has great value especially to preserve the composite culture of many countries. The equality of all religions or *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* of Gandhi provides a foundation for building healthy and enriching relations between religions. The spirit of Gandhi's religion not only could promote religious tolerance, but also provide scope for religious dialogue which will narrow down the differences between various faiths. Gandhi recognised, respected and accepted the religious, secular, and cultural identities of the people. By emphasising the diverse identities Gandhi promoted the idea of multiculturalism for countries like India, which is so diverse in terms of religion and culture. This approach has great significance in the contemporary world which is plagued by religious fundamentalism and communalism. In short, Gandhi's vision of preserving cultural, ethnic and religious diversities into broad framework of unity could remain as a blueprint for the ongoing debate on multiculturalism and religious fundamentalism with the whole gamut of issues involved.

Notes and References

1. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
2. *Ibid.* See also Samuel P. Huntington, *Who are we? The Challenge to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).
3. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995), p. 18.
4. Charles Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*

January–March 2012

- (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994), p. 25.
5. Amartya Sen *The Uses And Abuses of Multiculturalism: Chili and Liberty*, See <http://pierretristam.com/Bobst/library/wf-58.htm>
 6. Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 313.
 7. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/multiculturalism/>
 8. Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 2.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. Joshua Broady Presis , “Multiculturalism and Equal Human Dignity: An Essay on Bhikhu Parekh” *Res Publica*, Volume 17, Number 2, 2011, pp. 141-156. This article was published online on March 11, 2011 by Springer Science + Business Media , B. V.
 11. Joseph J. Doke, *Gandhi: A Patriot In South Africa* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 2005), p.40.
 12. Rajchandra Mehta (1868-1901) belongs to Jain family of Saurashtra. Gandhi came into his close contact after coming back from England in 1891 and continued his relationship even during his South African days. Gandhi sent a set of 27 spiritual questions to Rajchandra from South Africa in 1894 seeking his guidance. Subsequently, Rajchandra gave his views which greatly enlightened Gandhi so much so that the he acknowledged his spiritual guidance and expressed his indebtedness to him.
 13. *Harijan*, 26-12-1936.
 14. *Young India*, 22-12-1927.
 15. M.K. Gandhi, *My Varnashrama Dharma* (Mumbai: Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1998), p.35.
 16. M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 2004) p.44.
 17. *Young India*, 12-5-1920, p. 2.
 18. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan et al., (Ed.) *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), p.21.
 19. See Mrinal Miri, *Identity and the Moral life* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).
 20. Gora, *An Atheist with Gandhi* (Ahmedabad:Navajivan,2003) p. 44.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
 22. Nick Gier in his article *Gandhi, Deep Religious Pluralism, and Multiculturalism* described Gandhi’s Approach to Religion as “constructive postmodern” multiculturalism. See <http://www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/GandhiPlural.htm>
 23. Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Selections From Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1996), p. 255.
 24. *Harijan*, 22-9-46.
 25. M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 2005), p. 463.
 26. *Harijan*, 22-9-46.
 27. M.K. Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections* (New

York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1980), p. 54.

28. *Young India*, 19-1-21.
29. *Harijan*, 6 -6-36
30. *Young India*, 2-8- 1926.
31. *Ibid.*, 25-9- 1925.
32. Amartya Sen *The Uses And Abuses of Multiculturalism: Chili and Liberty* *op.cit.*
33. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Electronic Book) (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1999) Vol. 53 : 2 July, 1931 - 12 October, 1931p. 361
34. *Ibid.*, Vol.54: 13 October, 1931 - 8 February, 1932 p.221.

SIBY K. JOSEPH is Dean of Studies and Research, Institute of Gandhian Studies, Gopuri, Wardha-442001 Maharashtra E-mail: siby kollappallil@yahoo.com Website: www.gvpwardha.in He has edited a number of books relating to Gandhian Thought, Peace, Non-violence and Environment.

January–March 2012

