

Mahatma Gandhi, Khilafat and Hindu Muslim Unity



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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to throw light on the measures to bring Hindu Muslim unity with special focus on Mahatma Gandhi's activities during the first phase of his national politics in India. His success stories in Africa had made him popular in India and people began to see him as a liberator from the British rule. But before joining the politics here, he studied it and found that the Congress Movement was yet to reach among the mass people of country, particularly Muslim masses. He also observed that unlike Hindus most of the Muslims were not ready to oppose their British masters. Such situation of social division was not in the interest of national struggle. Hence he took up the issue of Khilafat and brought the Muslims in the domain of national struggle. The then leaders of Congress objected to his programmes initially but agreed to him later. During the period many amazing things in the way of unity were achieved. However the issue of cow slaughter continued to remain a problem. Though Gandhi's efforts did not succeed, it helped the Congress Movement to become national Movement and paved the way for a free and secular nation.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, Musalman, Khilafat, AICC, NonCo operation

Introduction

The Hindu Muslim Unity has been the main topic of discussion in India for over a century, but still the issue stands where it was when it started. A serious attempt in this direction was made by our national leaders, particularly by Mahatma Gandhi during the freedom struggle. Although Mahatma Gandhi could not accomplish this task but he fought for its realization throughout his life. This paper is an attempt to throw light on the measures to bring unity between the Hindus and the Muslims with special focus on the activities of Mahatma Gandhi during the period (1919-1924) of British subjugation.

Mahatma Gandhi returned in 1915 from South Africa. He had gone there to fight a legal battle of Seth Abdulla and Company, but there he felt the pain of racial policies of the South African govt. and stayed there to fight that inhuman policy. His struggle, based on Satyagraha was successful in obtaining many concessions for the people of Indian origin in that country. During his stay there he had learnt the role of newspapers in spreading messages¹ and he used them in his favour successfully. Many Indians were now eager to see him as they believed that Mahatma Gandhi may liberate them from their British masters.

However, till 1918 he had no significant place in Indian politics. But he was keenly watching the affairs of the country and had been taking part in different events. In order to establish himself in politics, he tried different methods which necessarily brought him into the limelight.² In 1916 he participated in the Lucknow conference of the League and the Congress. In 1917 he worked for the indigo grower in the Champaran district of Bihar who were exploited by the English planters. He advised the peasants of Khaira district in Maharashtra to start satyagraha and refuse to pay taxes to the government the following year. The same year, he organized the textile workers in Ahmedabad and secured for them a rise in wages. Successes which earned popularity for him in these affairs paved his way to establish himself as a leader. But it was his declaration of March 2, 1919 to launch satyagraha against the infamous Rowlatt Act and asking those who wished to join to sign the satyagraha pledge, he began his career in Indian politics. On these occasions he promised to win swaraj within six months. He said that he could perform the miracle only if certain conditions were fulfilled. One of these conditions was the achievement of Hindu Muslim Unity.

Though Gandhi's this satyagraha was short lived, he prescribed that the masses attending the meetings should take a vow in following terms;³ "We Hindu and Muslim declare that we shall behave towards one another as children of same parents, that we shall have no difference, that the sorrow of each shall be the sorrow of other in removing it. We shall respect each- other's religion and religious feelings, and shall not stand in the way of our religious practices. We should always refrain from violence to each other in the way of religion." Interestingly there was nothing in the campaign against the act, which could have resulted in the fight between the two communities, yet he asked his followes to take the vow. This shows how sincere he was for the unity.

Actually, he had well studied the Indian political scenario since 1915 and had reached the conclusion that there can be no swaraj without Hindu Muslim unity. He had himself observed; The Musulman masses do not recognize still the same necessity for swaraj, as the Hindus do. They do not flock to public meetings in the same numbers as the Hindus. This process can not be forced.⁴ And his this observation made him act for bringing unity between the said communities to pose an effective challenge to the British rule.

On the other hand, world scenario was also on the way of a change. Central European powers and its ally Turkey were defeated by the Entent in the world war first and according to four secret treaties to which Britain, France, Russia, and Italy were the signatories, the Ottoman empire was to be divided among them. This was a matter of great anxiety for the Indian Muslims for the disappearance of Ottoman empire would mean the extinction of Khilafat which was a symbol of Muslim unity and supposed to be the defender of the faith. But whenever the Muslims of the middle east who were in a state of revolt against the Turkish empire, Indian Muslims assumed the view that the English Christian was attacking Islam. The Ali brothers ; Md. Ali and Shaukat Ali took the lead of a powerful agitation, whipped up the Ulemas, the Maulanas in villages and towns, organizing Khilafat committees and conferences. Earlier two deputation to the British authorities were of no avail. Gandhi took these happenings as an opportunity to win the goodwill and confidence of the Muslims. He saw in the situation an opportunity of uniting Hindus and Muslims, as, would not arise in a hundred years.⁵

Not only Gandhi but prior to him, other Hindu leaders were also trying to woo the Muslims in their side. The Congress was very anxious to bridge the gap itself and Lucknow pact was the result of this very anxiousness. Now came the turn of the Muslims to secure the support of the Hindus. They began to invite congress leaders in their meetings. In the beginning, Motilal Nehru, Sir Sapru and Sarojini Naidu had also attended some meetings.

From January 1919 onwards Gandhi not only began to attend such meetings but even presided over some. However there were many people in the congress who doubted the ethical basis of the Khilafat movement and tried to dissuade Gandhi from taking any part in the movement on ethical basis of which

was so questionable. But Gandhi had so personally persuaded himself of the justice of the Khilafat agitation that he refused to yield to their advice. The position taken by him may be summed up in his own words; ".....If I dream the Muhammedan to be my brother, it is my duty to help him in the hour of peril to the best of my ability. If his cause commends itself to me as justit is expedient to suffer for my Muhammedan brother to the utmost in a just cause and I should therefore travel with him along the whole road so long as the means employed by him are as honorable as the end. I can not regulate the Muhammedan feeling. I must accept his statement that the Khilafat is with him a religious question in the sense that it binds him to reach the goal at the cost of his own life."⁶

Gandhi gradually became a prominent person in the Khilafat committee. The meeting held on Nov. 22 in Delhi resolved on Gandhi's advice that if the Khilafat question was not satisfactorily solved," 'the Musalmans of India shall progressively withheld all cooperation from the British government."⁷ On March 19, 1920 the day by the Khilafatists, Gandhi announced that he would lead a movement of non-cooperation if the terms of peace with Turkey failed to satisfy the Indian Muslims. And it was Gandhi's non-cooperation programme which the khilafatists had adopted after the peace terms imposed on Turkey was made public in May 1920. Though, the khilafatists used to form a committee to take decisions on different occasions but in reality they used to act on the advice of Gandhi. Later on August 1, 1920, the Khilafat committee organized a hartal and entrusted Gandhi with the leadership of non-cooperation movement. Gandhi launched this movement by returning his Kaiser-i-Hind to the government.

The launch had no sanction of the Indian National Congress then. Even Gandhi did not think it necessary to consult the Congress before announcing the Non-Cooperation. To justify this he stated, "In my humble opinion it is no congressman's duty to consult the Congress before taking an action into a matter in which he has no doubtFor me to suspend non-cooperation would be to prove untrue to Musalman brethrenThey could not await Congress decisionKhilafat is a matter of conscience for them and in a matter of conscience the law of majority has no place."⁸ But the real reason behind such act of haste of Gandhi was that the Muslims were getting impatient and he feared that if the movement was delayed it would take a violent turn and thus pass out of his control and leadership.⁹ However a hectic effort was on to woo the Congress leaders to bring them in favour of the non-cooperation programme.

Initially the Congress showed hesitation in joining the non-cooperation. Its members had different views on the issue of joining the Khilafat question.¹⁰ But Gandhi personally tried to shun their suspicion. This was also the time of coming of Enquiry Committee Reports on Punjab and their publications had created horror in the country. Owing to these developments, the AICC (All India Congress Committee) decided upon holding a special session at

Calcutta to consider the programme and policy of non-cooperation decided by the Khilafat committee.

The Calcutta session of the AICC gave its nod to the non cooperation after a voting. The Gandhian programme was approved by a margin of 1022 votes and the opposition which included stalwarts like Lala Lajpat Rai, B.C. Pal, and C.R. Das could poll only 842 votes. Speaking on the occasion, Lalaji, the president of the Calcutta session of AICC said, "Non-cooperation programme has to a certain extent been precipitated by the central Khilafat committee."¹¹

At Nagpur Congress (Dec.1920) efforts to bring some moderation by some heavy weights also proved ineffective. Even Lalaji had changed his earlier stand and favoured the policy of non-cooperation now. In fact the Muslims were now behind Gandhi and with the help of Muslims and many non muslims Gandhi was successful in getting his programme approved. This incident was of much importance in Indian history. Firstly, the support of Muslims and Khilafat earned Muslim support for Gandhi which helped him in securing the important position in the Congress¹², and secondly, the Muslims began to troop in the Congress to make a common front against the British and this made the Congress a power to be reckoned with.

During this period many amazing things in the way of Hindu Muslim unity were achieved. One of the main reasons behind the conflicts between the two communities had been the cow slaughter. When the Khilafat committee under the leadership of Gandhi sought the help of the Congress, some congressmen wanted to press the demand of cow protection. But Gandhi was against any bargain.¹³ and advised them not to raise this demand at that time.¹⁴ He also opined that to save the cow was to die in the act of saving the Khilafat without mentioning the cow. Gandhiji's opinion was not wrong for the Muslims did in large numbers give up the cow slaughter. Maulana Sulaiman of Phulwarisharif in Bihar announced that in future they would not slaughter cows.¹⁵ Abdul Bari of Lucknow also announced the same. The Muslim League at its Amritsar session of Dec. 1919 also passed a cow protection resolution. Ali brothers gave up eating beef, and during the Id-Uz-Zuha, Seth Chhotani saved hundreds of cows.¹⁶ Hindus were permitted to address their Muslim brethren from the pulpit of the mosque and so was the case with Muslims who were allowed within Hindu shrines. The enthusiasm that had come up even prevented Hindus to oppose the Montague Chemsford Reforms which had given concessions to Muslims. Not only these but even Hindus and Muslims jointly used to shout three slogans in meetings. These slogans were; Allaho Akbar, Bande Matram, and Hindu Muslim ki jai.¹⁷

But this unity was short lived. Gandhi and Maulana Ali had overlooked the long standing mistrust, conflicts and political, social and economic differences existing between the two communities. They never tried to diagnose the root cause behind such differences. Mischief Makers among the people were still active and were in no mood to listen to their leaders. The outbreak of Mopla rebellion, Kohat riot

gave those mischief makers necessary oxygen and the way. The media also played a significant role in arousing communal sentiments by misreporting of communal conflicts¹⁸. Some of the writings of Gandhi were also not liked by his muslim counterparts. They did not stop to understand the meaning of the full message of Gandhi and began to question the propriety of his statement.¹⁹ On the other hand the Hindus were also accusing Gandhi of showing softness towards Muslim bundalism. The Muslims also felt cheated when they saw that swaraj was still a distant dream and nothing was being done to protect Turkey. Gandhi had also noticed it and admitted that the Muslims had grown impatient and that, '.....to the Muslims swaraj means as it must mean, India's ability to deal effectively with the Khilafat question.....but in my humble opinion, attainment of swaraj is the quickest method of righting the Khilafat wrongmere ignorant, thoughtlessness and angry outburst of violence may give vent to pent up rage but can bring no relief to Turkey.'²⁰

Suddhi and Sangthan of Hindus and Tabligh and Tanzim of Muslims were another obstacles in the way of unity. Swami Shraddhanand led the suddhi movement which was started to bring back converted Muslims into Hindu fold, while Sangthan was aimed at self discipline and physical training. Similarly by the Tabligh the Muslims had been carrying the proselytization and Tanzim was like Sangthan of the Hindu. All these organizations were aggressive and were launched at a time when communal feelings in the country were Introduction of religion as a force against the alien rulers was also a mistake. Critics accuse Gandhi of uniting and awakening Muslims for making much of Khilafat wrongs²¹. Though Gandhi justified himself by saying; 'the awakening of the masses was necessary part of the training. It is a tremendous gain. I would do nothing to put the people to sleep again.'²² But it has been argued that the awakening led to revivalism of Hindu Muslim conflicts, and such was instrumental in giving birth to Hindu Mahasabha in 1925. Seeing this, Gandhi changed his earlier stand and said, ' Religion is a personal matter which should have no place in politics.'²³ But the damage had been done and after the recall of the non – cooperation the Muslims worked to strengthen the League. These affairs proved great assets in the struggle for Pakistan.²⁴

During the non- cooperation, schools, colleges were disrupted, councilors elected by one third of electors were not regarded as public representative. The government machinery was under strain. Under this situation eruption of violence was not beyond expectation.²⁵ Meanwhile the new viceroy Lord Reading, a jurist and a man of cool temperament, did nothing to disturb the movement and waited calmly to fall it apart. Perhaps, he had foreseen the essential disunity among the participating groups of the movement. That happened. Communal riots could not be checked which led to beginning of the end of the emotions. After the Chauri Chaura incident, Gandhi himself called off the campaign and soon after it he was arrested. No hue and cry was made over his arrest and this tells the

state of disunity erupted in the two community. The movement was never resumed even after his release in early 1924.

But these all things failed to shake Gandhi's faith in Hindu Muslim unity. In November 1924, Gandhi initiated discussions for the settlement of the Hindu Muslim problem. In an all party conference held at Delhi on 25 January, 1925 under his chairmanship, a sub-committee was appointed to study the communal problem. But the first meeting of the committee which failed to resolve the problem, it adjourned sine die²⁶. Gandhi himself admitted his failure and said, 'Hindu Muslim problem had passed out of human hands into God's hands'²⁷. From 1925 onwards, he diverted his attention towards untouchability and spinning wheels.²⁸

Conclusion

The Khilafat or the Non-cooperation movement came to its end and with it the Hindu Muslim unity also came to a halt. But the achievement of this phase; the Hindu Muslim unity, had stirred the nation against the colonial govt. Since it the things never remained the same again. The govt. came in self defence by adopting different measures. Through this unity it had suffered a great shock and recognized that public opinion existed and that the Congress got the status of a national force. Though Gandhi could not keep the Hindus and the Muslims united, but no one can deny his sincere and honest efforts towards it which ultimately helped India to grow as a free secular nation.

End notes

1. Kamal Kishore Goenka, *Gandhi Patrakarita ke pratiman*, Delhi, pp. 22-24.
2. Mohibbul Hasan, *Gandhi Theory and Practice; Social Impact and Contemporary Relevance*, Transactions of the IAS, Shimla, 1969, pp. 132-149.
3. *Young India*, 2nd June, 1920.
4. *Gandhi on Hindu, Muslim Unity*, Dr. Farooqui's resource page, 1.
5. Tendulkar, II, p. 59, also see V. Chaudhary, *Indian National & External Forces*, 1985, p 25
6. *Young India*, op.cit.

7. Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Islam in South East Asia*, V, 2009, p 53
8. Tendulkar, II, p 3-4
9. Mushirul Hasan, op. cit., p 54
10. *Young India*, 9 June, 1920
11. Mushirul Hasan, op. cit., p 66.
12. *Till the Calcutta Congress of 1917*, he was hardly of any importance in the congress politics. Illness prevented him from attending the two sessions of 1918. But one year more and he was at acclaimed at the Amritsar congress at the end of 1919 as one of the three or four principal leaders of congress organization in the country. (Indulal Yajnik, *Gandhi As I Know Him*, p 120.)
13. *Young India*, 10 Dec., 1919.
14. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Publication Division, GOI, Vol. 24, pp 18-20
15. *Ibid*
16. U A Rao(ed.) *The Way to Communal Harmony; Gandhi*, p. 90
17. *Young India*, 8th Sept. 1920
18. Mushirul Hasan, op. cit.,
19. *Gandhi urged Muslims to forebear because being bullies, they could fight and fight well and could protect themselves the attacks of Hindus. On the other hand, he asked Hindus to give up his gentleness because quarrels must break out. So long as the Hindu continue to be seized with fear.* (U A Rao, o p. 41.cit., p 264 & 312.)
20. *Khilafat a Pathway to Pakistan*, Md. M Munawwar, *Allama Iqbal.com/journal*, Oct. 86.
21. Tendulkar, op.cit., p174
22. *Ibid*
23. I H Qureshi, *The struggle For Pakistan*, p. 41
24. Balabhadra Ghadai, *Orissa Review*, Jan. 2008, p. 9
25. Percival Spear, *The History of India* 2, pp. 191-192
26. Tendulkar, op. cit., pp. 235-36
27. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p.259
28. I.H.Qureshi, *The Struggle for Pakistan*, 1979, p 41