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GANDHI ON RELIGIOUS NEUTRALITY : A HOLISTIC VISION FOR SOCIETAL HARMONY

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ABSTRACT

To Gandhi, secularism went beyond the political separation of religion and state; it was a moral commitment to uphold human dignity and social justice. His approach to secularism was intertwined with his socio-economic philosophy of *Sarvodaya*, or the welfare of all. Gandhi argued that true secularism required addressing the socio-economic disparities that often fueled religious tensions. He believed in the “*Sarvadharmasambhava* principle,” which means equal respect for all religions. This perspective aimed at eradicating prejudices and promoting a culture of empathy. In this context, this paper highlights Gandhi's views on secularism which went beyond conventional notions, emphasising the interconnectedness of spirituality, social equity, and communal harmony. The author argues that Gandhi's vision remains a poignant reminder of the potential for secularism to facilitate societal transformation by nurturing an environment of acceptance, understanding, and unity amidst diversity.

Keywords : *Dharma*, Secularism, *Dharmanirpekshita*, Inclusive society, Religious tolerance, Non-violence.

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi, a pivotal figure in India's struggle for independence, held distinctive and multifaceted views on secularism that remain relevant to contemporary discussions. Rooted in his philosophy of non-violence and spiritual principles, Gandhi's perspective on secularism transcended mere religious tolerance. He envisioned a society where diverse faiths coexisted harmoniously, fostering unity and mutual respect. Gandhi's secularism was deeply inclusive, advocating for equal treatment of all religions without favouring one over another. He believed in the fundamental unity of all religions, emphasising that each path held intrinsic value.

Following the interpretation of Indian social anthropologist T.N. Madan (1987), we can say Gandhi never identified himself as secular. His perspective on religion was quite inclusive; he regarded religion as a set of principles rather than being tied to specific faiths. He stressed the interconnection of religion and politics and

believed that religion held more significant importance than politics. He once stated that every small action in his life was guided by what he personally considered his religion. Moreover, the individuals who assert that religion and politics are unrelated fail to grasp religion's true essence (Madan, 1987, pp. 752-755). Gandhi viewed religion as an absolute and foundational value, integral to societal existence, while politics dealt with public concerns. He believed that without the ethical foundation provided by religion, politics would lose its moral grounding. Gandhi emphasised that the state should ensure the unrestrained growth of all religions without providing support to any; state-supported religions, according to him, were unworthy of survival. It is important to note that Gandhi's perspective on the relationship between religion and politics, particularly in the Indian context, differed from the concept of separating church and state in the Christian tradition. When Gandhi did advocate for the separation of “religion and state,” he meant restricting the state's role to matters

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of secular well-being and preventing intrusion into the religious affairs of the people (Madan, 1993, pp.674-677).

Gandhian Secularism

Regarding Mahatma Gandhi's stance on secularism, he rearticulated the conventional perspective within the evolving context of the 20th century. He underscored the interconnection between religion and politics, emphasising religion's superior significance over politics. Gandhi considered religion to possess inherent and paramount value, playing a foundational role in shaping societal dynamics. In his view, politics was a realm centred on public welfare, and its integrity relied on the moral underpinning provided by religion. Gandhi's concept of secularism was rooted in the belief that all religions held validity, contributing to moral purpose and that Indian society could be constructed upon a harmonious coexistence of various religious communities. He further maintained that the state bore the responsibility of safeguarding the autonomy of every religion, enabling them to evolve in accordance with their distinctive essence.

Nevertheless, he contended that any religion reliant on state patronage was not worthy of survival. Mahatma Gandhi is frequently hailed as the spiritual progenitor of Indian secularism. However, according to Professor T.N. Madan, Gandhi's classification as a secularist is both erroneous and unjust. Madan contends that if the central tenet of all forms of secularism involves delineating clear distinctions between the sacred and secular realms in and of themselves, then Gandhi would have found no relevance or utility in such an ideology (ibid.). Gandhi's emphasis on secularism differs from the conventional notion, as he envisioned a comprehensive perspective where religion served as the foundational element. He stressed that religion provided the standard for evaluating the significance of all human pursuits and behaviours. Gandhi demonstrated a keen awareness of the specific circumstances and needs of different contexts and exercised great caution in his choice of language. He also broadened the principle of personal religious values to encompass the state. According to Gandhi, the ethical obligation of individuals for their conduct played a

decisive role in shaping the nature of the state (Parekh, 1991, p. 124).

Gandhi strongly advocated for a secular state where everyone had the right to practice religion. However, he vehemently opposed the idea of a state-endorsed religion or any state assistance towards a specific religion. On a personal level, Gandhi believed that distancing oneself from religion was not feasible or practical. Gandhi penned that each era possesses its prevailing method of spiritual endeavour, most suitable for achieving *moksha* (salvation). In the present age, he noted, political *sanyasis* (saints) can effectively embody and fulfil the concept of *sannyasa* (renunciation). As a result, any Indian seeking to practice genuine religion cannot afford to distance themselves from politics (ibid., p. 100). In a conversation with a Christian missionary in 1946, Gandhi expressed that if he were a dictator, he would ensure the separation of religion and state. His allegiance to his religion was unwavering, and he was prepared to sacrifice for it. However, this was a matter of his individual belief (ibid., p. 204).

The state should focus on matters like the well-being of its citizens, healthcare, communication, international relations, and currency, but not meddle in anybody's religion because it is a private concern for each individual (ibid.). Adhering to the Gandhian outlook, it can be asserted that any individual who has faith in one religion and comprehends its significance will inherently be capable of understanding other religions as well. In the Indian context, the term '*dharma*' is used interchangeably with 'religion'. That is why "secular" is translated as "*dharmanirpeksha*" and secularism as "*dharmanirpeksha*". Following Gandhi's interpretation, this translates to '*Sarvadharmasambhava*', which means equal respect for all religions.

Understanding Dharma

The term *dharma* is also linked to significant aspects of societal concern, such as duty and nature. It encompasses inquiries regarding the nature of reality and the relationship between humanity and the universe, thus containing various dimensions of ethical and philosophical questions (Barlingay, 1998, p. 50). In ancient India, the term *dharma* held multiple meanings

and usages. For instance, it could denote: (i) A quality or attribute (similar to how colour or fragrance is an attribute of a flower), (ii) The notion of justice, (iii) Legal principles, (iv) One's duty or responsibilities, (v) The ultimate purpose or goal of human life (Kumar, 2018; Mathur, 2002). The term *dharma* (धर्म) originates from the root “*dhr*” (धृ), meaning “to bear, to hold, to support, or to sustain.” S.N. Dhyani (1996, p. 29) states that *dharma* safeguards us from descending into ruin in any aspect and contributes to our comprehensive well-being, advancement, and elevation. Indeed, the term *dharma* encompasses a range of meanings, including 'religious ordinances of the *Veda*,' 'established principles,' 'codes of behaviour,' 'rights and responsibilities,' and the various duties and obligations of individuals across different situations and life stages. It is a comprehensive framework for all moral laws (Barlingay, 1998, p. 81).

The *Mimamsakas*, with *Kumarila* as a notable figure, expand the scope of *dharma* to encompass all methods employed to achieve the most outstanding merit. According to the *Purvamimansa sutra*, “*Dharma*” is defined as '*Codana laksano rthah*' (चोदना लक्षणोऽर्थः), indicating that anything commanded by the Vedic texts is considered *dharma*. *Kumarila* also asserts that *dharma* is synonymous with “*sreyas*,” representing ultimate contentment or bliss (ibid., pp. 82-83). The sources that validate their existence and lead to achieving contentment are the directives of *Vedic* passages that inspire individuals to undertake actions. Consequently, the elements, their distinctive characteristics, and their actions collectively form the concept of *dharma*. In the context of *Sanatana Dharma*, the term *dharma* is perceived to hold extensive connotations within Hinduism. *Dharma* signifies the intrinsic essence of every entity within the creation, an essence that remains inseparable and guides its function in accordance with it. For instance, water's inherent *dharma* is to flow downward and drench everything it encounters. This inherent quality can manifest as both positive and negative attributes. If one adopts the notion that the sole reality behind creation is the reality of God, then an individual's *dharma* becomes their divine nature, as humanity's core essence is divine.

Dharma also denotes our role in living in harmony with our innate nature. This way of living materialises in our actions of truth, morality, fairness, and compassion, all aimed at securing our well-being through faith in the reality of God, which guards us against lack, illness, and diverse forms of fear. Each one of us, from our very birth, exhibits glimpses of this divine nature. Regardless of individual awareness or belief, one's *dharma* represents their innate divinity (Narain, 2001, pp. 98-99). Another interpretation of *dharma* is duty. We all bear responsibilities towards both others and ourselves. These duties are not entitlements that we can assert over others, society, the state, or even God. The responsibilities each individual fulfils in society yield beneficial outcomes for others. When we demand what we receive as our right, societal issues arise. When love serves as the foundational drive of human existence, duties carried out with love become sources of joy. For instance, a mother's duty is to nurture her children. However, children have no inherent claim to be nurtured by their mothers. As children mature, it becomes their duty to provide care and support for their partners, offspring, elderly parents, and the community. A society rooted in duties caters to the needs of all its members. This is because its motivating factor, love, translated into selflessness, identifies what requires attention for collective well-being (ibid., p. 98).

A society prioritising individual rights exclusively is destined for turmoil, as these rights often stem from self-centred wants. Desires are boundless in their pursuit of satisfaction. However, for a society to endure, its members must collectively embrace a foundational set of duties to ensure its continuation. These essential duties, often called *dharma*, are not codified within a state's constitution, as they are universal principles. Similarly, no religion can thrive without its adherents adhering to these fundamental duties, or *dharma*, which are crucial for the well-being of the community (Kumar, 2008, pp. 61-62).

Religion or *Dharma*

In practice, adherents of various religions embrace the essential, livable aspects of their faiths. This practical dimension of religion does not harm followers of other beliefs, as it is universally shared. This commonality,

known as *dharma* or the practical facet of every religion, is a unifying force, fostering unity, harmony, and goodwill within society. India's millennia-long experience underscores this approach, demonstrating its effectiveness. All beliefs beyond this fundamental *dharma* can be seen as variable, optional, or inconsequential overlays for human survival. If these added beliefs disrupt the inherent harmony of human existence, they exist temporarily as anomalies within society. Eventually, they fade away, allowing human society to endure based on its essential *dharma*. This basic *dharma* is intrinsic to humanity, transcending geographical and religious boundaries (Mathur, 2002). Religion becomes evident through its fundamental and observable indicators.

In contrast, *dharma* lacks such overt markers. *Dharma* is characterised by self-restraint and selflessness, representing the most profound expression of love for which we hold accountability. Our existence in accordance with *dharma* stems from its daily response to the question – why should we think, speak, or act in a specific manner? None of the rituals that set apart various religions can effectively address all the queries we confront in our everyday lives (Kumar, 2008, p. 62). *Dharma* transcends religious labels such as Hindu, Muslim, or Christian. It resides intrinsically within everyone, an inherent and unalienable aspect of our being. Politics is intertwined with our existence and cannot be detached from our adherence to *dharma*. However, politics must always remain distinct from any religious context, given that certain beliefs and practices within religions foster division and separation among their adherents (Narain, 2001, pp. 98-99).

We learn a lot about *dharma* from the speeches and letters of Gandhi. For instance, in his words, “The soul is never polluted by the touch of the leper; on the contrary, if such contact is inspired by a spirit of service, it is elevated. Service of the *Bhangi* (Manual Scavenger) is *dharma*; compassion lies in nursing an ailing *Bhangi* before others” (Gandhi, 1921, p. 116)... “Those who accept non-violence as part of *dharma* are convinced that no hatred or violence can survive in its presence” (ibid., p. 325)... “One's *dharma* is a personal possession. One is

oneself responsible for preserving it or losing it. What can be defended in and through a group is not *dharma*, it is dogma” (ibid.)... “He who fights from a sense of *dharma* never despairs. If one's ends are clean and one's means are pure, one ought to be confident of success” (ibid., p. 358). Hence, the separation of religion from politics is not a crucial imperative. *Dharma*, in fact, does not limit humanity to its personal deity or exclude the role of divinity in worldly matters. It forges a universal bond among individuals, regardless of their Hindu, Muslim, or Christian identity, grounded in the unwavering belief that the same divine presence resides within all living beings. With its broad perspective, this expansive cosmic faith forms the basis for politics, law, ethics, culture, philosophy, and all aspects of life.

The term “*dharmanirpeksha*”, often interpreted as secular, does not accurately convey neutrality between various faiths and religions, as commonly believed and used. *Dharma* signifies ethical conduct and morality. When ethical dilemmas arise, impartiality should never be the response. If one holds distinct faiths characterised by their rituals, mythologies, and convictions and seeks impartiality between them, the suitable term is “*panthanirpeksha*.” Rituals, myths, superstitions, and diverse modes of worship that differentiate one religion from another fall under the realm of “*pantha*.” The term incorporated in the Hindi version of India's Constitution amendment officially designates us as a “*panthanirpeksha*” nation, not a “*dharmanirpeksha*” one (Mohan, 2008). To put it differently, Gandhi's fundamental approach to secularism in India did not solely rely on abstract principles and ideals. His understanding of the process of secularisation was rooted not just in theoretical concepts but also in his real-world observations and his comprehension of the intricate Indian societal framework. Gandhi's perspective on the Indian social structure was dynamic rather than static. He acknowledged the significance of diverse religious, regional economies, societies, and cultures within a vast sub continental nation like India, which was pivotal for reconstructing its political landscape.

Gandhi's viewpoint extended beyond religious divisions to encompass the division between social

classes and the masses. He considered this division as fundamental and crucial as the divide between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi's vision of *Ramrajya* (Kingdom of *Rama*), symbolising an ideal society free from class-mass disparities, was not a Hindu-centric reign but a utopian aspiration for peasants. He emphatically clarified that *Ramrajya* was not synonymous with Hindu rule. According to Gandhi, *Ramrajya* epitomised “the sovereignty of the people based on pure moral rationality” (Gandhi, 1967, pp. 201, 303). Gandhi elucidated that those often perceived as uneducated and uninformed actually possess a clearer comprehension of *Ramrajya* compared to the educated strata. He remarked that a brief examination of the prevailing mindset among people, encompassing both Hindus and Muslims, would reveal that, as commonly perceived, *Swaraj* is synonymous with *Ramrajya* – denoting the establishment of a just and righteous kingdom on earth (ibid., pp. 303-304).

Therefore, Gandhi's interpretation of secularism centred on the reverence for all religions, and he identified no contradiction between advocating a secular state and embodying genuine religious sentiment. Consequently, his approach negated the possibility of a clash between the sacred and the secular, a dichotomy that characterised the secularisation trajectory of Western societies.

Conclusion

In summary, Mahatma Gandhi's legacy resounds not only as a pivotal figure in India's struggle for independence but also as a profound thinker whose perspectives on secularism and *dharmanirpekshata* offer profound insights into creating an inclusive and harmonious society. His approach to secularism was far from mere detachment between religion and politics; it was a dynamic and transformative philosophy aimed at uniting diverse elements while upholding principles of social equity and moral obligation.

Gandhi's interpretation of secularism surpassed traditional notions of religious tolerance. Rooted in his belief in the inherent unity of all faiths, he championed the idea that each religion contributes to humanity's spiritual wealth. His advocacy for

Sarvadharmasamabhava, the equal regard for all religions, tackled the roots of religious strife and intolerance. His vision envisioned a society where religious diversity was embraced rather than exploited—a realm where individuals of varying beliefs coexisted amicably, devoid of fear or bias.

Dharmanirpekshata, fundamental to Gandhi's vision, posited that the state should remain impartial towards religions, ensuring governance rested on fairness rather than religious predisposition. This philosophy extended beyond governance to societal dimensions. Gandhi recognised that authentic secularism necessitated addressing socio-economic inequalities often underpinning religious tensions. His concept of *Sarvodaya* emphasised uplifting all, regardless of their faith, seeking to bridge divides within communities.

Gandhi's approach to secularism and *dharmanirpekshata* intricately wove with his ideals of non-violence (*ahimsa*) and unwavering commitment to truth (*satya*). He acknowledged that achieving true secularism entailed introspection and internal transformation. His ability to engage constructively with diverse individuals showcased his authentic regard for varying beliefs and his readiness to discover common ground.

So, Gandhi's perspectives on secularism and *dharmanirpekshata*, representing religious neutrality, present a comprehensive guide for constructing a society that values differences, nurtures empathy, and upholds justice. His legacy reminds us that secularism transcends politics or law—a moral duty that demands active interaction with fellow human beings. As societies grapple with religious tensions and identity-based conflicts, Gandhi's all-encompassing vision remains a beacon, urging us to rise above distinctions and pave a path to lasting tranquillity and unity.

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