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## ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT OF INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Religion as a part of human life has made profound influence on individual, ideologies, movements, revolutions and the state since time immemorial. In case of the freedom movement of India, it had also played a significant role. In the beginning, the British popularised pro-religious terms in order to prove the British Raj as an "act of abundant mercy of Divine Providence" and a "gift of God to Indians".<sup>1</sup>*



### KEY WORDS

Parasurama, Mahabali, Vamana, Onam, Cheraman Perumal, Zamorin.

### INTRODUCTION

During British government, religion became a handle in the hands of rulers for the application of "Divide and Rule" policy.<sup>2</sup> Starting from the First War of Independence to the independence of India in 1947, religion and religious ideas have influenced the whole political scenario of India. In this paper, focus has been given on the impact of religion on the freedom struggle of India.

### IMPACT OF RELIGION ON THE REVOLT OF 1857

The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of first stages of Indian freedom struggle, and beginning of mutual interaction between politics and religion. In this war of independence, the Hindus and Muslims got united and fought against the British power. In this revolt, the religious interest of both the Hindus and Muslims was in danger with the issue of greased cartridges. In the Great Revolt in 1857, the revolutionaries used some slogans like "Din, Din" (Religion, Religion), Swadharm (Religion), "Swadesh" (My Country), "Swarajya" (Freedom), "Har, Har, Mahadev" (Victory be to Lord Mahadev).<sup>3</sup> Although the revolt got failure, but it had shaken the British empire. Hence, the colonial rulers found that religion could be profitably exploited in their approach to the Indian people. From this revolt onwards the British followed the policy of "Divide et impera" in their civil, political and military administration. The motivation of the colonial rulers was to maintain and to preserve the British Empire, rather than protecting or promoting one community and its interests against another community.<sup>4</sup>

In the next historical phases, in the most political activities, especially the influence and use of religion in line of nationalism is seen. In fact, every leading personality from the first messenger of revolutionary nationalism B.G. Tilak to many political leaders including Mahatma Gandhi, felt it necessary to write new commentary on the ancient and religious text in terms of political and social life of modern India. After the foundation of the Indian National Congress, the traditional anti-Muslim policy of the British government was gradually reversed and it became anti-Hindu in nature.

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### **PARTITION OF BENGAL AND THE DIVIDE AND RULE POLICY**

In 1905, the British government declared for the partition of the Bengal Presidency for cause of administrative effectiveness. But it was realized as a clever strategy to make a block between the two communities and to weaken the forces of the Bengal nationalism by separating Muslims from the Congress. The Indian National Congress saw in it the imperial design of divide and rule, but Bengali Muslims generally welcomed the step as a means of escaping from Hindu economic and political domination. For the partition of Bengal Lord Curzon had several intentions like (1) the partition would please loyal Muslims; (2) it would successfully break-up integrated and united nationalist forces in Bengal; (3) it would negatively affect Congress objectives of secular and national integration; and (4) it would open the path for Muslim unity and organization. Thus, it was the step to finish the process of institutionalization of separatist, divisive and sub-nationalist forces.<sup>5</sup> He also made public the major objectives of the scheme of partition viz. (a) it would not only relieve administrative pressures, (b) it would also help to create a Muslim province where Islam would be predominant and its followers in the upper hand.<sup>6</sup> The politics of 'Divide and rule' had approximately been continued up to early 1940s. From 1943 onwards, the political condition in India got changed. The transfer of power and politics of partition snowed under provincial politics.<sup>7</sup> Finally, this politics caused to the religious communalism and that also caused to final partition of Bengalis between Muslim and Hindu on the basis of religion in 1947. Although many Hindus and Muslims remained in both countries in the post-independence India and Pakistan.

### **DEMAND FOR SEPARATE ELECTORATES IN 1906 AND COMMUNAL AWARD**

The whole national movement scenario in India got changed in 1906 with the separate electorate issue which had far-reaching effects on the Hindu-Muslim relations. Lord Minto, the viceroy of India, had formed a committee to consider the necessity of this issue. This led to the Deputation of Muslims, headed by Agha Khan, which met Lord Minto at Simla on October 1, 1906 and claimed separate electorates, i.e., communal representation from the Imperial Legislative Council down to the District Boards and importance to Muslims which was totally essential to protect their legitimate interests. In this connection, it is worth to mention that the Muslim League was established in 1906 at Dhaka.

After repeated demands made by Muslim League, the British Prime minister declared a "Communal Award" which conceded to the Muslims almost all they had asked.<sup>8</sup> With Indian representatives unable to agree over representation under the proposed reforms, the British government published its communal award for India in 16th August 1932, a step that both reinforced the notion that Indians identified themselves fundamentally by their religion, and seemed to indicate the continued presence of communal antipathy, something the reforms' supporters counted on for their strategy's success. Moreover, the controversy over separate representation for untouchables under the award, and the split between Gandhi and some high caste Hindus over the question of untouchability, made more credible the idea that caste division would ultimately prevent any real Hindu political unity in India.

### **HINDUISM IN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT**

Hinduism has also played a significant role in Independence movement.<sup>9</sup> Indian religions were transformed in opposition to the state, and religion became more vital in public sphere. Religion was transformed and moulded in a national form that defined itself in opposition to the colonizing state.<sup>10</sup> The denial of participation in the political institutions of the British led Indians to develop an alternative set of institutions of a jointly political and religious nature. The people of India considered the colonial state as fundamentally Christian not neutral and secular. In fact, the nationalist movement was Hindu-dominated effort. It had taken on some of the trappings of Hinduism itself, with the use of religious symbols, Hindu songs, and especially the very public piety of Gandhi.<sup>11</sup> One British administrator in the 1950s had described that there is a 'close association of aggressive Hinduism with nationalism.'<sup>12</sup>

The nationalist movement witnessed extensive use of religion and religious symbols. The Hindu leaders nurtured Nationalist movement by the use of exciting and emotional appeal through the works in different fields of literature, music, drama, and other arts. The evocative appeal of such cultural products immensely aided the nationalist cause. They also raised some subtle religious issues. They used the popularity of Hindu devotional poets. For example, Brahma reformers in Bengal used the public forums provided by

religious fairs and festivals to popularize patriotic themes and songs in large-scale gatherings of people. The "Bande Mataram" ("Hail to Thee, Mother") hymn cum-slogan, central to much anti-British patriotism and at the same time a Hindu rallying cry, at least in Bengal, during confrontations with Muslims.<sup>13</sup> Swami Sahajanand, one of the organizers of peasant movements in the 1930s, was a Hindu religious activist who made extensive use of religious symbolism and traditional ties for the success of the peasant movement in India.

### **INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENTS ON INDIAN NATIONALISM**

The nationalist movements of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century were perceptible through the religious reform movements like the Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Rama Krishna Mission, the Theosophical Society, the Aligarh Movement, etc. In this connection, Raja Ram Mohan tried to interpret the highest elements of Islam, Christianity and modern Rationalism or Humanism and transformed them into a single creed which he discovered in the ancient philosophy from Upanishad.<sup>14</sup> The slogans of Arya Samaj were 'Back to the Vedas' and 'India for Indians' made a deep impact on the people of India. It is said, "If Ram Mohan was the mind, Dayananda, the physical arm, and Rama Krishna was the soul of new India".<sup>15</sup>

Another protagonist of religious reform movement, Annie Besant worked for the revival of Hinduism and uplift of India. She said, "Religion is essential to patriotism because nothing else destroys the separate tendency in men and prevents the disintegration of bodies of workers by continual sub-divisions. It is the religion which alone teaches man to feel his unity with his fellows and leads him to sacrifice the smaller to the smaller self. It is also the religion which has ever bound individuals into a tribe and tribes into a nation."<sup>16</sup> She had written and lectured profusely on Hindu culture and philosophy. She translated the Gita and lectured the Upanishads philosophy. Theosophical Society of India had important impact on the political events in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is worth to mention here that the Father of Indian National Congress was a Theosophist.

### **INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON EXTREMIST LEADERS**

Religion had made a deep impact on the extremist movements in India. This movement had revealed two distinct trends of the spiritualization of politics as represented by Sri Aurobindo and of preparing the people for the struggle of independence by diverting the religious enthusiasm of them into political channels as advocated by Tilak.<sup>17</sup>

With the extermination of the Britishers from India as their sole aim, the extremist groups sought the aid of religion to propagate their political principles. Some leaders like Tilak, B.C. Pal and Aurobindo Ghose tried even to spiritualize politics. The revolutionaries drew inspiration from the teachings of the Gita and cheerfully sacrificed their lives in the service of India. The Extremists formulated the program of actions like Celebration of the Ganpati and Shivaji festivals, Swarajya, Swadeshi, Boycott, National Education, National Judiciary and Passive Resistance which were also in line with Hindu ideals and traditions and was deeply embedded in the religious psychology of the people. The whole of the Extremist movement was a call to go back to Indian ancient religious and cultural traditions by following the Hindu scriptures as its religious and philosophical weapons to meet the challenge of a foreign civilization.<sup>18</sup>

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, one of the leader and the composer of India's national song 'Vande Mataram', was a strong believer in Hinduism and in some of his religious writings like 'Samya', 'Krishna Charitra' and 'Dharmatattva' he tried to outline the essential principles of the Hindu faith.<sup>19</sup> The Neo-Hinduism that he preached lay down that the salvation of India lay in reviving the spiritual ideals of ancient nation-builders. His nationalism was strongly grounded in religion. He considered that without religion nationalism tended to become aggressive, even anti-social. Hence, he turned nationalism itself into a religion and wanted to raise nationalism to the dignity of a religion. He also tried to tie modern nationalism with religious symbols of India.<sup>20</sup>

In his famous novel, 'Anand Math', he had presented India "as goddess Kali, black because of intense misery, naked because denuded of wealth, with human skulls round her neck because the country was no less than a vast burial ground. But the future India would be like radiant Durga who will annihilate the 'demons' and usher in an era of plenty and prosperity." He made patriotism popular among mass by linking it with religion. However, his patriotism is deeply associated with religion. He perceived that the strongest sentiment of Eastern civilization including India is the religious sentiment. Apart from merging patriotic sentiments with

religion, he visualized nationality itself under the category of religion. The master idea of his writings was the religion of patriotism. 'In 'Anand Math' this idea is the keynote of the whole book and received its perfect lyrical expression in the great song which has become the national anthem of united India. Bankim gave to his country not only the religion of patriotism prescribed for his countrymen, not only the way of Karmayoga for their salvation but also held before them the vision of the Mother India.' Though, he took no part in politics, first employed the triple appeal of language, history and religion which enabled Hindu nationalism to win widespread support in the first decade of the 20th century.<sup>21</sup>

Bal Gangadhar Tilak otherwise known 'Lokamanya' is also remembered as the 'Father of India's Revolution.' His political philosophy 'was integrated with the value system of the Indian civilization and his nationalism was firmly grounded in religion.' In relation with the impact of religion on his life and political philosophy, Gita had important role. As a political realist, he considered that the Gita offered justification for violent action. This part of Tilak's interpretation appealed also to the revolutionaries and the terrorists of his day. He was, therefore, described as "the Father of Indian unrest" and the British Government held him guilty of promoting violence and sedition. He looked to religion as a unifying force and used the revivalist method to awaken the people. His motive in appealing to the religious faith of the people was to use this faith as an instrument to national awakening and to give an ethical and moral basis to the political struggle. In the light of these purpose he thought for the introduction of the religious festivals. So, Tilak's conception of Indian nationalism constitutes historical legacies and religious unity.<sup>22</sup>

The clarion call of "Swarajya as my birth right" was raised by Tilak and 'a constructive program of practical action based upon religious sanction was drawn up to back it. His conception of nationalism was 'a combination of the Vedanta ideal of the spiritual unity of mankind and the Western notions of nationalism.' He believed that 'nationalism could be promoted and strengthened if the peoples' psychological bonds are given symbolic expressions of an objective, visible or concrete type, namely, flags, insignia and the celebration of social and religious festivals.' For this, he revived the Ganesh (Ganapati) and Shivaji festival and used it as an instrument to unite of Brahmans and non-Brahmans of India. Bipin Chandra Pal, another advocate of the philosophy of militant nationalism in Bengal, believed that the separation of the secular and the spiritual is alien to Hinduism which regards politics as a part of the science of salvation in India.<sup>23</sup>

### The Revolutionary Groups

From the beginning, the Revolutionary Groups had its roots in the conflict of an alien religion and culture with their own. These movements may be categorized as "political revolution" under the apparel of religion. Some of these important the movements were of the Sanyasis, the Wahabis, the Muslim Fakirs, the Faraidis, the Pagal Panthis of Monsingh, the Naikdas, the Kukas, Birsa Bhagwan etc.<sup>24</sup>

Most of the revolutionary activities were inspired by 'religion and its sacred texts such as the Gita, the Upanishads and the speeches and the writings of the Vedantist leaders like Swami Vivekanand.' In his booklet 'Bhawani Mandir', Aurobindo wanted to concretise his concept of spiritual nationalism and India as a Divine Mother in the form of Bhawani, Kali or Durga. He also prescribed ways and means to serve and worship her. The Sedition Committee Report described this booklet as a remarkable example of the travesty of religious ideals to political purposes and expressed the view that 'it really contains the germs of the Hindu revolutionary movement in Bengal.' The Aurobindo's Bhawani Mandir scheme in 1905 purposed building a temple in a secret place among the hills consecrated to Goddess Bhawani symbolizing Mother India. This temple would be the home of a new order of young ascetics, sacred body and soul to the liberation of the mother from the foreign yoke and ready at any time to spear-head a national spiritual regeneration and the armed struggle for independence. In Aurobindo's opinion, self-government or Swarajya "is the fulfillment of the ancient life of India under modern conditions, the return of the Satyayuga of national greatness, self liberation of the people for the final fulfilment of the Vedantic ideal in politics, this is the true Swarajya for India." He had said the first and the greatest among the means of winning Swarajya is "faith in God". It is the God who commands and inspires us to conquer our independence.<sup>25</sup>

Vinayak D. Savarkar, another leader of the revolutionary movement in Indian history, was the framer of the Hindu Mahasabha ideology and also its guiding spirit. He had written more than a dozen of books. Out of these publications his 'Hindutva', embodying the fundamentals of Hindu nationalism and Hindu state became 'the Bible of the great movement' and gave to the Hindu Mahasabha a platform, a slogan, a Bible and

a Banner. Similarly, in his 'Hindu-Pad-Padshahi', Savarkar says that Shivaji's movement of Hindavi Swarajya or Baji Rao's Hindu-pad-padshahi was "essentially a Hindu Movement in the defence of Hindu Dharma for the overthrow of the foreign rule."<sup>26</sup>

### **Influence of religion on Gandhi and his political activities**

In pre-independence India, Mahatma Gandhi's sharp understanding of the Indian psyche helped him to make a powerful symbolic representation associated with non-violence, as a socio-political movement. He gradually symbolized prophetic leadership in India. since he has been addressed by his followers as the 'Mahatma' meaning 'a great soul', he provided both a concentration of charisma and its dispersal by resorting to powerful symbols of identity that forced all the sections of the Congress rank and file to fall in line.<sup>27</sup> For this Gandhi followed three means like (1) he developed 'a model of "exemplary" life by making his own life a museum of national learning and a pacesetter and the "demonstration effect" that resulted was powerful', (2) he converted large and unresolved issues of Indian society into charismatic symbols as he gave to the vast masses of "untouchables" the name of "Harijans" Which means 'beloved of God', and (3) he launched a nation-wide movement for their improvement as part of the Congress program. He also developed a massive program for the propagation of Hindustani (a combination of Hindi and Urdu) as a language of national unity. He twisted the symbolism of Hindu-Muslim unity into a general platform of national unity.<sup>28</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi also used the concept of 'Rama-rajya' (the rule of Rama) interchangeably with the term for "self-rule" or independence (swaraj). In his view, "Rama Rajya was not only the political Home Rule but also Dharmarajya... which was something higher than ordinary political emancipation" that it does not mean Hindu kingship: "Ramrajya means rule of the common man."<sup>29</sup> A person like Ram would never wish to rule." He liberated the concept of "the rule of Rama" from its "royal" aspects and relates it to a "higher" utopian objective, namely the transformation of society by religious reform. This rule for him acted as Hindu public voters.<sup>30</sup>

Gandhiji believed that spiritual pursuits take a variety of forms, and therefore differ among individuals. His speeches emphasize his individual mission for "truth" as a symbolic instance, rather than emphasizing a common or collective path for his constituents to follow.<sup>31</sup> During his mass and great movements, the people who assembled to see and listen to him when he toured the country and who participated in the movements were moved more by traditional religious beliefs, including the belief that Gandhi himself was a saint or like a god on earth who would bring miraculous changes in their present or future situation for wellbeing and happiness. So, the mass religious belief and superstition had made some representative rumours about Mahatma. Another instance is that he regarded untouchability to be more a religious than a social problem. Gandhi established an 'Untouchability Abolition Week' in September-October 1932, launched a weekly journal, Harijan, in February 1933 and campaigned on behalf of the Untouchables to make an end of this.<sup>32</sup>

He also used traditional religious idioms to mobilize his unorganized society to fight against the colonialism. Some of his opinions in support of religion were "Religion must govern all life," "My heart, word and deed are pledged to the Being called God", "God rules every breath", "The whole of my life is saturated with the religious spirit... My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion."<sup>33</sup> In fact, a great part of his influence was because of his inner depth. He preached and practiced truth and Ahimsa. So, his greatness was related to the depths of the human soul. He regarded the old Indian values of spirituality, morality, austerity, devout saintliness and reminded the Indian people of the old sages and moral prophets of India. His constant references to God and the 'inner voice', his daily prayers and his solemn vow of Brahmacharya, since 1906, made him a saint and the Indian public revered him.' Hence, Gandhi in tactics or technique in political mobilization regarded religion as an important part of tradition and culture. It led to his influence as a charismatic leader among the masses of India.<sup>34</sup>

### **ISLAM AND INDIAN NATIONALISM**

As mentioned, not only Hinduism but also other religions played role in Indian Nationalism and independence movement, although Hinduism played the principal role. Even in Islam there were some symbols as Khilafat that were used in politics and among Muslim there were some leaders like Tyabji and Abu Kalam Azad, Ali Jinha, etc. who used religion in politics.<sup>35</sup>



## KHILAFAT MOVEMENT- ISLAM AGAINST THE BRITISH

From the historical point of view the British India was called as the ‘enemy territory’ (dar-ul-harb) by the Ulemas because of hostility with the British due to religious grounds. With the Khilafat issue, this hostility was further enhanced. The Caliphs have been the successor to the prophet Muhammad and they were as representative of God.<sup>36</sup> These titles have acted as symbols of Khilafat on the community of Islam all over the world. Therefore, the Khilafat movement (1918–1924) was a pan-Islamic and political protest campaign launched by Muslims in India against the British government and to protect the Ottoman Empire during the aftermath of World War I. The Indian National Congress and the Muslim League decided to organize a protest movement based on the Khilafat manifesto.<sup>37</sup>

Famous Muslim clerics had joined the Congress-League movement of Khilafat against the British. The leadership of the Muslim League dedicated its political efforts for the success of the Khilafat movement in India. Under the powerful religious- political leadership like Ali Jinnah, the political activism and mobilization of Indian Muslims started through several processes of communication.<sup>38</sup> Though, it was a Muslim religious movement in India, the movement became a part of the wider Indian independence movement. This was for the first time in modern India that this Movement led to the Hindus and Muslims unity in a single mass movement against British government.

On the issue of the large-scale Muslim discontent over the Khilafat question, Gandhiji used this opportunity to unite Hindus and Muslims in order to enlist their support for the freedom movement in India as a result of which the first major non-cooperation movement against the British (1920-22) was started.<sup>39</sup> At the Khilafat Conference in July 1920, Gandhi called upon Hindus to help Muslims. In the All-India Khilafat Conference on 7 April 1921, a resolution was passed that the Muslims should adhere to non-cooperation until Swaraj was obtained. In July 1921 the All India Khilafat Conference declared at Karachi in which it was declared that "it is in every way religiously unlawful for a Musalman at the present moment to continue in the British army and it is the duty of all the Musalmans in general and the Ulema in particular to see that these religious commandments are brought home to every Musalman in the Army." In this Conference, Abdul Majid projected a resolution to secure Swaraj for India. Here, Gandhiji assured that he had joined the Khilafat movement to help the Muslims, because for him their success meant Swaraj.<sup>40</sup> In this way, different religious persons, political parties and leaders along with common man of India were directly or indirectly used religions, religious ideas and slogans, etc. to fight against the British government in India.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, religion played a crucial role in the British politics and they used different religions of India particularly Hindu and Islam to maintain the policy of ‘divide and rule’. On the other hand, the nationalist leaders used religion to mobilize the common people against British Empire for gaining independence. Almost all the groups or parties used the religion, religious ideas, cultures, traditions, etc. in the line of achieving their aims and objectives. Within each community, these leaders used the religious symbols, the religion’s power of solidarity to inter-community integration and consequently achieved coordination and unity against the same enemy. In fact, it is the religion and the religious ideas which helped Gandhi to emerge as a magnetic national leader and it paved the way for the freedom of India. It is the religion which encouraged the people in each and every way to struggle against the British government for the independence of India.

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