

RELIGION AND POLITICS: INTERPRETATIONS OF GANDHI, NEHRU AND AMBEDKAR

Thomas Kadankavil*

Today we witness a number of inter-religious conflicts, international disputes, socio-economic inequalities, social prejudices, north-south division of nations for world market and superpower and excessive exploitation of nature. The ideal of peaceful co-existence of nations under the political principle of *panchasila* is threatened by ever increasing fanatical terrorist groups organized on the basis of colour, race, ethnicity, class, caste, religion and nation. The growing cult of violence along with the degeneration of moral values does not auger well for the whole of mankind. Racial discrimination, suppression of freedom of opinion, religious intolerance, criminalization of politics, tacit sanction given to consumerism and corruption are the present day social evils with which we can have no compromise. In the history of the Indian struggle for independence several great statesmen who reflected seriously on these have offered their own vision for a better society where religion and politics play their own proper role. We select Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, representatives of different or even opposing line of thinking for our special study.

I

Gandhi's Vision of Welfare State (*sarvodaya*)

While the Western ideal of the enlightenment extols a democratic system of governance independent of religion, Gandhi thinks that no politics is possible without the strong support of a religion or a philosophical vision. Violence, the exploitation of the poor, the devastation of nature and the neglect of moral and spiritual values spring from a material world vision (*Weltanschauung*) in which God and peaceful non-violent society have no place. Politics by its acknowledged aim should work for the establishment of a new just society free from all social evils and which would ensure the good of all. For this purpose Gandhi proposes the ideal of *sarvodaya*, the integral development of every individual. It is a healthy and happy blending of religion

*Dr. Thomas Kadankavil is a member of the Faculty of Philosophy, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore. He is currently involved in the Dalits Studies and promotion of their cause.

and politics, or a humanitarian religion in action. In this Gandhi, the Indian Socrates, puts forth a message which seems to hold out, like the cross of Christ, a promise and an assurance for the redemption of the suffering of humanity today.

1. The Political Vision of *Sarvodaya*

The term *sarvodaya* literally means, the rise of all, i.e., a society in which the good of all is achieved. Gandhi writes about the India of his dream: "...an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people; an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. There can be no room for such an India for the curse of untouchability, or the curse of intoxicating drinks and drugs. Women will enjoy the same rights as men. Since we shall be at peace with all the rest of the world, neither exploitation nor being exploited, we shall have the smallest army possible. All interests, not in conflict with the interests of the dumb millions, will be scrupulously respected, whether foreign or indigenous."¹ In the words of Jayaprakash Narayan "Gandhi had a vision of the future India.. That vision was of a new social order different from the capitalist, socialist and communist orders of society. A non-violent-society, a society based on love and human values, a de-centralized, self-governing non-exploitative, co-operative society."² It aims at the realization of global welfare and consequently, a universal brotherhood and friendship in the place of a corrupt, unjust world where only a few enjoy the fruits of the common labour. The ideal of the welfare of humanity has scriptural foundations. The *Gita* preaches the *lokasamgraha* (well-being of all).

The goal of *sarvodaya* is the greatest good for all living beings, and not the utilitarian principle which aim at only the welfare of the greatest number. According to Gandhi, "it means in its nakedness that in order to achieve the supposed good of fifty one percent the interest of forty nine percent may be, or rather should be sacrificed. It is a heartless doctrine and has done great harm to humanity."³ It implies the tyranny of the majority. *Sarvodaya* upholds the maximum welfare of every individual on the basis of sharing goods and

¹Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, Vol.47, 388-389. First appeared in the *Hindustan Times (Daily)*, September 5, 1931. Citations from Gandhi's works in this section are from: Davis Kavungal, *The Philosophical Foundation of Mahatma Gandhi's Vision of Sarvodaya*. Hereafter referred to as *Gandhi's Vision*.

²*Gandhi's vision*, p.52-53.

³*Ibid.*, p.56.

services regardless of one's own contribution. Even an invalid can make his own contribution to the society. Gandhi writes:

Persons who are ill bemoan their inability to do anything for others while they themselves have to accept peoples' services. This is a great error. Such a person can do service by thinking pure thoughts, by exacting the minimum of service and bathing in love those who serve them. He can also serve by keeping cheerful. We should never forget that meditating on God with pure devotion is also service.⁴

The self-realization of every individual is the primary objective of *sarvodaya* ideal. Total self-realization, according to Gandhi, is the God-realization.

2. Characteristics of *sarvodaya* Society

From the writings of Gandhi five important aspects can be identified they are: 1) Rama Rajya, 2) Kingdom of heaven 3) *Sarvadharm Samabhava*, 4) Swaraj 5) Swadeshi 6) Panchayat Raj. Concerning Rama Rajya Gandhi writes:

Now for Rama Rajya. It can be religiously translated as Kingdom of God on earth. Politically translated, it is perfect democracy in which, inequalities based on possession and non-possession, colour, race, creed or sex vanish. In it, land and state belong to people, justice is prompt, perfect and cheap, and therefore, there is freedom of worship, speech and press - all this because of the reign of the self-imposed law of moral restraint. Such a state must be based on truth and non-violence and must consist of prosperous happy and self-contained villages and village communities.⁵ I warn my Musslamman friends against misunderstanding in my use of Rama rajya. By Rama Rajya I do not mean Hindu Raj... Divine Raj, the kingdom of God. For me, Ram, Rahim are one and same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of truth and righteousness."⁶

For Gandhi, a person's political, social, and economic life should be a manifestation of his religious life directed towards the kingdom of God?⁷ One

⁴ *Complete Works*, Vol. 52, p.75.

⁵ *The Hindu (Daily)* Madras, June 12, 1945.

⁶ *Collected Works*, Vol.41, p.374.

⁷ *Young India*, June 18, 1925.

of the very important ideas of *sarvodaya* society is the equal attitude (respect) of all towards all religions (*sarvadharmā sambhava*). On the individual level *swaraj*, which is a combination of two words: *Swa* meaning own or self, and *raj* meaning government, is the rule over one's own self. It is the capacity of individuals to decide and actualize their own future. At the natural level, it means self-government. Each nation should be independent from any foreign rule in order to co-operate with other nations as equal partners. *Swadeshi*, coming from two words, *swa*, meaning one's own, *desh*, meaning the total cultural and natural environment, of which one is the integral part, is proposed as one of the means to attain *Swaraj*. It is the use of native products manufactured in one's own locality to the exclusion of foreign products so that local industries may flourish and the nation prosper. It also means reliance on our own strength; our strength means the strength of our body, our mind and our soul. Being born in India has a prior claim to our service to it. *Panchayat Raj*: The term *panchayat* means republic and *raj* means rule. So *panchayat raj* stands for a village republic having full powers exercised by the people aiming at the all round welfare of every citizen. Inspired by India's ancient village model of political and social structure, Gandhi advocates the theory of *panchayat raj*.

3. Other Distinguishing Marks

Sarvodaya society is theocentric and anthropocentric. It is theocentric in the sense that it is centred on God as the Summum Bonum of human life. Gandhi writes: "I do not seek to serve India at the sacrifice of truth or God. For I know that a man who forsakes truth of God can forsake his country, and his nearest and dearest ones."⁸ God-centred life is anthropocentric life because God dwells in every human being. Hence supreme consideration is to be given to human beings. Through moral conversion of the individual Gandhi plans to build up a human society. Moral and human values are integrated in one's life.

Each man should aim at establishing a society with the following four qualities namely i) a non-violent society, 2) a just society, 3) an egalitarian society and 4) free and self-supporting society. What is essential to establish such a society is to have self-sustaining villages.

Real India is to be found not here in the very few cities, but in the seven hundred thousand villages covering a surface of 1900 miles long 1500

⁸ *Collected Works* Vol.32, p.441.

miles broad.⁹ ...If the village perishes, India will perish too, India will be no more India. Her own mission in the world will get lost.¹⁰ True democracy cannot be worked out by twenty men sitting at the centre. It has to be worked out from below by the people of every village.¹¹

Like the village, each province, state and nation must also attempt to be self-sufficient concerning the basic necessities of life in order to enjoy freedom. Self-sufficiency does not intend each village, province and nation to be isolated and excluded from others.

To be faithful to the *sarvodaya* means going beyond one's familial, ethnic, caste, linguistic, village, regional and national loyalties. Love has no boundary. Gandhi says that his nationalism includes the love of all nations of the earth irrespective of creed. "It calls, for universal brotherhood." It is only when individuals go out to die the nation will survive."¹² Gandhi envisaged a world society in which people lived in love and friendship.

Non-violent means can only bring about the conversion of heart of people. For Gandhi, ends and means are of equal importance. The means should be equally good and non-violent as is the end. He makes his position clear thus: I am unable to subscribe to methods of bribery and deceit even for gaining entrance into heaven, much less for gaining India's freedom. He was very much concerned about the purity of means in the field of politics.

Another distinguishing mark of a *sarvodaya* society is that it is an educated society. Gandhi believed that an illiterate nation can never make any solid progress of achievement. Opportunity for education must be the fundamental right of every citizen in the nation. "The education is that which helps a us to know the *atman*, our true self, God."¹³ It is also the knowledge of unity of all life in One God. "You may read books but they cannot carry you far. Real education consists in drawing the best out of yourself. What better book can there be than to go, day in and day out, to Harijan quarters and to regard Harijans as members of human family. It would be an uplifting

⁹*Ibid.*, Vol.26, 302 (Harijan, August 29, 1936)

¹⁰Harijan, January 18, 1948.

¹¹Collected Worksm, Vol.61, p.27.

¹²*Ibid.*, Vol.76, p.403.

¹³*Ibid.*, Vol.50, 182.

enabling study. Mine is no narrow creed. It is one of realising the essential brotherhood of man."¹⁴

4. The Economic Property

"A semi-starved nation can have neither religion nor art nor organization."¹⁵ A solution proposed by Gandhi to the acute problem of poverty was "bread labour". "If every one of us did bodily labour to earn his food, we could not see the poverty which we find in the world."¹⁶ Gandhi held the view that bodily labour is equally good and valuable as are clerical job. He wants even the rich do manual labour. "He who eats without labour eats sin, is verily a thief."¹⁷

Gandhi held the view that the poverty of millions cannot be solved by big industries of the modern western type which is based on industrial capitalism, rationalistic materialism and colonial imperialism. The progress of *jnana* is to be achieved based on her religious and moral traditions. The introduction of machines into production leads to the exploitation of masses by the small group of rich people through competition and marketing. Because of the demerits of heavy industries Gandhi encouraged small scale industries like spinning, hand pounding of rice, hand grinding, soap, paper and match-making, tanning, weaving etc. on the village level. About spinning wheel (*carka*) he wrote: "I would make spinning wheel the foundation on which to build a sound village life. I would make the wheel as the centre round which all other activities will revolve."¹⁸ As to his objection to machinery and heavy industry he writes: "What I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. Today machinery merely help a few to ride on back of millions..."¹⁹ Gandhi's critique of modern civilization is to be viewed as a corrective to the negative aspect of it and not as a rejection of the whole.

5. Economics and Religion

Religion and morality are to be integrated in economics. Gandhi writes: "An economics which runs counter to morality cannot be called true

¹⁴Speech at Annamalai University, February 16, 1934 (Collected Works, vol.58, PMO).

¹⁵Young India February 17, 1927.

¹⁶Collected Works, Vol.8, p.335.

¹⁷Ibid., vol.28, p.46.

¹⁸Ibid., Vol.4, p.192.

¹⁹Ibid., Vol.25, p.251.

economics."²⁰ Human welfare, which is the object of economics, is impossible without a deep concern for moral life of human person." Gandhi uses the adjective moral as synonymous with spiritual. He stands for economic equality and it is to be realized by equal sharing of goods for the fulfilment of basic needs of every individual, regardless of one's contribution to the process of production. According to Gandhi all have not the same capacity. "I would allow a man of intellect to earn more, I would not cramp his talent. But the bulk of his greater earnings must be used for the good for the state. *Possessions of riches is a trust to be discharged in the name of God and for the sake of all poor people.*"²¹ Gandhi proposes the *theory of trusteeship* which is the voluntary sharing of riches as a solution to the problem of the unequal distribution of wealth. The capitalists are to be conscientized to share their property voluntarily with the working class through dialogue and discussion. To bring into existence a 'humane economics', Gandhi founded an organization known as *Lok Sevak Sangh* i.e. a society for the service of humankind. It was intended to build up the nation from the very bottom through indigenous methods. The establishment of communal harmony through interreligious prayer sessions, abolition of class discrimination and untouchability, promotion of cottage industries, village sanitation, universal adult education, assistance to attain gender equality are some of the items included in the 'constructive programme' of Gandhi.

For Gandhi the role and function of the state must be reduced to the minimum possible so that the individuals are better empowered. The individual is the architect of his own government. Gandhi, therefore, preferred an enlightened or ordered anarchy of self-ruled citizens experiencing the integral liberation of all. But Gandhi writes: "no government worth its name can suffer anarchy to prevail. Hence I have said that even under a government based primarily on non-violence a small police force will be necessary."²²

6. His Approach to the Depressed Class

Gandhi was determined to keep the Dalits within the Hindu-fold. At the round table conference in London in 1932 representations were made by Muslims, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians for separate electorates to protect their minority rights. Ambedkar too demanded a separate electorate for the Dalits. Gandhi opposed the demand vehemently. And when the British

²⁰*Ibid.*, Vol.78, 174.

²¹*Ibid.*, Vol.35, p.79.

²²Harijan, March 9, 1940.

Government did agree in the following year to award "Depressed Classes" a separate electorate, he undertook in Yerwada (Poona September 21, 1932) a fast-unto-death. At the end of involved discussion lasting for five days, Ambedkar gave up the demand for a separate electorate. In bargain he won 148 reserved seats in the provincial legislatures as against 78 allowed under the communal award. Today many dalit-leaders regard the pact made at Poona as an act of betrayal of their claim for separate religious minority status in the Indian society.

7. Ruler a sage

The state should be ruled by sages and its goal must be the welfare of all. It will be a government, so to say, by sages. In ancient days people respected the sage. "In modern times a sage is a person who has education, a spirit of service and the qualification of rendering service in the largest measure. A man of this type will not seek power."²³ The politician must share the sorrows of the people; understand their difficulties and anticipate their wants; become one with the untouchable; they should know what it feels like living in boxes, miscalled houses (slums) of the city labourers."²⁴ According to Gandhi a politician is one who is at the service of God through the service of community especially the lowliest and the exploited.

With a view to form true *sevak* politicians for the country Gandhi established *satyagraha ashram* in Ahmedabad (Sabermati) in May 1915 and proposed for himself and other members of the *ashram* eleven fellowship vows, of which the first five are important moral principles to be observed by every one: *satya* (truthfulness), *ahimsa* (non-violence), *Brahmacharya* (celibacy), *asteya* (non-stealing) *aparigrah* (non-possession). The following are specially for ashramites: *asvada* (control of palate), *Sarirasrama* (physical labour) *swadeshi* (using goods made in one's own country) *bhayavarjana* (fearlessness), *sparsabhavana* (abolition of untouchability), and *sarvadharmasamanatva* (reverence for all religions).

Conclusion

Gandhi's political philosophy is based on the existence of the one-truth, God and man's oneness with him. Here political goal is intertwined with religious goal. Integral liberation of one individual is said to be related to the

²³Cited from, Davis, *Gandhi's Vision*, p.120.

²⁴Young Inida, September, 11, 1924.

salvation of others because there is oneness of humanity. In the creation of a *sarvodaya* society which aim at the integral liberation of all the concrete means for the same are prayer and selfless service. A nation ruled by sages, where political power is decentralized with *panchayat raj*, which mostly rely on small scale industries, its practicability apart, is certainly an unique ideal which mankind has a right to dream of.

II

Nehru and His Ideal of Secularism

The intervening period between the date Gandhi landed in Bombay on 9th January 1915, and Jawaharlal Nehru's death on 27th May 1964, is usually looked up by the historians of Indian history as Gandhi-Nehru era. When Gandhi based his struggle for independence on a spiritual evolution, Nehru was working for a political revolution. These two figures dominated the Indian scene so prominently that we are justified in marking it off as a distinct era, though the composite greatness of India owes a great deal to a number of other great personalities of this period.

1. The Philosophy of Nehru

The three basic integrated principles of his philosophy of life were (1) his passionate dedication to democratic process, 2) world -peace through non-alignment, 3) and humanism embracing the family of man. He grew into intellectual maturity through various stages: first in time was classical liberation with its emphasis on individual rights; then at Cambridge, he was drawn to Fabian socialism; thereafter, he was influenced by Gandhian stress on the purity of means and the message of non-violence, and in the late twenties and thirties by Marxist theory and the gospel of classless society. He was also attracted to the ethical norms of western humanism and its worship of science. Ideas of national secularism and radical equality were the underlying moving force behind this intellectual openness.²⁵

Dispite his occasional lapses into uncertainty and pessimism, he always maintained faith in science and faith in man's upward march to a better life. He was indifferent to religion as a guide to action. The orthodox religion as practised in the modern world repelled him because Nehru writes, "it seemed to be closely associated with superstitious practices and dogmatic beliefs."

²⁵Cf. Verinder Grover (ed.) *Political Thinkers of Modern India: Jawaharlal Nehru*, Deep and Deep Publications, Delhi, 1990, p.15.

Mysticism irritated him because, "it appears to be vague and soft and flabby, not a rigorous discipline of the mind but a surrender of mental faculties and living in a sea of emotional experience." Metaphysics and philosophy provided a certain intellectual fascination. But I have never felt at ease there and have escaped from their spell with a feeling of relief. He also acknowledged his agnosticism. "I find myself incapable of thinking of deity or of any unknown supreme power in anthropomorphic terms, and the fact that many people think so is continually a source of surprise to me."²⁶ He held the view that instead of thinking too much on fundamental problems of life one should rather concentrate on the immediate, urgent and concrete problems of life. A living philosophy must answer the problems of life. Pragmatism looms very large in his thought, as it does in his approach to decisions.

Flexible on tactics, he is rigid on goals; secularism of the democratic type, achieved by planing, but within the framework of political democracy; secularism or more correctly equal rights for all communities in the Indian family; raising standards of living for masses; to be achieved by peaceful change, not revolution and the preservation of individual rights."²⁷

These were considered to the fixed ideas of Nehru. Nehru is a convinced socialist but he was not a communist. Though during 1929-1939 he had prolonged flirtation with communist, in 1945 he also recommended the expulsion of communists from Congress. "Far from being revolutionary, the communists are actually conservative", he declared in 1946. Commenting on Korean war he said: "huge monolithic states under communist guidance (may)... answer an economic question.. but I don't like monolithic states, I don't like authoritaian states... I do think that individual liberty, i.e., normally considered political liberty, does not exist in monolithic authoritarian countries." Two years later he said: "I think Marx is out of date today. To talk about Marxism today, if I may say so, is reactionary. I think communists, with all their fire and fury, are in some ways utterly reactionary in outlook."²⁸

2. Minority Communities and Communal Problems

By the mid-twenties Nehru was compelled to take a clear cut position on the question of religion in politics due to the spread of rioting involving

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.20.

sections of Muslim and Hindu communities. It became clear to him that mutual antagonism would drag India down into the abyss unless this so-called religion was scotched and the intelligentsia at least was secularized. Nehru used this word secular in 1926 not in the accepted sense of the separation of religion (church) and state, but to mean the toleration of all faiths and beliefs and permissible religious practices, *leading to a separation of religion from politics*. To achieve this end Nehru looked to both industrialization and the mass education of the type that would dissolve dogma and dogmatic mentality. Since getting rid of the authoritarianism of religion could only be a long-term object, Nehru turned his attention to the problem of growing communal animosity. Those who gained most from British rule were predominantly Hindus. The national awareness expressed itself increasingly in a Hindu idiom. The process of divergence between the religious communities was further aggravated by official policy symbolized by the establishment of separate electorate.²⁹

The communal parties, both Hindu and Muslim, derived their support from the feudal and upper classes and Nehru thought that they were giants with feet of clay, which would fade into nothingness in the light of reason once the British were pushed out. Therefore he regarded as waste of time, all attempts at a political settlement of communal problem. But to ensure support for civil disobedience in 1930 Nehru asserted that the Congress would not favour any side but hold the centre impartially. In the resolution on fundamental rights at Karachi-Congress in 1931, Nehru incorporated the clauses providing that every citizen should enjoy freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess and to practise any religion. *This was the first break down in concrete terms, of the concept of secularism in the Indian context* and it formed the basis of the articles in the Constitution many years later.³⁰ This was also meant to leave no room for special reservation. He might assert that communalism was a ghost, but the ghost refused to vanish and continued to drink blood. The communalism that existed among Hindus was able to disguise itself as nationalism, the Indian version of fascism. Recognizing some of the claims of the Muslim communities Nehru distinguished between shades of communalism: "Honest communalism is fear; false communalism is political reaction."³¹ Though he played down the communal issues, the British

²⁹"Nehru and Minorities," S.Gopal, *Political Thinkers of Modern India*, p.209.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p.211.

³¹Interview, November 29, 1933, *The Bombay Chronicle* (Dec.,2, 1933).

government with Communal Award divided the people into numerous religious compartments.

The fear of the Muslims that they might be swamped by the Hindu majority had widened considerably. Therefore Jinnah demanded that Muslim league, his party, should be recognized as the authoritative and representative organization of the Muslims. This was unacceptable to Congress. But the league, with active British support, extended its popular backing and moved to the climax of partition. Nehru's policy towards the minorities before 1947, therefore, had not been a success.³² A dissolution of the communal problem the way Nehru thought, was not possible in a colonial setting. The presence of large religious minorities in India made secularism the only possible basis of uniform and durable national identity.

3. The Ideal of Secularism

It was suggested that secularism was a western concept unsuited to India where the large majority practised Hinduism as a social religion. To counter this, Nehru had, long before independence, defined secularism not according to any dictionary or historical tradition but in a way adapted to conditions in this country. The future Indian state would not be hostile to religion but would not represent any one religion and would provide freedom of conscience to all.

As Prime Minister Nehru was more concerned with Hindu than the Muslim communalism. The Hindu faith, preaching hospitality to all forms of belief, was ideal on paper; but the practice was rigid and narrow. Therefore Nehru was convinced that the destruction of Hindu communalism was indispensable for India's survival and it was the prime duty of the Hindus to provide the religious minorities with a sense of security. The ideal of secularism cannot be worked out as the Hindus were not secular. If all are in the political field, no non-Hindus would be treated as second-class citizens in the country.

The secularism Nehru proposed is the opposite category to communalism rather than to religion. One can hardly talk of secularism in the Indian context without referring to communalism. After partition Nehru was determined to build a secular India whatever the odds and difficulties. According to Nehru, a secular state does not, of course, mean that people should give up their religion. A secular state means a state in which the state protects all religions,

³²"Nehru and Minorities," *op.cit.*, p.215.

but does not favour one at the expense of others and does not itself adopt any religion as state religion. It was precisely in this spirit that under Nehru's guidance constitutional guarantees were given to all religions, especially to minority religions. With this ideal in view he was determined to eliminate communalism from independent India.³³

There is no doubt that secularism is a must for a pluralist democracy. No pluralist society can go much further without weakening parochial, as well as separatist ethnic tendencies. Therefore the Nehruvian model of secularism has still not lost its relevance and it will not be in the foreseeable future. Secularism in the elitist sense is anti-religious and atheistic. Nehru never sought to impose such an understanding of secularism on the society. But his usual emphasis on rationality and science and technology may have created an impression that he is anti-religious. By secularism he did not strictly mean to privatise and restrict religion to one's home. It would go against the socio-cultural ethos of our country. Nehru envisaged a secularism in which active propagation of one's religion is permitted (Constitution art.25). Religion in South Asian Countries has always had a collective sense. We can never think of secularism in India without respecting collective religious sensibilities of its people. One has, however, to guard against the politicization of religion.

4. Nehru and Gandhi: No Politics without Religion

In an admirable introduction K.T. Narasimha Char in his *Quintessence of Nehru* (1961) details significant contrast and surprising similarities between Gandhi and Nehru, which confirm that Nehru has always deplored asceticism as well as speculative metaphysics but has always retained a strong moralistic strain in this thought and personality³⁴ under the influence of Gandhi's "ethical approach to life." Gandhi and Nehru differed in many matters not only intellectually, but they were different in make up, in approach, in temperament and even in personal ideals.³⁵ And yet they co-operated so intensely and closely in the task of liberating India. Gandhi was essentially spiritual and deeply religious, with an unshakable faith in God that is truth. Faith in God and religion was not a strong point with Nehru, though he was committed to the social ideal of the good of all (*sarvodaya*) for which Gandhi dedicated his life. Gandhi is regarded both as a saint and a political. But there was an

³³Cf. Nehru, *Secularism and Nation-Building*, Asghar Ali Engineer, op.cit., pp.220-233.

³⁴V. Grover, op.cit., p.8.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p.133.

historical reason for the political partnership of Gandhi and Nehru. Gandhi's philosophy was suited to the stage of struggle which India had reached and Nehru understood this. Nehru might not accept entirely Gandhi's belief in non-violence, but he knew that in India no other policy was possible.³⁶

Nehru adopted what was wanting in him, namely God and religion from Gandhi's faith. He approvingly quotes from Mahatma Gandhi's writings on religion in his autobiography: "None can live without religion... 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"³⁷ Commenting on these words Nehru writes:

Perhaps it would have been more correct if he had said that most of these people who want to exclude religion from life and politics mean by that word "religion", something very different from what he means.. It is obvious that he is using it in a sense probably moral and ethnical more than any other - different from that of the critics of religion."³⁸

Nehru learned from Gandhi that we can never think of secularism in India without respecting the collective religious sensibilities of its people.

5. Socialism and Democracy

In the late thirties of his life Nehru was convinced that there was no middle path between capitalism and socialism. But in 1955 he abandoned this extreme position and held that it was possible to adopt a middle path between the two rival economic systems.³⁹ This change of view was mainly due to the concern for national unity and peaceful democratic solution for various problems arising from class caste/tribal antagonism. In the socialistic goal of economic democracy he dreamt of, egalitarian society, based on equality and guided by co-operative effort rather than by the profit motive. In 1951 he declared that the purpose of our Constitution, as proclaimed in the directive principles, is to move towards a classless and casteless society. Towards the end of his life he has used the term **welfare state** to describe the goal of economic democracy. Nehru's ideal was mixed economy which involved the recognition

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.738.

³⁷ *Autobiography* (1962), p.377.

³⁸ Nehru, *Secularism and Nation Building*, *op.cit.*, p.222.

³⁹ 'Socialistic Trends in Nehru's Philosophy', Mahendra Kumar, *op.cit.*, p.147.

of two main divisions in the country's economy, the public sector and the private sector. Another element of his socialism is his conviction that the size of land holdings should be limited by law to what is ordinarily sufficient for a family to cultivate.⁴⁰ Here socialism means state intervention in economic matters.

The Constitution makers were hesitant to use the word socialism in the Constitution. It was added in the preamble only by a later constitution amendment. Nehru's failure to build up socialism can be explained by the fact that he wished to usher socialism in the country without bringing about radical changes in the socio-economic structure. In the absence of willingness to transform the existing structure based on private property, no effort to bring socialism could ever succeed. The vested socio-economic interests, in fact, defeated the half-hearted steps of the government. Moreover the utter passivity and apathy of the poor in India played a significant role in keeping Nehru's efforts towards socialism in a low key.⁴¹

As to Nehru's democratic ideals, he was successful in laying down the foundation of 'Revolution by consent'. Universal adult franchise was a revolutionary step in the Indian context. Nehru was active in nurturing the plant of democracy in India. In a country where the majority of the people are illiterate, Nehru acted as a great teacher of democracy. He evolved a set of principles and ideas to achieve a socialist reconstruction of society with democratic means rather than with a violent-revolution. His conviction was that socialism without democracy would mean tyranny in the Indian context. In Nehru's view, in the Indian context, the journey to socialism should be slow. On account of this flexibility and pragmatism in his approach to socialism, the radical socialists described him as a 'centrist' with learning towards the left.⁴²

Conclusion

Has Nehruvian model of secularism failed? It would be difficult to give a straight forward answer to this question. To provide special treatment (reservation) to religious and other minorities on the basis of their backwardness is to weaken secularism as the foundation of equality and democracy. Pressure of circumstance sometimes led Nehru to hesitate and not to throw his full weight on the side of secularism. He did not oppose the

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p.150.

⁴¹Ranbir Singh, *Nehru and Socialism*, *op.cit.*, pp.256-259.

⁴²Nehru, *Democracy and Socialism*, C.P. Bhambhai, *op.cit.*, p.286.

listing of the banning of cow-slaughter as one of the directive principles of state policy in the Constitution. In his keenness to win the confidence of the Muslim community, he failed to ensure the equality before the law of all Indians and enact a common civil code. Instead personal laws of the religious communities were sanctioned. Again to assuage the fears of Muslims, their women were denied that which are available to women of other faith.⁴³ Since the religion is not separated from the state law, it could not be easily separated from politics also.

Nehru realized from the very start that the real answer to the problem of mixing of religion with politics is mass education. He believed that an educated society, forward-looking and striving for development, will even without knowing it, liquidate communalism both of reaction and fear. His dream has not come true. Our national life today is marred by communal riots and hatred for the religious minorities. Nehru himself suggested that the problem of the minorities was not suited to his temperament and cast of mind. He wrote to Jinnah after the outbreak of war.

I must confess to you that in this matter I have lost confidence in myself, though I am not usually given that way. But the last two or three years have had a powerful effect on me. My own mind moves on a different plane and most of my interest lie in other directions. And so, though I have given much thought to the problems and understand most of its implications, I feel as if I was an outsider and alien in spirit.⁴⁴

Secularism can never succeed in India if the western model is adopted. Our social ethos are very different. It would succeed only if an Indian model is evolved with a creative application of the concept.

Though Nehru was not satisfied with the policies he was championing, and in many instances he had gone back on his own principles, he has at least left us with the right answers and the correct approaches.

III

Ambedkar: Politics for Equality Through Religion

Ambedkar rose to great heights of eminence, and glory by dint of his practical application, tenacity of purpose, hard work, education, clear vision of

⁴³Verinder Grover (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.217.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p.217.

the goal, courage to challenge the stalwarts in the society, power of knowledge and selfless service. His political thinking seems to revolve around the following two convictions: 1) rights are protected not by laws, but by the social and moral conscience of the society and; 2) a democratic form of government presupposes a democratic form of society. As we try to understand the implications of these statements we would be led to the core of the national and personal problems Ambedkar confronted.

1. Ambedkar a Short profile

While Gandhi (Baniya) and Nehru (Brahmin) belonged to the upper castes, highly honoured in the society, Ambedkar was born in a highly despicable and untouchable low caste of the Mahars. This certainly accounts for the great difference of priorities we found in his political and religious thinking from Gandhi and Nehru.

He was born at Mhow in Maharashtra on 14th April 1891. He passed his B.A. examination in 1912. He received a scholarship from Sayajirao, the king of Baroda, to take up his higher studies in United States and London. After completing his law as well as securing D.Sc. in Economics (1921) Ambedkar returned to India and went to Baroda to fulfil his obligation of service to Baroda state. On account of ill-treatment meted out to him, being an untouchable, he left the service and returned to Bombay to practise law in 1923. On October 14th 1935 in a public meeting at Nasik he declared that, though he was born in the outskirts of Hinduism, he would not die as a Hindu. In 1936 he started Independent Labour Party to protect the interests of the oppressed classes. He opposed in the Bombay assembly in 1938 the move to change the name of the depressed class in to Harijans. In his personal life he had been a widower for twenty years, but in 1947 at the age of 54, he married for the second time. This time the bride was from Brahmin caste, Saraswat, a woman from the medical profession, who transformed his personal life both as physician and housewife. Ambedkar got elected to the Constitution making body from Bengal Assembly and he lost this membership in the partition of Bengal. Congress leaders, recognizing his talents elected him to the Constituent Assembly from Bombay and made him the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee. Ambedkar's contribution to the constitution is undoubtedly of the highest order. Indeed, he was a modern Manu and deserves to be called the father or the chief architect of the Constitution of India. On August 15, 1947, he was made the minister of law in the central cabinet and resigned that post in 1951 due to the differences of opinion on the

bill of Hindu code. He embraced neo-Buddhism with his three lakhs of followers on October 14, 1956 just before his death on December 6, 1956.

2. Political Thought

The ideal to be realized according to Dr. Ambedkar is of one man, one value in all walks of life, political economic, and social. This ideal of one man, one value is to be achieved by stopping religious social and economic exploitation of man by man. Absence of exploitation in any form is the essence of socialism. Socialism does not only embrace economic equality, but also social and political equality. The foremost hindrance to socialism in India is the caste-system in Hinduism and its byproduct untouchability. Ambedkar gives a graphic picture of the hardships of the untouchable.

The Hindus will not allow the untouchables to take water from a well... will not allow the untouchables entry in schools. The Hindus will not tolerate untouchables to own land.. will not allow an untouchable to sit when a Hindu is standing.... They are not isolated acts of a few bad men among Hindus. They are the emanations of the permanent anti-social attitude of Hindu community against the untouchables.⁴⁵

This shows that almost all the human rights were denied to the untouchables. As such in India no attempt was made to strengthen respect for human rights and fundamental freedom. Though Hinduism had been absorbing many odd cultures into its fold, it failed to adjust itself to absorb the untouchables or to remove the bar of untouchability, as the Hindu had nothing to fear from the untouchables, nor had they anything to gain by the abolition of untouchability.⁴⁶

A society of unequals, according to Matthew Arnold, "materializes our upper class, vulgarizes our middle class, brutalizes our lower." Therefore the task before Ambedkar was to create upheaval changes by bringing an end of exploitation of untouchables, creating in them a sense of self-respect, dignity of individual and the consciousness of equality of status. For this end what he adopted was not Marxian type of socialism, but constitutional method of democracy. As a part of this social process he exhorted the untouchables... "Never regard yourselves as untouchables, live a clean life, dress yourselves

⁴⁵G.S. Lokhande, *Ambedkar and Socialism, Political Thinkers of Modern India*, Verinder Grover, Deep and Deep Publications, Delhi, 1990, p.274.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p.275.

like the touchables... None can restrict your freedom in the choice of your garments... Attend more to the civilization of mind and the spirit of self-help."⁴⁷ Through another effective slogan, namely, "educate, agitate and organize," he goaded the untouchables into action. With this goal in mind he started the institution, "Bahiskrit Hitakarini Sabha.

Ambedkar advocated state socialism in the field of industry and also state ownership in agriculture with a collectivised method of cultivation. He believed that only collective farms can solve the problems of the 60 millions of untouchable who were landless labourers. He did not want to leave state socialism to the will of the legislature, but to establish it by the law of constitution and thus make it unalterable by any act of the legislature and the executive. The connection between individual liberty and the shape and form of economic structure of society becomes real only when state socialism has been established through political democracy. Therefore, he had the earnest desire to include the programme of socialism in the fundamental rights. When Sardar Patel and J.B. Kripalani refused to include the programme of socialism in their constitution draft on fundamental rights, Ambedkar requested Rajendra Prasad and Nehru to include it in the section on fundamental rights. They were also not willing to include any substantial programme of socialism in the constitution.⁴⁸

Following are the characteristics of Ambedkar's state socialism: 1) A condemnation of existing social, political and economic order as an unjust order. 2) an advocacy of a new order based on the principle of one man, one value, one vote (universal adult franchise). 3) A belief that this ideal is realizable through state socialism and parliamentary democracy and constitutional means. 4) A revolutionary will of establishing social democracy to carry out the programme of social solidarity.⁴⁹

He has expressed his desire in the parliament to establish a social democracy which would satisfy the economic, social, educational and cultural needs of the people. In his concluding speech in the constituent assembly on November 25, 1949, he declared:

Social democracy "means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty,

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p.277.

⁴⁸Verinder Grover, *op.cit.*, p.280.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p.280.

equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items of a trinity. They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy... without equality liberty would kill individual initiative. without fraternity, liberty and equality would not become a natural course of things.⁵⁰

The basic concept of Ambedkar's political thought is the equality of all men which is to be achieved by a state socialism of a constitutional and parliamentary democracy.

3. A New Vision of Religion

To achieve social and religious equality the first act he did was to organize at Mahad, Maharashtra, 'a public bonfire of Manusmriti' on 25th December 1927. He believed that at intervals such drastic remedies are a necessity. Concerning this Ambedkar said: We made a bonfire of it because we view it as a symbol of injustice under which we have been crushed across centuries. Because of its teachings we have been ground down under despicable poverty, and so we made the dash, started all, took our lives in our hands and performed the deed."⁵¹

His approach to religion was that of the social scientists. He looked at religion as the basis for social interaction. He did not stress the relationship of religion to social conflict. In Ambedkar's thought religion came as a stimulant of the people. Hatred and at the same time attraction towards Hindu religion and culture worked simultaneously on his mind.⁵² He argued that Hinduism had lost its values and could not be reformed. In the beginning his approach to Hinduism was of a social reformer. In *Annihilation of castes*, he says that true religion is the foundation of the society, the basis on which all true civil governments rest and earn their sanction. His search to find a liberative force in one religion ended in finding Buddhism in its pristine form. It can be called Neo-Buddhism. As Gore assesses, "leaving aside scholastic disputes, what emerged was a version of Buddha's teaching which was consistent with a modern liberal philosophy, met the criterion of a religion with a social mission and answered the needs of India's deprived millions."⁵³

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.653.

⁵¹ G.S. Lokhande, *op.cit.*, p.277.

⁵² F.H. Bennur, *Ambedkar's Concept of Religion*, Verinder Grover, *op.cit.*, p.417.

⁵³ M.S. Gore, *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993), p.225. Quoted from "In Search of a New

His attitude towards religion was not spiritual like that of Gandhi. His approach was intellectual and socio-political. In the name of God and religion *Varnashrama dharma* and untouchability were advocated in India. It was contended that the given unjust social structure was God-given and hence, cannot be changed. Due to this Ambedkar developed utmost anger towards Hinduism and Hindu God's (Rama and Krishna - **Riddles in Hinduism**) and even God-based religions like Islam and Christianity were not acceptable to him. Perhaps, because of this factor, he could not take a categorical decision about religion or conversion till 1954. Buddhism, finally he accepted, was not primarily God-centred, but a religion thoroughly Indian.

Ambedkar looked at religion from a cultural dimension and was under the influence of Hindu culture. He writes: "If the depressed classes join Islam or Christianity they not only go out of Hindu religion, but they also go out of the Hindu culture. On the other hand, if they become Sikhs, they remain within the Hindu culture... Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalize the depressed classes."⁵⁴ He separated religion from culture and held Hindu religion is responsible for slavery, the practice of untouchability and exploitation of the depressed classes. He was, in fact, afraid of the so-called denationalisation of the depressed classes by his call for conversion from Hinduism to other religions. He looked at nationalist and nationalism in terms of religion and culture. National culture is wider than Hindu religion. He therefore, was inviting his community to change over from Hinduism to Buddhism in its pristine form (neo-Buddhism) so that it could raise its politico-social status and bring it at par with Hindus. He always thought in terms of Indian religion and Indian culture.

First a social system develops its value and instruments of exploitation for its own stability, perpetuation and safeguarding of its vested interests. Then doctrines of religion develop at a later stage, to give justification to this exploitation. Hinduism came as a religious sanction and psycho-cultural justification of exploitation of the depressed classes. Religion however, alone cannot be the chief source of exploitation in a nation and its culture. So, rejection of one religion and mass acceptance of another religion does not

Religion," J.Xavier Ilango, *Little Traditions and National Culture*, Dharmaram Publications, Bangalore, 2000.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p.415.

bring either revolutionary changes in the exploited community or in the unjust and exploitative socio-political system."⁵⁵

Ambedkar wanted a religion which instructed people how they should behave with one another and prescribed for man his duty to another, and relation with God in the light of equality, fraternity and liberty. In a way, are not these concepts religion in themselves? This would call for a total and revolutionary change of the Indian social system. Instead of envisaging such a revolution based on fundamental human values, Ambedkar's ideas about social reconstruction, establishment of a civil and political community and nation-building centred around religion. Ambedkar was still far ahead of Nehru, who professed no religion, in proposing and pleading for state socialism and thereby to effect a social revolution in India.

4. Gandhi, Ambedkar and the Issue of Reservation

When Ambedkar was released by the generous Maharaj from the agreement to serve Baroda, he decided to launch on a campaign of self-help. He resolved to make the uplift of his depressed class brethren his mission by self-help and self-reliance. He made use of every opportunity to advance the interests of Harijans and to raise in them unshakable moral courage.

It is a well-known fact that Ambedkar clashed with Gandhi, and came to consider him as almost the arch enemy of the untouchables of India. On Gandhi's part he clearly realised that Ambedkar's ways were not his and kept clear of him. Ambedkar's followers to this day continue to feel and think that Gandhi did most harm to the cause of the untouchables, particularly so by forcing the famous Poona fact (also known as the Yeravada pact) on them in 1932. When the British government decided to give untouchables separate electorate Gandhi resorted to a fast unto death opposing this Communal Award. Ambedkar was not moved by it for quite long, but at last he yielded to pressure from everywhere and agreed to joint electorates with reservation of seats for Harijans and thus Gandhi's life was saved. Ambedkar believed that Gandhi and the Congress would never accept the ideal of equality and the political method of socialist revolution. T.V. Parvate records Ambedkar's view on social revolution:

It is a most unsatisfactory state of things that most human beings should be required to sweat for fourteen hours a day like beasts of burden just to be able to keep body and soul together, being wholly deprived of

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p.418.

opportunity to make use of the brain and the mind that were the precious possession of every human being. The scientific and technological advance has made this quite possible, whatever may have happened before. It is because there is no social ownership of the means of production, i.e., land and factories that men are subjected to exploitation by a few. When this will be made possible, I shall regard that, as the advent of a genuine social revolution.

Man has been waging war against nature and conquering her in order to be happier and happier and less and less handicapped. This process must go on until mankind becomes entirely happy and the poetic paradise is realized on earth.

As I understand it Gandhi is against this. Gandhism only wants to reduce man to the position of two bullocks he yokes to his plough, to shut up his women in the cottage to make her cook and procreate and play on the *charkha* and deprive both of them of all culture that can develop only by using the brain and mental faculties. This is Gandhism which is wholly reactionary. Whatever movement Gandhi may start, its roots will be found in this line of thought and so Gandhi is not acceptable to me."⁵⁶

Ambedkar had come to feel a strong dislike for Gandhi in the course of the Round Table Conference, for Gandhi failed to see the need to treat the case of the depressed classes with as much weight as he was willing to give to Muslims and Sikhs. Soon after Poona Pact Gandhi started Harijan Sevak Sangh to work for the uplift of the untouchables. At one stage Gandhi invited Ambedkar's co-operation in its works. In Ambedkar's conception of work among untouchables, the emphasis was on politicising them and organizing them to wrest a larger share in power. Whereas Gandhi wished to recruit *savarna* workers who would dedicate themselves to the service of the untouchables. Gandhi's position was that it was *savarna's* duty and responsibility to work for the amelioration of the untouchables, for the caste Hindus were responsible for the creation of this social evil. It is clear that Ambedkar and Gandhi were at complete variance, and they could not have co-operated on this front for any length of time.⁵⁷ Ambedkar continued his work with Bahiskita Hitakarini Sabha and other organizations of the depressed classes.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, P.249-250.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.156.

Conclusion

Gandhi's extreme spiritualism and Ambedkar's stand for state socialism were unacceptable to Nehru, first because of his personal agnostic make up and the second because of his lack of courage to face a social revolution that would go against the trusteeship theory of Gandhi. Though Nehru theoretically dissociated himself from belief in God and religions, Gandhi his mentor in these matters, was all for the maintenance of the social structure of *varnashrama dharma* of Hindu religion minus its untouchability. Neither Nehru nor Ambedkar was in agreement with Gandhi's vision of *Panchayat Raj*, reliance primarily on cottage industries decentralization of power, though the ideal of *panchayat raj* was included in the section on Directive Principles to the States. Nehru was in agreement with Ambedkar's stress on the human equality in the political life, but he did not go along with Ambedkar's political programme of state socialism to achieve this goal. As Gandhi, Ambedkar also used religion as a unifying and binding force for a section of people (depressed classes) to bargain for their political advantage. Religion was a controlling force in the Indian politics in the past. The present BJP Government has it vital aim in the national religious sentiments roused up by the Hindutva movement. In India and in South Asian countries religion of the majority and minority will certainly continue to play a decisive and vital role in shaping the political programmes of these countries for a long time to come.