Long Essay

MAHATMA GANDHI AND ISLAM: A RELATIONSHIP DEFINED BY AFFINITY, FASCINATION, CRISIS AND RUPTURE[1]

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As a historian of India, with a focus on the colonial epoch, I have for a decade or so researched into the significance of Mahatma Gandhi's contribution to the Indian freedom movement in its multidimensionality. One central component in his striving is exemplified by his close interaction with Muslims and by his endeavour to highlight the historical and civilisational importance of Islam, in particular for the Indian subcontinent. Furthermore, in view of the contemporary conflictual discourse pertaining to Islam, and yet also bearing in mind the caveat that I am not an expert on Islam, I feel all the more privileged to have the opportunity to trace with you the contours of Gandhi's enigmatic relationship with Islam.

First and foremost, I would like to underscore Gandhi's 'ecumenical' attitude, citing his own words:

> *I am a believer in the truth of all the great religions of the world. There will be no lasting peace on earth unless we learn not merely to tolerate but even to respect the other faiths as our own. A reverent study of the sayings of the different teachers of mankind is a step in the direction of such mutual respect.*[2]

Notably, this exhortation for religious magnanimity was articulated in the Preface to a small booklet entitled *The Sayings of Muhammad or The Wisdom of the Prophet*, compiled by Abdullah al-Mamun Suhrawardy (1870-1935), an eminent Muslim scholar and politician. Originally published in 1905, the slim volume was much appreciated, in particular by Leo Tolstoy, in whose overcoat pocket a copy was discovered when he died in 1910. This anecdote itself could motivate us to unravel even more interesting connections between Tolstoy, Gandhi and Islam, but for now, let me restrict my

focus to the intriguing pair 'Gandhi' and 'Islam'. And, I should just add that Gandhi's preface appeared, not in 1905, but in the 1938 new edition – which in itself is indicative of the fact that by the late 1930s this 'prophet of nonviolence' was considered to be a prominent spokesman of Islam who extolled the "sayings of the Prophet as treasures of mankind, not merely of Muslims" (as stated in his Preface). Gandhi's Islamic 'cosmopolitanism' implied more than tolerance and respect, for it was accentuated by intellectual curiosity, an approach which was otherwise conspicuously absent in Hindu scholarship of the late colonial period, especially with regard to Islam.[3]

To lend some structure to my ensuing comments, I shall proceed chronologically, highlighting the crucial stages of Gandhi's life across the temporal span of eight decades and spatially unfolding in three continents, namely: his childhood and youth in India from1869 to1888; as a law student in London from1888 to 1891; in South Africa as a nonviolence resister against racial discrimination from 1893 to1914; and finally, from 1915 until 1948, back in India, as a salient leader of the Indian Independence Movement.

Born in Porbandar, a coastal town in western Gujarat, young Mohandas was intimately familiar with and influenced by the cosmopolitan maritime world of the Arabian Sea where trade with the Middle East had flourished since Antiquity, long before the advent of Islam. Belonging to a *Bania* merchant community, economic and socio-cultural interaction with differing religious communities, especially with Muslim traders, defined the daily habitus of his childhood. Political symbiosis between Hindus and Muslims was also apparent: for being the son of a distinguished family of Diwans to the Rana of Porbandar (belonging to the Jethwa dynasty), as a boy he appreciated the courtesy shown to Muslim officials visiting his father. As later observed in his *Autobiography*, the *modus vivendi* of mutual respect was only tangentially impinged upon by abrasive colonial intervention.

From his mother, Putli Bhai, he imbibed the syncretistic religiosity of the *Pranami* sect, founded by the poet mystic Mahamati Prannath (1618-1694), who preached equal respect for Hindu and Muslim beliefs, whereby a viable synthesis of the two was developed, in like manner to the *Kabir-panthis* with whom Gandhi felt closely related. Intimacy with the divine and even hints of iconoclasm, as characteristic traits of *Pranami-bhakti* worship, enabled him to empathise with Islamic belief, especially of the *Sufi* variety. So symbiotically intertwined was the latter with the popular religiosity

experienced during his formative childhood years that Gandhi would later in life claim that, whilst his spiritual insights were based in Hinduism, he could simultaneously appreciate the shared affinity with Islamic belief. Due to this foundational experience, Gandhi's 'Hindu-Muslim' religiosity emphasised the shared 'inner' meaning of religion, articulated by the strength of individual devotion rather than being dependent on the allegiance to a distinct religion, and eschewed the more reified practice of worship in the temple or mosque, as well as doctrinal preaching.

In short, orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy was what mattered to Gandhi, also because the former represented the lived reality of late 19th century rural India. And it was this inter-religious popular piety which was defined by the singing of hymns, using terminology and symbols from both religions, that constituted a pervasive form of Indian religious poetry, and hence was integrated as a daily practice in Gandhi's prayer meetings – later in South Africa and India.

To sum up Gandhi's early experience of inter-communal harmony, let me cite his own testimony when in the 1920s, *nota bene*, he was striving for Hindu-Muslim unity:

> *Hindu-Muslim unity is not a new thing. Millions of Hindus and Mussalmans have sought after it. I consciously strove for its achievement from my boyhood. While at school, I made it a point to cultivate the friendship of Muslim and Parsi co-students. I believed even at that tender age that the Hindus in India, if they wished to live in peace and amity with the other communities, should assiduously cultivate the virtue of neighbourliness.*[4]

This congenial interaction with Muslims was to continue, for when, at the age of 19 as a college student, Gandhi decided against the wishes of his community elders to embark in 1888 on the sea passage to England to train to be a barrister, what is less known, is that his legal studies in London were facilitated by the financial assistance of a Saurastrian Muslim magnate with transcontinental business connections.[5] Also one of his first hosts in London was a Gujarati Muslim through whom he became closely associated with the Muslim students' association *Anjuman Islamia,* founded as early as 1886 (only a year later than the INC) with the proclaimed aim "to activate the Indian Independence movement". Political lobbying, however, was not Gandhi's main concern, though he may have established contact with Muslims who were later to play a prominent role in Indian politics. At this juncture, it was above all his religiously informed intellectual quest that was nurtured: in like manner to his much-publicised revelation concerning the *Bhagavad Gita*, the law

student Gandhi became singularly impressed by the narrative of the founder of Islam. We learn from his *Autobiography* that: "A Muslim friend recommended Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. I read the chapter on the Hero as a prophet and learnt of the Prophet's greatness and bravery and austere living".[6]

Indeed, it was fortuitous that he was introduced to Thomas Carlyle's portrayal of Muhammad (1841) as a hero which contrasted refreshingly with the hitherto negative stereotyping of him as a liar and impostor by European Christian discourse. To cite just a brief example, Carlyle's panegyric depiction of the heroic Prophet reads as follows:

> *A man of truth and fidelity, solid brotherly, genuine (…) able to laugh (…) spontaneous, passionate, just (…) a great, silent soul (…) one who communed with his own heart (…) open to the 'small, still voice'.*[7]

These character traits could not but appeal to young Gandhi's extremely receptive mind, and could possibly have served as a blueprint for his own development. As we know, communing with the "small, still voice" was to become central to Gandhi's understanding of religiosity, as was his emphasis on truth, fidelity and the virtues of brotherhood. And Carlyle's estimation of the religion founded by this heroic Prophet certainly struck a chord with Gandhi:

> *Islam means in its way Denial of Self, Annihilation of Self (…).This is yet the highest Wisdom that heaven has revealed to our earth.*[8]

Carlyle's emphasis on self-denial, central as this goal was for Gandhi's *Vaishnava* tradition, reinforced for him the certainty that such fundamental religious values were also shared by Muslims. At a later juncture, lauding the Prophet's practice of self-suffering, fasting and praying, Gandhi affirmed "I learnt from him that only he can fast who has inexhaustible faith in God" and is sustained by "food-divine".[9]

Gandhi's deep appreciation for the Prophet and his religion was to be enhanced by a feeling of intense kinship with Muslims as a result of the next stage in his life which brought him to Durban, South Africa, and placed him in charge of a lucrative case for Muslim friends of his brother. Given that the Muslim businessman, Abdullah Seth, his client, was his brother's friend, conviviality rather than formality defined their relationship from the start. Through the intermediary of his benefactor, he was welcomed into the community of Gujarati Muslims settled in Natal and Transvaal, an experience he recalled empathetically later:

> *When I was in South Africa, I came in close touch with Muslim brethren there (…) I was able to learn their habits, thoughts and aspirations (…) I had lived in the midst of Muslim friends for 20 years. They had treated me as a member of their family and told their wives and sisters that they need not observe purdah with me.*[10]

The Hindu-Muslim intimate bonding valued by Gandhi, due in part to a shared cultural background, was reinforced by a shared sense of victimhood to South African racism. And subsequent to being persuaded by his Muslim 'brethren' to stay and represent them as a 'coolie' barrister, Gandhi fostered with them "a brotherhood of resistance to degradation". Indeed, without the persuasive support of Muslims, Gandhi's sojourn in South Africa would have been extremely brief and uneventful. As it was, Muslims represented the vanguard of the South African Indian protest movement from the very beginning, which is testified by the signatures of many Muslim protagonists in Gandhi's combative *Green Pamphlet*, in 1896.

Impressed by the commitment and discipline of his Muslim co-combatants in their joint struggle against oppression and injustice, and desirous that religious differences should not be a stumbling block to the cherished Hindu-Muslim unity, Gandhi resumed his reading of Islamic literature to glean useful insights concerning Islam's religious tenets and its historical trajectory. Intent on making an impact on the prevalent discourse, he publicised his findings in the South African press; an extract from one of his articles reads as follows:

> *The key-note of Islam was, however, its levelling spirit. If offered equality to all that came within its pale, in the manner that no other religion in the world did. When, therefore, about 900 years after Christ, his followers descended upon India, Hinduism stood dazed. It seemed to carry everything before it. The doctrine of equality could not but appeal to the masses who were caste-ridden.*[11]

This affirmative interpretation, which was certainly out of sync with the conventional narrative of Islam's destructive conquest of the subcontinent, needs to be understood from the perspective of Gandhi's political objective. Given that Hindu-Muslim unity was his primary concern, the spread of Islam in India was not viewed in a deprecatory manner, but rather the contrary: preaching a doctrine of simplicity and equality, its forceful appeal led to the conversion of lower castes, a fact that Gandhi did not consider "to be in any way derogatory"[12] vis-à-vis the Muslim converts. On the contrary, adopting a 'constructive' approach, the recognition of Islam's remedial impact later served Gandhi as a vicarious tool to address

the defects of Hindu society, as exemplified paradigmatically by his sustained campaign against untouchability.

To bolster his resistance struggle against South African racism, he derived inspirational impetus from Washington Irving's portrayal of the Prophet.[13] Fifteen years after his first intellectual encounter, now in Johannesburg in 1905, Gandhi deliberately projects the Prophet as battling against the "forces of darkness" as exemplified in the following quote:

> *Hazrat Mahomed was born 1300 years ago. He saw moral anarchy rampant in Arabia. Judaism was struggling for survival; Christianity was not able to gain a foothold in the land; and the people were given to licence and self-indulgence. Mahomed felt all this to be improper. It caused him mental agony; and in the name of God, he determined to make them realise their miserable condition. His feeling was so intense that he was able immediately to impress the people around him with his fervour, and Islam spread very rapidly. Zeal or passion, then, is a great speciality, a mighty force, of Islam.*[14]

The traits of self-denial and austerity which impressed him during his student days in London were now, in his role as a political activist, superseded (or at least complemented) by the integrity, zeal and passion, manifested by the Prophet, attributes with which Gandhi hoped to galvanise the Hindu-Muslim community against unjust colonial discrimination.

This engendered dynamism became explicit on 11th September, 1906, when, following Gandhi's initiative, three thousand Indians, both Hindu and Muslim, 'free' and indentured, gathered in Johannesburg at the Empire Theater (which happened to be under Jewish management) to discuss how to oppose the Transvaal Asiatic Ordinance, or the so-called discriminatory *Black Act*, with representatives from the government being invited to the meeting. Gandhi first called on all present to pledge non-cooperation with the proposed restrictive immigration law, irrespective of any penalties they might face (in like manner to the traditional method of protest familiar to him from his native Gujarat). Then, as Gandhi informs us in his book *Satyagraha in South Africa* (1928), to his surprise, an elderly Muslim merchant, Seth Haji Habib, stood up and declared that the resolution must be passed "with God as a witness", that Indians would never yield in cowardly submission to such a law. This spiritual commitment on the part of a Muslim is what caught Gandhi's imagination, so that he reinforced this religious oath with a pledge to nonviolence which all the assembled Indians took most solemnly. That the forceful spiritual dimension for this first mass nonviolence

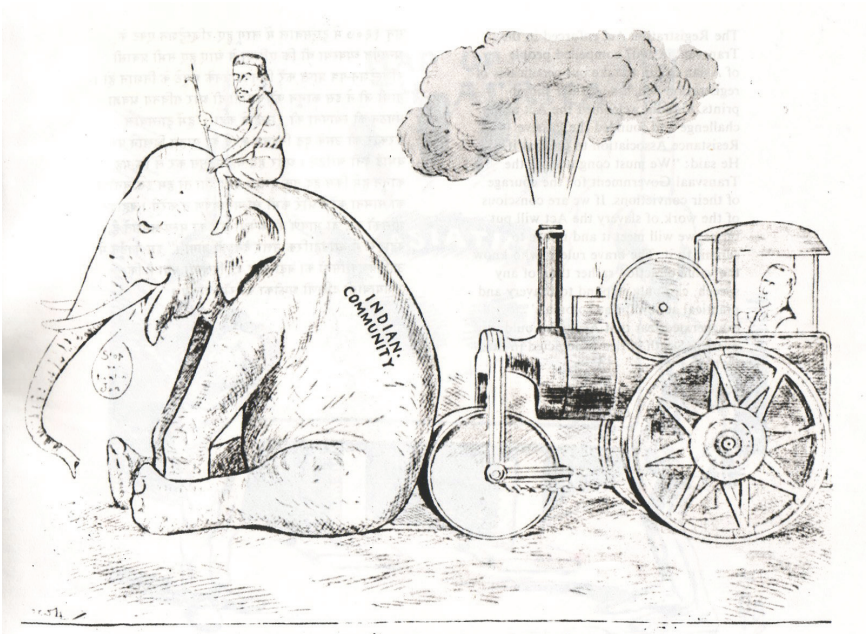
campaign in South Africa came from a Muslim is something that needs to be remembered today. Indeed, the Islamic influence on Gandhi's definition of *Satyagraha* as a spiritual struggle against structural violence is a feature that is seldom mentioned. However, the picture of Gandhi serving as a mouth-piece for a *Jihad* of the inner spiritual variety would revolutionize both our understanding of the Mahatma, and indeed shake up the media's clichés of violence as being inherent to Islam.

Let me elucidate this briefly: *Jihad*, in its pre-eminent meaning as an inner struggle with one's conscience (or as an intense effort to gain clarity), inspired Gandhi's conceptualisation of *Satyagraha* (as "active striving towards the attainment of truth") which made compelling sense as a passionate affirmation to transcend the deadlock with the racist South African regime with creative power, mediated through the synergy of Muslim and Hindu epistemic traditions.

In this constellation, Gandhi could be seen as a *Jihadist* of the nonviolence variety! Underscoring a historian's ethical responsibility vis-à-vis influencing collective memory, and viewed from a global vantage point, but in critical retrospect, through Gandhi's mediation, Islam can be presented as propagating a spiritual struggle, with 9/11/1906 (giving birth to a nonviolence *Jihadic Satyagraha*) contrasted against the Frankenstein monster of 9/11/2001. Instilling confidence into the newly constituted inter-religious community of *Satyagrahis*, both Muslims and Hindus, Gandhi invoked the name of *Khuda-Ishwar* and emulated the faith of the Prophet. To exemplify his empathy for Islam, he maintained a ritual fast during the Muslim holy month of *Ramadan*, insisting that fellow workers at Tolstoy Farm followed his example.

Gandhi's relatively successful leadership of the unified opposition to the Boer Prime Minister Botha's Government was satirically captured in a cartoon with its comic connotations that was published in the London Sunday Times (at the beginning of 1907 against the backdrop of the Anglo-Boer animosity) entitled "Passive Resistance in the Transvaal: The Steam Roller v. the Elephant". (The Elephant [i.e., the Indian community under Gandhi's leadership][15] 'sat tight'; the Steam Roller exploded) (see Figure 1). When Gandhi's *Satyagraha* campaign got underway, the governmental steamroller found it could not make headway against the united, stubborn, relentless force of the Indian community, represented by the elephant blocking its path.

Though Gandhi developed his *Satyagraha* strategy in the South African diaspora, this multi-ethnic and multi-religious arena



PASSIVE RESISTANCE IN THE TRANSVAAL

"The Steam Roller v. The Elephant. (The Elephant 'sat tight'; the Steam Roller exploded.") *Sunday Times.*

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Figure 1

constituted for him the ideal stage for a kind of dress-rehearsal for his ultimate goal of Indian independence. This was explicitly elaborated in his political manifesto, *Hind Swaraj* (1909), a master-plan for Indian independence, in which he underscored his pluralistic conception of an Indian nation, as a civilisational entity, ideally integrating a myriad variety of languages, religions and ethnic groups.

Yet fully aware of inter-communal tensions, he admonished his co-religionists as follows:

> *If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in a dream-land. The Hindus, the Mahomedans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow-countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own interest.*[16]

Challenging the late 19th early and 20th century European concept of nationhood that was mono-cultural, Gandhi's understanding of India as a 'civilisation of communities' was more akin to the contemporary 21st century political discourse of communitarianism and multi-culturalism. Moreover, it is insightful to discern the way in which Gandhi sought historical confirmation of the relatively

harmonious Hindu-Muslim interaction prior to the dissensions which, according to his understanding, set in subsequent to colonial intervention:

> *(…) The Hindus flourished under Muslim sovereigns and Muslims under the Hindu. Each party recognized that mutual fighting was suicidal, and that neither party would abandon its religion by force of arms. Both parties, therefore, decided to live in peace. With the English advent, quarrels recommenced.*[17]

Though simplistically formulated, this interpretation, which contrasted with the hegemonic colonial historiographical narrative of the late 19th century, corresponds to the conclusions of recent research by some Indian scholars, as elucidated by the following brief quote:

> *The picture of medieval India, especially under Muslim rulers, as a brutal, barbarous, dark-age was assiduously built by the British as one of the strategies for the legitimization of colonial rule in India, portrayed as meant for liberating and civilising the Hindus.*[18]

Gandhi, in the first decade of 20th century, based in South Africa, was able to deconstruct and contest this influential *divide et impera* discourse. Yet being a pragmatic realist, he was astutely aware that the communal tensions, either created or aggravated by colonial rule, constituted dangerous fault-lines which urgently needed to be healed if India was to emerge as a viable independent nation. Hence, evoking a shared patrimony, he endeavoured to mitigate religious antagonism:

> *Should we not remember that many Hindus and Mahomedans own the same ancestors and the same blood runs through their veins? Do people become enemies because they change their religion? Is the God of the Mahomedan different from the God of the Hindu? Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling?*[19]

Arguing that past religious conversion should not engender enmity in the present, Gandhi's emphasis here is on inter-religious understanding rather than implying inclusive assimilation. Furthermore, he did not refrain from addressing sensitive issues such as the Hindus' anxiety about cow-protection which at the turn of the century was a source of intense animosity. In *Hind Swaraj*, he urges his fellow religionists to adopt a pragmatic approach defined by tolerance and patience:

> *But just as I respect the cow, so do I respect my fellow-men. A man is just as useful as a cow no matter whether he be a Mahomedan or a Hindu. Am I, then, to fight*

with or kill a Mahomedan in order to save a cow? In doing so, I would become an enemy of the Mahomedan as well as of the cow. Therefore, the only method I know of protecting the cow is that I should approach my Mahomedan brother and urge him for the sake of the country to join me in protecting her.[20]

By prioritising a humanitarian and nonviolent approach, Gandhi by no means belittles the Hindu belief in the sacredness of the cow, but rather transforms its protection into a common national cause to be supported by both Hindus and Muslims.

On a broader canvas, this commonality of purpose was heightened in Gandhi's frequent equations between the Prophet's struggle to create a new form of civilisation with the epic struggle of *Rama* against *Ravana* as depicted in the Hindu *Ramayana*. Deeply convinced that modern materialistic civilisation was godless, because it ranked material goods above spiritual and moral values, Gandhi castigated it as 'Satanic' or '*Ravanic*', to use an idiom comprehensible to Muslim and Hindu audiences alike. Indeed, shared religious symbols served a purpose: not only did they mould the awareness of common involvement in a joint struggle, but they also generated courage among the campaigners to brave ensuing hardships. In particular, Gandhi appreciated the transformative function of religious devotion and commitment displayed by his Muslims friends, perhaps even more intensely than by fellow Hindus. In this connection, he often asserted that Hindus could learn to be courageous, following the example of their "Muslim brethren".

After having achieved relative success with his campaign against South African discrimination, Gandhi returned to India in January 1915 with the intention of contributing to the realisation of *Hind Swaraj* (India's Independence). Faced with a colonised Indian society in which individuals had been deprived of their sense of dignity, he identified four pillars on which the structure of *Swaraj* was to be built, namely, the "unbreakable alliance between Hindus and Muslims", the implementation of Satyagraha, the wiping out of untouchability, and the promotion of *Swadeshi* (concretised by hand-spinning and weaving, i.e., the propagation of *khadi*). Above all, he saw his main task in restoring dignity to individual Indians through underscoring their shared common ground and interests. Hence, of these four goals, Gandhi gave priority to Hindu-Muslim "heart-unity", as he termed it.

The primacy accorded this issue was also determined by global political developments, namely the imminent dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of the 1st World War. Astutely aware of Indian Muslim anxieties induced by the collapse of the one

strong independent Islamic power, the Turkish caliphate, Gandhi was convinced that a united Hindu-Muslim movement must come to the rescue of what he called 'civilisational' Islam. Fired by the revolutionary enthusiasm of the Ali brothers[21] and Maulana Azad,[22] Gandhi launched the so-called Khilafat movement.[23] In doing this he recognised the identity and dignity of Indian Muslims as a 'community', and at the same time, declared that community identity was no bar to national identity. Moreover, by equating non-cooperation (and unswerving devotion to the truth) with the concept of 'surrender' as symbolised in Islam, he aimed at energizing the movement for *Swarajya*. Lobbying for support, primarily from the Hindu majority community, he argued as follows, employing a traditional body-politic metaphor:

> *The Turkish question concerns eight crores [i.e., 80 million] of Indian Muslims; and a question that concerns nearly one-fourth of the nation must concern the whole of India. It is impossible that one of the four limbs of the nation be wounded and the rest of the nation remain unconcerned. We cannot be called one nation, we cannot be a single body, if such a wound has no effect on us. Hence it is the duty of all, Hindus and Muslims alike, to understand the main points of the Turkish question…*[24]

…namely, to realise that Islam was in peril. Further, by convincing Hindus to join the Khilafat movement, intent on lending whole-hearted support to Islam in jeopardy, he hoped to reinstate Hindu-Muslim unity, with the ultimate goal of achieving *swaraj*.

Deep commitment and sincerity of purpose, rather than political opportunism were Gandhi's guiding principles, as explicit in the compelling cogency of this exhortation:

> *(…) swaraj for India must be an impossible dream without an indissoluble union between the Hindus and the Muslims of India. It must not be a mere truce. It cannot be based upon mutual fear. It must be a partnership between equals, each respecting the religion of the other.*[25]

Gandhi's endeavour to establish a Hindu-Muslim relationship of mutual respect was governed by democratic rather than theocratic concerns, and did not intend to privilege theological doctrinaire traits in Islam, as has been the criticism lodged against him by some scholars. Social and educational reform for Muslims was also high on his agenda, as evidenced by his support for the founding in 1920 of the Jamia Millia Islamia, an Islamic National university.

By repeatedly countering accusations of violence as being inherent to Islam, he underscored its foundational nonviolent spirituality, for instance like this:

(…) the glory of Islam is due not to the sword but to the sufferings, the renunciation, and the nobility of its followers, its early Caliphs. Islam decayed when its followers mistaking the evil for the good, dangled the sword in the face of man, and lost sight of the godliness, the humility, and the austerity of its founder and his disciples.[26]

Implicit in this statement was his concern for the regeneration of contemporary Islam, a challenge that struck a chord with religiously minded liberal Muslims[27] who felt strengthened in their efforts towards Islamic intellectual and socio-religious reform. In hindsight, it could be averred that their reformist zeal synergized productively with Gandhi's own endeavours to revitalise Hinduism.

As for Muslim political mobilisation, besides the Ali brothers, Gandhi's right hand was Maulana Azad, a prominent example of the communal inclusiveness of Congress, who at an important Khilafat conference in Agra exhorted his co-religionists:

(…) it is my belief that the Muslims in India cannot perform their best duties, until in conformity within the injunctions of Islam, in all honesty, they establish unity and cooperation with the Hindus. This belief is based on the imperative of Islam.[28]

This call for socio-political cooperation between Muslims and Hindus was validated by Maulana Azad's influential commentary on the Qu'ran, *Tarjuman-ul-Qur'an*,[29] in which the practice of nonviolence, tolerance and dialogue, was highlighted. Needless to say, Gandhi was receptive to forceful corroboration of this kind from an acclaimed Muslim intellectual who also drew comparisons between the Islamic and Hindu spiritual traditions, for instance, by stressing that the Sufi concept of 'the unity of existence' (*wahdat-i-wujud*) was akin to the pantheism of the Upanishads. Significantly, the Islamic *wahdat-i-din,* or 'the oneness of faiths', corresponded with Gandhi's reiterated belief that truth was fundamentally the same for all religions. And being an upholder of *Advaita*, Gandhi could easily endorse the Islamic belief in *rabb-ul-alameen* (the Lord of all worlds) as representing the 'right path' (*sirat-al-mustaqeem*).[30] From the Hindu perspective, according to Gandhi, *tapasyacharya* (suffering, self-sacrifice to transform consciousness) could be equated to the Islamic concept and practice of martyrdom. And symptomatically, his frequent incantation of *Ramarajya* (signifying democratic and righteous rule to bring about freedom from British domination[31]) was considered evocative of the 'Islamic kingdom of God on earth', at least by liberally minded Muslims; unfortunately, during the pre-Partition hysteria, the term was denounced by some for its implications of imposing a *Hindu raj.*

The moral-religiously inspired basis for Gandhi's propagation of

Hindu-Muslim unity, however, did not make him oblivious to the hard realities of political campaigning. Realising that his faith in nonviolence might not be adhered to by the aroused masses, he made the following powerful statement:

> *Let it be remembered that violence is the keystone of the Government edifice. Since violence is its sheet-anchor and its final refuge, it has rendered itself almost immune from violence on our side by having prepared itself to frustrate all violent effort by the people. We therefore co-operate with the Government in the most active manner when we resort to violence. Any violence on our part must be a token of our stupidity, ignorance and impotent rage. To exercise restraint under the gravest provocation is the truest mark of soldiership. The verist tyro [i.e., novice] in the art of war knows that he must avoid the ambushes of his adversary. And every provocation is a dangerous ambush into which we must resolutely refuse to walk.*[32]

Nonetheless, despite Gandhi's nonviolent '*Jihadist*' efforts, violent outbursts did erupt at a number of places of which the most serious one was in Kerala where the Mappila Muslim tenants rebelled against their Hindu landlords. Yet adamantly refuting the stereotypical communalist explanation, Gandhi understood this rebellion to have been engendered by longstanding socio-economic grievances, partially aggravated by colonial authorities.[33] And even when, during his imprisonment in the wake of the violent Chauri Chaura incident in February 1922 and the subsequent collapse of the Khilafat movement, religious animosities between Hindus and Muslims intensified, his endeavour towards establishing Hindu-Muslim unity did not slacken. On his release from Yeravda jail in February 1924, he devoted a whole issue of his national journal *Young India* (May 1924) to the Hindu-Muslim question. Entitled "Hindu-Muslim Tension: its Cause and Cure", in like manner to a medical diagnosis, a systematic analysis is presented, listing the complaints of Hindus and Muslims which are then addressed point by point. When this sincere commitment towards rational problem-solving did not have sufficient effect, he realised that "(...) in an atmosphere surcharged with suspicion and passion, my impartiality is bound to be mistaken for partiality", and preached the urgent need for "(...) a large heart, otherwise called charity. Let us do unto others as we would that they should do unto us".[34]

Residing in the house of his Khilafat companion, Muhammad Ali, and thereby stressing Hindu-Muslim friendship, Gandhi embarked in September 1924 on a fast unto death, as a form of penance, for he considered his life an acceptable price to pay to put an end to communal hatred. Through this emotional and moral appeal, religious strife abated so that on the 21st day Gandhi was persuaded

to end his fast by a delegation of Hindu and Muslim leaders, taking solemn pledges to ensure communal harmony. The ceremony of reconciliation was accompanied by the recital of a Koranic *sura* and the singing of a Vaishnava hymn.

Unfortunately, the rapprochement, remaining mere lip-service, did not greatly influence ground realities. Hence Gandhi, resuming his endeavour through the printed word, published a moving article in Muhammad Ali's journal *The Comrade* calling for religious amity between Hindus and Muslims, from which an extract reads as follows:

> *India is like a bird whose wings are the Hindus and the Mussalmans. But the wings have become paralysed and therefore disabled the bird from soaring high in the air and breathing the pure bracing air of freedom. Surely to leave us thus paralysed is not the essence of Hinduism nor of Islam. Is it the religion for the Hindus to weaken the Mussalmans and vice versa – for the one to refuse to help the other? Should religion be a destructive force destroying freedom and all that is best and noblest in man?*[35]

This metaphoric image of India's rise being arrested by Hindu-Muslim conflict testifies to Gandhi's emotional distress, which was to be further intensified as a result of the ensuing estrangement with the Ali brothers. Having to come to terms with the loss of widespread Muslim support for his vision of a united India, Gandhi increasingly devoted himself towards strengthening the other three pillars (mentioned previously,[36] which were also endorsed by Islamic principles) on the basis of which Indian independence was to be achieved.

Gandhi's efforts culminated in the historic *Salt Satyagraha* (March-April 1930) which drew the attention of the global media. It is interesting to underscore that beyond a mere rhetorical use of militarism, Gandhi also employed it for his own self-definition: in fact, he considered himself to be a "general of an army" of satyagrahis, demanding strict discipline and order from his "troops" who received rigorous training in his ashrams which functioned to a certain extent as "army camps". That this militant feature also impressed the international media is apparent from a Czech Cartoon entitled "Gandhi Goes To 'War'" in which Gandhi supported by his nonviolent army of 78 (Muslim-looking!) *satyagrahis* or freedom fighters is shown as resolutely defying the armed might of the British Empire (see Figure 2). In this almost surrealistic portrayal, it is above all the militaristic discipline of the campaign that is highlighted. This seems to reinforce my contention that Gandhi was (or could be interpreted as) a *Jihadist* of the nonviolent variety.

But even more pertinently, in this connection, his Muslim

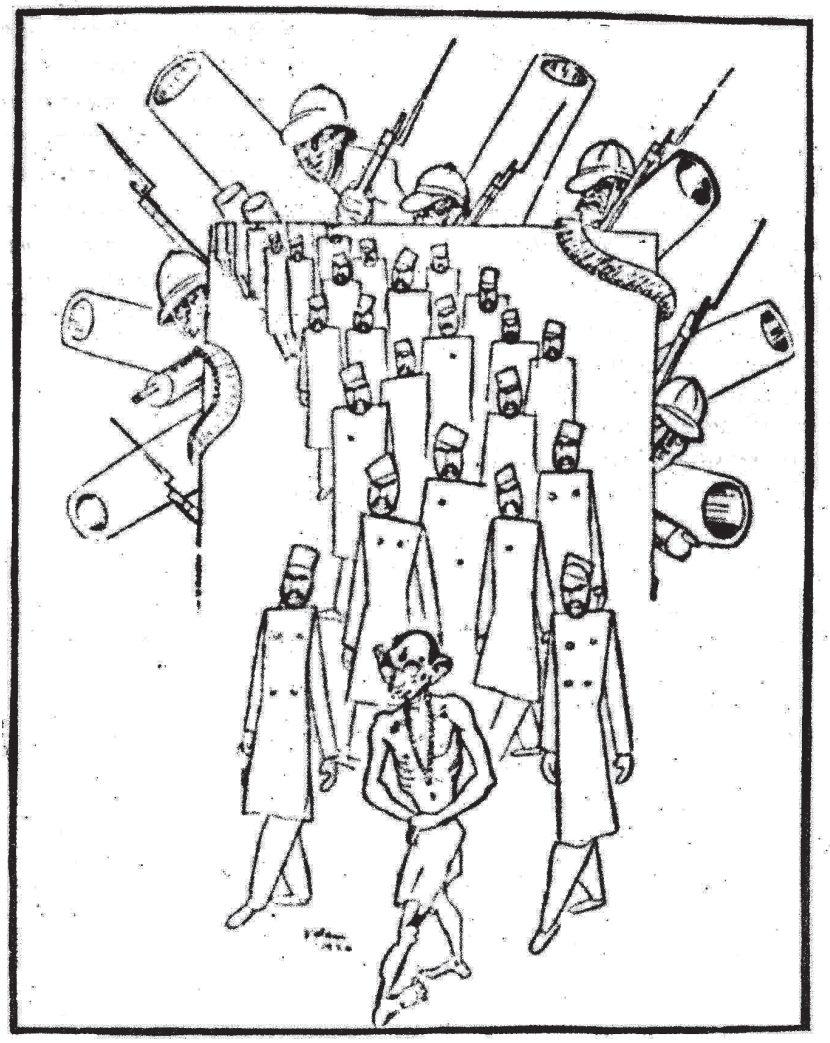

Figure 2

counterpart, Abdul Ghaffar Khan[37] from the Northwest Frontier Province, with his nonviolence army of Pashtuns, the *Khudai Khidmatgars*, the 'Servants of God', deserves to be highlighted most prominently. But due to time constraints, without going into further details, let me just cite this brief quote stressing Badshah Khan's Islamic inspiration for *Ahimsa* or *Satyagraha*:

It is not a new creed. It was followed fourteen hundred years ago by the Prophet, all

the time he was in Mecca. And it has since been followed by all those who wanted to throw off the oppressor's yoke. But we had so far forgotten it that when Mahatma Gandhi placed it before us, we thought that he was sponsoring a new creed or a novel weapon.[38]

Gandhi confirmed this explicitly by stating precisely: (…) he [Badshah Khan] derives his ahimsa from the Holy Qu'ran".[39] Hence, rather than prioritising one against the other, i.e., the 'Frontier Gandhi' against the 'Indian Khan', we should acknowledge their shared foundational inspiration.

As for the Salt March, its relatively successful outcome paved the way for Gandhi's participation at the 2nd Round Table Conference in London in 1931. On his maritime passage, he stopped at Aden, and made this appeal to his Arab hosts:

I want you, who belong to the country of the Prophet's birth, to make your contribution to the restoration of peace between Hindus and Muslims in India (…) I want the Arabs of Arabia to come to our rescue and help to bring about a condition of things when the Mussalman will consider it a point of honour to help the Hindu and vice versa.[40]

Moral support was extended by Mustafa al-Nahhas Pasha, President of the Egyptian Wafd Party which, during the next decades, developed strong links with the Indian National Congress. Notably, the Wafd Party did not endorse the Muslim League's demand for partition of the Indian subcontinent.[41]

Yet in India of the 1930s, as the 'passion for Hindu-Muslim unity' experienced during the Khilafat movement got transformed into a 'politics of interest', the Pakistan discourse became more prominent. Gandhi, painfully aware of the intensifying communal tensions, saw these reflected increasingly in school books. From his prison cell in 1932, he remarked that "Muslim children are being taught the lesson of violence and force from their very babyhood", and that "the life of the Prophet is reduced to a series of battles".[42] According to him the interpretation of Islam was at fault, and not Islam itself, as he understood it.

In particular, he appealed to the Muslim poet Muhammad Iqbal, the main ideological proponent of a separate Islamic nation, to desist from his pan-Islamic rhetoric which he perceived as a threat to national unity. As noted in Mahadev Desai's diary, he observed: "The song of Iqbal (*Tarana-e-Milli*) is as a stroke on the war drum; and the caravan of Islam is ready to march".[43]

In view of the subsequent strengthening of the Muslim League (partially as a backlash to the Congress victory in the provincial

elections of 1937), Gandhi realised that Indian Muslims were increasingly desirous to have control over their own future which they sensed could not be assured by the Indian National Congress. But the onus for this political disenchantment on the part of Muslims Gandhi lodged squarely with the Hindus who represented the majority community, as is explicit in the following counsel with its ring of urgency: "It [i.e., the Muslim disenchantment] can be mitigated only if the Hindus wake up and break down the barriers they have erected".[44]

Incessantly, Gandhi endeavoured to set an example in manifold ways – in his writings, speeches and interactions with leading Muslims. His tone became more sermonizing, as in this brief extract from a speech held in 1938, at the Islamia College in Peshawar:

> *Islam, it is said, believes in the brotherhood of man. But you will permit me to point out that it is not the brotherhood of Mussalmans only, but it is universal brotherhood (…) Living faith in this God [i.e., Allah or Ishwar] means acceptance of the brotherhood of mankind. It also means equal respect for all religions. If Islam is dear to you, Hinduism is dear to me and Christianity is dear to the Christians. It would be the height of intolerance – and intolerance is a species of violence – to believe that your religion is superior to other religions and that you would be justified in wanting others to change over to your faith.*[45]

To throw some light on the emerging tragic dilemma, it is necessary to at least briefly refer to Gandhi's stance vis-à-vis the Muslim League's leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the debacle of Partition: Gandhi contested the validity and viability of Jinnah's two-nation theory by stressing (especially in their talks held in September 1944) that Islam did not represent such an exclusive religion, and that the Partition propaganda was anti-Islamic. The division of the subcontinent would, according to his understanding, offer no solution to the problem of dealing with one another's minorities, but only lead to retribution and reprisals by introducing a system of mutual hostages.

And yet his efforts to prevent Partition were frustrated, not primarily because of Hindu-Muslim antagonism, but, according to his understanding, due to the play of 'power politics', and as a result of the intransigent logic of the colonial *divide and rule* strategy. The aporia of the final tragedy could be summed up as follows: Paradoxically, though Jinnah considered himself to be a secularist, he prioritized religion, and as a political strategist, perceived Indian Independence exclusively from the perspective of the Muslim community. In contrast, Gandhi replaced a divisive view of religion by a pluralist and tolerant one by equating religion with ethics. More significantly, according to Gandhi, the antagonism between

Hindus and Muslims was not caused by religious difference, but rather originated as a result of the lack of truth and transparency in the political realm, as exemplified in the tripartite 'Transfer of Power' negotiations between the Congress, the Muslim League and the British.

Until the very last, even (or especially) when confronted with the riot-torn communities of Noakhali in Bengal, and the turmoil in Delhi's refugee camps, Gandhi continued adamantly to uphold religion as a stabilizing force, not as a source of discord. Resolutely maintaining until his very last breath that true Islam did not propagate violence, one can be sure that Gandhi would have been reassured that the hands of his assassin on 30th January 1948 did not belong to a Muslim. The extent to which Gandhi's perspective on Islam can be considered of relevance for today's conflictual situation is a matter that requires serious reflection and represents the tentative, open-ended bottom line of this brief essay.

Notes

1. Originally a Keynote Address held at the IIAS, Shimla, on 27th May, 2019, the text of which has been slightly revised in line with the theme of my ICSSR Major Research Project "Redressing the Balance", which underscores Gandhi's emphasis on communal harmony for constructing a regenerated Indian society. Besides acknowledging the ICSSR's generous support, I would like to express my grateful appreciation to the IIAS Director and Chairman for inviting me to Shimla, to the scholarly audience for their incisive comments, as well as to the administrative staff for facilitating the event.
2. Preface to *The Sayings of Muhammad or The Wisdom of the Prophet*, compiled by Abdullah Suhrawardy, 1905, reprint 1938.
3. Whilst my findings correspond in part with the studies by Sheila McDonough, Amalendu Misra, Ramin Jehanbegloo, and Fred Dallmayr (for details, cf. the bibliography at the end), to name the most pertinent ones, so as to ensure historical authenticity, I will be using direct quotes from Gandhi's writings and speeches, taken from primary sources, including the 100 volumes of his *Collected Works (CWMG)*.
4. *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, ed. D. G. Tendulkar, Delhi: Publications Division, 1962, 8 vols., vol. 6, p. 155.
5. Cf. Ashutosh Lahiri: *Gandhi in Indian Politics*, Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1976, p. 4.
6. M. K. Gandhi: *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Navjivan, 1925-1928, cited from *CWMG*, vol. 39, p. 61.
7. Thomas Carlyle: *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*, London: James Fraser, 1841, cited from reprint: London: Chaplin Hall, 1898, p. 53 f.
8. Ibid., p. 57.
9. M. K. Gandhi: *The Hindu-Muslim Unity*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965, p. 66.
10. *Gandhiji on Communal Unity*, ed. S. Abid Husain, Bombay 1969, p. 54.
11. *The Star*, Johannesburg, 18.03.1905.

12. *Indian Opinion*, 20.05.1905.
13. Washington Irving: *Mahomet and His Successors*, Chicago: Belford, Clarke, 1849.
14. *Indian Opinion*, 15.04.1905.
15. This parenthesis is mine.
16. *Hind Swaraj* (1909), cited from the English translation published in 1910, Chapter 10.
17. Ibid., Chapter 10.
18. Raziuddin Aquil: "There is nothing shameful about being a medieval Indian", *The Wire*, 29.08.2015. The author is a Professor of Medieval History at Delhi University.
19. *Hind Swaraj*, op. cit., Chapter 10.
20. Ibid.
21. Namely, Maulana Shaukat Ali (1873-1938) and Maulana Muhammad Ali Jouhar (1878-1931), for details, cf. Rakhahari Chatterji: *Gandhi and the Ali Brothers: Biography of a Friendship*, New Delhi: Sage, 2013.
22. Besides Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) another prominent member was Dr. Mukhtar Ahmed Ansari (1880-1936).
23. For details, cf. Gail Minault: *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India,* New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
24. *Navjivan*, 07.09.1919.
25. "Hindu-Muslim Unity", *Young India*, 06.10.1920.
26. *Young India*, 09.02.1921.
27. Such as Maulana Azad, Zakir Husain (1897-1969), Muhammad Mujeeb (1902-1985) and Syed Abid Husain (1896–1978), to name the most prominent ones.
28. Speech at Khilafat Conference in Agra, 25.08.1921.
29. For a detailed study, cf. Syeda Saiyidain Hameed: *Maulana Azad, Islam and the Indian National Movement*, Oxford University Press, 2014, in particular, the chapter titled "Tarjuman-ul-Qur'an".
30. For further elucidations, cf. Ramin Jahanbegloo: *The Gandhian Moment*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013.
31. Gandhi elucidated this as follows: "By Ramarajya I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by Ramarajya Divine Raj, the Kingdom of God. For me Rama and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of truth and righteousness. (…) Whether Rama of my imagination ever lived or not on this earth, the ancient ideal of Ramarajya is undoubtedly one of true democracy in which the meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure", *Young India*, 19.09.1929, p. 305.
32. *Young India*, 28.07.1921.
33. For further details from a historical-political perspective, cf. K.N. Panikkar: *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar 1836–1921*, Oxford University Press, 1989.
34. *Young India*, 07.08. 1924.
35. "The Key to Success", *The Comrade*, 31.11. 1924, republished in *Hindi Navajivan*, 02.10. 1924.
36. They were the implementation of *Satyagraha*, the wiping out of untouchability, and the promotion of *Swadeshi*.
37. 1890-1988, also known as Badshah Khan ('King of the Chiefs'), cf. Eknath Easwaran: *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam: Badshah Khan: A Man to Match His Mountains,* Nilgiri Press, 1984.
38. Abdul Ghaffar Khan: *My Life and Struggle*: *Autobiography of Badshah Khan as*

narrated to K. B. Narang, Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1969, p. 23.
39. *CWMG*, vol. 72, p. 277.
40. Extract from Gandhi's speech at his reception at Aden, 03.09.1931.
41. In subsequent decades, the Wafd Party's empathy for the Congress was to wane. However, more recently, in the Arab Spring of 2011, a new avatar of Gandhian nonviolence surged forth.
42. *The Diary of Mahadev Desai,* Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1953, vol. 1, p. 155.
43. Ibid., p. 115.
44. Note in *The Diary of Mahadev Desai*, vol. 1, op. cit., p. 50.
45. Speech at the Islamia College, Peshawar, *Hindustan Times*, 05.05.1938; reprinted in *Harijan*, 14.05.1938.

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