CHAPTER – V

GANDHI’S CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

It is important evident from these considerations that the topic of “Gandhi’s concept of Conversion” is a very sensitive issue. In the present day scenario of India with its caste hierarchy and the exploitation of the scheduled castes and tribes setting finer tuned with political patronage tensions are found to increase. This controversy will help to shed light upon the concept of conversion.

According to Gandhi, “I do not expect India of my dreams to develop one religion. i.e. to be wholly Hindu or wholly Christian or wholly Mussalman but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another.

The Nation, after 60 years of its past colonial socio-economic life is quite far away from secularism and socialist modernity. To achieve a welfare state where all citizens of India, will have at least the basic needs to aware of our Constitution, a change in outlook is very essential for harmonious life.

The constitution has no doubt paid down certain safeguards to protect persons who suffer because of low social and economic status. In other words, secularism in India has to become really practical one. India is a sovereign and democratic republic country. Reforming to the preamble of the Indian constitution, which contains the condensed essence of the Constitution, then President of India (K.R. Narayanan) said: “The Constitution was made to promote among the people fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation. That sense of fraternity is the indispensable
that holds together our society with all its multifaceted diversity and pluralism. The unity of our nation is not based on any monolithic idea, but on our age-old tradition of tolerance which at once a pragmatic concept of living together and a philosophic concept of finding truth and goodness in every religion”. Therefore India as a Nation belongs to all citizens, irrespective of any religion or region.

**Conversion is an error:**

Gandhi’s thoughts, comments and actions in respect of conversions, reconversions - are even more relevant today than when he expressed himself, and will ever remain. Gandhi in his reply letter to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur captioned, “A Christian letter” has clearly outlined his general attitude towards conversion. Gandhi believed that there is enough room for all the major religions in Hinduism. For him different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree.

According to Gandhi conversion is an error and it is the greatest impediment to the world’s progress towards peace. Gandhi believed, in the country of India, which is considered to be the mother of Religion or Religions, expressions such as “Waning creed”, are blasphemous. The Motherhood of India is on trial. He said, if the mental attitude of a man regarding discipline is a matter of no concern, the form of worship in a particular manner in a church, a mosque or a temple is an empty formula. It may even be a hindrance to individual or social growth. Insisting a particular creed may be a potent cause of violent quarrels leading to bloodshed and ending in utter disbelief in Religion, i.e., God himself¹. Gandhi could not reconcile to the idea of conversion, as he believed that all religions ‘are equally true’.
Gandhi elaborated this idea forcefully in a convention of the council of International Federation at the Sabarmati Ashram. This convention was attended by Shri. C.F. Andrews, Prof. P.A. Wadia, a few Americans, English, a Russian, a Swede, Christians, Hindus, a Parsi and a Muslim. Gandhi said that he believed in the truthfulness of all religions and their respective errors. So, Gandhi proposed a unique form of conversion in which the prayer should be to make a Hindu a better Hindu, a Mussalman a better Mussalman and a Christian a better Christian. Gandhi considered this truthful approach to be the fundamental of companionship or comradeship. Any doctrine claiming superiority for one’s own religion should be out rightly rejected. Gandhi’s doctrine of toleration does not include toleration of evil, though it does the tolerance of the evil-minded. Further, he said, that like a rose would transmit its own scent without the vehicle of speech, God, being a self-acting force can also transmit His Godliness without the humanly interferences of Proselytisation or conversion².

Gandhi on Individual Conversion:

When a Polish Research Student wanted Gandhij’s autograph on a photograph, from the proceeds of the sale of which a school run by Catholic Fathers in a rural area would be supported, Gandhi refused and said that he had known the so-called conversions in the vicinity of Tiruchengodu, practiced by those Catholic Fathers. Gandhi told that he had written to his Muslim friends condemning them as untrue representatives of Islam for they had converted his son to Islam by simply exploiting his weakness³.

Gandhi believed that his Missionary friends did not bring to their work a purely humanitarian spirit. Instead their objective was to add more number to their fold. Gandhi said neither the Christian Mira
Behn nor the Khan Saheb’s daughter who was in his care would be tried to get converted to Hinduism, whereas they will be made better Christians and better Mussalmans⁴.

Once asked by Mrs Millie Graham Polak as to why he did not accept Christianity, Gandhi’s reply was: “I studied your scriptures for some time and thought earnestly about it. I was tremendously attracted to Christianity, but, eventually, I came to the conclusion that there was nothing really in your Scriptures that we had not got in ours, and that to be a good Hindu also meant that I would be a good Christian. There was no need for me to join your creed to be a believer in the beauty of the teachings of Jesus or to try to follow his examples”⁵.

Gandhi once said: “Jesus to me is a great world teacher among others. He was to the devotees of his generations, no doubt, ‘the only begotten son of God.’ This belief need not be mine. He affects my life no less because I regard him as one among the many begotten sons of God”⁶.

According to Gandhi, “proceeded from the heart, and a heart conversion was impossible without an intelligent grasp of one’s own faith”. (D.G. Tendulkar, Mahatma, Vol.7, p.304). He said: “The rose does not need to write a book or deliver a sermon on the scent, it sheds all around on the beauty which everyone who has eyes can see. Well, spiritual life is infinitely superior to the beautiful and fragrant rose, and I make bold to say that the moment there is a spiritual expression in life, the surroundings will readily respond”⁷.

According to Gandhi individual conversions should be based on purely spiritual urge. His overall position was: “God is not encased in
a safe to be approached only through a little hole in it, but it is open to be approached through billions of openings by those who are humble and pure of hearts”.

In 1926 Manilal fell in love with a Muslim woman. Both families knew each other. Gandhi wrote a letter to Manilal, "You follow the Hindu Religion Fatima follows Islam. Your desire (To marry) is against your religion. It would be like putting two swords in one Scabbard. What religion will your Children follow?...... If Fatima forsakes her religion just for the sake of marriage. She will be committing a crime against religion itself... That issue cannot be solved by inter-marriage". (Kasturba a life, Arun Gandhi 2000, P-240) 6.3.1927 Manilal Gandhi and Susila Mushruwala were married in Akola, some 200 miles northeast of Bombay.

Gandhi said that he would have accepted his son Harilal’s conversion to Islam if it had been made from the heart and free from any worldly considerations. But, he had the greatest doubt about this acceptance of his son, as Harilal was a drunkard, visitor of brothel and a heavily indebted man. Based on his earlier words to the press complaining against Hindus – not Hinduism – it was clear that he had gone to the highest bidder. A Muslim brotherhood telegraphed Gandhi that they expect him also on the lines of his son Harilal to embrace Islam, the truest religion of the World. Gandhi asserted that conversion is a matter between man and His maker who alone knows his creatures heart. And conversion without a clean heart, is a denial of God and Religion.

Gandhi on Mass Conversion:

While discussing with C.F. Andrews and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, at Sevagram Ashram in 1936, Gandhi made his views very
clearly on Mass Conversion of Harijans stating that the Missionaries’
behaviour was as bad as that of the other proselytisers. Gandhi said
that it is absurd on the part of Dr. Ambedkar to talk of taking all the
Harijan with himself to another religion, as if they are all bricks that
they can be moved from one structure to another. Christians and
Mussalmans should not indulge in such acts setting aside all the
reform works undertaken in Hinduism. A Christian approaching
Gandhi after getting captivated by reading Bhagavat, if declare himself
a Hindu, Gandhi would advise him that whatever the Bhagavat offers,
the Bible also offers. And that Christian will also be advised to
become a good Christian. It is not necessary for a person to disregard
his own religion just to believe in the Bible. This proselytization will
mean no peace in the World. For Gandhi religion is a very personal
matter. One should live according to one’s lights, share the best with
one another, thus adding to the sum total of human effort to reach
God. According to Gandhi all the great religions are fundamentally
equal. One should respect other religions as one respects one’s own,
not based on mutual toleration but based purely on equal respect.

In a letter dated February 23, 1925 to Maulana Shaukat Ali
Gandhi had said that he couldn’t treat the conversions as lightly as
any other person do. In his report on kohat riots, Gandhi condemned
strongly these forcible conversion by saying that at least in future if
such conversion take place it should happen in the presence of the
elders of the communities. Anything happening against this procedure
should not be conceived and recognised as genuine conversions. 11

When Dr. Ambedkar threw the bombshell of his decision to
undergo mass conversion, the Christian missionaries, the Muslims
and the Sikhs vyed with each other in wooing the untouchables,
Gandhi said that he could understand the reason for Muslim
organisations doing this, as they were quarrelling with the Hindus. But, the Sikh intervention is not understandable to Gandhi. The Christian mission claiming it to be a purely spiritual effort hurts Gandhi because it seemed to him as an ugly performance and absurd imitation (travesty) of Religion\textsuperscript{12}.

Though Gandhi could understand the anger of Dr. Ambedkar over atrocities committed against the downtrodden, he declared that religion is not like a house or a cloak that can be changed at will. It is a moral integral part of one’s self than that of one’s body. Religion persist even after death. Gandhi said that, he would urge Dr. Ambedkar to assuage his wrath and to reconsider his decision to conversion, as it won’t serve the cause which they have at heart. If worldly betterment is assured by means of wholesale conversion to Islam or Christianity, Gandhi said, then he would recommend for or advise it without hesitation. There is no such thing as untouchability that form a part of Hinduism. It is rather an evil that should be removed by every effort. And to get rid Hinduism off this blot, many a reformer had started working for it, therefore, he considered conversion not to be a remedy, whatsoever.

Ghandhiji said only if the leader of different religions in India stop their competition with one another to entice Harijans into their fold, then it would be well for this unfortunate country. These competitions do not serve the cause of religion. By looking at it in terms of politics or economics they reduce the religious values, whereas the proper thing would be to estimate politics and every other thing in terms of religion\textsuperscript{13}. 

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Conversions: A Harmful to everyone:

One cannot claim infallibility for his own religion if he had examined all religious beliefs. If one thinks that what is best to oneself is also best to others, then it is an assumption for omniscience and infallibility, which is “a Double fallacy”\(^{14}\).

According to Gandhi all the activities of Christian Missionaries and Evangelists towards conversion are harmful not only to the persons towards whom they are directed but also they are harmful to the workers themselves and also to the whole of India\(^{15}\).

Gandhi explained his concept of Swadeshi as that the spirit restricting them to the use and service of their immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. So, based on this definition, he should restrict himself to his ancestral religion, that is his immediate religious surrounding. If it is found defective, he should serve it by purging it of its defect. Like the same one should make use of the indigenous institutions in that of economics by curing them of their proved defects. He further elaborated that, Hinduism has become a conservative religion and a mighty force because of the Swadeshi spirit underlying it. It is most tolerant because it is non-proselytising. It has succeeded in absorbing Buddhism. And based on this Swadeshi reason and spirit a Hindu refuses to change his religion, not necessarily because, he considers it to be the best, but because he knows that, he can complement it by introduction of reforms. In God’s house there are many mansions and they are equally holy and so no thought of conversion is necessary or is possible\(^{16}\).

According to him, conversion are not a spiritual act, forcible conversions are not conversion at all but abductions. When questioned whether he would prevent missionaries coming to India in
order to Baptize, Gandhi replied that if he had power, he could legislate and certainly stop all proselytising. But, he would welcome people of any nationality if they come to service in the true intention of service\textsuperscript{17}. Gandhi said that, conversion and service go ill together. And whenever conversion has taken place it has not been a spiritual act in any sense of the term. They are conversions for convenience\textsuperscript{18}.

According to Gandhi, conversion had become a matter of business, like any other, as he had found a missionary report furnishing the cost per head to convert and then presenting a budget for ‘the next harvest’\textsuperscript{19}.

\textbf{Gandhi on Reconversion:}

Gandhi called it a misnomer if a person is converted through fear, compulsion, and starvation or for material gain or consideration. He considered, such conversions a false one. According to Gandhi real conversion springs from the heart and at the prompting of God, not of a stranger. So, if a repentant wishes to make his home - coming into Hindu fold, Gandhi said, he would unhesitatingly readmit him without ado and without any Shuddhi. This is something like a man returning to his original branch that he was sitting earlier from a temporarily switched over branch of a tree\textsuperscript{20}.

However, reconversion to original faith did not arouse any opposition in him. He said in 1924: “If the Malakanas wanted to return to the Hindu fold, they have a perfect right to do so whenever they liked. But no propaganda will be allowed which reviles other religions”\textsuperscript{21}. In 1939 when an American missionary complained to him against C.Rajagopalachari for congratulating some Christians on becoming Hindus, he said: “A Government responsible to the people dare not favour one religion over another. But I should see nothing
wrong in Hindus congratulating those who having left them may return to their fold\textsuperscript{22}. Regarding the forcible conversions and abductions in Noakhali in 1946, he observed that forcible conversion was no conversion at all, nor abduction a bar to the return to her home of an abducted girl. No purification or penance was necessary in such cases\textsuperscript{23}.

Gandhi told in all humility that Hinduism as such that he knew, entirely satisfied his soul, fills his whole being and he found a solace in the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads that he missed even in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’. He asserted that he did not under estimate the precious teachings in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, but it was Bhagavad Gita that gave him a true comfort, whenever he was confronted with sorrow and haunted with doubts\textsuperscript{24}.

More of Gandhi on Conversion:

In 1927, Gandhi had written that after much prayerful study of the Hindu Shastras, he had come to the conclusion that there was no room for conversion such as they have in Islam and Christianity. Further, he was also certain that in Quran, there was no warrant for the Tabligh that was practiced then\textsuperscript{25}.

According to Gandhi no religion is perfect. He attributed their imperfection to the double distillation process they had to undergo. He said in 1936: “Whilst I believe that the principal books are inspired, they suffer from a process of doubles distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly”\textsuperscript{26}.

And again, “God has created different faiths just as He has the votaries there. How can I even secretly harbour the thought that my
neighbour’s faith is inferior to mine and wish that he should give up his faith and embrace mine? As a true and loyal friend, I can only wish and pray that he may live and grow perfect in his own faith. In God’s house there are many mansions and they are equally holy.

**Anti Conversion Laws in India:**

In 1954, a Congress member moved the “Indian Converts (Regulation and Registration) Bill” in the Parliament proposing compulsory licensing of missionaries and registration of conversions. The Bill was, however, dropped at the behest of Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1960, a private member’s Bill,” Backward Communities (Religious Protection) Bill “aimed at checking the conversion of Hindus to non-Indian religions like Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism was introduced, but was rejected for “its apparent affront on specific religious faiths”. In 1970 again, a “Bill to forbid any conversion of minors” was introduced in the parliament, but was rejected too. Once again in 1978, a Private Members Bill was introduced entitled as “Freedom of Religion Bill”, but met with a severe opposition from the public. Another attempt in this direction was made in the parliament in 1979 when a private member Bill came up but it also was rejected. No further attempt has been made in this direction in the past two decades.

At the State level the following Acts have already been passed.

“The Madhya Pradesh Swanthantrya Adhiyam, 1968”, “The Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1979” and

“The Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978”. In Bihar and Rajasthan similar Bills were introduced but rejected.

Anti–conversion Act of Tamilnadu 5.10.2002 was introduced by AIADMK Government, only to be repealed later in 2004.
Though there is no specific law against conversion, there are certain central laws which effectively discourage conversion from Hinduism to Christianity and Islam by subjecting the converts to loss of material benefits.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations Organizations as its 217 A, (III) resolution of 10 December 1948. Though all the articles are worth recalling in such a debate, it will be pertinent to bring in two of the articles which seem to be more relevant to our topic of discussion viz, articles 18 and 19.

Article 18 says: “every one has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance”.

Article 19 says: “every one has the right to freedom of opinion and of expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

Article 25 of the Indian Constitution guaranteeing the right of freedom of worship and propagation of one’s religion, had come up for interpretation by that Court in an appeal which had questioned its interpretation by the High Courts of Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. It then ruled that the phrase “to propagate” used in it does not mean the right to convert another to one’s religion. It only stands for the right to transmit or spread one’s religion by an exposition of its tenets. It argued that Article 25(i) guarantees “freedom of conscience” to every
citizen, and not merely to the followers of one particular religion, and that, in turn, postulates that there is no fundamental right to convert another person to one’s religion because it would amount to the impingement of the “freedom of conscience” guaranteed to all29.

In 1931, The restriction on fundamental right passed by the Karachi Congress with Gandhi's approval, affirmed the principal of religions freedom and declared that "the State shall observe neutrality in regard to all religions" People of all religions are aware of Gandhi's great contribution to the concept of Secularism in India30.

To Sum Up:
Gandhi thoughts and comments and actions in respect of conversions, reconversions are even more relevant today than when he expressed himself, and will remain ever Gandhi in his reply letter to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur captioned, "A Christian letter" has clearly outlined his general attitude towards conversion. Gandhi believed that there is enough room for all the major religions in Hinduism. For him different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree.

In 1928, Gandhi declared his idea in the Council of International Federation at the Sabarmathi Ashram, Ahmedabad. He said : “After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that (1) all religions are true; (2) all religions have some error in them; (3) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to one as one’s own close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faith: therefore, no thought of Conversion is possible”.
According to Gandhi conversion is an error and it is the greatest impediment to the world's progress towards peace. Gandhi could not reconcile to the idea of conversion, as he believed that all religions 'are equally true'. So, he proposed a unique form of conversion in which the prayer should be to make a Hindu a better Hindu, a Mussalman a better Mussalman and Christian a better Christian. Gandhi condemned his Muslim friends as untrue representatives of Islam for they had converted his son to Islam by simply exploiting his weakness.

Gandhi said that he would have accepted his son Harilal's conversion to Islam if it had been made from the heart and free from any worldly considerations. But he had the greatest doubt about this acceptance of his son, as Harilal was drunkard, visitor of brothel and a heavily indebted man. Further Gandhi said that any conversion without a clean heart, is a denial of God and Religion.

Gandhi once told Mrs. Millie Graham Polak that after studying the scriptures of Christianity he was tremendously attracted to it but could not find anything new than that of Hindu Scriptures. Gandhi made his views very clearly on Mass conversion of Harijans stating that the missionaries' behaviours was as bad as that of the other proselytizers. It is not necessary for a person to disregard his own religion just to believe in the Bible. This proselytization will mean no peace in the world. For Gandhi religion is a very personal matter. According to Gandhi all the activities of Christian missionaries and Evangelists towards conversion are harmful not only to the persons towards whom they are directed but also they are harmful to the workers themselves and also to the whole of India.
Gandhi felt that conversion violates the spirit of Swadeshi, where 'Swadeshi' meant a restriction to the use and service of their immediate surrounding to the exclusion of the more remote. In God's house there are many mansions and they are equally holy and so no thought of conversion is necessary or is possible.

Gandhi had told if he had power he could legislate and certainly stop all proselytising. According to Gandhi, conversion had become a matter of business involving 'report' and 'budget' etc. for Gandhi real conversion springs from the heart and at the prompting of God, not of a stranger. So, if a repentant wishes to make his home coming into Hindu fold, Gandhi said, he would unhesitatingly readmit him. Thus Gandhi welcomed reconversion of the people to their original faith of Hinduism.

In 'Young India' (1927) Gandhi had written that after much prayerful study of the Hindus shastras, he had come to the conclusion that there was no room for conversion such as they have in Islam and Christianity.

Gandhi condemned strongly, forcible conversion by saying that at least in future if such conversions take place it should happen in the presence of the elders of the communities. Anything happening against this procedure should not be conceived and recognized as genuine conversion. If worldly betterment is assured by means of wholesome conversion to Islam or Christianity, Gandhi said, then he would recommend for or advise it without hesitation.

Gandhi said if the leaders of different religions in India stop their competition with one another to entice Harijans into their fold, then it would be well for this unfortunate country. In Gandhi view
untouchability cannot be liquidated by the mere conversion of untouchables to Islam or any other religion. When Dr. Ambedkar threw the bombshell of his decision to undergo mass conversion, the move of Christian missionaries hurt Gandhi because it seemed to him as an ugly performance and absurd imitation of religion.

Untouchability cannot be liquidated by the mere conversion of untouchables to Islam or any other religion. It is the so-called Caste Hindu who has to rid himself off the sin of untouchability. These caste hindus can wash away the stain only by doing justice. Gandhi considered proselytising under the cloak of humanitarian work as unhealthy. Conversion has become a matter of business, like any other. Since, Gandhi could find a missionary report furnishing the conversion expenses incurred per head and then a budget for the next harvest.

Gandhi did not approve of conversion. He strongly believed that, conversion is no remedy for Harijan emancipation. He was much opposed to religious conversion as a solution to the problem of untouchability. In his opinion the converted Harijans would remain untouchables and untouchability would not go; and change of religions would not make any different in their social status. He said: “Whether the Harijan is nominally a Christian, Muslim or neo-Sikh, he is still a Harijan. He cannot change his spots inherited from Hinduism so called. He may change his garb and call himself a Catholic Harijan or a Muslim Harijan, neo-Muslim or neo-Skih or neo-Buddhist. But his untouchability will haunt him during his life time until untouchability is removed from Hinduism, no matter what he adopts. The moment untouchability is utterly banished from Hindu society it will ipso facto disappear from elsewhere too.”
One among their many attempts to liberate themselves from absorption into Hinduism was conversion to other religions, when Hinduism was under the threat of another imperial power. Some of them converted into Christianity, Islam and other religions. The initiation for conversion mostly came from the Dalits in certain places. Their conversion was a social protest against the inhuman social system rooted in Hindu religion. They also changed their imposed caste names and started using protest names. This gives them high self esteem, self confidence and a new identity. It empowers them and gives them a different world view.

Gandhi did not believe in the conversion of one person by another. He said, “I have been, and I am still, as strong an opponent of either party changing religion for the sake of marriage. Religion is not a garment to be cast off at will”\textsuperscript{34}. By this he did not mean to undermine another faith. He was of the opinion that conversion without conviction led to mere change where as conversion with conviction meant a revolution is one’s life. For Gandhi, religion is a very personal matter one should live according to one’s inner lights.

Gandhi regarded religions to be the personal affair of every individual. Religions helps the people to lead their life with love and compassion. All religions are just different paths to conversing to the same print. He believed that Truth is inherent in all the religions. For him ‘Truth is God’.

All religions proclaim God’s will of universal salvation of human kind, and he said that, the goal of all religions is the salvation of all. All religions teach that mankind should live in harmony and peace with each other.
In conclusion, the underlying significance of this social phenomenon, Inter-caste marriage, will be explored in terms of social change in India as it struggles between a deep rooted tradition and rapid changes in the world which India must respond to now as well as in the future.

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