

# NEW CITIZENSHIP LAW GOES AGAINST GANDHI'S IDEA OF CIVIC NATIONALISM

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Human Values - Lessons from the lives and teachings of great Leaders, Reformers and Administrators

The principle that every Indian is equal before the law — enshrined in the Indian Constitution — is an ideal [Mahatma Gandhi](#) fought for all his life. Gandhi is not alive to criticise supporters of the new citizenship law and condemn the violence that followed demonstrations in Delhi and elsewhere. But we can recall what he taught us.

Gandhi was convinced that despite many social and political contradictions, and the tragedy of Partition, India would become a secular, democratic republic. That it did, though with flaws, is because of the civic and empathetic nationalism Gandhi advocated and practised.

A striking feature of Gandhi's civic nationalism was his insistence that India is not an exclusively Hindu civilisation. His political genius lay in reconciling the complex social and religious fabric of traditional Indian society with the modern phenomenon of nationalism and the struggle for independence. As such, more than being the “father of the Indian nation” he could be remembered as the architect of an inter-faith, inter-cultural India. What Gandhi did was to give different religious communities, for the first time, a sense of involvement in the Indian nation's destiny.

Gandhi did not make the religious element an integral part of his civic nationalism. He abstained from any reference to Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism or Jainism in his definition of swaraj. He continually defined and defended Indian nationalism through his belief in the truth of all religions. One is not surprised, then, to see Gandhi joining the Khilafat movement and calling on Indian Muslims to participate in the independence movement. Gandhi's action was shaped by his conviction that all religious boundaries are arbitrary and false. He was convinced that a mere doctrinaire approach to religion will not help consolidate the foundations of Indian civic nationalism. He knew that independence can't come about by the efforts of the Hindus alone. Gandhi never accepted the argument that Hindus and Muslims constituted two separate elements in Indian society.

Gandhi's involvement with the Khilafat movement helped him secure political authority in the [Indian National Congress](#). He expressed sympathy for Muslims and the Khilafat movement at the Delhi Imperial War Conference in 1918 and later, followed it up with a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford. “As a Hindu”, he wrote, “I cannot be indifferent to their cause. Their sorrows must be our sorrows.” Two years later, in response to Maganlal Gandhi who was troubled by Gandhi's involvement with Muslims, he wrote: “If I had not joined the Khilafat movement, I think, I would have lost everything. In joining it I have followed what I especially regard as my dharma... I am uniting Hindus and Muslims.”

The questions of Indian home rule and Hindu-Muslim unity were not separate issues for Gandhi. This was why Gandhi reacted against the spectre of the “Hindu Raj” and the cry of “Islam is in danger”. For Gandhi, the communal dispute between Hindus and Muslims was not confined to religion. According to him, it was due to the lack of truthfulness and transparency in the political realm. It is, therefore, not surprising that he chose to work with individuals whose primary interests were best defined in civic and ethical terms. He once declared that “a true Muslim could not harm a Hindu, and a true Hindu could not harm a Muslim”. It was probably in this spirit that Gandhi developed a friendship and a great esteem for both Maulana Azad and Khan Abdul

Ghaffar Khan. In 1939, while visiting Ghaffar Khan, Gandhi said: "If you dissect my heart, you will find that the prayer and spiritual striving for the attainment of Hindu-Muslim unity goes on there unceasingly all the twenty-four hours without even a moment's interruption whether I am awake or asleep... The dream (of Hindu-Muslim unity) has filled my being since the earliest childhood."

Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, did not share his dream. Godse said: "Gandhi is being referred to as the Father of the Nation. But if that is so, he had failed his paternal duty inasmuch as he has acted very treacherously to the nation by his consenting to the partitioning of it. I stoutly maintain that Gandhi has failed in his duty. He has proved to be the Father of Pakistan."

Today, Indians have to choose between the Gandhian paradigm of civic nationalism or a second assassination of Mahatma Gandhi.

***The writer is Noor-York Chair in Islamic Studies, York University, Toronto***

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