

**Gandhiji on**  
**RELIGIOUS CONVERSION**

Selected and Compiled with an Introduction by

**Sandhya Mehta**

MANI BHAVAN GANDHI SANGRAHALAYA MUMBAI

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## Preface

Gandhiji's life, ideas and work are of crucial importance to all those who want a better life for humankind. The political map of the world has changed dramatically since his time, the economic scenario has witnessed unleashing of some disturbing forces, and the social set-up has undergone a tremendous change. The importance of moral and ethical issues raised by him, however, remain central to the future of individuals and nations. Today we need him, more than before.

Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangrahalaya has been spreading information about Gandhiji's life and work. A series of booklets presenting Gandhiji's views on some important topics is planned to disseminate information as well as to stimulate questions among students, scholars, social activists and concerned citizens. We thank Government of India, Ministry of Tourism & Culture, Department of Culture, for their support.

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6<sup>h</sup> April 2002

## Introduction

### Sandhya Mehta

Born in a deeply religious family, Gandhiji developed an understanding of religion since his childhood. His father had friends from different faiths, with whom he would generally have religious discussions. These discussions inculcated in Gandhiji the tolerance for other faiths. Gandhiji believed in 'sarvadharmasamabhava'- equal respect to all religions. He believed that all the religions originate from the same God and they preach the same doctrines. For him no one religion is higher than other : all are complementary to one another. He reasoned, as all the religions are fundamentally equal then what is the need to convert people from one faith to another. He said, "For me different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden or they are branches of the same majestic tree". (64:326)

He was, however, aware of the gravity of the issue of conversion. He realized that whether it was proselytizing by Christians, *tabligh* by Muslims or *shuddhi* by Hindus, each religion was converting people from other religions to their own, simply to add numbers to their respective faith. Christian missionaries were proselytizing the villagers or the downtrodden while doing humanitarian work. Ill treatment or injustice of Harijans by the upper caste Hindus drove the former to convert to Christianity and seek material betterment. The Muslims were also forcibly converting Hindus to their own faith. Meanwhile, the Hindu untouchables, who wanted to come back to their own original faith, were asked to perform Shuddhi by Hindu priests. But, in Gandhiji's opinion, "religion is not like house or cloak which can be changed at will". (62:37)

Gandhiji's inner urge led him to study and analyse different religions. Although Gandhiji opposed the forcible conversion, he did not disapprove of voluntary conversion. If a person desires to convert to faith other than his own, then it should be for his inner satisfaction and growth.

When his eldest son Harilal got himself converted to Islam, Gandhiji was very upset. He felt that Harilal's acceptance to Islam was a matter of convenience, to satisfy his greed of wealth and sensual pleasures. He had no objection if Harilal's conversion to Islam was from his heart and free from desire for material benefit. On another occasion, when

Indira Nehru got married to Feroze Gandhi, Gandhiji remarked, "I have been, and I am still as strong an opponent of either party changing the religion for the sake of marriage, religion is not a garment to be cast off at will". (75:375).

In South Africa, Gandhiji had come in contact with both Roman Catholics and Protestants. Some of them tried to convert him to Christianity. He refused to convert with a firm belief that only if his inner voice commanded then only he would convert to Christianity. Once a Quaker (member of a religious society), Michael Coates urged Gandhi to discard his beads, which he was wearing around, his neck. Gandhiji did not oblige, saying it was a gift from his mother given with love and faith. Moreover, Gandhiji could not agree with his Christian friends who told him that he would find redemption only if he believed in Jesus. He questioned whether God was prejudiced against non-Christians?

Socio-economic factors often compelled people to convert to Christianity. Conversion was often used as a bait, especially for the poor and downtrodden. Gandhiji remarked that religion is not a barter which one can exchange for a materialistic gain. He warned the missionaries to stick to the humanitarian work they were doing in the field of education and health of the downtrodden without asking them to convert. He gave the example of his missionary friend C.F. Andrews, who, like a good Christian, silently worked spreading the sweet aroma of his life — "like a rose which does not need speech to spread fragrance but spread it because it must". (64:421)

Gandhiji criticized the narrow outlook of the upper caste Hindus for the conversion of Harijans to different faith. According to him untouchability drove them to follow other religions. If social equality is granted to the downtrodden, then they will not be lured to convert to another faith. There were instances, when a Hindu, who was disillusioned after adopting another faith either by force or for material gain wanted to come back to his original Hindu faith, was asked to perform shuddhi. The reason given was that he had committed a sin by converting to another religion. But Gandhiji maintained that, this person should be re-admitted to Hinduism without performing shuddhi. Because if a person converts to another religion because of compulsion, fear or greed, such conversion cannot be called conversion at all.

Gandhiji always emphasized that all the religions of the world preached the same message of universal brotherhood, through different words. He said, "When you look at these religions as so many leaves of the tree, they seem so different but at the trunk they are one". (72:254)

In an attempt to understand Gandhiji, this book deals with Gandhiji's views on religious conversion through his own words. It is broadly classified into three main parts, i.e. his general views on conversion, conversion to Christianity and to Islam. Also included are his thoughts on the upliftment of Harijans and shuddhi.

*All the views in this book are compiled from 'The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi', published by Publication Division, Govt, of India. The volume and page numbers are given in the bracket alongside the text.*

**Gandhiji on**  
**RELIGIOUS CONVERSION**

Gandhiji's views on religious conversion were published in Harijan, 22.3.1935 under the heading – 'Deploring Conversion'.

"Conversions are but one small result of the disease. Remove the cause, and the conversions will cease, as also many worse results." (60:327)

\* \* \*

Excerpts from the speech delivered at School of Indian Languages, Darjeeling, for missionaries serving in India, on 6-6-1925.

"Today we see competition and conflict among different religions for counting the number of their followers. I feel deeply ashamed of this and, when I hear of people's achievement in converting such and such number to a particular faith, I feel that, that is no achievement at all, that on the contrary it is a blasphemy against God and the self." (27:205)

\* \* \*

In a speech at Solapur on 20-2-1927, Gandhiji said :

"As I said at Nasik, I fail to understand the shuddhi, tabligh, and proselytization as they are carried on today. I cannot understand a man changing the religion of his forefathers at the instance of another. But that is my personal conviction. No one need stop shuddhi, tabligh or proselytization at any instance. My own duty is clear. I must go on purifying myself and hoping that only thereby would I react on my surroundings. It is my unshakeable conviction that penance and self-purification are the only means for protection of Hinduism." (33:100-101)

\* \* \*

Members of the Council of International Federation held a discussion, on 15-1-1928, on 'The fundamental objectives of the fellowship', where they also discussed the question of conversion. Gandhiji defined his position on conversion in following words.

"Hinduism with its message of ahimsa is to me most glorious religion in the world — as to me, my wife is the most beautiful woman in the world—but others may feel same about their own religion. Cases of real, honest conversion are quite possible. If some people for their inward satisfaction and growth change their religion, let them do so." (35:462).

\* \* \*

During an interview with Gandhiji, which was published in *Young India* on 21-3-1929, Dr. John Mott asked him - "Do you disbelieve in all conversions?" Gandhiji replied :

"I disbelieve in the conversion of one person by another. My effort should never be to undermine another's faith but to make him a better follower of his own faith. This implies belief in the truth of all religions and therefore respect for them. It again implies true humility, a recognition of the fact that the divine light having been vouchsafed to all religions through an imperfect medium of flesh, they must share in more or less degree the imperfection of the vehicle." (40:60)

\* \* \*

At the conference of Missionary Societies of Great Britain and Ireland, on 8-10-1931 in London; missionary Mr. F. B. Meyer asked Gandhiji whether he had found peace without acknowledging the message of Christ. Gandhiji replied in affirmative.

"Religion is a personal matter, and I am not going to ask another man to become a Hindu or a Parsi. I would be doing something contrary to my belief. I am sharing with you my own experience, and trying to show you as fellow-workers that probably, if you could see eye to eye with me, your work would flourish more and more. You have amazing self-sacrifice; you are great organizers; you are good men. I want to multiply occasions for your service. I want to work closer with you, but I do not want you to get India to change her faith." (48:126)

\* \* \*

In his letter to Premaben Kantak, 22-4-1932 he wrote,

"Regarding conversion, I don't mean that it is never justified. But no one should invite another person to change his or her religion. In my view, the belief which underlines such practice, namely, that one's own religion is true and another's is false is an error.



When, however, a person has changed his religion under compulsion or in ignorance, there should be no objection to such a person rectifying his error, that is returning to his original religion, on the contrary, he should be encouraged to do that. His action is not conversion. If I think my religion is false I should give it up. And I may, I ought to accept what seems to me good in any other religion. If my religion seems to me imperfect it is my duty to make it perfect. It is also my duty to try to rid it of any evil which I may see in it. I regard Miraben as Christian and now she also regards herself as Christian. I see no inconsistency in her being Christian and reading the Gita with devotion. Persons belonging to other faith also join in our prayers with sincere feeling." (49:345)

\* \* \*

A speech at Parsi meeting, in Karachi, on 11.7.34.

"Just as men have different names and faces, these religions also are different. But just as men are all human in spite of their different names and forms, just as leaves of a tree though different all leaves are the same as the leaves of the same tree, all religions though different are the same. We must treat all religions as equal." (58:177)

\* \* \*

In an interview to a missionary, on or before 22-3-1935, Gandhiji complained that missionaries were preaching the gospel of Christ with some motive behind it.

"One sordid motive violates the whole preaching. It is like drop of poison, which fouls the whole food. Therefore, I should do without any preaching at all. A rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its fragrance. The fragrance is its own sermon ...The fragrance of religious and spiritual life is much finer and subtler than of the rose." (60:323)

\* \* \*

Defining his position on conversion, Gandhiji wrote in *Harijan*, 28-9-1935.

"I believe that there is no such thing as conversion from one faith to another in the accepted sense of the term. It is highly personal matter for the individual and his God. I may not have any design upon my neighbour as to his faith, which I must honour even as I honour my own. For I regard all the great religions of the world as true at any rate

for the people professing them as mine is true for me. Having reverently studied the scriptures of the world, I have no difficulty in perceiving the beauties in all of them. I could no more think of asking a Christian or a Mussalman or a Parsi or a Jew to change his faith than I would think of changing my own." (61:457)

\* \* \*

The statement issued to the Press on 2-6-1936, under the title "To My Numerous Muslim Friends", regarding Harilal's conversion to Islam, was published in Harijan.

"Harilal's apostasy is no loss to Hinduism and his admission to Islam is a source of weakness to it if, as I apprehend, he remains the same wreck that he was before.

"Surely conversion is a matter between man and his Maker who alone knows His creatures' hearts. And conversion without a clean heart is, in my opinion, a denial of God and religion. Conversion without cleanness of heart can only be a matter for sorrow, not joy, to a godly person.

"My object in addressing these lines to my numerous Muslim friends is to ask them to examine Harilal in the light of his immediate past and, if they find that his conversion is a soulless matter, to tell him so plainly and disown him and if they discover sincerity in him to see that he is protected against temptations so that his sincerity results in his becoming a godfearing member of society. Let them know that excessive indulgence has softened his brain and undermined his sense of right and wrong, truth and falsehood. I do not mind whether he is known as Abdulla or Harilal if, by adopting one name for the other, he becomes a true devotee of God which both the names mean."(63:7)

\* \* \*

Talking to a Polish student on or before 12-6-1936, Gandhiji explained that if conversion was of intellectual and spiritual level then he would bless the conversion. In this context he gave the example of his son Harilal's conversion to Islam.

"If he (Harilal) had become a Muslim from a pure and a contrite at heart, I should have no quarrel with him. But those who had helped him to embrace Islam and are enthusing over his apostasy simply exploited his weaknesses. They are no true representatives of Islam." (63:47)

\* \* \*

When Amtul Salaam, Gandhiji's follower, was apprehensive that Kanti, grandson of Gandhiji, would adopt Islam while in Bombay, Gandhiji wrote to Kanti from Seagaon on 1-12-1936.

"To me all the religions are equal, so I would not feel unhappy if one changed one's religion with deliberate knowledge and in a sincere spirit in order to cultivate more detachment and attain God sooner. However, there is one thing: one who believes that all religions are equal will have no need to change his religion as it includes other religions. One who has grasped this has no need to change his religion." (64:96.)

## Conversion to Christianity

When Gandhiji was asked by Christian Missionaries, whether he would allow Christians to continue with their conversion activity without any hindrance, Gandhiji replied (*Young India* 27-10-20.)

"(And) if a change of religion could be justified for worldly betterment, I would advise it without hesitation. But religion is matter of heart. No physical inconvenience can warrant abandonment of one's own religion." (18:376)

\* \* \*

Gandhiji's views from Bihar notes (8-10-1925) indicate that:

"Christian missionaries have been doing valuable service for generations, but in my humble opinion, their work suffers because at the end of it they expect conversion of these simple people to Christianity ...How very nice it would be if the missionaries rendered humanitarian service without the ulterior aim of conversion." (28:295-96)

\* \* \*

Replying to the question asked by a student regarding evaluation of the work of Christian missionaries in India, (*Young India* on 17-12-1925) Gandhiji said :

"I'm against the modern method of proselytizing. Years' experience of proselytizing both in South Africa and India has convinced me that it has not raised the general moral tone of converts who have imbibed the superficialities of European Civilization, and have missed the teachings of Jesus .. .The indirect contribution, on the other hand, of Christian missionary effort is great. It has stimulated Hindu and Mussalman religious research. It has forced us to put our houses in order." (29:326)

\* \* \*

Speaking about the Bhils, the tribe from Central India, Gandhiji said (*Navjivan* 18-4-1926) :

"These so-called uncivilized communities are bound to attract the attention of missionaries, for it is the latter's duty to get recruits for the Christian army. I do not regard such proselytization as real service to dharma. But how can we blame the missionaries if the Hindus take no interest in the Bhils? For them anyone who is

brought into the Christian fold, no matter how he has become a Christian, has entered a new life and become civilized. If, as a result of such conversion, converts rise spiritually or morally, I personally would have nothing to say against their conversion.

But I do not think that this is what happens." (30:311-312)

\* \* \*

In reply to the question about the work of the missionaries in India, Gandhiji said :  
(*Young India* 14-7-1927)

"It is customary to decry other religions to offer their own as the only one that can bring deliverance. That attitude should be radically changed. Let them appear to people as they are, and try to rejoice in seeing Hindus become better Hindus and Mussalmans as better Mussalmans. Let them start work at the bottom, let them enter into what is best in their life and offer nothing inconsistent with it. That will make their work far more efficacious, and what they will say and offer to the people will be appreciated without suspicion and hostility. In a word let them go to the people not as patrons, but as one of them, not to oblige them but to serve them and to work among them." (34:164)

\* \* \*

Gandhiji clarified his views on the role of foreign missionaries in India. (23-4-1931)

"(If) instead of confining themselves purely to humanitarian work such as education, medical services to the poor and the like, they would use these activities of theirs for the purpose of proselytizing, I would certainly like to withdraw. Every nation considers its own faith to be as good as that of any other. Certainly, the great faiths held by the people of India are adequate for her people. India stands in no need of conversion from one faith to another.

"Let me now amplify the bald statement. I hold that proselytizing under the cloak of humanitarian work is, to say the least, unhealthy. It is most certainly resented by the people here. Religion after all is a deeply personal matter, it touches the heart. Why should I change my religion because a doctor who professes Christianity as his religion has cured me of some disease or why should a doctor expect or suggest such a change whilst I am under his influence? Is not his medical relief its own reward and satisfaction? Or why should I, whilst I am in a missionary educational institution, have

Christian teaching t<sup>^</sup>mist upon me? In my opinion these practices are not uplifting and give rise to suspicion if not even secret hostility. The methods of conversion must be like Caesar<sup>^</sup> wife above suspicion. Faith is imparted like secular subjects. It is given through the language of the heart. If a man has a living faith in him, it spreads its aroma like the rose its scent. Because of its invisibility, the extent of its influence is far wider than that of the visible beauty of colour of the petals.

"I am, then, not against conversion. But I am against the modern method of it. Conversion nowadays has become a matter of business like any other. I remember having read a missionary report saying how much it cost per head to convert and then present a budget for 'the next harvest'.

"Yes, I do maintain that India's great faiths all suffice for her. Apart from Christianity and Judaism, Hinduism and offshoots, Islam and Zoroastrianism are living faiths. No one faith is perfect.

All faiths are equally dear to their respective votaries. What is wanted therefore is living friendly contact among the followers of the great religions of the world and not a clash among them in fruitless attempt on the part of each community to show the superiority of its faith over the rest. Through such friendly contact it will be possible for us all to rid our respective faiths of shortcomings and excrescences.

"It follows from what I have said above that India is in no need of conversion of the kind I have in mind. Conversion in the sense of self-purification, self-realization is the crying need of the times. That, however, is not what is ever meant by proselytizing. To those who would convert India, might it not be said, 'Physician heal thyself' ? (46:28)

\* \* \*

Gandhiji sent a telegram to the Editor of *Daily Herald*, London, (after 23-4-1931) stating, that the report about the foreign missionaries was distortion of his views.

"Am certainly against the use of hospitals, schools and the like for purposes conversion. It is hardly healthy method and certainly gives rise to bitter resentment, conversion matter of heart and must depend upon silent influence of pure character and conduct of missionaries. True conversion comes imperceptibly like aroma of rose. Thus, am not against conversion as but am certainly against present methods. Conversion must not

be reduced to business depending for increase upon pounds, shillings, pence. I also hold that all great religions are of equal merit to respective nations or individuals professing them. India is in no need of conversion of type described. Whilst under swaraj all would be free to exercise their own faiths. Personally, I would wish present methods adopted by missionaries were abandoned even now and that under conviction not compulsion." (46:34)

\* \* \*

Speaking at the conference of the Missionary Society, which was held at Church Missionary House, London, on 8-10-1931. Gandhiji said :

"The idea of converting people to one's faith by speech and writings, by appeal to reason and emotion and by suggesting that the faith of his forefathers is a bad faith, in my opinion, limits the possibilities of serving humanity. I believe that the great religions of the world are all more or less true and they have descended to us from God. ...Religion is like a rose. It throws out the scent which attracts like magnet and we are drawn to it like involuntarily. The scent of religious contact has greater pungency than the scent of the rose, that is why I hold my view with reference to conversion." (48:122)

Gandhiji felt that his campaign against untouchability should not be a reason for the missionaries to get disturbed. (*Harijan*, 25-1-1935.) He said :

"But my trouble is that the missionary friends do not bring to their work a purely humanitarian spirit. Their object is to add numbers to their fold, and that is why they are disturbed. The complaint which I have been making all these years is more than justified by what you say. Some of the friends of a Mission were the other day in high glee over the conversion to Christianity of a learned pandit. They have been dear friends, and so I told them that it was hardly proper to go into ecstasies over a man forsaking his religion. Today it is the case of learned Hindu, tomorrow it may be that of an ignorant villager not knowing the principles of his religion... Here is Miraben. I would have her find all the spiritual comfort she needs from Christianity, and I should not dream of converting her to Hinduism, even if she wanted to do so ...Take the case of Khan Saheb's daughter entrusted to my care by her father. I should jealously educate her in her own faith and should strive my utmost against her being lured away from it if ever she was so inclined. I have had privilege of having children and grown-up persons

of other faith with me. I was thankful to find them better Christians, Mussalmans, Parsis or Jews by their contact with me." (60: 76-77)

\* \* \*

When A. A. Paul from Federation of International Fellowship had asked Gandhi to define conversion, (*Harijan*, 28-9-1935.) Gandhiji stated :

"My own detached view may now be stated in few words. I believe that there is no such thing as conversion from one faith to another in the accepted sense of the term. It is highly personal matter for the individual and his God. I may not have any design upon my neighbour as to his faith which I must honour even as I honour my own. For I regard all the great religions of the world as true at any rate for the people professing them as mine is true for me. Having reverently studied the scriptures of the world, I have no difficulty in perceiving the beauties in them. I could no more think of asking a Christian or a Mussalman or a Parsi or a Jew to change his faith than I would think of changing my own.. .It is a conviction daily growing upon me that the great and rich Christian missions will render true service to India, if they can persuade themselves to confine their activities to humanitarian service without the ulterior motive of converting India or at least her unsophisticated villagers to Christianity, and destroying their social superstructure, which notwithstanding its many defects has stood now from time immemorial the onslaughts upon it from within and from without. Whether they—the missionaries—and we wish it or not, what is true in the Hindu faith will abide, what is untrue will fall to pieces. Every living faith must have within itself the power of rejuvenation if it is to live." (61:457)

\* \* \*

Gandhi discussed conversion with C.F. Andrews, in Segaoon on 28-11-1936:

"Supposing a Christian came to me and said he was captivated by a reading of the Bhagavata and so wanted to declare himself a Hindu, I should say to him: ' No. What Bhagavata offers the Bible also offers. You have not made the attempt to find it out. Make the attempt and be a good Christian... If a person wants to believe in the Bible let him say so, but why should he disregard his own religion? This proselytization will mean no peace in the world. Religion is a very personal matter. We should, by living the



life according to our light, share the best with one another, thus adding to the sum total of human effort to reach God."

"Consider whether you are going to accept the position of mutual toleration or of equality of all religions. My position is that all the great religions are fundamentally equal. We must have the innate respect for other religions as we have for our own. Mind you, not mutual toleration, but equal respect." (64:20)

\* \* \*

During the discussion with Gandhi a missionary said : (*Harijan* 17-4-1937)

"But when you say I must accept Jesus in preference to Ramakrishna Paramhans, you will have to go into deep waters. That is why I say, let your life speak to us, even as rose needs no speech but simply spreads its perfume. Even the blind who do not see the rose perceive its fragrance. That is the secret of the Gospel of the rose. But the Gospel that Jesus preached is more subtle and fragrant than the Gospel of rose. If the rose needs no agent much less does Gospel of Christ need any agent." (65:80)

\* \* \*

Gandhiji was having discussions with Harijan workers in Bardoli On 8-1-1942. Question was put to Gandhiji that, how one deals with the temptations given by the missionaries in forms of books, school fees etc., to which he replied —

"The missionaries have of course the right to preach the Gospel of Christ and to invite non-Christians to embrace Christianity. But every attempt to press material benefits or attractions in the aid of conversion should be freely exposed, and the Harijans should be educated to resist these temptations." (75:207)

### **Conversion to Islam or Tabligh**

Gandhiji delivered this speech under the auspices of the Theosophical Society, Johannesburg, 13-5-1905.

"All the facts stated by me were drawn from history, which we have been learning at the school since childhood . . . That Islam was spread by force is a historical fact. But along with it, I also pointed out that the potent cause of the spread of Islam was its simplicity and its special virtue of regarding all as equals. That the majority of converts to Islam were Hindus from lower classes is also a fact that can be proved; and I, for one, do not consider that to be any derogatory. To me personally there is no distinction between a Brahmin and a Bhangi. And I consider it a merit of Islam that those who were dissatisfied with the social distinctions in Hinduism were able to better their condition by embracing Islam. Nor did I suggest that all the converts to Islam came only from lower classes of Hindu society. And I have not the least idea that by lower classes are meant only the untouchable Dheds. While I admit that men from the higher classes such as Brahmins and Kshatriyas also became Muslims, it is universally known that the bulk of converts was not drawn from among them. However, the point I want to emphasize is that no stigma attaches to Islam if the Hindus of lower castes became Muslims. On the contrary, it shows its excellence, of which the Muslims should be proud." (4:430)

\* \* \*

An article under the heading — Hindu-Muslim Tension:. Its Causes and Cure, was published in *Young India*, dt. 29.5.1924.



"I'm told that both Arya Samajists and Mussalmans virtually kidnap women and try to convert them. I have before me volumes of Aga Khani literature which I have not yet had the time to study carefully, but I am assured that it is a distortion of Hinduism. I have seen enough of it to know that it describes H.H. the Aga Khan as a Hindu avatar. It would be interesting to learn what the Aga Khan himself thinks of all this literature. I have many Khoja friends. I commend the literature to their attention. A gentleman told me that some agents of Aga-Khani movement lend money to poor illiterate Hindus and then tell them that the debt would be wiped out if the debtor would accept Islam. I would regard this conversion by unlawful inducements. But the worst form is that preached by gentleman of Delhi. I have read his pamphlet from cover to cover. It gives detailed instructions to preachers how to carry on propaganda. It starts with lofty proposition that Islam is merely preaching of unity of God. This grand truth is to be preached, according to the writer, by every Mussalman irrespective of character. A secret department spies is advocated whose one business is to be to pry into the privacy of non- Muslim households....If this kind of propaganda becomes popular, no Hindu household would be safe from the secret attention of disguised misinterpreters (I cannot call them missionaries) of the great message of the Prophet of Islam. ...My Mussalman friends tell me that no respectable Mussalman approves of the methods advocated." (24:149)

\* \* \*

Gandhiji wrote in *Navjivan*, 26-10-1924.

"It would, however, be an outrage to take advantage of someone's poverty and tell him 'Come my friend. I shall give you so many rupees, pay off your debts; because your co-religionists are pestering you, you come over to us.' He does this not because of his love for Islam, but because of the sum that is offered to him." (25:240)

\* \* \*

Talking at Rawalpindi on 5-2-1925, to the Hindus who had left Kohat due to the Hindu-Muslim riots Gandhiji stated:

"I learnt something very distressing yesterday, namely, that many among you embraced Islam to save your lives and then you came here. In my view such people have not truly

embraced Islam but have done so under fear and in order to save their lives. ...What I mean to say is that we should be prepared to lose our lives but not to change our faith."

"I could not swallow that argument yesterday about the possibility of a Hindu woman being converted to Islam. I wish to have this point clarified by Muslim friends . . . does Islam teach them to abduct my wife? My wife might not even know what Islam and Christianity are about. She was born in a Hindu family, she chants the name of Rama, and reads Ramayana and Bhgavat. She cannot use her intellect in embracing Islam. She continues to stick to her dharma and that too with complete faith. What should one make of it if someone comes and tells one that such a woman has embraced Islam? She has not embraced Islam in full knowledge and therefore she is not prepared to regard herself as a Muslim.

"In my view religion does not mean one becomes a Hindu simply because one reads Gayatri. According to me, he alone is a Hindu in whose heart the Gayatri is inscribed. A man does not become a Sikh by merely reciting the Granth Sahib. He alone is a true Sikh who cherishes the Granth Sahib in his heart with genuine pride. One does not become Arya Samajist because one chants Vedic mantras well. But one who shapes his life in accordance with those mantras is a true Arya Samajist. I will ask Muslims also whether I become a Muslim because I read the Kalama." (26:81,82,84)

\* \* \*

Gandhiji expressed his views in *Harijan* 1-12-1946.

"So far as I know, Islam does not permit forcible conversion and atrocities on women. What can a mere repetition of Kalama do to one whose heart does not accept Islam." (86:124)

## Conversion of Harijans

Gandhiji was speaking at the Antyaja Conference, Sojitra, on 26-1-1925. He told the Harijans to preserve their human dignity and should remain steadfast to the religion of their birth.

"Lots of people will come and tell you that your Hindu religion is all wrong, as you are not allowed to go to school or enter the temple. To such people you should say, 'We shall settle accounts with our Hindu brothers; you may not come between us anymore than you may intervene in a quarrel between father and son or among relatives'; and you should remain steadfast to your religion. I am an outcaste. There are many like myself. Shall I give up my religion because of that? Many Christian friends urge me to turn Christian. I tell them there is nothing wrong with my religion. Why should I give up? Let me be outcaste. If I am pure and clean, why should I be unhappy? I have joined Antyajans and if for that reason Hindus persecute me, do I cease to be a Hindii? Hinduism is intended for me and my soul. Tell this to both the Christians and the Muslims and be firm in your own religion. Antyajans are not pawns in a game of chess so that anyone can play with them." (26: 7-8)

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In his address to a meeting at Bhadran on 11-2-1925 Gandhiji said :

"I want you to destroy this evil of untouchability by arousing in you compassion and love, or, if you would have it so, a sense of brotherhood. If we end it, we shall win glory for Hinduism and will have saved it. I do not mean that Antyajans will then stop embracing Islam or Christianity. No religion depends for its survival on the numerical strength of its followers. There has been more fallacious idea than that the strength of a religion depends on the number of those who profess it. Even but one person remains a true Hindu, Hinduism will not perish if, on the other hand, the crores of Hindus in the country adopt the ways of hypocrisy and evil, Hinduism will not live long but it is certain to be destroyed." (26:132)

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At the Depressed Classes Conference, in Nasik in October 1935, on Dr. Ambedkar's advice, members passed a resolution that Harijans should sever ties with Hinduism

and should embrace any other religion which gives them equal status and treatment. Referring to that resolution, Gandhiji said :

"Ever since Dr. Ambedkar has thrown his bomb-shell in the midst of Hindu society in the shape of threatened conversion, frantic efforts have been made to wean him from the proposed step. ... Without a doubt these threats are a portent and a matter of grave concern to those who care at all for the religion of their forefathers. But it will not be served by coming to terms with those who have lost faith in Hinduism or for that matter in any religion. Religion is not a matter of barter. It is a matter for every individual to decide for himself to which faith he will belong. It does not lend itself to purchase in any shape or form. Or if such an expression can be used in connection with things of spirit, religion can only be purchased with one's own blood.

"The greatest hardship felt by thousands of Harijans is want of pure water for drinking and domestic use, denial of access to public schools and other institutions, constant pinpricks in villages and, last but not the least, denial of access to temples of worship. These disabilities are stern realities in the lives of the vast mass of Harijans. If they as a mass give up Hinduism, they will do so because of these common disabilities which brand them as lepers of Hindu society. Hinduism is passing through a fiery ordeal. It will perish not through individual conversions, not even through mass conversions, but it will perish because of the sinful denial by so-called savarna Hindus of elementary justice to Harijans. Every threat of conversion is, therefore, a warning to the savarnas that if they do not wake up in time, it may be too late!" (62:280-81)

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It was reported that during Sunday service in St. Mary's Cathedral at Kumbakonam, caste Catholics withdrew from the service when Catholic Harijans entered the Cathedral and seated themselves among caste Catholics, instead of occupying the position intended for them. Commenting on the incident, Gandhiji wrote in *Harijan* on 26.12.1936.

"Whether the Harijan is nominally a Christian, Muslim or Hindu and now Sikh, he is still a Harijan. He can't change his spots inherited from Hinduism so called. He may change his garb and call himself a Catholic Harijan or a Muslim Harijan or neo- Muslim or neo-Sikh, his untouchability will haunt him during lifetime. It is one and the same thing

whether you call numeral after five, half a dozen or six. Not until untouchability is removed from Hinduism will the taint be removed from Harijans, no matter what label they adopt. Therefore, Harijans have it in their hands either to save Hinduism or to destroy it, as caste Hindus have it in theirs. It is no doubt easier for Harijans to change labels than for caste Hindus to change their hearts, but it maybe easier for Harijans to rise superior to every earthly temptation and be consciously steadfast in the faith in which they have been denied by their fellows the most elementary human rights. It is no doubt difficult for anybody to resist the temptations to which Harijans are exposed today. It will therefore be a marvel if they prove true and cling to their ancestral faith with determination to purify it by conscious supreme effort. They can do this as they could not before for they know that there is a growing body of caste Hindus who are making common cause with them and making reparation for their own past wrongs and the continuing wrongs of fellow caste Hindus. Thus viewed, the Kumbakonam incident is as much a shame of the Roman Church as it is of Hinduism." (64:174)

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Gandhiji wrote a letter to the Christians of Kerala, which was published in Harijan, 30-1-1937.

"Why should a Christian want to convert a Hindu to Christianity and vice versa? Why should he not be satisfied if Hindu is a good or godly man? If the morals of a man are 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 and insistence on a particular form or repetition of a credo may be a potent cause of violent quarrels leading to bloodshed and ending in utter disbelief in religion, i.e., God Himself." (64:327)



## **Shuddhi**

Gandhiji expressed his views on shuddhi movement in *Young India* 29-5-1924.

"In my opinion, there is no such thing as proselytism in Hinduism as it is understood in Christianity or to lesser extent in Islam. The Arya Samaj has, I think copied the Christians in planning its propaganda. The modern method does not appeal to me. It has done more harm than good. Though regarded as a matter of the heart purely and one between the Maker and oneself, it has degenerated into an appeal to the selfish instinct." (24:148)

Gandhiji had visited Rawalpindi to meet Hindu refugees and Muslims of Kohat, where forceful conversion of Hindus to Islam was carried out during Kohat riots. He spoke on 19-3-1925 at Tirupur:

"I would personally like the stopping of all conversions and shuddhis. One's faith is a personal matter with oneself. It is open to any person of mature age to change his or her faith when and as often as he or she wishes . But if I could do so, I would stop all propaganda except through one's conduct. Conversion is a matter of heart and reason. An appeal to heart and reason can only be made through conduct." (26:342)

\* \* \*

Gandhiji wrote in *Young India* on 6-1-1927 :

"Shuddhi is entitled to the same toleration that is claimed for tabligh so long as either remains within moral and legitimate bounds. But this is not the occasion for entering into an examination of that highly controversial question. Both the tabligh and the shuddhi which is a reply to the former, have to undergo a radical change. Progress of liberal study of religions of the world is bound to revolutionize the existing clumsy method of proselytizing which looks to the form rather than the substance. It is the transference of allegiance from one fold to another and the mutual decrying of rival faiths, which gives rise to mutual hatred." (32:514)

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In his homage to Swami Shraddhanandji. (*Young India*, 6.1.1927.) Gandhiji expressed his views :

"For my part I still remain unconvinced about the necessity of the shuddhi movement, taking shuddhi in the sense it is generally understood. Shuddhi of sinners is a perpetual inward performance. Shuddhi of those who can be identified neither as Hindus nor as Mussalmans or who have been recently declared converts but who do not know even the meaning of conversion and who want to be known definitely as Hindus is not conversion but 'prayaschitta' or penance. The third aspect of shuddhi is conversion properly so called. And I question its use in this age of growing toleration and enlightenment. I am against conversion whether it is known as shuddhi by Hindus, tabligh by Mussalmans or proselytizing by Christians. Conversion is a heart-process known only to and by God. It must be left to itself. But this is no place for airing my views on conversion. Those who believe in it have perfect right to follow their own course without let or hindrance, so long as it is kept within proper limits, i.e., so long as there is no force or fraud or material inducement and so long as the parties are free agents and of mature age and understanding. Those, therefore, who believe in shuddhi have a perfect right to subscribe to the appeal." (32:515)

\* \* \*

Gandhiji said at a public meeting at Ramna, on 15-1-1927:

"... I have made no secrets of the fact that I did not approve of all aspects of shuddhi work. After much prayerful study of the Hindu Shastras I have come to the conclusion that there is no room in them for conversion such as they have in Islam and Christianity. I am also certain on a prayerful reading of the Koran that there is no warrant for the tabligh that is being promoted today. It is possible that I may be mistaken. Let God correct me in that case. I for myself would love to protect my religion with 'tapascharya'- the way of prayerful suffering which is the royal road to success in any noble object. ... I must be free to read Gita or Koran of my own accord . Why should a Hindu compel me to read the one or Mussalman to read the other? Why should I need a Christian to compel me to read the Bible? No one may stand between a man and his religion or God. He who has no inkling of religion, whose heart is arid and purified—how dare he purify (by proselytizing) others? But that is my opinion." (32:566)

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A correspondent had suggested that, if Gandhiji agreed to Harijans going through shuddhi before seeking temple entry, the Sringapatam Temple might be thrown open to them. Gandhiji's response was: (around 19-3-1933.)

"Requiring shuddhi for Harijans is to grant that they are not Hindus. But then our whole movement is based on the principle that the Harijan community is an important section of Hindu society. Therefore, whatever is to be done in this matter has to be done only after abolishing untouchability. Moreover, who will perform the shuddhi and for whom? One should have shuddhi of the heart. Only a pure, i.e., a perfect man can perform for another the sacrament of shuddhi according to certain rites is unthinkable to me. In any case, this kind of shuddhi cannot be a condition for removal of untouchability.

"But, I cannot prevent you or anyone else from implementing your proposals. It is clear that it will not have my support. But I will not oppose you if you can admit Harijans of your area to the Sringapatam Temple after performing the ritual of shuddhi as suggested by you." (54:126)

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Gandhiji's reply to the question, 'If the shudras are Hindus, then why should they undergo shuddhi?' *Harijan*, 6-4-1934.)

"It is news to me that Harijans are required by the Arya Samajists to perform the ritual of shuddhi before being admitted to the Arya Samaj. But I have seen the shuddhi ceremony performed in order to strengthen the Harijans in the due fulfilment of the vow that they take as to abstention from beef, carrion- eating, drinking intoxicating liquors, etc. The correspondent quite rightly says that, if an untouchable is really a Hindu, no shuddhi is required of him. If any is required, it is required of the caste Hindu who has committed the sin of believing in untouchability." (57:355)

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When a correspondent asked Gandhiji about the converted Hindus, now wanting to come back to their original faith, Gandhiji replied. *Harijan*, 25-9-1937)

"In my opinion they are not examples of real heart conversion. If a person, through fear, compulsion, starvation or for material gain or consideration, goes over to another faith, it is a misnomer to call it conversion. Most cases of mass conversion, of which we have heard so much during the past two years, have been to my mind false coin. Real conversion springs from the heart and at the prompting of God, not of a stranger. The voice of God can always be distinguished from the voice of man. The hypothetical cases coined by my correspondent are, so far as I see, not cases of conversion. I would, therefore, unhesitatingly re-admit to the Hindu fold all such repentants without ado, certainly without any shuddhi. Shuddhi is not applicable to such cases. And, as I believe in the equality of all great religions of the earth, I regard no man as polluted because he has forsaken the branch on which he was sitting and gone over to another of the same tree. If he comes back to the original branch, he deserves to be welcomed and not told that he had committed a sin by reason of his having forsaken the family to which he belonged. Insofar as he may be deemed to have erred, he has sufficiently purged himself of it when he repents of the error and retraces his step." (66:163-64)

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