

Very few Muslims know that Gandhi offered the directorship of the new institution to the renowned poet and philosopher Allama Mohammed Iqbal. Most of Gandhi's close Muslim friends loved Iqbal's poetry; the poet's work was an important source of increased Muslim pride and self-esteem. Gandhi himself was well aware from his conversations with his friends like Muhammad Ali Jauhar that Muslims generally considered Iqbal's poetry a magnificent source of inspiration.

In his brief but eloquent letter written to Iqbal in 1920 Gandhi wrote: "The Muslim National University calls you. If you could but take charge of it, I am sure that it will prosper under your cultured leadership. Hakimji Ajmal Khan and Dr. Ansari and of course Ali Brothers desire it."

Iqbal, however, very politely declined the offer for personal reasons. He replied: "I regret very much my inability to respond to the call of those for whom I have the highest respect, for reasons which need not and perhaps cannot be mentioned at present. While I am a strong supporter of National Education, I do not think I possess all the necessary qualifications for the guidance of a University that requires a man who would steer the infant institution through all the struggles and rivalries to arise in the earlier stages of its life. And I am, by nature, a peace-time worker."

Zakir Hussain, M. Mujeeb and S. Abid Hussain, the three young Muslims who returned from their graduate studies in Europe to take over the Jamia Millia Islamia, remained with the institution until the independence of the country. They devoted themselves specifically to education.

Gandhi called upon educators to design a new system of basic education for Indian Schools. He put Zakir Hussain in charge of this project. Dr. Hussain stayed with the project for ten years. Subsequently, he became the governor of Bihar, vice president of India, and finally president of India.

Gandhi's broad outlook and respect for other religions urged him not only to ask that Jamia Millia Islamia retain the word Islamia in its name, but he also sent one of his sons to be educated there. Gandhi's keen interest in Islam took a political turn when he launched India's freedom struggle after his permanent return to the country. He was able to enlist the full support of Muslims, intellectuals and masses alike, when he himself lent full support to the Khilafat movement and tacked on the 1921 Civil Disobedience movement to it.

The message of the Khilafat movement, ably led by Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali, and supported

whole-heartedly by Mahatma Gandhi and Deshbandhu Das, reached every nook and corner of India.

It seemed that India at last realised her new dreams, her new pride & dignity, her unity & strength. The folk song of the day truly echoed the feelings of the nation by the words: "Desh ka Bandhu Chittaranjan, Desh ka Shova Gandhiji, Khoda ka piyara Muhammad Ali" (Chittaranjan is the friend of the country, Gandhiji is its ornament, Muhammad Ali is the darling of God).

The Muslim sentiment had been antagonised by the dethronement of the caliph at Istanbul by the victorious Western powers as Turkey had fought with the Germans in World War I. The caliph was needed to protect the freedom of Makkah. Pilgrimage to Makkah is one of the basic religious duties of all Muslims, and Makkah has been free from foreign domination since the days of the Prophet (p). The independence of Makkah was therefore a potent symbol for all Muslims.

Gandhi argued that one must help a brother whenever he says he has a religious need. Hence the Hindu should help his Muslim brother defend the sacred shrines of the Islamic faith. According to him, Hindus needed "heart-unity" with their Muslim brothers; they could win this unity if they helped the Muslims protect the independence of the Turkish caliph.

Indian Muslims joined the civil disobedience in large numbers as Gandhi had linked it to the demand to restore the Caliph to his pristine spiritual glory. Not only Muhammad Ali & Shaukat Ali, but many other renowned Muslim leaders and exegetists like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad also became actual participants in the joint Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements, **the first nation-wide Hindu-Muslim movement since the First War of Independence in 1857.**

Mention must be made in this connection of another Muslim stalwart who influenced Gandhi's life and thought (not always in a positive way), especially in the period from 1937 to 1947. He was Mohammed Ali Jinnah, creator of Pakistan. Hailed as the Father of the Nation in Pakistan, he is revered by all Pakistanis as Quaid-e-Azam, the "Great Leader".

Gandhi and Jinnah took diametrically opposite positions on most occasions and arrived at very different solutions for the Muslims in undivided India. But the situation was totally different and **quite friendly** at the initial stage. The two leaders were not at daggers drawn and saw eye to eye on many an issue: "In 1915, the young Jinnah, having established a successful legal practice in Bombay, became a leading advocate of co-operation between Hindus and Muslims in the task of working together to promote self-government for India after the

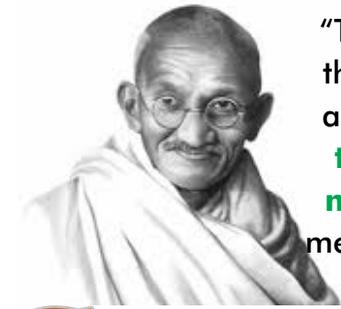
war. He managed to arrange for the Muslim League and the Congress party to hold a joint meeting." No wonder, Gopal Krishna Gokhale unhesitatingly declared: "Jinnah is an ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity." Jinnah was also hailed by many as the "Muslim Gokhale."

Jinnah was interested primarily in the development of modern constitutional means of government ... He never felt any sympathy with Gandhi's approach, or with the tactics of the Muslim leaders of the Khilafat movement. Although he certainly shared the goal of self-government for India, he disliked the populism and mass agitation of the Non-Cooperation movement of 1919-22. The difference between him and Gandhi was **a matter of disagreement over means; it was not in the first instance a difference based on Hindu-Muslim issues.**

Through intimate acquaintance & discussions with learned exponents of Islam, his profound respect for Prophet Muhammad (p) became deeper & stronger. Gandhi was so eager to know about the Prophet (p) that he became sad when he did not have more to read about him. In his own words: "I wanted to know the best of the life of one who holds today undisputed sway over the hearts of millions of mankind ... I became more than ever convinced that it was not the sword that won a place in those days in the scheme of life. It was the rigid simplicity, the utter self-effacement of the Prophet, the scrupulous regard for pledges, his intense devotion to his friends and followers, his intrepidity, his selflessness, his absolute trust in God and his own mission – these and not the sword carried everything before them and surmounted every obstacle. When I closed the second volume of the Prophet's biography I was sorry there was not more for me to read of that great life."

Gandhi's eulogy further testified: "Muhammad was a great Prophet. He was brave and feared no man but God alone. He was never found to say one thing and do another. He acted as he felt. The Prophet was a Faqir, he could have commanded wealth if he had so desired. I shed tears when I read of the privations, he, his family and companions suffered voluntarily. How can a truth-seeker like me help respect one whose mind was constantly fixed on God, who ever walked in God's fear and who had boundless compassion for mankind."

The sayings of Prophet Muhammad (p) impressed Gandhi to such a great extent that he hailed those as "the treasures of mankind." In his introduction to The Sayings of Muhammad (SM) by Allama Sir Abdullah Al-Mamun Al-Suhrawardy, he unhesitatingly declared: "I have read Sir Abdullah's collection of the sayings of the Prophet with much interest and profit. They are among the **treasures of mankind**, not merely Muslims."



"The sayings of the Prophet (p) are among the **treasures of mankind**, not merely Muslims."

Gandhi & Islam

No part of Gandhi's life has escaped scholarly attention in a corpus of a little over a century. Literature on him is abundant. Two lines stand out as the profoundest words ever spoken on the Mahatma. First, Einstein, in 1944, said generations might **not** believe that a great man like Gandhi ever "walked upon this earth". Second, Orwell's 1949 piece on Gandhi opens with a rational probe: "Saints should always be judged guilty until proven innocent..." In the end, Orwell gracefully exonerates Gandhi: "...**how clean a smell he has managed to leave behind.**" Although a very devout Hindu with unshakable conviction in Hinduism, Gandhi was a religious genius as well – with genuine tolerance and respect for all mankind's faiths. Gandhi declared emphatically: "There will be **no** lasting peace on earth unless we learn **not merely to tolerate but to respect** the other faiths as our own". Gandhi's commitment to religion did **not** mean commitment to a single religion. In his Ramarajya (which means principled rule, equal rights, living by the highest moral value), every faith had full freedom & complete equality. His prayer meetings were **not** just about the Gita; there was space for the Quran, the Bible. "Rama, Allah & God are to me convertible terms."

Articles such as this tend to create polarizations. But Why? Why can't we listen & share ideas without confrontations. None of us can know the hearts of people or the true nature of events that took place in the past. It is a truism that many conflicts are a consequence of the gap between the intention of what was actually said & how it was received by the listener. To argue with a person who has renounced the use of reason is like administering medicine to the dead.

The impression of Islam and the Muslims on Gandhi started at a very early age. "He was born," says Sheila McDonough, a renowned authority on comparative religion, "into that part of India (the coast of Malabar) where the geography situates Hindus to reach out and experience contact with others. To be a child beside the sea is already to know that a mysterious beyond beckons. The Muslims had been in Gujarat for centuries as traders. In his childhood, Gandhi knew them as representatives of those who came and went to other places beyond the seas. Muslims seem from the beginning to have represented challenge & adventure to him. Muslims were received as guests in the Gandhi home: the political traditions of diplomatic courtesy seem to have been imbibed by the child as a self-evident way for civilised life to be conducted ... In his father's world, the Muslims had long been part of the community. The British were the perceived danger to the well-being of the social and political order."

Gandhi not only spent his childhood among Muslim neighbours who were frequent visitors to his house, six generations of Gandhis had also served as ministers of the ruler of one of the principalities of Kathiawara where Gandhi was born. The family had therefore great experience in dealing with Muslims as part of local political and social life. Even at school he learnt to cultivate friendship with students who professed other religions and developed a healthy respect for their beliefs.

Gandhi was well aware that his fundamental values with respect to Hindu-Muslim mutual respect & cooperation were rooted in his childhood experiences.

While addressing a meeting of the Congress Working Committee in 1942, he reiterated the importance of these fundamental values as a basis for designing a free, renascent, independent India: "Hindu-Muslim unity is not a new thing. Millions of Hindus & Muslims have sought after it. I consciously strove for its achievements from my boyhood. I believed even at that tender age that the Hindus in India, if they wished to live in peace & amity with other communities, should assiduously cultivate the virtue of neighbourliness."

In the world of the men of his family, friendships with Muslims, Jains, and Parsis were indeed part of the natural order of life. Once when Gandhi's paternal grandfather had been involved in a conflict with a local ruler, Muslim soldiers had guarded his house during an attack, and one of them was killed. A memorial to that Muslim soldier still exists in the Vaishnava temple adjoining the family house.

When Gandhi returned to his native land after qualifying as a barrister in England, he went to South Africa as a lawyer for a Muslim firm that had family connections with some of his neighbours at home. Through this significant phase Gandhi's sense of common brotherhood with Muslims was reaffirmed and strengthened. Many of the Muslim businessmen he worked with in South Africa had roots in his hometown of Probandor, as well as in Bombay (now Mumbai). He sometimes lived in their homes there. The feeling of participation with Muslims in common life with shared goals became much stronger.

In his own words: "When I was in South Africa, I came in close touch with Muslim brethren there ... I was able to learn their habits, thoughts & aspirations ... I had lived in the midst of Muslim friends for 20 years. They had treated me as a member of their family & told their wives & sisters that they need not observe purdah with me."

In his political activity in South Africa, both Hindus & Muslims living there were his followers. The South African experience invigorated his belief that there should be mutual understanding & cooperation among Indians irrespective of religion. "The South African experiences," writes Sheila McDonough, "seems to have developed Gandhi's basic religious consciousness by eliciting from him a profound 'no' to the absolute category of eternal inferior which the South African were attempting to impose upon the Indians. Since the category was imposed on Hindus & Muslims equally, the 'no' came with power from both. The protesters formed a **brotherhood of resistance to degradation.**

"Gandhi knew that Prophet Muhammad had said 'no' to many elements of his own situation. He understood

from his Muslim friends that sometimes courage requires casting the whole self into struggle ... Gandhi responded with the movement of his own soul when he heard an old Muslim say that, with God as his witness, he would never submit to that law.

"This attitude is characteristic of a certain Muslim understanding of jihad, struggle, namely that sometimes witnessing to God requires that the whole self must make conscious choices and decide to act. Gandhi believed that the essential struggle of Muhammad's lifetime, the struggle to create a new form of civilisation, could be equated with the mythical struggle of Rama against Ravana as portrayed in the epic, the Ramayana. The Quran and the Ramayana, as he understood them, conveyed images and symbols that could illuminate the spiritual meaning of everyday life."

The years spent by Gandhi in Great Britain to qualify for the Bar also played a significant role in educating him on Islam. During the early twentieth century when he was in England, the climate against eastern religions, especially Islam, was slowly changing.

On May 8, 1840, Thomas Carlyle delivered a public lecture in Edinburgh on Muhammad (p) and Islam. It was the second of a series "On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History," & had the particular title: "The Hero as Prophet."

Carlyle had no special qualifications as Arabist or Islamist for lecturing on this subject, and yet the lecture has an important place in the development of Islamic studies in Europe, since here for the first time in a prominent way was it asserted that Muhammad (p) was sincere & the religion of Islam basically true. This speech on the Prophet Muhammad (p) was a massive attack on the stereotyped Christian and Jewish attitude to Islam.

Carlyle carefully listed the virtues he had found that Muslims attributed to Muhammad (p). The Prophet was regarded as: "A man of truth and fidelity, solid, brotherly, genuine ... able to laugh ... spontaneous, passionate, just ... a great, silent soul ... one who could not but be in earnest ... one who communed with his own heart ... open to the 'small, still voice'."

In his historic & brave endeavour, Carlyle was only following the footsteps of the German philosopher-poet Goethe's positive evaluation of the religious simplicity of basic Islamic teaching, namely that human beings should surrender to God, and only to God. "If this be Islam," said Goethe, "do we not all live in Islam? Yes, all of us that have any moral life, we all live so."

It was through Carlyle's sensational essay that Gandhi got the perception that Islam affirmed self-denial. Carlyle said: "Islam means in its way Denial of Self,

Annihilation of Self ... This is yet the highest Wisdom that heaven has revealed to our Earth." The fact that Gandhi read Carlyle's essay at a formative period in his own development makes it very probable that Carlyle's perspective strengthened the young Hindu's conviction that Muhammad (p) represented an example of a significant religious leader whose battle against the forces of darkness in his own time **could & should be a model of honest people everywhere.**

Gandhi himself informs us: "A friend recommended Carlyle's Hero and Hero Worship. I read the chapter on the Hero as a prophet, learnt of the Prophet's greatness and bravery and austere living ... These books raised Muhammad in my estimation."

Later, Gandhi read Shibli Numani's biographies of Muslim heroes, books of Hadith, and Syed Amir Ali's books on Islamic history which strengthened his respect for the Prophet Muhammad (p) all the more. We find references to the works of Carlyle, Shibli and Amir Ali scattered throughout Gandhi's writings in every period of his life.

All this whetted Gandhi's interest in Islam and he made a deeper study of the tenets laid out in the Quran to understand better. In his later years, he learnt to carry on "sympathetic debates" with eminent Islamic scholars like Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar and later Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Zakir Hussain, M. Mujeeb and S. Abid Hussain.

Gandhi firmly believed that understanding the religion of another is ultimately appreciation of the other as a person, with direction and hope. He tried to reveal himself in this sense to his Muslim friends, so that they could perceive the inner meaning of his tradition. He was committed to inter-faith dialogue; he believed one should try to comprehend the personal dimension of faith. "Heart-unity" meant for him that friends should be open to the deepest values of each other's traditions.

In 1920, Zakir Hussain, M. Mujeeb, S. Abid Hussain, and a few other Muslims of Gandhi's way of thinking felt that they had to disassociate themselves from the Aligarh Muslim University which was considered pro-British. In this instance they decided to set up an altogether different type of institution of learning for Muslims, the Jamia Millia Islamia.

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