

Treatment of Gandhi as a Religious and Social Reformer in J.B. Kripalani's *Gandhi: His Life and Thought***Dr. Pramod Kumar,**

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Haridwar**Abstract**

This research paper helps in understanding and appreciating a literary biography of Gandhi. Gandhi's biographer, J.B. Kripalani was closely associated with Gandhi from the days of Champaran movement. His proximity to Gandhi gives a true insight into the views and efforts of one of the greatest men that world saw in the twentieth century. Biographical writings of Gandhi have always dealt with key issues of human lives. Exploring the ways of religious and social reform J.B. Kripalani's biography of Gandhi remains relevant in current stage of our lives whosoever we are in the world.

As a religious reformer his Gandhi believed in the basic teachings of all religions of the world. He was against proselytizing actions and superstition in view of religion. As a social reformer his Gandhi tried to eradicate social evils like untouchability, drink habit, communalism, gender disparity, dowry system, purda system, child marriage and educational backwardness from society. His Gandhi considered that untouchability was an inhuman and evil practice. It had greatly harmed the national character. Drink habit was more a disease than a vice. It was socially undesirable. He promoted remarriage of widows and upliftment of women. His Gandhi's educational reform gave the first place to the formation of character through education in fulfilling social realities and requirements.

Keywords: Biography, Integral Approach, Religion, Untouchability, Communal Unity, Prohibition, Equality, Women.

Gandhi's biographer, Professor J.B. Kripalani was closely associated with Gandhi from the days of Champaran movement. His proximity to Gandhi gives a true insight into the views and efforts of one of the greatest men that world saw in the twentieth century. He was an exponent of the Gandhian philosophy and ideology. He is best known for holding the chair of the President of the Indian National Congress during the turbulent phase of 1947. He penned his autobiography *My Times*.

A biography is a full and truthful account of the facts, events, actions, achievements and failures of a hero's life written by somebody else. The oxford dictionary defines

biography as “History of the lives of individual men as a branch of literature” (Prasad 231). The aim of biography is a successful presentation of personality in the best examples of the period to which the protagonist belonged and to understand the particular attitude of the biographer to his protagonist whom he presents differently. Secondly, its aim is to inspire the world masses for a truer, a purer and a better life. J.B. Kripalani presents Gandhi as a religious and social reformer in relation to social evils. Therefore J.B. Kripalani’s *Gandhi: His life and Thought* seems to be a social biography.

J.B. Kripalani presents Gandhi as a reformer. He has a different way of narration in order to focus on Gandhian integral approach. J.B. Kripalani’s Gandhi believed in the unity of human life, which is synthetic whole. It can not be divided into separate-religious, moral, political, economic, social, individual and collective. They are inextricably intertwined. Gandhi was a reformer whose teachings and schemes of reform also reflect the same integration and coordination. J.B. Kripalani states, “Like many of the old reformers and prophets he was content to act in a given situation and solve life’s problems, as they arose or presented themselves to him, in the light of his basic moral principles.” (312) In fact, Gandhi wrote a few books. But even these are concerned with particular problems. He did not acquire his ideas and knowledge merely from books. Much of his knowledge was the result of direct contact with life. Gandhi is a reformer, in this connection, J.B. Kripalani states, “All the relevant arguments lie scattered in his speeches and writings. But he had not the genius of a scholar buried in books. Moreover, as a practical reformer he had not the time to work in libraries and museums. He had to think even as he was acting and guiding a revolutionary movement” (320) Indeed, Gandhi’s view of human life is synthetic. His concrete schemes of social reform are therefore connected with one another. He emphasized on unity that is achieved through some definite guiding and regulating ideas and principles. J.B. Kripalani states, “A reformer, especially of Gandhi’s type, has to concern himself pre-eminently with value of significance. Mere study is not his object. He has to reweigh and to revalue ideas, ideas and systems. He has to remould, refashion, recreate the individual and society”. (323) J.B. Kripalani gives the reference of the sant mat movement of Nanak, Chitanya, Narasimha Mehta, Kabir, Dadu and others represent synthetic thoughts. They partly attempt to the coordinate Hindu and muslim thought. Synthetic thought implies the unity of opposites. J.B. Kripalani observes, “Synthesis implies the union of opposites that would appear contradictory in formal logic”. (323) Gandhi is a reformer who concerned with manifold complex of life. J.B. Kripalani refers, “Gandhiji seeks to synthesize the material and the spiritual, the individual and the collective life. He has, therefore, to deal with both the sect.” (324) J.B. Kripalani presents Gandhi as a man of the masses who used a simple language of the common man. He learnt it through experience. J.B. Kripalani, the biographer adds:

He was a man of the masses and spoke to them in their own simple language, which they understood. He addressed them not about what he had read and studied in books but what he had seen, sensed, experienced and thought about. He described his own observations and his reactions to them. This is the method that has characterized great religious reformers and prophets (314)

Indeed, It appears that what his Gandhi did was to elaborate and apply ‘Truth’ on a much wider scale and for more fundamental reform of national life, that is why Gandhi talked of truth. Truth is not only religious and legal but social term. Gandhi is a man of truth, emphasizing on Gandhi’s truth, J.B. Kripalani states,

“The combatants forget that truth, however old, never becomes stale. It is always revolutionary, restated in fresh terms. If truth ever became stale or out of date, all ancient thought and wisdom would be valueless and would have only an antiquarian value”. (329)

J.B. Kripalani’s Gandhi is a reformer who entered politics in terms of social reform. J.B. Kripalani refers, “He wanted to carry on his experiments in the constructive programme of his conception. This was more social and educative than political. Politics at the time was not his preoccupation. Rather he conceived of politics in terms of social reform.” (335)

In ‘Gandhi and Religion’, J.B. Kripalani presents Gandhi as a religious reformer. He used the term ‘religion’ in its broadest sense which meant ‘self realization’ or knowledge of self which brings us face to face with our maker. As a religious reformer his Gandhi made his conception clear about God. Gandhi’s God was not the husband of Sita or son of Dasaratha. But his God lives in the hearts of living beings. In this regard, J.B. Kripalani narrates, “He uttered Ramanama though he made it clear that Ram of his conception was not the husband of Sita or the son of Dasaratha but he who abides in the hearts of men, the Antaryami.” (348) In fact, Gandhi had great faith in prayer. He did not believe in image worship for himself but he had no objection to it for those who needed such symbols. Gandhi believed in God. His God is truth. Gandhi views, “Truth is God. To me God is truth and love, God is ethics and morality, God is fearlessness. God is the source of light and life and yet he is above and beyond all these”. (J.B. Kripalani 348) Gandhi’s Hinduism was based on the teachings of the Upanishads and the Gita. J.B. Kripalani, the biographer writes:

Like other great reformers in Hinduism he wrote a commentary on the Gita. He moulded his life in accordance with the basic teachings of this scripture. He was a karmyogi, as described in the Gita. In accordance with its teachings he held that good work must be performed in the spirit of sacrifice to the God of humanity, especially in serving deridranarayan, God of the poor and the downtrodden (344)

In fact, Gandhi’s God lives in everyone and he wants to see God through the service of humanity. For Gandhi, serving mankind is as good as the worship.

J.B. Kripalani, The biographer describes that as a religious reformer Gandhi believed in the basic teachings of all religions of the world. He would live with muslim, Christian, and Pandit co-religionists in his Ashram, nevertheless he never believed in proselytizing actions. His Gandhi believed in this fact that people should be humble and have open mind in learning good things from other religions and condemn immoral and irrelevant things from their own concerned religions. As a religious reformer Gandhi worked tirelessly throughout his life making co-religionists ‘humanitarian’ in their own respective religions. In *India of My Dreams*, Gandhi himself writes:

A curriculum of religious instruction should include a study of the tenets of faiths other than one's own. For this purpose the students should be trained to cultivate the habit of understanding and appreciating the doctrines of various great religions of the world in a spirit of reverence and broad-minded tolerance. (Prabhu 95)

Indeed, to have blind faith leads to fanaticism. A fanatic person can not be religious in real sense of the term. His Gandhi's religious thoughts are immensely significant in a society where people belong to different faiths. It will also result in social cohesion

In 'Social Reform: Untouchability', J.B. Kripalani presents in detail Gandhi as a social reformer. He selects elaborately Gandhi's views on social reform: untouchability. Untouchability means impurity by the touch of certain persons on account of their birth in a particular community. It had greatly harmed the national character. It is inhuman and evil practice. It violates human dignity. It deadens the moral sense of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Untouchables lived apart on the outskirts of villages in unhygienic surroundings. J.B. Kripalani refers:

He poured out the anguish of his souls when he said : I do not want to be reborn but if I have to be reborn, I should be born as untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from miserable condition. I, therefore ,pray that if I should be born again, I should do so not as a Brahmin, Kshtriya, Vaishya or Shudra but as an Atishudra.(391)

Gandhi fought for the human rights of untouchables nonviolently and vehemently. He unceasingly worked for them. He aimed at establishing a classless egalitarian society in which all citizens would contribute their mite to social and national well being. Gandhi emphasized on temple entry on the basis of equality. J.B. Kripalani narrates ,“The equality that Gandhiji claimed for the untouchables in Hindu society included the right to enter Hindu temples. It did not matter to him if these temples were built or endowed by caste Hindus. This insistence of Gandhiji on temple entry was misunderstood by some intellectuals.” (391) Gandhi believed in the fundamental equality of all persons. J.B. Kripalani gives the reference of the condition of untouchables through the example of west. J.B. Kripalani refers:

In India, the Brahmin may be as poor as the untouchable but he will not be ill treated on that account. Untouchability in India as the race and the colour problems in the west, rests upon the idea of the superiority of one section, of people over another on account of their birth. The untouchable, in spite of his being treated cruelly by the caste Hindus, yet continues to profess the Hindu religion. He worships the same gods and goddesses. But he is denied access to the Hindu temples. (392)

J.B. Kripalani's Gandhi viewed that temple entry was a social and spiritual act that would constitute the freedom to the untouchables. J.B. Kripalani adds, “Though they were Hindus and believed in and worshipped Hindu gods and goddesses. They were not allowed to enter Hindu temples. Public institutions like schools, hotels, hostels etc. were closed to

them". (390) Gandhi is a social reformer who considered all are absolutely equal, equal because all are the creatures of that creator. He called untouchability a sin against God, it is a blot on Hinduism. He gave the name them 'Harijan'. Gandhi set up an organization, the Harijan Servak Sangh which was to work for the removal of all their disabilities. To set up an example, Gandhi brought a Harijan family into the Ashram. He blessed the marriages that celebrated between untouchables and caste Hindus. J.B. Kripalani observes, "He also blessed all the marriages that were celebrated between Harijans and caste Hindus". (393) J.B. Kripalani does not ignore the reference of Buddha, Guru Nanak and Kabir who launched campaign against untouchability. He gives the reference of Guru Nanak who accepted untouchables in Sikh religion in this regard, J.B. Kripalani aptly remarks, "Guru Nanak and his nine successors accepted the untouchables in the Sikh religion". (394)

In 'Gandhiji and the Muslims', J.B. Kripalani focuses on Gandhi's Hindu Muslims Unity elaborately. He describes Gandhi's true love for them without distinction of race, caste, creed and sex. The biographer selects Gandhi's views on cow protection. In November 1919, Gandhi was invited to a joint Conference of Hindus and Muslims at Delhi, where the subject of cow protection was discussed. In this connection, In *The Way to Communal Harmony*, Gandhi himself writes :

Cow-protection is the dearest possession of the Hindu heart. It is the one concrete belief common to all Hindus. No one who does not believe in Cow-protection can possibly be a Hindu. It is a noble belief--- Cow worship means to me worship of innocence. For me the cow is the personification of innocence. Cow-protection means the protection of the weak and the helpless – cow protection means brotherhood between man and beast (Rao 93)

In fact, both parties must act together as good neighbours, understanding and helping each other. J.B. Kripalani highlights that Muslims were largely organized under the Muslim league, under the leadership of Jinnah, who was against the independence movement. As a social reformer Gandhi stressed communal unity. He did not want only political unity. He wanted the unity of hearts. Friendship should be cultivated with people of different faiths. They should cooperate with each other and share each other's joy and sorrow. All conscious efforts should be made to achieve heart unity. They should have a common purpose and a common goal.

Since the biographies contain likely success and failure of a hero's life, J.B. Kripalani gives the record of Gandhi's failure in relation to genesis of partition. Gandhi did not want the partition of India in any shape, nevertheless India was divided due to Muslim league's insistence. J.B. Kripalani refers, "Muslim league would not accept any formula unless the Muslim demand for a separate sovereign state was granted." (398) Indeed, his assassination at the hands of a Hindu fanatic was due to the fact that Gandhi wanted the Muslims to live in peace and honour as citizens of India. He fought against communalism throughout his life and became a martyr for communal unity.

Gandhi's biographer, J.B. Kripalani selects Gandhi's views on women. The progress of women was one of his concerns as a part of social reform. He strove for the human rights of women. He condemned the exploitation of women. He criticized Hindu society and

Hindu culture for giving the subordinate position to wife. Woman is the companion of man endowed with equal mental capacities and she is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his own. She is the mother and maker of man. That is why Gandhi was against all inequalities. He made no distinction between men and women so far as strengthening the goal of gender equality is concerned. It is a human right that may be achieved when men and women enjoy the same rights and opportunities in all walks of life—political, economic and social. Women should be equally valued and honoured like men. J.B. Kripalani truly remarks, “Gandhiji was against all inequality in any walk of life, political, economic or social. He held that inequality ultimately led to exploitation” (399) J.B. Kripalani gives the reference of vedic times, when in ancient time during the vedic age women were given education in the same way as men. J.B. Kripalani narrates, “In vedic times men and women were equal in all walks of life, including the religious and the intellectuals”. (399) It was during the muslim period that women began to keep in purdah system. Gandhi was against the purdah system that ceased their advancement to society. J.B. Kripalani adds, “He was against the purdah system. It crippled not only the free movement of women but interfered with their advancement and their capacity for doing work useful to society. I have seen Gandhiji simply ignoring purdah” (401) Confining women within the four walls of their homes for centuries has crippled their personalities. This has paralysed social life of women.

J.B. Kripalani’s Gandhi is a social reformer who was against dowry system. For the poor and middle classes it was a nightmare. Dowry system was that while there was joy on the birth of the male child and there was a silent mourning on the birth of the female child. Gandhi says, both are God’s gifts. They have an equal right to live and are equally necessary to keep the world going”. (402) His Gandhi is against dowry system and heavy expenditure in marriage ceremonials. He simplifies marriage ceremonials. J.B. Kripalani observes:

He was against feasting on such occasions. Many marriages were celebrated in his Ashram. All that was done was the recitation of the simple Ashram prayer and some advice from Gandhiji to the young couple on how they should live a contented and happy life of service. At the end of this simple ceremony, he would present to the couple a copy of the Bhagavadgita. Following his example, many rich men celebrated the marriages of their children without giving or receiving dowry (402)

J.B. Kripalani mentions the name of Jamnalal Bajaj whose daughters were married without presenting dowry. Gandhi recognized that women should be enlightened to root out social evils like untouchability, communalism and superstitions etc, because the children are under their care. Gandhi considered women superior to men. J.B. Kripalani observes, “Gandhiji invited the women of India to participate in the satyagraha movement not only because they were equal to men but also superior to men in a non-violent fight which requires infinite patience and uncomplaining and silent suffering”. (403)

Indeed, Gandhi believed woman is the incarnation of ahimsa that means infinite love which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Gandhi held that woman’s grace lay in her character and in her modesty. He did not want her to be play thing for man. He therefore

was against costly clothes, jewelry and make up. His biography of Gandhi points out that Gandhi stressed purity and asked women not to consider themselves sex objects or toy persons. He held that women have right over themselves. It strengthened women empowerment. Talking to women on one occasion, Gandhi exhorts, "Woman must cease to consider herself the object of man's lust. The remedy is more in her hands than man's. She must refuse to adorn herself for men, including her husband, if she will be an equal partner with man". (404) Indeed, A woman should not be timid, weak and terrified to tolerate the inhuman behaviour of her husband. Gandhi criticized child marriage and supported widow remarriages. But he held voluntary widowhood as better. J.B. Kripalani observes, "If a widow could not or did not wish to live alone, she had every right to remarry and society must not look down upon such marriage". (400) Of course, Gandhi's views contributed a lot in awakening women's power and in securing their rightful place in society.

In 'Prohibition', as J.B. Kripalani's Gandhi is a social reformer, he selects elaborately prohibition. Gandhi wanted India to be free from the use of intoxicating drinks and drugs that was considered as a social evil. Drink habit is socially undesirable. He wanted total change. Transformation of individual is essential for this. One should get rid of evil habits and gain mastery over himself. People under the spell of this drink habit can not apply their minds to understand their situation and their problems. J.B. Kripalani observes :

The consequence is that the family lives in chronic poverty and indebtedness. Thus the innocent are made to suffer for the guilty. In the case of most people, especially the poor, intoxicating drinks impair their intelligence which distinguishes man from the animal. It also deadens one's moral sensitivity. (405)

They can not organize themselves to solve those problems. The addicts are ruined physically, economically, morally and intellectually and many homes are destroyed . Drink is more a illness than a vice. In *India of My Dreams*, Gandhi himself writes:

The drink habit destroys the soul of man and tends to turn him into a beast, incapable of distinguishing between wife, mother and sister. I have seen men who forget this distinction under the influence of liquor. The drink and the drug evil is in many respects infinitely worse than the evil caused by malaria and the like, for , whilst the latter only injure the body, the former saps both body and soul. (Prabhu 162)

J.B. Kripalani gives the example of several religions about the prohibition of drink habit. The drink habit in the muslims, the Jains and the Vashnavites are prohibited by their religions. Prohibitions should be imposed legally, but legal prohibition would not be successful in the absence of a strong public opinion. J.B. Kripalani truly remarks, "the reformer must create public opinion as was done by Gandhiji who had no political power" (408). Indeed, Gandhi viewed the task may be carried out patiently with love and sympathy. Since J.B. Kripalani's Gandhi is a social reformer, the biographer selects Gandhi's views on educational reform. J.B. Kripalani narrates, "Gandhi's educational reform was the most radical. He made socially useful activity as the medium of instruction. It must be done meticulously and must have same utility or value, He wanted to combine learning with doing socially useful work". (410) Gandhi emphasized learning by doing and

activity based education. He made efforts for social progress through advocating purposeful and real education. It should be related to bread earning.

As a biography is a written account of individual lives in relation to the contemporaries, J.B. Kripalani selects Rabindranath's views on educational reform. Tagore viewed education could be imparted in an atmosphere of freedom, beauty and joy of life. J.B. Kripalani adds, "Reform in education was also brought about by Rabindranath Tagore in his institution at Shantiniketan. He believed that education could best be imparted in an atmosphere of freedom and the beauty and joy of life". (410)

Both Gandhi and Tagore expressed their views on reform in education that are highly relevant to the students' needs. It should be a continuous process. His Gandhi gave the first place to the purification of heart and formation of character through education in fulfilling social realities and requirements. In his *An Autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi himself writes, "I regard character building as the proper foundation for their education and if the foundation was firmly laid, I was sure that children could learn all the other things themselves". (307) Indeed, It should cause all – round development of body, mind and soul. We discover that the real significance of J.B. Kripalani's *Gandhi: His Life and Thought* lies in this fact that his Gandhi is a reformer whose thoughts are very valuable in order to redress all religious and social problems of the world masses.

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