

## Gandhian Pluralism in Hamid Kureishi's Memoir *Agnipariksha*

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### **Introduction**

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of pluralism is a cornerstone of his vision for a harmonious and equitable society. Rooted in his commitment to truth (*satya*), nonviolence (*ahimsa*), and respect for diversity, Gandhian pluralism emphasizes the coexistence of diverse cultures, religions, and ideologies. In the contemporary globalised world, marked by increasing cultural interactions and conflicts, Gandhi's principles hold profound relevance. Gandhian pluralism arises from his deep respect for all religions and his belief in their shared ethical core. Gandhi viewed religion not as a divisive force but as a path toward moral and spiritual development. His famous assertion, "Truth is God", transcended dogmatic interpretations of faith, offering a unifying principle that embraced diversity. He believed that the ultimate truth is multifaceted and can be approached through various perspectives, advocating tolerance and dialogue over exclusivity:

You asked me why I consider that God is Truth . . . I would also say with those who say that God is Love, 'God is Love.' But deep down in me I used to say that though God may be Love, God is Truth above all. I have now come to the conclusion that for myself God is Truth, but two years ago I went a step further and said Truth is God. And I came to that conclusion after a continuous and relentless search after Truth, which began nearly fifty years ago. I then found that the nearest approach to Truth was through Love.  
(427)

The world now faces significant challenges to pluralism. The rise of nationalism, polarisation, and identity-based conflicts often pits communities against one another. In this context, Gandhian pluralism provides a framework to counter such fragmentation. Gandhi's interfaith dialogues and his insistence on respecting all religions resonate strongly today, especially in regions experiencing religious tensions. His methods to alleviate violence are such:

The way of violence is old and established. It is not so difficult to do research in it. The way of nonviolence is new. The science of nonviolence is yet taking shape. We are still not conversant with all its aspects. There is a wide scope for research and experiment in this field. You can apply all your talents to it (383).

His approach encourages moving beyond mere tolerance to active engagement with and understanding of different faiths. For instance, his personal practice of including verses from multiple religious texts in prayers illustrates how coexistence can be nurtured at both individual and collective levels.

Contemporary societies are increasingly multicultural, with migration and globalization intensifying intercultural interactions. Gandhi's pluralistic vision challenges xenophobia and cultural superiority by celebrating the interconnectedness of humanity. His emphasis on local traditions and grassroots empowerment also ensures that global integration does not erase indigenous identities. Gandhi's notion of *swaraj* (self-rule) underscores the importance of decentralization and participatory governance. In today's polarized political environment, his belief in consensus-building and the inclusion of diverse voices can guide democracies toward more equitable and representative systems:

Nonviolence is central to Gandhian pluralism. Gandhi saw violence—whether physical, structural, or verbal—as a barrier to understanding and coexistence. In the contemporary scenario, where online hate speech, cultural chauvinism, and geopolitical conflicts proliferate, nonviolence offers a pathway to dialogue and reconciliation. Nonviolent movements worldwide, such as those led by Martin Luther King Jr. and

Nelson Mandela, continue to draw inspiration from Gandhi's methods, proving their enduring relevance. Martin Luther King had said:

There is another element in our struggle that then makes our resistance and nonviolence truly meaningful. That element is reconciliation. Our ultimate end must be the creation of the beloved community. The tactics of nonviolence without the spirit of nonviolence may become a new kind of violence. (116)

### **Agnipariksha: The Memoir**

The memoir undertaken for investigation highlights these proposals of pluralism as proclaimed by Gandhi. *Agnipariksha* is a poignant memoir of trauma and hope set against the backdrop of the 1969 Ahmedabad riots. It recounts the experiences of Hamid Kureshi, a prominent Gujarat High Court lawyer who epitomized a life of religious and cultural pluralism in both word and spirit. Raised in a family deeply devoted to the nation and to Gandhi, Kureshi grew up in close proximity to the Mahatma's ideals.

A third-generation Gandhian and a non-practicing Muslim married to a Hindu woman, Kureshi lived a life that embodied Gandhian syncretism. However, the riots brought a profound personal and ideological crisis. For perhaps the first time in his life, Kureshi found himself reduced to being identified solely by his Muslim identity. As he grappled with the hatred and violence directed at his community, the memoir captures his struggle to reconcile this hostility with the inclusive values he had cherished. Through his experiences, *Agnipariksha* examines the fragile nature of communal harmony and the challenge posed to Gandhi's legacy of coexistence and unity in times of turmoil. As Gandhi forecloses about *ahimsa*:

*Ahimsa* means not to hurt any living creature by thought, word, or deed, even for the supposed benefit of that creature. To observe this principle fully is impossible for men, who kill a number of living beings large and small as they breathe or blink or till the land (28).

In this understated yet profoundly evocative first-person narrative, Hamid

Kureshi captures the stark realities of a city gripped by communal violence while offering a poignant portrayal of resilience and humanity. Against the backdrop of fear, chaos, and uncertainty, he paints a vivid picture of the tragic events that unfolded, juxtaposing the harshness of the riots with the quiet strength of human compassion. Through his account, Kureshi brings to life not just the struggles of his own family but also the broader experiences of those connected to the Gandhi Ashram. He describes how, amidst an atmosphere of deep mistrust and escalating brutality, his family's fight for self-preservation was sustained by the enduring bonds of friendship and solidarity. Hindu friends, neighbors, and members of the Ashram community stood as a protective shield around them, offering their care and concern even as violence raged around them. These acts of courage and kindness underscore the enduring power of human connection and the possibility of goodness even in the darkest times.

Kureshi's memoir is more than just a recounting of personal hardship; it is a celebration of the indomitable spirit of humanity. His reflections serve as an affirmation of values such as friendship, dignity, and mutual respect, which shine brightly even amidst hatred and fear. What makes this narrative particularly impactful is Kureshi's ability to convey the gravity of the events without succumbing to bitterness or resentment. His calm and empathetic tone invites readers to reflect on the resilience of the human spirit and the possibility of reconciliation. In recounting the terror and trauma of the riots, *Agnipariksha* ultimately becomes a story of hope and redemption. It reminds readers that even in the face of communal violence and widespread distrust, there exist individuals and communities who stand firm in their commitment to peace, compassion, and humanity. Kureshi's words leave an indelible mark on the reader, urging them to recognize the enduring importance of these values in building a just and harmonious society.

### **Agnipariksha and Gandhian Pluralism**

Senior advocate and trustee of the Sabarmati Ashram Preservation Memorial Trust, Hamid Kureshi, offers a deeply introspective and

evocative account of his life during the 1969 Gujarat riots in his memoir *Agnipariksha*. This compelling narrative stands as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, highlighting how kindness, unity, and companionship can triumph even in the face of the darkest adversities. Through *Agnipariksha*, Kureshi revisits the harrowing days of the Gujarat riots, chronicling events that spanned a tumultuous five to seven days. The memoir, written in the first person, vividly portrays the brutality and inhumanity inflicted by one section of society upon another. It unflinchingly exposes the scale of destruction, fear, and hatred that swept across communities, turning familiar spaces into battlegrounds of mistrust and violence.

Yet, what makes this memoir particularly remarkable is its tone of unwavering hope and humanity. Even amidst an atmosphere saturated with rage, anger, and communal hatred, Kureshi refrains from inciting bitterness or hostility. Instead, he narrates a deeply personal story that emphasizes the enduring bonds of friendship, trust, and mutual respect he experienced with his Hindu neighbors and friends. His interactions reveal a sense of belonging and solidarity, challenging the divisive narratives often associated with such times of conflict. Margaret Chatterjee argues that “Gandhi believed that reality must be changed non-violently lest we add to the total burden of suffering in the world, and that in so doing we chime in with reality at a deeper level since we are thereby operating according to the law of love” (77).

*Agnipariksha* also delves into the broader emotional and moral struggles of living through communal violence. Kureshi reflects on the complex dynamics of identity, morality, and resilience, offering a profound meditation on what it means to rise above fear and hatred to seek light amid darkness. His portrayal of human nature emphasizes not just survival but the potential for renewal and reconciliation, even when communities are pushed to their limits. This memoir transcends the mere documentation of the Gujarat riots; it becomes a universal story of hope, courage, and the unyielding strength of human values. Through his restrained yet deeply moving narrative, Kureshi calls upon readers to embrace compassion and solidarity, making *Agnipariksha* an enduring contribution to the discourse on communal harmony and coexistence.

The year 1969 marked a pivotal and tragic chapter in the life of Hamid Kureshi, a senior advocate and a steadfast adherent of Gandhian ideals. On what appeared to be an ordinary day, Kureshi set out for the High Court, unaware that his life and the city of Ahmedabad were about to be engulfed in communal strife. A man of secular convictions, married to a Hindu woman and deeply committed to the principles of pluralism, Kureshi epitomized coexistence and mutual respect. However, the eruption of communal riots shattered this harmonious existence. For the first time, Kureshi found himself stripped of his identity as a lawyer, a contributing member of society, and a humanist; he was instead reduced to being identified solely as a Muslim, rendering him a target of the prevailing hatred and violence.

The riots inflicted profound psychological and physical wounds, challenging Kureshi's unwavering faith in humanity and secularism. The eruption of anger and hostility directed at minority communities tested his belief in the ideals of unity and understanding, as the violence eradicated the last vestiges of hope and security he had once held. Yet, even amid this turmoil, Kureshi's reflections remained deeply rooted in Gandhian philosophy, emphasizing love over hatred, nonviolence over conflict, and inclusivity over division.

Kureshi's dedication to Gandhian principles was a result of his upbringing and historical context. Growing up during India's struggle for independence, he actively participated in the Quit India Movement, an experience that led to his imprisonment and further solidified his commitment to Gandhi's vision of a pluralistic and harmonious society. His grandfather, Imam Abdul Kadir Bawazeer, was a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi and affectionately referred to as *Sahodar* by the Mahatma himself. After Imam Saheb's passing, a residence was established within the precincts of the Gandhi Ashram, known as Imam Manzil, which became the permanent home of the Kureshi family.

When the communal riots of 1969 broke out, Kureshi's home in Swastik Society was reduced to ashes, and even the Gandhi Ashram—long a symbol of peace and unity—was under attack. Kureshi poignantly

recollects the Imam Manzil in Gandhi Ashram as not safe. This moment marked one of the most devastating episodes in a series of harrowing events. The very existence of Imam Manzil was threatened by forces that espoused violence and hatred, a paradox that reflected the collapse of Gandhian ideals in the face of communal animosity. Yet, in the midst of despair, Kureshi witnessed acts of courage and solidarity that reaffirmed the resilience of humanity. Despite the threats, Imam Manzil emerged unscathed, safeguarded by members of the Ashram and the local Hindu community. Kureshi narrates these events with profound gratitude and compassion, emphasizing the power of unity and the enduring strength of Gandhian secularism and pluralism, even during one of the most turbulent periods in modern Indian history.

Translated from the original Gujarati by Rita Kothari, the book offers a vivid and immersive journey through the riot-stricken neighborhoods, streets, and alleys of Ahmedabad during the 1969 communal violence. Hamid Kureshi's articulate and evocative writing style captures the unfolding events with remarkable clarity and detail, drawing readers into the harrowing experiences of those days. As the narrative progresses, the reader is transported into Kureshi's perspective, experiencing the turmoil and tragedy through his eyes.

The palpable fear and anxiety gripping his family, juxtaposed with the calm and composed demeanor of his father, bring the emotional weight of the events to life. The indifference of the government and the police, the destruction witnessed as he moves through the city—shops engulfed in flames, familiar areas reduced to unrecognizable chaos—paint a stark picture of life during the Gujarat riots. Through its vivid descriptions and firsthand accounts, the memoir provides an unflinching portrayal of the horrors of communal violence, while also serving as a testament to the resilience of those who lived through it. Kureshi's narrative, translated with precision and sensitivity, offers an invaluable glimpse into the human cost of hatred and the enduring struggle for peace and unity.

Gandhi's secularism was deeply rooted in his spiritual and philosophical outlook. Unlike the Western notion of secularism, which often advocates

the separation of religion and state, Gandhi's approach sought to integrate the moral teachings of all religions into public and political life. He believed that the core values of all religions—truth, nonviolence, compassion, and justice—could serve as a unifying force in society. Gandhi's insistence on *sarva dharma samabhava* (equal respect for all religions) underscored his belief that no single faith held a monopoly on truth.

### **Conclusion**

Gandhi viewed Hindu-Muslim unity as a prerequisite for India's independence and social progress. He consistently emphasized that the Indian freedom struggle was incomplete without the active participation and cooperation of both communities. For Gandhi, Hindu-Muslim unity was not merely a political strategy but a moral imperative that reflected India's pluralistic ethos. His personal practices mirrored this commitment. Gandhi celebrated both Hindu and Muslim traditions, often incorporating Islamic prayers alongside Hindu hymns in his daily prayers. He regarded religious tolerance as essential for national cohesion and worked tirelessly to bridge the divide between the two communities.

Gandhi's vision of Hindu-Muslim unity was tested during communal riots, such as those in Bihar, Bengal, and Punjab, where the scars of partition and religious animosity threatened to unravel the fabric of Indian society. His response was one of direct action and personal sacrifice. Gandhi undertook fasts, traveled to riot-affected areas, and appealed to the moral conscience of both Hindus and Muslims to end violence and rebuild trust. One of the most poignant examples of his resolve was his fast in Calcutta in 1947, which successfully brought an end to communal violence. Gandhi's ability to inspire peace through moral authority underscored his belief that love and nonviolence could triumph over hatred.

In contemporary times, Gandhi's principles of secularism and communal harmony remain profoundly relevant. The rise of religious polarization and intolerance in many parts of the world underscores the need for a Gandhian approach to interfaith dialogue and coexistence. His emphasis

on respecting all religions, fostering dialogue, and prioritizing shared human values over sectarian differences offers a blueprint for addressing the challenges of communalism and religious extremism. Gandhi's legacy reminds us that true secularism is not about erasing religious identities but about celebrating diversity and finding unity in shared moral principles. His vision continues to inspire those who strive for a world where individuals of all faiths can live together in peace and mutual respect.

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