



Diamond Harbour Women's University

Department of History

Special Lecture

By

Prof. Amit Dey

Topic: Gandhi and Islam



Prof. Amit Dey, Professor in the Department of History, University of Calcutta delivered an enriching lecture on the topic 'Gandhi and Islam' in Diamond Harbour Women's University on 2nd January 2019.

Gandhi's responses to Islam should be studied in the context of the eclectic influences to which he was exposed from his childhood days. His father hailed from a liberal Vaishnava background, which enabled him to interact freely with Jains, Parsis and Muslims. While in England, Gandhi

was influenced by the Gita and the Bible, which brought him closer to the world of comparative theology. In Indian historiography, the recognition of comparative theology is a recent phenomenon; however, Gandhi could anticipate its relevance for India's plural society in the late nineteenth century. He could locate it in his nation-building project. In the 1890s, during his stay in South Africa, a new dimension was added to his eclectic bent of mind as he established contacts with Muslim merchants and many Christians. Gandhi delved deep into theological discourse after reading Sale's Quran, Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and Carlyle's writings on the Prophet. This did not reduce him to a mere recluse but incentivised him to become the future leader of a colonised people who would combine the bravery and frugality of the Prophet to defy the constraints of colonial rule. Along with his myriad activities in South Africa, Gandhi kept alive his interest in religion. It is useful to note that Gandhi's serious engagement with comparative theology enhanced his appreciation of Hinduism. However, he had no prejudice against other religions. Unlike most other Indian politicians, Gandhi in this way gathered more knowledge about different religions. Gandhi studied not only the Quran, he seriously studied other works related to Islamic theology, and particularly the 'sirat' (the biography of Prophet Muhammad). During his discourses in South Africa, he often referred to his knowledge of Islam, which he acquired through painstaking efforts.

Learning Outcomes from the Given Lecture

What we have learned from this lecture is that Gandhi theoretically justified his inclusive policy as opposed to the exclusivist two nation theory, by highlighting the broad humanitarian, spiritual and liberal values of Islam. In that endeavour, he emphasised the tolerant, spiritual and inclusive policies of the heroes of Islam who are often wrongly projected by a section of the Indian ulema sponsored by the Muslim League. Though Gandhi did not succeed in his effort to maintain communal harmony or the integration of India, the spirit with which he defined and defended the composite nature of Indian civilization can be an inspiration to those interested in the nation-building process in the post Partition phase and even during the new millennium.