Two days with Mahatma Gandhi

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The author had the rare privilege of meeting Mahatma Gandhi when the latter visited Noakhali for restoration of peace following a large-scale violence triggered by the call given by the Indian Muslim League to the Muslims to launch direct action from August 16, 1946 for the creation of an independent state for them, namely Pakistan. He narrates the enthusiasm of the people over the arrival of the Mahatma at Noakhali. There are very few left in the country who had seen the Mahatma and had the opportunity to interact with him. As a young boy of 15, he saw and met Gandhi and received his blessings which continue to inspire him to render service to the downtrodden.

It was in 1946 that the Indian Muslim League under the leadership of Mohamad Ali Jinna called upon the Muslims of India to start Direct Action from 16th August in the same year till they reached their target for a separate Independent State for the Muslims in the name of “Pakistan”. Bengal Province was under the reign of Muslim League Govt. and Mr. Sohorab Suharawardi was its Prime Minister. Hence the Muslim League workers started direct action by killing Hindus, burning their houses and belongings, raping Hindu women and girls. The situation became worst in Noakhali district where they had strong organisations. Thousands of people were killed and a large number of them left their houses and took shelters in the neighbouring princely state of Hill Tripura, Assam and other places. The incidents created panic all over India. National leaders and Gandhiji were deeply shocked and decided to go to Noakhali to work for peace and amity. Accordingly, Bapu along with a group of his followers reached Chaumuhani village of Noakhali district on 5th November, 1946 (so far as I remember the date).

Due to Noakhali communal riots a large number of riot victims took shelters in different parts of Hill Tripura, and Tripura people and the government gave them necessary shelters and protection. The situation was grave. The Congress leaders (before Independence Indian National Congress had no units in the princely states of India, but an organisation in the name of All India State’s People Conference working in the princely states (about 600 in India), decided to go to Noakhali (Chaumuhani) to meet Mahatma Gandhi to apprise him of the situation of Hill Tripura state arising out of heavy influx of refugees from Bengal province and invite him to pay visit to Agartala.

At that time I was one of the volunteers of the Tripura State Students’ Congress and was working for the Bhangis of Agartala by running Literacy Centre and for prohibition of alcoholism and intoxicants. When I came to know that our leaders are going to meet Mahatmaji at Noakhali I met our leader, Shri Sachindralal Singh, to get his permission to accompany them to Noakhali to see Gandhiji. He gave me permission and advised me to take Bhangi leader, Sri Gopal Dhanok and Cobbler’s leader, Sri Chabiraj Rabidas, with us for going to meet Mahatmaji. Accordingly, we, a group of eight people under the leadership of Sri Sachindralal Singh, went to Chaumuhani (Noakhali) on 6th November, 1946. On 5th November afternoon we left Agartala for Akhaura Railway Station (about 6 miles from Agartala) to catch train for Chaumuhani on foot. At Akhaura we entrained at about 9 P.M. for Chaumuhani and reached there on the 6th early morning. When the train was about to enter the Chaumuhani railway station, from the train we saw people standing in a row by the side of the road in the western side of the station and an old man from whose body a heavenly ray was coming out, slowly coming towards the station side. As soon as the train stopped in the station, we quickly rushed to that road side and had the privilege of a glimpse of Bapuji. This was the last time we all saw Bapuji.

Gandhiji was staying in a house just near the railway station, and on the other side of the station road there were some houses where the leaders and volunteers were staying. From the station we went to a cottage where respected Sri Surendra Mohan Ghosh (popularly called Madhuda), the then president of Bengal Provincial Congress, was staying. We also stayed there for two nights. Madhuda arranged our meeting with Gandhiji on that day at about 10 A.M. After taking breakfast

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of “Muri and Gur” and introduction with other leaders and volunteers, we went to Bapu’s cottage to meet him. We entered his room through the room of his secretary, Mr. Pyarelal. Gandhiji was taking rest on his bed on the floor of the cottage and Dr. Sushila Nayar taking his care. In a row one by one we entered the room offering pronama with folded hands. Gandhiji also, with folded hands and with his heavenly laugh, reciprocated. In the row I was the last and standing just near his feet with folded hands, I forgot to seat in spite of Dr. Nayar’s instructions. Lastly, she called me to take seat. One of our leaders, Sri Umeshlal Singh, introduced each of us to Bapu. While he introduced me, stating that I was a school student and working among the Bhangis for literacy and prohibition works, Bapu blessed me, raising his hand and saying in Hindi — continue to work with devotion and love. Still that blessings drive me to keep my associations with Harijan and such other people’s work.

Later, we attended his evening prayer meeting in the field of a school, just opposite the railway station. At about 4.30 P.M. prayer meeting started with Ravindra Sangeet — “If your own people leave you, don’t think for it” sung by respected Smt. Sucheta Kripalani, renowned Congress leader and wife of Acharya J.B. Kripalani. We had the proud privilege of listening Bapu’s message for about 15 minutes and then he requested Mr. Suharawardi, principal guide of communal riots in Bengal (Gandhiji called him Sahid saheb) to address the people. Sahid Saheb started his address paying respect to Bapu and addressed the people as his own brothers and sisters with tears in his eyes and crying for the unthinkable situation in this part of the country, which forced Bapuji to come here at this old-age for establishment of peace and amity. He addressed the people for about one hour.

Next day, we along with some other peace core volunteers, visited some burnt houses and worst affected families still living around Chaumuhani station area.

In that camp I had the proud privilege of meeting many Congress leaders, constructive workers like Smt. Sucheta Kripalani, Dr. Sushila Nayar, Mr. Pyarelal, Smt. Bina Das, Smt. Neli Sengupta, Shri Surendra Mohan Ghosh.

I heard many stories of inhuman tortures by the Muslim extremists of the Hindu men, women and girls, their murders, forced marriage apart from arson.
So far memory goes, Bapuji started his Peace March from 7th November, 1946 through Haimchar village. (It needs verification from the Book of Prof. Nirmal Basu, who also acted as secretary of Bapu during his stay in Noakhali). I lost that book.