

“The Miracle of Calcutta”

By Manubehn Gandhi

In December 1946 Manubehn joined Gandhiji and lived with him till the end of his life. How very crucial these days were in the life of the Nation and of Gandhiji, needs no description. Often, during these days, Manubehn was his only companion. She used to keep a daily record of this period. As a part of her education, Gandhiji had asked her to do it, and would look through it every day. Undoubtedly therefore, this diary is a rare and most authentic record of Gandhiji's daily routine, his activities and of his inner struggles.

“The diary mentions some crucial days Gandhiji spent at Sodepur Khadi Ashram from 09.08.1947 to 13.08.1947 just prior to Independence.”

20-7-1959

9-8-1947

This time I learnt an excellent lesson as the result of a mistake on my part. We had forgotten to take with us Bapuji's chamber pot. We did not feel the want of it till we reached Patna. There Abhabahen told Bapu about our oversight and I asked him whether we should purchase a new one. Bapu replied laughingly, "Why not? Your father has deposited your money with me and I have been appointed its trustee. If you decide to purchase a new pot I would not object to it. But I cannot spare even a single pie myself." I could see that this was a joke ; but thinking that it would be indispensable for Bapu in Noakhali, I bought one. Bapu came to know of this in the train the next morning. The train was due to reach Calcutta in a short while. Shri Nirmalbabu joined us at Burdwan and Bapu was busy talking with him. As soon as we got down at Calcutta and started for **Sodepur** in a car, Bapuji opened the topic of my purchase. Both of us had been nervous with fear at the thought of facing Bapu. It was I who was responsible for the mistake, but when Abhabahen saw Bapu become cross with me she plied me with sympathy. Bapu said, "I was merely joking. I would have managed with a glass bottle. Have you any idea as to how seven rupees are earned? You have not earned a single pie. You have today spent seven rupees for my chamber pot, but tomorrow you will be spending money for some useless stuff. Are you going to squander your father's money like this? I appreciate your generosity but you must learn to be practical. There is every chance that others will misunderstand that what you have done has been done through pride. I do not misunderstand. It may be argued that there is nothing wrong in providing for our bodily comfort by necessary purchases if we can afford the money. This leads man to degradation. I wanted to tell you this at 2 a.m. But I postponed the idea and blamed Bisen. I am now telling you this so that you may be on your guard henceforth."

I had to listen to Bapu's reproach all the way from Calcutta to **Sodepur**. Bapu bathed, and then started his interviews.

At Calcutta

Sodepur, 9-8-1947

Dr. Prafulla Ghosh, Satish Dasgupta, Bal Kalelkar and Bhansalibhai came to see Bapuji. Dr. Ghosh had an exclusive interview for an hour. At 3.30 p.m. Bapu went to meet the Governor. On his return, Nirmalbabu read out some letters to him. Later, he had a discussion with Renuka Roy. Prayers were held at 5.30 p.m.

Calcutta was in the grip of communal riots. Bapu was filled with anxiety. He said, "This is the time of our real test. We must show our strength to the whole world. If India is to be enslaved again, I do not wish to live to see it, as my soul will weep at the sight. But I pray to God that such a time does not come."

Bapu took his walk after returning from prayers. He finished his day's work and went to bed at 10 p.m.

Sodepur, Sunday, 10-8-1947

Washed and attended prayers at 3.30 a.m. Bapuji started his daily work after prayers. This was the only time when he got some peace to write for the Harijan.

We started for a walk at 6 a.m., and Abhabahen and I were the only persons who joined him. Bapuji asked laughingly, "Who is older, Abha or you?"

When Abhabahen replied that she was the older one, Bapu said to her, "In that case you can scold Manu if you want to."

I retorted, "But Bapuji, being Kanubhai's sister I am her sister-in-law, and according to the custom in Kathiawar, even a younger sister-in-law can scold her brother's wife."

Bapu laughed and said, "Yes, that is so ; I had clean forgotten it. I too used to harass my sister-in-law although I was younger than she. Brothers' wives always suffer at the hands of their sisters-in-law. But you two should be ideal sisters-in-law."

Immediately after a bath Bapu interviewed visitors as usual. One of them was Usmankhan who was the secretary of some league. He described the terrible situation in Calcutta and, while pressing Bapu to stay there for a couple of days, said, "The Muslims have as much claim on you as the Hindus, for you have yourself accepted that you are as much a Muslim as a Hindu."

Bapu replied, "Are you prepared to guarantee that nothing will happen in Noakhali? If anything happens there I now have the right to go on a fast for Noakhali and you will have to be a witness during the fast."

There were twenty other Muslims who accompanied Usmankhan at the time of the interview, but they did not dare accept such a heavy responsibility. They said that they would wire to Gulam Sarvar, Kasam, and others who had been released, about the matter, and that they would also send special emissaries, but they refused to be witnesses to the fast. Bapu replied that he would, in any case, prolong his stay by two days. He then fixed the 13th for starting for Noakhali.

Other routine matters, including the evening prayer, went on as usual. Bapu poured out his heart in prayer. He said, "The Hindus should do nothing in Calcutta for which we shall have to feel ashamed. If in our pride we maintain that the Government being ours we can behave in any manner we choose, we shall be the worst of fools, and India's freedom will not last long. If you want to fight, fight like brave men. Why this stabbing in the back? I can speak to you in this strain as I am sure that the Hindus do not think me to be their enemy."

Most of Bapu's visitors today were Muslims. Ministers also came. Bapu started his silence at 7 p.m.

Bapuji's diet consists of milk, vegetables and chapatis. He weighed 113 lbs.

Monday, 11-8-1947

After prayers, Bapu wrote letters to Manibahen Patel, P. R. Das, Balkoba, Mehtab, and Chimanlal. He also wrote to the Governor. He started for his morning walk at 6. After massage and bath he listened to newspapers being read aloud to him while he took his meal. At 11 a.m. he rested for half an hour. Kakasaheb came at 11.30. Bapuji talked to him while spinning. At 1 p.m. Prafullababu and Annadababu came. At 2.30 he went to see the damage caused by the riots. He returned at a quarter to five. Then followed a continuous flow of visitors right up to 10 p.m., with a break only for the daily prayer.

At prayer time Bapuji said, "We must make ourselves worthy of the freedom that is to come after two days. Let us be grateful to God, who has given us the fruit of the sacrifice we have made even in our poverty. How grand it would be if four-hundred millions of people fast on that day and save that much food. Try to understand that there is great strength in fasting, silence and spinning."

Shri Suhrawardy came at 10 p.m. He was with Bapu for nearly an hour and a half. Bapuji said, "We shall both work together. You should join me if you are sincere. Then I do not have to go to Noakhali. This is a path of renunciation. So, you should consult your family before you decide."

In the afternoon Bapu was requested by the B.B.C. to broadcast a three minutes' talk on "Free India and Her Relations with the World" , but he refused and said, "I must resist this temptation and these people should forget that I know English."

Bapuji postponed his departure to Noakhali.

Tuesday, 12-8-1947

Today also Bapuji's routine followed the usual daily course.

In the afternoon, Shri Usman, the ex-Mayor of Calcutta, brought Mr. Suhrawardy's message which was that he and Bapuji should stay together in the same bungalow in the area where Muslims dared not enter. Both should go there with open minds. Neither should have secret interviews. Both should issue joint statements. Both should stay and eat together. Shri Suhrawardy took upon himself to take care of Noakhali.

Bapu launched on a frightening venture, for the locality in which he was asked to stay was thought to be very dangerous. Not a single Muslim had been spared there. One has to rely on God for the future.

Chief amongst today's visitors were Kakasaheb, Horace Alexander, Stuart, representatives of Chandranagar, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Gopinath Roy, Prafullababu, Annadababu, Usman Saheb, and Shri Suhrawardy.

The First Miracle

15th August at Calcutta

Wednesday, 13-8-1947

Rising and prayers as usual at 3.30 a.m. This was our last day at **Sodepur**. With the idea of informing people about the sudden change in his programme, Bapu wrote a number of letters addressed, among others, to Kanu Gandhi, Pyarelal, Amtus Salambahen, Satishbabu, Radhakrishna, Aryanayakam, Balvantsinh, Rajendra Babu, Sardar Vallabhbai, Manibahen and Perinbahen Captain. A small meeting was also held for "Hindustani". Bapu was kept busy from the time he got up at 3.30 a.m. till 12.30 p.m., when he decided to rest for a little while. Just then, however, Suhrawardy's group called on him. They remained with him up to 1.30 p.m. Bapuji told Shaheed Saheb that he would leave **Sodepur** at 2.28 p.m. and they should join him in time. Having waited for Shaheed Saheb till 2.25, Bapu took his seat in the car at 2.28 as per schedule. He drove towards the Haidari Mansion at Beliaghata where the Hindus had massacred all the Muslims.

A few men belonging to Bapu's party went in advance to clean the Haidari Mansion. It was a very shabby house without any sort of facility. It was open on all sides ? thus being easy of access to outsiders. The doors and windows were broken. There was only one latrine which was used by hundreds of people, including a number of volunteers, policemen and visitors. Every inch of the place was covered with dust. In addition, rain had made the passages muddy. Bleaching powder having been profusely sprinkled, the acrid smell caused great discomfort. There was only one usable room where everybody and everything had to be accommodated, including Bapu himself, his luggage and guests.

There had been a riot. The youths were excited. They said to Bapu, "Why have you come here? The slightest suffering on the part of the Muslims has caused you to hasten to their succour. Where were you when we suffered?" But they did not prevent Bapu from entering the house. Shaheed Saheb, who came later on, was stopped at the door. It was feared that he might be killed. Bapu sent Nirmalbabu and others to bring a few representatives of the rioting mobs to meet him. When they came inside, the rest of the mob remained calm. Shri Suhrawardy was then allowed to enter the house.

Bapu had the following conversation with the excited youths who had come inside.

Question: Why was there no one to protect the Hindus in the Muslim locality during last year's riots in Calcutta on the 16th of August? And you have come here to save the Muslims when there is only a small scuffle of four days' duration!

Bapu: There is a vast difference between today and the 16th August, 1946. I accept that all the atrocities of 16th August were perpetrated exclusively by the Mohammedans. But what is the use of avenging past wrongs? I was on my way to Noakhali. But now I shall manage the affairs of Noakhali from here. I have not come for the good of Muslims alone. I want to serve everybody, for I am a friend of all men. Those who kill and burn prove unfaithful to their own religion. It is you who can save me. And if I am to be killed it is you who can kill me. After all, I am old now. I have very few days to live. I have done a lot of work. I have come to make you understand my point of view if I can. But within my heart I feel that I am the servant of both communities. I am a Bania. I am doing my business. I have warned Hindus of Bihar that a repetition of the former happenings would cost me my life. In coming here I have obtained the permission to say that they (Muslims) will have to

murder me first before they start a riot in Noakhali. Why don't you try to understand that my responsibility concerning Noakhali is now being shouldered by Shaheed Saheb and his men, and persons like Gulam Sarvar? Is this small matter? This is what I call my business.

The youths (greatly excited): We do not want to take lessons in Himsa and Ahimsa from you. Better leave this place. We shall never allow any Muslim to come here.

Bapu: This means that you do not want my interference. But if you help me and allow me to do my work, you will find a new situation wherein Hindus will be able to go safely where they cannot go today. What do you gain by harping on the events of August 16th, 1946, and becoming permanent enemies?

To this, an eighteen year old boy replied: "History has not proved that two widely differing communities have been able to exist amicably, side by side. I have noticed since childhood that the Hindus and Muslims have always been fighting."

Bapu: You are not older than I . I have seen a number of instances where Hindu boys called Musulmans by the fond term, chacha. ¹ Persons of both communities participate in each other's auspicious ceremonies and carry on friendly business and social dealings. Besides, you want to force me to leave this place. I never submit to force of any kind whatsoever! It is not in my nature. You can stop me doing my work. You can imprison me if you like, or kill me. I shall not call in the help of the military of pray to be spared. You say that I am an enemy of the Hindus, but this does not affect me as long as my soul is witness to my worthy motives. How can I then accept that I am the enemy of Hindus? If you can convince me that I have made a mistake in coming here, I shall immediately leave this place.

This went on up to 8 p.m. In the end, Bapu said to two of the boys, "Can't you understand that being a Hindu by religion, deed and name, I cannot possibly be an enemy of my own community? This is sheer narrow-mindedness on your part."

One does not know how, but the utterance of these two sentences had a magic effect and all the young boys were satisfied. Then, the same youths volunteered to keep watch over Bapu throughout the night. They said, "God knows, the old man is a wizard ; everybody is won over by him. He is never vanquished."

Prayers were held inside the house at 9 p.m. Bapu was extremely tired, and so were we. Abha and I were very hungry as well, but there was nothing to eat. Bapu said that we should not eat anything at so late an hour. But hunger got the better of us and we ate something at 10 p.m.

Bapu retired at 11 p.m. We had fixed up an old four-legged charpoy for him, and spread our own bedding on the floor. Bapu said, "How can I sleep on a bed, while you sleep on the floor? Spread my bedding also on the floor." We therefore spread his bedding too on the floor. Shri Suhrawardy decided that he would not sleep here tonight. He had some work to do. He said he would join us from the following night.

Some of the **Sodepur** people wanted to stay on to help Bapu. He refused, saying that the greatest help they could render was to carry out their duties in their own place properly. Bapu had not eaten anything since 1 p.m., nor had he taken any rest. He went to sleep at 11.30 p.m.