



Gandhi in Kolkata in 1917: His visits to the city

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Abstract: Calcutta, presently known as Kolkata, was the capital of colonial India till 1911. The city bears the rich legacy of learning, culture as well as political consciousness. Mahatma Gandhi had a good relation with this city and its people though he had to face fierce criticism from a section of the Bengalis. The people of the hometown of Subhas Chandra Bose differed from him on several issues from time to time despite 'a frank friendship' between them. The 'Father of the Nation' came to this city several times between 1896 and 1947. This paper elucidates Gandhi's relationship with Kolkata and its people specially in the year of 1917.

Keywords: Gandhi, Surendranath Banerjee, Calcutta, Indentured labour, All India National Congress, All India Social Service Conference, Conference of the Agriculturists, The National Language Conference, All India Muslim League Conference .

I. Introduction:

Gandhi departed Calcutta for the last time in his life on September 7, 1947, when his train left the Belur station in Howrah at 9:30 p.m. Before his departure people offered him 'arati' with *ghee lamp* to show their veneration towards him. Hussain Saheed Suhrawardy (1890-1963) and other Bengal Ministers came to the station to see him off with tears at their eyes. But this relationship was not so cordial at the beginning. Gandhi had to go to door to door of the leaders of Kolkata in 1896 to organize a public meeting so that he could make people aware of the miserable condition of Indians in South Africa in those days. But all his efforts went in vain. Nobody came forward to help him and he could not organize a public meeting here that time though it was possible in Bombay and Madras where people listened to him with rapt attention. Pheroza Mehta (1845-1915), Dinshaw Wacha (1844-1936) helped him in Bombay for arrangement of his lecture before an audience and G. Parameswaran Pillai (1864-1903), editor of *Madras Standard* and Subramania Iyer (1855-1916), the editor of *The*

Hindu helped him in Madras. In Calcutta Gandhi met with Surendranath Bandyopadhyay (1948-1925), editor of *The Bengalee* Sir Peary Mohan Mukherjee (1840-1924), Zaminder of Uttarpara and other leading men of the city; even he visited the office of Bengali newspapers like the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and the *Bangabasi*. But he was nowhere given due attention and importance except by newspapers like *The Englishman*, *The Statesman* which showed their interest in South African issue. But at that time he could not narrate the miserable condition of the Indians in South Africa before the conscious citizens of the Calcutta as he had to leave Kolkata on an urgent call from South Africa.

Gandhi first came to Calcutta by a ship named S.S. Pongla on May 6, 1896 on his way back to his native place Rajkot in Gujarat from Durban, South Africa. He left the city on the same day by a train bound to Allahabad. Later in October of the same year he again came to the city to organize the aforesaid public meeting.

In 1915 when Gandhi permanently came back from South Africa, he visited Shantiniketan at Bolpur. From there he went to Burma to meet with his friend Pran Jivandas Mehta. On his way to Burma he came to Calcutta again. This time the entire scenario changed. In the mean time Mahatma earned fame for his struggle against apartheid in South Africa and he was warmly felicitated by the citizens of this city. He met with the teachers of National College, addressed the students on futility of violent resistance in a meeting at College square, and stayed with Chittaranjan Das in his residence at Russa Road. Two years later he came to Calcutta again in 1917.

Demand for abolition of indentured emigration:

In 1917 Gandhi decided to force the government to abolish the agreement system in case of indentured emigration to South Africa. He started to build up public opinion against indentured emigration on agreement and demanded its abolition before July 31, 1917. Gandhi visited Bombay,



Karachi and Calcutta for this purpose and delivered lectures in public meetings. Wherever he went, he was warmly greeted and huge response was noticed among the mass.

From Karachi Gandhi proceed to Calcutta by train via Lahore and Delhi. On March 6, 1917 he reached Calcutta. He was invited by Manindra Chandra Nandy, Maharaja of Kashmir Bazar, Murshidabad and stayed at Cossimbazar House at 302 Upper Circular Road, presently known as Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy Road.¹ On the next day a public meeting was organized to protest against the system of indentured emigration on agreement at the Town Hall.

A mammoth gathering, comprising of both Hindus and Mahomedans and some Englishmen,² at the Town Hall witnessed the leaders like Motilal Ghosh, Surendranath Bannerjee, C.F. Andrews, Heramb Chandra Maitra, Sachindra Prasad Bose raising their voice against the indentured labour system considering it 'a great national wrong', 'a national disgrace'³ and demanded its abolition. Gandhi attended the meeting while Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandy of Cossim Bazaar presided over it.

Surendranath Bannerjee moved a resolution in the meeting demanding immediate and unconditional abolition of indenture labour in colonies of Trinidad, Jamaica, Fiji, British Guiana and Dutch Surinam before July 31, 1917 irrespective of occurrence of the proposed conference expected to be held or not in London to discuss the issue.

In placing the resolution Bannerjee said "it had often been brought forward as an incident that Indians were caste ridden. The demonstration held in the capital of Bengal and other capital cities of other provinces of India gave the lie direct to such an indictment. No matter in which part of the world, where oppression was practiced on Indians the voice of educated Indians would be heard for justice. It had been said that no coolies from Bengal were sent to the colonies, the interest of Bengal was not so much as that of other provinces. That mattered little. The grievances of the United Province of Madras, of the Punjab were the grievances of Bengal. They all stood today united under a common banner and inspired by common impulse..."⁴

Gandhi supported the resolution and while rising to second the resolution he was warmly greeted with prolong cheers. At the outset he expressed his sympathy of all present in the meeting, their deep condolence to Mahmed Kasuali on the death of his son. Mahmed Kasuali was an ardent passive resister and went to jail several times

in South Africa for opposing the poll tax and lost all of his wealth and affluence. With regard to indentured labour issue Gandhi said, "Government did not allow Mr. Malaysia to introduce his bill because the government wanted to introduce a measure which would satisfy the people. They all knew that Viceroy was in sympathy with them but the Secretary of State for India was opposed to them. He was to weigh the interests of the Colonial planters as of the Indians in a scale of gold. Sitting at a long distance the Secretary of State would not understand the feeling of the Indians, India believed that Mr Andrews report was true. The planters had engaged their best men to go to England and they were pressing for time. If India did not rise to the occasion the planters would gain the day. It was not the Secretary of State for India but the people who could say when the system should be abolished and they fixed the 31st July for its abolition. They could not contemplate with calmness the shifting of dates from season to season. It was their duty to say that India could not tolerate this wrong a minute longer than the July 31. No substitute to be brought forward by the London Conference was acceptable to India."⁵ This was supported by Moulavi Najumuddin Ahmed and was carried. Gandhi's initiative did not prove to be futile. Government stopped the indentured emigration from India and the decision was gazetted on March 12, 1917.⁶

Gandhi's presence in All India Congress Committee meeting in Kolkata:

One month later he came to the city again on April 7 from Bombay to attend a meeting of the All India Congress Committee. In that congregation a decision was taken to send eight members on deputation to England for Congress work. Gandhi attended the Congress meeting on both the 8th and 9th April. This time Gandhi took refuge at Bhupendra Basu's residence.⁷

Rajkumar Shukla, a farmer from Champaran, met with Gandhi for the first time in Lucknow when Mahatma went to that city to attend the annual session of Congress. He wanted to take Gandhi to Champaran in Trihut division of Bihar and requested him to do something to save the farmers of that region from the oppression of the Indigo planters on them. Gandhi first refused to go there. Rajkumar did not lose hope. From Lucknow Gandhi went to Cawnpore, Rajkumar followed him there and sincerely requested him to go to Champaran. This time Gandhi could not refuse him but did not go to Champaran. Gandhi returned to his ashram in Gujarat. Rajkumar also went there with a request to fix a date for visiting Champaran. Gandhi



assured him this time that he would be in Calcutta in April and asked him to come to Calcutta to take him to Champaran.

In April, 1917 when Gandhi came to Calcutta he was put up in the house of Bhupendranath Bose. There he saw Rajkumar Shukla who had already arrived and had been staying there.

After attending the Congress meeting Gandhi accompanied by Rajkumar Sukla left for Patna by a train from Howrah station. Bhupendranath Basu and many others came to the station to see Gandhi off. Bhupendranath Basu was one of them. The Patna bound train left the station at 3:25 pm.⁸ This was the time when Gandhi was on the way to launch a Satyagraha in Champaran, first time in India after returning from South Africa, against the Indigo planters of that area.

In November Gandhi again arrived at the city on his way from Allahabad to Ahmedabad on November 30th. On that occasion he did not stay here but left for Ahmedabad.

Gandhi in Kolkata in the last week of December, 1917:

In the last week of December, 1917 the 32nd annual session of the All India National Congress was held in Kolkata from December 26 to 29, except on the 28th. Annie Besant presided over the session and Baikuntha Nath Sen was the Chairman of the Reception Committee. Gandhi along with Kasturba again came to Calcutta on the 25th December to take part in the Congress and they took shelter in a *Dharamsala* arranged by Jammalal Bajaj.⁹ The opening session of the Congress was held at the Wellington square on December 26 under the presidency of Annie Besant. Poet Rabindranath Tagore recited his poem 'India's Prayer' on that day.^{9a} Gandhi attended the Congress sessions bare footed as he used to do in Champaran.^{9b} On the 3rd day of the session, speaking in Hindi Gandhi moved a resolution on South African issue which was passed as follows:

"This Congress re-expresses its regret that the British Indians of South Africa and east Africa still labour under disabilities which materially affect their trade and render their residence difficult, and unjustly and unduly restricts their movement to and in this parts of the Empire, and hopes that the local authorities will realise their responsibility to the Indians who have, in spite of disabilities, taken their full share in the war by raising corps and otherwise remove the disabilities complained of and authorises the President to cable the substance of the resolution to the respective authorities."¹⁰ This

proposal of Gandhi was seconded by Patanwalla, Seikh Ibrahim and Sadhu Ganpat Pantulu.

Many other conferences were convened at the same time in the city. These were All India Social Service Conference, All India Muslim League Conference, Bengal Agriculturist Conference, and National Language Conference. Delegates, who came from other provinces to attend the Congress session, participated in these conferences also. Gandhi also attended several conferences.

Gandhi in First All India Social Service Conference:

The First All India Social Service Conference was scheduled to be held on December 27, 1917 under the presidency of Mahatma Gandhi but it could not be happened owing to too much of enthusiasm on the part of the people to see and hear Gandhi. The conference was scheduled to be held at the Calcutta University Institute which could accommodate maximum one thousand five hundred people. The meeting was notified to be started at 4p.m. but at 2p.m. The crowd became so large that those who were in charge of the hall thought it wise to bar the gates. But that did not deter the young men amongst the crowd to scale the gate and the pointed railings and they got inside the compound only to find the hall doors barred. They then forced the doors open. Those who got inside the premises now attempted to get into the hall which was closed from inside and as a result several windows were damaged and a number of volunteers injured. The Chairman of the reception committee Justice Sir Ashutosh Chowdhury, Sarala Devi and Dr. Watkins, Pandit Gokarannath Mishra of Lucknow and Justice Sadasiva Aiyer who were all to take part in the deliberations of the conference, could not find entrance owing to the huge crowds blocking all the gates. The Lord Bishop of Calcutta who came at about four thirty and who was to propose the election of Gandhi was brought inside the hall with greatest difficulty. Rabindranath Tagore who was to open the conference with his benediction could not also come.

It was then announced that the meeting would be held at College Square. The crowd then left the hall and took their stand at the square expecting Gandhi to appear every moment.

A Little after five Gandhi with Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya arrived and with great difficulty succeeded in entering the hall where he announced that he would address them in an open air meeting at the College square where the chairman of the reception committee was waiting.



The meeting was arranged accordingly at College square but the meeting could not be held there also due to tremendous gathering of people at College Square from one end to another. Gandhi addressed the gathering in Hindi and declared that the programme was impossible to be carried out. Bipin Chandra Pal declared the postponement of the programme to some other time and place. When asked by the representative of *The Bengalee*, a Calcutta based newspaper, Gandhi said that he was in favour of the occurrence of the meeting in the Congress pandal after its conclusion and advocated for limited admission by tickets at certain price. The amount collected from the sale of the tickets was to be utilized for social service.^{10a} However the conference came off at last on December 31 at 3p.m. at the Overton Hall under the presidency of Gandhi in place of Congress pandal which was declared earlier by the organizers as venue.^{10b}

There was once again a rush of visitors, and no available inch of space was left vacant. A large number of ladies also attended the conference. Not only the delegates from various provinces came but people so far distant as Ceylon also came to attend. Among those present notables were M.K.Gandhi, Kasturibai, Ashutosh Chowdhury, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Krishna Govinda Gupta, Madan Mohan Malaviya, B.P. Wadia, Saraladevi, N. Subha Rao, Saojini Naidu, Dewan Bahadur Govinda Raghava Ayer, Pandit Gokarannath Mishra. Amal Home was the organising Secretary of this conference.

When Gandhi arrived at the hall, he was received at the gate by the reception committee and he was taken to the hall, people assembled there gave a tremendous ovation. The proceeding began with the song "Janaganamana Adhinayaka.....Bharata Bhagya Bidhata" sung by a powerful chorus led by Ajit Kumar Chakrabarty who later became the personal secretary to the poet Rabindranath Tagore and wife of Poet Sukumar Ray.

In absence of the Lord Bishop of Calcutta, Sir Krishna Govinda Gupta in proposing the name of Gandhi to preside over the conference said that Gandhi had lived with the South Africans and suffered with them and he had done so in Champaran also. Natesan in seconding the proposal said that India's manhood had attained its highest perfection and Gandhi had devoted his life to the service of humanity.

Srinibas Shastri and Wadia also supported the proposal. Wadia said that he was not only an admirer of Gandhi but a follower as well. He then openly declared that one aspect of Gandhi's service

to India was his social work and his work was like that of a social servant.

Gandhi in taking the chair said:

"If I want to hear music, I must come to Bengal. If I want to listen to poetry, I must come to Bengal India is contained in Bengal, but not Bengal in India. I heard some Marwari boys singing songs. It was like jargon. I told them to associate with the Bengalis." Then he proceeded to deliver the Presidential lecture:

"I thank you for the honour you have conferred upon me. I was totally unprepared for the invitation to preside over the deliberations of this assembly. I do not know that I am fitted for the task. Having fixed views about the use of Hindi at national gathering, I am always declined to speak in English. And I felt that the time was not ripe for me to ask to be allowed to deliver the presidential speech in Hindi. Moreover I have not much faith in conference. Social service to be effective has to be rendered without noise. It is best performed when the left hand know not what the right is doing. Sir Gilbert's work told because nobody knew it. He could not be spoiled by praise or held back by blame. Would that our services were of this nature! Holding such views, it was not without considerable hesitation and misgiving that I obeyed the summons of the reception committee. You will, therefore, pardon me if you find in me a candid critic rather than an enthusiast carrying the conference to its goal with confidence and assurance.

"It seems to me then that I cannot do better than draw attention to some branches of social service which we have hitherto more or less ignored.

"The greatest service we can render society is to free ourselves and it from the superstitious regard we have learnt to pay to the learning of the English language. It is the medium of instruction in our schools and colleges. It is becoming the lingua franca in our country. Our best thoughts are expressed in it. Lord Chelmsford hopes that it will soon take place of the mother tongue in high families. This belief in the necessity of English training has enslaved us. It has unfitted us for true national service. Were it not for force of habit, we could not fail to see that, by reason of English being the medium of instruction, our intellect has been segregated, we have been isolated from the masses, the best mind of the nation has become gagged and the masses have not received the benefit of the new ideas we have received. We have been engaged these past sixty years in memorizing strange words and their pronunciation instead, of assimilating facts. In the place of building upon the foundation, training received from our parents, we have almost



unlearned it. There is no parallel to this in history. It is a national tragedy. The first and the greatest social service we can render is to revert to our vernaculars, to restore Hindi to its natural place as the national language and being carrying on all our provincial proceedings in our respective vernaculars and national proceedings in Hindi. We ought not to rest till our schools and colleges give us instruction through the vernaculars. It ought not to be necessary even for the sake of our English friends to have to speak in English. Every English civil and military officer has to know Hindi. Most English merchants learn it because they need it for their business. The day must soon come when our legislature will debate national affairs in the vernaculars or Hindi, as the case may be. Hitherto the masses have been strangers to their proceedings. The vernacular papers have tried to undo the mischief a little. But the task was beyond them. The *Patrika* reverses its biting sarcasm, *The Bengalee* its learning, for ears tuned to English. In this ancient land of cultured thinkers, the presence in our midst of a Tagore or a Bose or a Ray ought not to excite wonder. Yet the painful fact is that there are so few of them. You will forgive me if I have carried too long on a subject which, in our opinion, may hardly be treated as an item of social service. I have however taken the liberty of mentioning the matter prominently suffers materially owing to this radical defect in our system of education.

“Coming to more familiar items of social service, the list is appalling. I shall select only those of which I have any knowledge.

“Work in times of sporadic distress as famine and floods is no doubt necessary and most praiseworthy. But it produces no permanent results. There are fields of social service in which there are no renown but which may yield lasting results.

“In 1914, Cholera, fever and plague together claimed 4639,663 victims. If so many had died fighting on the battle-field during the War that is at present devastating Europe, we would have covered ourselves with glory and loves of Swaraj would need no further argument in support of their cause. As it is 4,639,663 have died a lingering death unmourned and their dying has brought us nothing but discredit. A distinguished Englishman said the other day that Englishmen did all the thinking for us whilst we sat supine. He added that most Englishmen basing their opinions on their English experience presented impossible or costly remedies for the evils they investigated. There is much truth in the above statement. In other countries, reformers have successfully grappled with epidemics. Here Englishmen have tried and failed. They have

thought among Western lines, ignoring the vast differences, climate and other, between Europe and India. The doctors and Physicians have practically done nothing. I am sure that half a dozen medical men of the front rank dedicating their lives to the work of eradicating the triple curse would succeed where Englishmen have failed. I venture to suggest that the way lies not through finding out cures but through finding or rather applying preventative methods. I prefer to use the participle “applying”, for I have it on the aforementioned authority that to drive out plague (and I add Cholera and malaria) is absurdly simple. There is no conflict of opinion as to the preventive methods. We simply do not apply them. We have made up our minds that the masses will not adopt them. There could be no greater calumny uttered against them. If we would but stoop to conquer, they can be easily conquered. The truth is that we expect the government to do the work. In my opinion, in this matter, the Government cannot lead; they can follow and help if we could lead. Here, then is work enough for our doctors and army of workers to help them. I note that you in Bengal are working somewhat in this direction. I may state that a small but earnest band of volunteers is at the present moment engaged in doing such work in Champaran. They are posted in different villages. There they teach the village children, they give medical aid to the sick and they give practical lessons in hygiene to the village folk by cleaning their wells and roads and showing them how to treat human excreta. Nothing can yet be predicted as to results as the experiment is in its infancy. This conference may successfully appoint a committee of doctors who would study rural conditions on the spot and draw up a course instructions for the guidance of workers and of the people at large.

“Nothing perhaps affords such splendid facility to every worker, whole time or otherwise, for effective service as the relief of agony through which the 3rd class railway passengers are passing. I feel keenly about this grievance not because I am in it, but I have gone to it as I have felt keenly about it. This matter affects millions of our poor and middle-class countrymen. This helpless toleration of every inconvenience and insult is visibly deteriorating the nation, even as the cruel treatment to which we have subjected the so-called depressed classes has made them indifferent to the laws of personal cleanliness and the very idea of self-respect. What else but downright degradation can await those who have to make a scramble always like mad animals for seats in a miserable compartment, who have to answer and curse before they can speak through the window in order to get standing room, who have to wallow in



dirt during their journey, who are served their food like dogs and eat it like them, who have ever to bend before those who are physically stronger than the and who ,being packed like sardines in compartments, have to get such sleep as they can in sitting posture for nights together? Railway servants swear at them, cheat them. On the Howrah-Lahore service, our friends from Kabul fill to the brim the cup of the misery of the third class travelers. They become lords of the compartments they enter. It is not possible for anyone to resist them. They swear at you on the slightest pretext, exhaust the whole of the obscene vocabulary of Hindi language. They do not hesitate to be labour you if you retort in any way oppose them. They usurp the best seats and insist on stretching themselves full length even in crowded compartments. No compartment is deemed too crowded for them to enter. The travelers patiently bear all their awful impertinence out of sheer helplessness. They would if they could, knock down the man who dared to swear at them as do these Kabulis. But they are physically no match for the Kabulis and every Kabuli consider himself more than a match for any number of travelers from the plains. This is not right. The effect of this terrorising on the national character cannot but be debating. We the educated few ought to deliver the travelling public from this scourge or forever renounce our claim to speak on its behalf or to guide it. I believe the Kabulis to be amenable to reason. They are God-fearing people. If you know their language, you can successfully appeal to their good sense. But they are spoilt children of nature. Crowds among us have used their undoubted physical strength for our nefarious purposes. And they have now come to think that they can treat poor as they chose and consider themselves above the law of the land. Here is work enough for social service. Volunteers for this class of work can board trains and educate the people to sense their duty, call in guards and other officials in order to remove over-crowding, see that passengers leave and board trains without a scramble. It is clear that until the Kabulis can be patiently taught to behave themselves, they ought to have compartment all to themselves and they ought not to be permitted to enter any other compartment. With the exception of providing additional plant, every one of the other evils attendant on railway travelling ought to be immediately redressed. It is no answer that we have suffered the wrong so long. Perspective rights cannot accrue to wrongs.

“No less important is the problem of the depressed classes. To lift them from the position to which Hindu society has reduced them is to remove

a big blot on Hinduism. The present treatment of these classes is a sin against religion and humanity.

“But the work requires service of the highest order. We shall make little headway by merely throwing schools at them. We must change the attitude of the masses and of orthodoxy. I have already shown that we have cut themselves adrift from both. We do not react on them. We can do so only if we can speak to them in their own language. An Anglicized India cannot speak to them with effect. If we believe in Hinduism, we must approach them in the Hindu fashion. We must do *tapasya* and keep our Hinduism undefiled. Pure and enlightened orthodoxy must be matched against superstitious and ignorant orthodoxy. To restore to their proper status a fifth of our total population is a task worthy of any social service organization.

“The *Bustees*(Slums) of Calcutta and the Chawls of Bombay badly demand the devoted services of hundred of social workers .They send our infants to an early grave and promote vice, degradation and filth.

“Apart from fundamental evil arising out of our defective system of education, I have hitherto dealt with evils calling for service among the masses. The classes perhaps demand no less attention than the masses. It is my opinion that all evils like diseases are symptoms of the same evil or disease. They appear various by being refracted through different media. The root evil is loss of true spirituality brought about through causes I cannot examine from this platform. We have lost the robust faith of our forefathers in the absolute efficacy of *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (love) and *brahmacharya* (self-restraint). We certainly believe in them o an extent. They are the best policy but we may deviate from tem if our untrained reason suggests deviation. We have no faith enough to feel that, though the present outlook seems bleak, if we follow the dictates of truth or love or exercise self-restraint, the ultimate result must be sound. Men whose spiritual vision has become blurred mostly look to the present rather than conserve the future good. We will render the greatest social service that will reinstate us in our ancient spirituality. But humble men that we are ,it is enough for us if we recognise the loss and ,by such ways as are open to us ,prepare the way for the man who will infect us with his power and enable us to feel clearly through our reason.

“Looking then at the classes I find that our Rajahs and Maharajahs squander their resources after so called useless sport and drink. I was told the other day that the cocaine habit sapping the nation’s manhood and that, like the drink habit, it was on the increase and in its effect more deadly than drink. It



is impossible for a social worker to blind himself to the evil. We dare not ape the West. We are a nation that has lost its prestige and its self-respect. Whilst a tenth of our population is living on the verge of starvation, we have no time for indulging ourselves. What the west may do with impurity is likely in our case to prove our ruin. The evils that are corroding the higher strata of society are difficult for an ordinary worker to tackle. They have acquired a certain degree of respectability. But they ought not to be beyond the reach of this Conference.

“Equally important is the question of the status of women, both Hindu and Mahomedans. Are they or they not to play their full part in the plan of regeneration alongside their husband? They must be enfranchised. They can no longer be treated either as doll or slaves without the social body remaining in a condition of social paralysis. And here again, I would venture to suggest to the reformer that the way to women’s freedom is not through education, but through the change of attitude on the part of men and corresponding action. Education is necessary, but it must follow the freedom. We dare not wait for literary education or restore our womanhood to its proper state. Even without literary education, our women are as cultured as any on the face of the earth. The remedy largely lies in the hands of husbands.

“It makes my blood boil as I wander through the country and watch lifeless and fleshless oxen, with their ribs sticking through their skins, carrying loads or ploughing our fields. To improve the breed of our cattle, to rescue them from the cruelty practiced on them by their cow-worshipping masters and to save them from the slaughter-house is to solve the half the problem of our poverty....We have educated the people to humane use of their cattle and plead with the Government to conserve the pasture of the country. Protection of the cows is an economic necessity. It cannot be brought about by force. It can only be achieved by an appeal to the finer feelings of our English friends and our Mahomedan countrymen to save the cow from the slaughter-house. This question involves the overhauling of the management of our *pinjarpoles* and cow protection societies. A proper solution of this very difficult problem means establishment of perfect concord between Hindus and Mahomedans and an end of *Bakr-i-Id* riots.

“I have glanced at the literature kindly furnished at my request by the several languages who are rendering admirable social service. I note that some have included in their programme many of the items mentioned by me. All the Leagues and non-sectarian and they have as their members the

most distinguished men and women in the land. The possibilities for services of a far-reaching character are therefore great. But if the work is to leave its impress on the nation, we must have workers who are prepared, in Mr.Gokhale’s words, to dedicate their lives to the cause .Give me much workers and I promise they will rid the land of all the evils that afflict it.”¹¹

After Gandhi’s speech Sarala Devi read a paper on social service in the Punjab and briefly narrated her experience in that connection. Besides Pandit Gokarannath Misra, as the representative of Gokhale Representative Brotherhood, Lucknow and two Ceylonese representative like J.P.Mehta and D.Silva shared their problems which needed attention .¹²

In the conference Gandhi placed the following proposal which was seconded by Maharaja of Nattor and supported by M.R.Jayakar:

“That this conference is of opinion that the measures adopted by the Government and certain associations for the education and elevation of depressed classes have served the purpose of drawing public attention to their detrimental influence on the general progress of the country. But in the opinion of this conference, the measures hitherto adopted are quite inadequate to meet these evils. This conference, therefore, urges upon the government and social Reform bodies (1) to provide greater facilities for the education of the depressed classes, and (2) to enforce equality of treatment in all public institutions so as to remove the prejudice and disabilities of untouchableness.”¹³

In the evening Gandhi went to Jorashanko on invitation of Poet Tagore to watch a drama, named *Dak Ghar* or *Post Office* written and performed by Rabindranath himself. In a letter dated December 28, 1917 to Amol Chnadra Home, Poet Rabindranath Tagore confessed that as per wishes of Abanindranath Tagore and Gaganemdranath Tagore Congress leaders were invited to watch the drama and he invited Amol Home also. Kalidas Nag has also written so in his diary. Besant, Malaviya, and Tilak also went to *Bichitra*, the poet’s house, to enjoy the drama. The drama was so nicely performed and the acting was so beautiful that Malaviya was moved by it and became emotional, his eyes were filled with tears and Tilak stared at the stage. Besant watched it with keen interest and Gandhi with rapt attention without spending a single word.¹⁴

Agriculturists and Gandhi:

A Conference of the agriculturists was held for the first time on December 30, 1917 in the



Muslim League pandal under the presidentship of Chittaranjan Das. No less than five thousand people participated in the proceeding. C.R.Das addressed the gathering and said that though he was not an agriculturist himself he had heard of their troubles and grievances wherever he had gone. He would not certainly try to please the rich alone and he had never done so. His heart always ached for the poor though he knew he had not done his duty thoroughly towards the poor in the past. He had however, began to atone for his sin and he would devote himself to the service of the poor and go atoning for his past neglect. It was very happy sign that so many thousands of agriculturists and their friends and sympathizers were present in the meeting and he hoped that by their pointed action the agriculturists would gain their ends. The peasants must not think that they were lawyer in any way that the others. The peasants were the real masters of the situation. The country would never rise unless the lot of the peasants was improved. Owing to an urgent engagement elsewhere he left the meeting and thereafter Col. U.N. Mukherjee presided over the meeting.

When the first resolution of the meeting was going to be taken up Mahatma Gandhi along with Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya entered the pandal with several other followers amid loud shouts of 'Bande Mataram' and 'Allaho Akbar.' As they had other very urgent engagements the President requested Mathamaji to say something to encourage the agriculturists. The president in doing so remarked that it was most fortunate that in their very first conference they were favoured with the presence of such great men like Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Malaviya.

Gandhi then said that agriculture had been the principal occupation of the Indians and that if it was a most honourable profession. He confessed that he had worked among agriculturists and knew all their wants, grievances, complaints and needs. He, would, however, very soon take to agriculture himself and try to do what he could to improve the lot of the peasantry. He sincerely expected that the peasants would improve their conditions. As he was scheduled to go to another place he made his speech very short.¹⁵

Gandhi in the National Language Conference:

The National Language Conference was held on the same day (December 30, 1917) at 8 a.m. in the Alfred Theatre building. Bal Gangadhar Tilak presided over the conference. The Hall was packed up with visitors from different provinces of India. Gandhi along with Madan Mohan Malaviya,

Sarojini Naidu, Shivaprasad Gupta attended the meeting. Tilak, in a long but instructive and interesting speech, said that a common language was the most essential elements in nation building, and as such India should have a national Common language, especially at a time when she was busily engaged in working at the problem of her salvation.¹⁶ At the meeting Gandhi urged on learning Hindi and said it would have been a great advantage if Lokamanya Tilak spoke in Hindi. He advised Tilak to learn Hindi like Lord Dufferin and Lady Chelmsford. Even he cited the example of Queen Victoria who learnt Hindi. He said, "It is my submission to Malaviyaji that he should see to it that, at the Congress next year, no speeches are made in any language except Hindi. My complaint is that, at the Congress yesterday, he did not speak in Hindi."¹⁷ The Meeting resolved to have a common language in India. In presence of people from different provinces of the country, Gandhi proposed to take Hindi as common language which was seconded by Raibahadur Jadunath Majumder and supported by Modan Mohan Malaviya, Sarojini Naidu, M.K. Acharya and N.C. Srinivasachariar.¹⁸ In his proposal Gandhi argued that as Hindi was widely used and understood by a large section of Indians, it was practicable to consider Hindi as a common language. It was also resolved to form a committee of representatives of different provinces from among the gentlemen present with the power to submit a report at the next session of the conference to be held at Delhi in the later part of 1918. Tilak was elected as President of this committee, Jatindranath Chowdhury as secretary, Durga Prasad Shukla as assistant secretary and Gandhi, M.M. Malaviya, Sarojini Naidu, Shivaprasad Gupta and others as members.¹⁹ It is mention worthy here that When Gandhi visited Shantiniketan (the Abode of Peace) of Rabindranath Tagore in 1945 for the last time, he emphasized on Hindi as an official language of the Visva-Bharati.

On the same day Gandhi attended a dinner party thrown in honour of Mahammad Ali Jinnah by Chittaranjan Das at the Orient Club. Several distinguish men of Bengal and other provinces were invited there and they were from different communities like Hindu, Muslims, Parsees, Christians who dined together. Gandhi was also invited there.²⁰

A Humanitarian Meeting

A public meeting under the auspices of the Bnegal and Bombay Humanitarian League was held on Monday morning, December 31, 1917 at the



University Institute, College Square, Mahatma Gandhi presided over the meeting. There was a good gathering and the name of Gandhi was sufficient to attract a pretty large audience. Nilananda Mukherjee proposed the name of Gandhi to the chair and Gandhi delivered his lecture in English. He regretted for the lack of understanding and knowledge of Hindi by Indians. Everybody was eager to do national service but he opined that the Nation could not be served without a national language. He regretted for the suicidal act of his Bengali friends by 'omitting to use their national tongue' without which no one could hear the masses. In that sense, the wide use of Hindi was expected to come within the purview of humanitarianism.

Gandhi elucidated another form of humanitarianism, i.e., sacrifice of animals before Goddess and slaughter for food. He said, "The Hindu *Shrastras* do not really advocate animal sacrifice. This current practice is one of the many things which have passed under the name of Hinduism. The Hindu religion aptly finds expression in the two aphorisms – 'harmless is the best form of religion' and 'there is no force higher than truth' and these principles are incompatible with the cruel practice of animal sacrifice."²¹

Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya then rose and in an eloquent speech in Hindi deprecated the sacrifice of animals before goddesses. We have no right to kill God's creatures. The meeting came to close at 11 a.m.

A Jain Conference of Setambar Sect was held on the same day of December 31, in the compound of Paresnath temple near Manicktala. A large number of people of Jain and Marwari communities were present there. Gandhi attended the conference. He asked the people assembled there to adopt a friendly attitude towards different Jain sects as that was the cult of the Jain religion.²²

Gandhi in All India Muslim League Conference:

The tenth session of the All India Muslim League Conference commenced on December 31, 1917, Sunday, in the city at a specially erected *sahamiyana* on Haliday Street. The conference continued for three days. A large number of people, nearly two thousand, participated in the conference. Distinguished leaders like M.A. Jinnah, Omar Sobhani, Yakub Hasan Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew, M.A. Ansari Fazlul Huq, Moulabi Abul Kashem took part in this conference. The organizers kept the chair of the President-elect vacant. The session was remarkable for the presence of Abadi Bano Begum, mother of Mohammad Ali.²³

Many Congress leaders also attended the conference. Mahatma Gandhi along with Kasturba Gandhi, his wife, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Annie Besant, Sarojni Naidu, Srinivas Shastri, Malaviya, Tez Bahadur Sapru, and Horniman visited the League Conference. Gandhi visited the conference in first two days. The second day's sitting started in the morning at 11 o'clock on December 31. Fazlul Huq moved a resolution asking for release of Muhammad Ali which was supported by Mahatma Gandhi, Saifuddin Kitchlew, Mahomed Safi and Zahur Ahmed.²⁴ When requested by the President of the conference to say something to the audience Gandhi spoke on the resolution about the arrest of Ali Brothers. The League in the conference resolved to initiate a campaign of constitutional agitation in India as well as in Britain for the release of the Ali Brothers.²⁵ Gandhi lamented for the futility of paper resolution and appealed to the people assembled there for solid work. He wanted everybody, irrespective of Hindu or Muslim, to ask the Government to intern them also if the Ali Brothers were not released. He assured them that Hindus were with them in the agitation for their release.²⁶

Gandhi left for Bombay on January 31, 1917.

Epilogue

Gandhi had developed a frank friendship with Bengal and its people. But at the beginning it was not so smooth. In 1915 when he came to Kolkata for the first time after returning from South Africa he started to draw the attention of the citizen of this city. Gradually Gandhi was able to attract more people especially after Champaran Satyagraha in April, 1917. In December 1917 when Gandhi reached Calcutta he was widely reported in the newspapers in comparison to earlier times. Not only that people became wild to get a glimpse of Gandhi, even they broke into the hall of the Calcutta University Institute where Gandhi was expected to deliver a lecture. This kind of enthusiasm on the part of the people of Calcutta was inconspicuous earlier. Next time when Mahatma came to Calcutta in September 1920 to attend the special session of Congress, he was at the centre of attraction. In this session his proposal for Non-Co-operation movement was accepted and the Indian national movement entered into a new arena of struggle.

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