

Meeting the Mahatma

In 1921, Mahatma Gandhi visited Calcutta to launch his Non-Cooperation Movement. He was a guest in the house of the famous barrister, Chittaranjan Das, who had given up his flourishing practice to join Gandhiji's movement.

We were already imbued with Gandhiji's novel approach to securing independence for India and the thought of meeting him in person filled us with great excitement. Several of my friends and I took permission from the College authorities to pay a visit to the Mahatma.

On the day of our first visit, we went over to Shri C. R. Das's house after our class hours. We were taken to a big room on the second floor where the Mahatma was sitting. There were other girl students present and with us joining them, the number must have gone up to about hundred. Gandhiji had specifically asked to address girl students on that particular afternoon. He advised us to keep our studies on hold for sometime and join his struggle for freedom. As we sat listening to him, mesmerised, we suddenly realised that it was already 6 pm. Chittaranjan Das's younger daughter served the Mahatma's frugal evening meal of bread and milk while he continued with his discourse.

We explained to Gandhiji that our hostel rules were not flexible and we could not stay out beyond 6 pm. He informed us that there would be a big meeting for women the next day in the same venue and asked us to attend.

Next day, we reached the house at 2.00 pm. The meeting was held outdoors and there were not too many people present.

Gandhiji called the two daughters of C. R. Das and P. K. Roy to his side and told the ladies present, "These two girls have donated their jewellery to the cause of *Swaraj* (self rule). I request all of you to join the *Swaraj* movement as they have done."

The two young girls publicly took off all their jewellery and placed them in the Mahatma's hands. They were wearing tussar sarees and suddenly looked austere without the glittering gold. The Mahatma, then asked the assembled women to contribute to his cause according to their capacity. I remember students donating whatever they could.

The Mahatma's inspirational speech touched us all. He motivated us to such an extent that everyone started to think in what way they could contribute to his mass movement to free India from the shackles of British rule.

After meeting Gandhiji, our focus shifted from studies to the fight for freedom. Some of us even thought of giving up studies and going back home. That same year, on hearing that Gandhiji was going to visit Assam, my sister and I came back home. He was accompanied on this trip by two brothers, Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali. This open emphasis on bonding between Hindus and Muslims created a mixed response in Assam. Some felt it augured well but others remained sceptical. But Gandhiji himself firmly believed that as India was inhabited mostly by people of these two faiths, empathy between them was necessary. If they did not unite in the struggle for Independence, then freedom would always remain an elusive dream.

When Gandhiji visited Dibrugarh we were at home, having given up our studies for sometime. The day the public meeting took place, no housewife could be stopped from attending. Perhaps, it was the first time in the history of Assam that there was a meeting held where women were allowed to attend freely. Unfortunately for my mother, my father ran a high fever on that day and she could not leave him unattended. She was heartbroken for missing the chance to see Gandhiji in person. The rest of us all went to the

meeting. What I saw and heard on that fateful day remains imprinted in my memory. Gandhiji sat on the dais with Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali flanking him. While he spoke in Hindi, Shri Tarunram Phookan stood nearby and translated the speech into Assamese. Gandhiji's simple but effective solutions to social and political evils cast a spell on us. It was as if a messiah had come to deliver us from our woes.

The next morning, my brother took my mother and me to meet Gandhiji at Shri Prasanna Barooah's residence. Shri Barooah was an eminent tea planter and Gandhiji's host in Dibrugarh. There were an assorted lot of people present, all from different faiths. Shri Barooah introduced me to Gandhiji as one of the few women graduates of the time and informed him that I had come back home to take an active part in the struggle for freedom. Gandhiji promptly told a Marwari gentleman, "If this young girl can respond so positively to the attainment of *Swaraj*, don't you think you all should also join the Non-Cooperation Movement?"

The Dibrugarh Congress Committee was formed after the Mahatma left. I was made the Secretary of the womens' wing. My duties entailed going to the villages and creating an awareness among the women about the freedom movement and ensuring their active participation.

A horse carriage was arranged to carry me around with a volunteer - escort named Kamaluddin. He later became employed as a boiler superintendent in Shillong.

My parents did not approve of my travelling all over the countryside attending meetings. My mother voiced her displeasure strongly but as always, my brother championed my cause. He wanted me to dedicate myself to the service of the country at this crucial time. I understood my mother's feelings on this matter. No guardian in those days would willingly allow an unmarried girl to roam about freely even for a great cause. At this point, my aunt, Deviprobha Dutta came to my rescue. She assured my mother that she would accompany me everywhere as she fully supported the fight for

freedom. We were also accompanied at times by the wife of Shri Ganesh Dutta, a devoted Congress worker.

I started public speaking at this point of my life. In certain places I had to talk against untouchability. I must admit that there was a conflict within me while speaking on such a sensitive subject as I was myself not yet absolutely convinced about this issue which was so close to Gandhiji's heart.

It was not as if everyone in Assam was immediately transformed by Gandhiji's revolutionary concept of social equality. There was a time when in a village named Tengakhat, we faced a volatile situation while trying to spread the Mahatma's teachings. We had reached the place early in the morning. Upon entering one of the houses, we found several women making preparations for weaving. There was an elderly lady present among them. The moment I took out the register book and declared our intention of making them members of the Mahatma's mass movement, she became belligerent and screamed at us, brandishing a dao, "Get out of here immediately or I will chop you to pieces." My aunt was a little further away from me. She now came rushing forward and forced me to leave the house, saying, "Come away dear, or they might create trouble. We cannot trust them." I too realised that these people had no faith in Gandhiji's mission. It would take a long time for such mindsets to change. The task before us suddenly seemed formidable.

The first weaving centre for women was opened in Amolapatti, Dibrugarh. The ladies of the neighbourhood responded by coming there after lunch everyday. The premise was given free of rent by the late Golap Duara for the purpose. Gradually, several other community centres for weaving were opened elsewhere in the town. Women who had never left their houses now came out to join these centres and share their skills after they heard Gandhiji's soul stirring speeches. They felt privileged to be an integral part of the freedom movement, to contribute whatever they could for the nation.

The Non-Cooperation Movement engendered a great response in people from all walks of life. College students suspended their studies to join the Mahatma. Eminent lawyers such as the late Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, the late Tarun Ram Phookan, Rohini Kumar Chowdhury and Gopinath Bordoloi gave up their lucrative practices to work full time in the struggle for freedom. People in the Government service also left their jobs to give an added thrust to the gathering momentum of the movement.

In Dibrugarh, my brother Rajanikanta Baruah, Lakheswar Baruah, Prasanna Kumar Barooah and Ganesh Dutta formed a core group with other members of the Congress Committee and determinedly set out to spread Gandhiji's message of *Ahimsa* or non-violence. The British Government retaliated by arresting and imprisoning the participants of the Non-Cooperation Movement. Throughout Assam, hundreds of Congress workers courted arrest willingly.