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Gandhi's search for HARMONY IN NOAKHALI

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From the period of his lifetime and particularly in the aftermath of his assassination, Gandhi's philosophies have been the subject of deep scholarly discussion. With renewed interest and a fresh set of questions, historians routinely revisit how he understood the empire, anti-colonial politics, and nonviolence within the context of the Indian nationalist movement. This explains how Gandhi's relevance in the present and historians' interest in the past intertwine irrevocably and permanently. However, one significant aspect of his thoughts that remains relatively unexplored is how he engaged with village communities to unravel the longstanding Hindu-Muslim communal tensions. This is challenging because not everything he wrote and said was included in his collected works, signifying that robust ethnographic work is needed in the regions he visited to retrieve different spectrums of his thoughts as well as collective memories from the people in those districts. Let us return to Noakhali to understand Gandhi.

Just before the colonial departure, Gandhi turned up at the villages—often described as the soul of the nation—that had been burned to ashes due to sectarian violence, particularly in Bengal and Punjab, which resulted in large-scale displacement and ensuing migration to the other side of the newly created border. It unnerved Gandhi more than anything else that riots, a phenomenon that had previously only occurred in cities, were now seeping into villages that were considered sacred and untainted. I will throw some light on the plans and procedures that Gandhi adopted to restore communal harmony, particularly in Noakhali, to stop the pendulum of communal violence that was spiralling out of control.

To secure the trust of Hindus and Muslims whose relations had been broken into pieces with the thrust of repugnance and communal flame, he provided an answer from a rural setting in Noakhali, East Bengal, to the rest of India on how a situation like communal riots should be handled: through placating anger and madness as well as holding together both Hindu and Muslim in one, single, and united community.

The pilgrimage of peace arrived in Noakhali on November 7, 1946, where Hindus were subjected to communal oppression and displacement as a result of the Calcutta Riots, where violence had been inflicted on Muslims. Putting everything aside, he set out on a task that required community engagement and religious tolerance. On top of that, the situation required a personality that people could blame for everything that had gone wrong between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, yet who could also bring light into the darkness.

As riots simultaneously erupted in Noakhali and in Bihar, Gandhi could only travel to one location at a time. He could easily have visited Bihar, a predominantly Hindu area. And yet, a practising and believing Hindu, Gandhi decided to journey to a Muslim-dominated Noakhali to realise where he stood in terms of his nonviolence. This was one of many atypical moves he made throughout his political career. But then again, he understood that a single misstep would jeopardise Hindu and Muslim reconciliation.

Gandhi was at his finest; his time spent listening to Hindus and Muslims in Noakhali enabled him to gain insight into the region and its people. He employed his entourage to navigate the nooks and crannies of the villages. By intermingling with the Muslim community as a Hindu, he felt that such a display would deflect the course of communal violence. Gandhi also sought to help Hindus understand and trust him, assuring them that they could return home safely. As a minority, Hindus sought refuge in their relatives' houses and in makeshift camps set up across the Ramganj police station.

Map of the 47 villages in Noakhali visited by Gandhi.

Aside from his ongoing work with villagers, he also debunked some of the views that were believed to be responsible for triggering situations like riots. First and foremost, the very idea that he confronted was the collective assumption of retaliation, which received a tacit acceptance as justifiable among both Hindus and Muslims in Bihar and in Noakhali. The twin riots were therefore retaliatory violence and took the shape of revenge on the minority of either community.

A glance at history reveals how much 'revenge' has played a central role in the development of civilisations. Gandhi challenged the notion of retaliation in any form by underscoring that it was cowardice, not bravery, on the part of the goondas (delinquents) who associated with this terrifying act.

While in Noakhali, he pointed to Bihar: "The people of Bihar did and brought disgrace upon themselves and India. They have set the clock of India's independence back," meaning that killing a mere handful of Muslims amid a Hindu majority was the conduct of cowards. He also held that, "If the Bihari wanted to retaliate, they could have gone to Noakhali... But for a thousand Hindus to fall upon a handful of Musselman men, women, and children—living in their midst is no retaliation but just brutality."

Then he turned to Noakhali in a similar fashion and had Muslims understand that resorting to violence against Hindus was not courage but merely joining the crowd. Likewise, the houses that had been laid desolate or those where people had been abducted, forcibly converted, and forcibly married were not supported by any religion. Holding the problem of both communities in one hand, he asked for religious tolerance, peace, and confidence in the other.

The second issue pertained to local Muslims who anticipated that Gandhi would also address their problems, particularly poverty and a poor communication system. Throughout his entire journey, Gandhi met several leading Muslim political personalities, particularly Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy and Shamsuddin Ahmed, with whom he discussed his goals at great length. He, however, felt that no undertakings would bear fruit without the force of ordinary people being at the forefront. To incorporate them into his plan, Gandhi made an emblematic statement: "I have come to stay here with you as one of you.... I claim to be an Indian and therefore a Bengali even as I am a Gujrati."

This speaks volumes about who Gandhi was and how he strove to transcend the religious barriers that hindered communal harmony. If he could reside in a Muslim house, it would be possible for the rest of the Hindus to get along with Muslims. A symbolic exposé was needed, and whatever rhetorical move it may seem, it leaves no confusion about how he stitched the communities back together after riots tore them apart.

Gandhi also drew upon the Khilafat Movement as a historical precedent for Hindu-Muslim alliance and mentioned his prior collaboration with the Ali Brothers for a lasting peace in Noakhali. Muslims, thus, were not adversaries but allies. He engaged with people about their understanding of the Holy Quran and was shocked that so many ordinary people could not relate to it. Gandhi took this as an opportunity to connect with Muslims by teaching the content of the Quran.

Shamsuddin Sahed, for instance, agreed with Gandhi's quoting of a verse from the Quran which emphasised that faith cannot be forced upon anyone. He repeatedly emphasised that nowhere in Islam does it allow such acts as had taken place in Noakhali. To pull them into one integrated community, Gandhi reflected on Hindus' and Muslims' coexistence, their shared memories of the past, and their struggles against colonial mistreatment, and even ruled out any fear that painted Muslims as inherently antagonistic to Hindus. He reiterated that Hindus and Muslims were part of the same community and would continue to be so in the future, regardless of colonial departure or even if a physical border came into being.

Gandhi and Noakhali

Noakhali has become synonymous with Gandhi following his visit to rural villages in East Bengal. I suggest that Noakhali completed Gandhi's life and philosophies, and vice versa. It has been eighty years since Gandhi walked to forty-seven villages in a flood-ridden area. He had been informed about the situation in this area through letters from Manaranjan Chowdhury in 1938 but was unable to act at that time due to other commitments.

Nearly a decade later, he responded to Noakhali and expressed his willingness to stay there forever, hinting that his presence was still necessary for bringing communities together. From then until now, he has remained a subject of discussion and debate among the villagers. People still fondly remember him through his monument erected in Noakhali and learn the history of the Indian colonial struggle from the collections housed in the Gandhi Ashram Trust Museum, a philanthropic organisation established to commemorate Gandhi.

The trust is rooted in his peaceful philosophy immediately after the communal riots, showing how all walks of life welcomed Gandhi with open arms. The memories are still vivid in the community, passed down through time. He was seventy-seven years old and went to every site where riots had flared up, forging an alliance between Hindus and Muslims. This took a huge toll on his physical health: while travelling to Chandpur by boat, he became ill but persevered to finish his plan. Moreover, despite the poor rural communication system and the precarious nature of Indian politics, nothing stopped him from testing his nonviolence.

Muslims flocked to him in great numbers. The Muslim principal of Chowmuhani Government College, Taffazzal Hossain, met him and later received a letter from Gandhi. Hossain wrote in his autobiography *Sritikana* (*Bits of Memories*) that Gandhi was equally saddened by Noakhali as he was by Bihar, due to the sectarian strife in both places. Regardless, whether he went to Noakhali or Bihar, it would not make any difference as long as he addressed the concerns of both places while remaining in one area. Hossain writes that Gandhi was assassinated for his impartiality towards Muslims. His objectives were to make both Hindus and Muslims more nonviolent in their protests.

Collection of Gandhi's personal items on display at the Gandhi Ashram in Noakhali, photographed by the author on June 4, 2022.

To respond to a question about security and self-confidence among minorities, Gandhi firmly insisted that people could lead a perfect life by learning to live bravely. He tried to instil courage in the hearts of displaced Hindus. This statement pointed to the fact that Hindus intended to leave East Bengal, which Gandhi said would be a shame for both Hindus and Muslims.

Hossain also reproduced a brief exchange between Gandhi and Mahavir Tyagi in his book. Tyagi said to Gandhi, "You fought our battles, but in the hour of decision, I find you are not in the picture." Gandhi replied, "Who listens to me today?" (p.91). This quote reveals Gandhi's sadness and loneliness, demonstrating how much he was enduring to ensure that his ideas were communicated. The two men, Gandhi and Tyagi, agreed that even though political leaders did not consistently support him, ordinary people still listened to him.

I want to cite another book, *Mahatma Gandhi in Noakhali*, written by Tofael Ahmed, where he interviewed individuals from Noakhali who witnessed Gandhi.

Tofael (Panchgaon, Noakhali), 1947: Mohandas Karamchand had spent some days and nights holding prayer and peace meetings, during which he invoked and conveyed messages of harmony, brotherhood, and humanity among all communities. I was a student of class V, and the children of my age glanced at Gandhi sitting on the mat on the dais, with no chair or table, under the winter sky. He was a God-sent saviour and saint. Monk-like, Gandhi's words and talks had enlightened the people who were temporarily swept away by bad elements. I saw the Hindus wearing a lungi instead of a dhoti while going to the Panchgaon Bazar. Gandhi came and won the hearts of the people, and communal harmony was restored. (p.6).

Mahbubur Rahman, 1991: Mahatma Gandhi thanked us for having given shelter to the riot-affected Hindus. We did it, although some Muslims did not like it and tried to get us into trouble. I met Gandhi at Ramganj, and he listened to me patiently for thirty minutes. He appreciated my views. I realised Gandhi had a clear conception of all people and regions, and his voice was so mild and melodious. I felt elevated while experiencing a man like Gandhi giving me a full thirty minutes of his time. (p.10).

Bimalendu Bikash Ray Chowdhury, 30 November 1991: I was in class five in 1946 in Hajiganj and heard that Gandhi came to Ramganj. I also learned that Nehru came to Feni, and people threw stones at him. To this Nehru responded, "I have been fighting the British and still continue this fight, and you would not be able to scare me by hurling stones." Ray also noted that Gandhi delivered his final verdict on partition while he was in Noakhali. (p.26).

Conclusion

Gandhi understood that bringing Hindus and Muslims together would be the final option in a period fraught with violence. To root this out, he came to the devastated villages to find a way to test his doctrine. India was infected with a cancer called riots, which led to an unusual bleeding of the Indian body politic. A high dose of the therapeutic regimen of nonviolence was needed in the initial stage to kill the cancer. He was searching for an answer to why people still overlooked nonviolence, which had made his life worth living. He believed it was, and always had been, in the Indian villages that the answer would have to be found. He encountered people in the areas who responded enormously to him as the voice of peace and fraternity.

It was a coincidence that a series of events occurred while Gandhi was in Noakhali. From testing nonviolence to the decision of partition, those four months deserve special treatment to understand the spectrums of his thoughts and experiments, including celibacy. However, nothing was more important than successfully conveying his messages on nonviolence to the people, especially when the political landscape of India was dictated by communal hate and violence.

He also used a simple act of depriving himself—a fast. This act worked better to get his voice heard. He could have done those things elsewhere, and yet the rural villages of Noakhali, one of the most inaccessible areas in India, turned out to be the place for Gandhi. He gave his best effort to prevent people from turning on each other in a communal frenzy during the final hours of independence. He believed that it was the last and greatest experiment of a grassroots movement of nonviolence with the village community. If he could rekindle the lamp of neighbourliness in those villages, their example might inspire the whole nation.

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Mahatma Gandhi on his peace mission, walking through a paddy field during his visit to riot-affected areas in Noakhali, 1946.