

Brahmaputra and Louhitya in Assam; Jamuna, Padma and Meghna (after it joins the Ganga) in Bangladesh. These names are cross-cultural in every way. The river has always been central to the culture of all the countries/regions through which it flows. That is why the river is a living presence in the Beehu songs, marriage songs and other folk songs of the Assamese, in the plaintive notes of the Mishing's Oi-Nitam, in the songs of the boatmen in Bangladesh. Assamese poets from ancient times to the present days—from the unknown poet who wrote an invocation to Louhitya in one of the ninth-century copper-plate inscriptions of King Vanamaladev of Kamrupa, to the modern-day poets and musicians like Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, Bupen Hazarika and Ajit Barua—have recorded the saga of the river in their verse and music.

In my recent novel *Louhitya Sindhu* (written partially at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla), I have endeavoured to pay my homage to that great river saga. The river exists in my book both as a powerful, awesome entity and as a symbol of cultural diversity. Defying all narrow, parochial, sectarian claims, the river constantly inspires one with a vision of infinity, of unity through multiplicity. The deep, mysterious music of the river seems to echo the harmony produced by the intermixing of Aryan and Mongolian strains of culture, of the beliefs of the Vaishnavas, Shaktas, Shaivas, Sufis, Buddhists, Christians and the worshippers of Doyni-Polo (Sun-Moon). There may be ominous signs of attempting to drown that solemn music by the loud, discordant notes of hatred. But, my novel renews my faith in the healing power of the river, in its ability to re-establish harmony in the midst of chaos.

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## Mahatma Gandhi and the U.P. Congress

On 21 October, 1997, the violent proceedings inside the U.P. Legislative Assembly caught the attention of the entire nation. The fittings of the august Council House were ripped apart and microphones were hurled by the legislators at each other. It seemed as if a street riot was being enacted inside the legislative assembly. Amongst the others involved in this sequence of events were the legislators of the Congress party. How did this incident come about? Is it symptomatic of a larger

phenomenon: the growing space for violence in Indian politics?

Sixty years earlier, i.e. in 1937, when the first Congress ministry was in power in the United Provinces (as Uttar Pradesh was then known), the Legislative Assembly was not in session on 21 October. It had adjourned, after completing its business, on 2 October. Two resolutions were passed: one paying tribute to Mahatma Gandhi on his sixty-ninth birthday and the other reiterating the demand for a Constituent Assembly in place of the 1935 Government of India Act. The former resolution was passed unanimously. The Premier (as Chief Ministers were called in those days), Pt. G.B. Pant expressed the opinion that if people all over the world were to accept Gandhian principles and act upon them, 'there will be no such developments as Abyssinia... China or Spain today and a spirit of brotherhood and friendliness will be infused in the people, which will make everybody look for the welfare of all'. He went on to observe that while in the western countries, people had become enemies of each other—with one country wanting to annihilate the other—in India the people, following the Gandhian path, had forged ahead.

Today, we seem to have given up the Gandhian path for the western one of the 1930s. Each political party is hell-bent on annihilating the other. How did this happen? No doubt, there are several contributory factors. Here we shall focus on just one of them, i.e. the undermining of the Gandhian method.

What had rendered the Gandhian method of struggle unique was its commitment to non-violence. The strength of non-violence lay in the fact that it chose the moral terrain to challenge the adversary. It is well known that the strategy of non-violence had confounded the British Raj at all its hierarchical levels—from the Viceroy to the policeman who had to deal with peaceful *satyagrahis*. Of course, non-violence was only a part of the Gandhian method, but, intriguingly it was the principle most questioned and challenged by his critics.

In September 1934, Mahatma Gandhi had himself observed that even after 14 years of trial, non-violence still remained a *policy* with the majority of Congressmen, whereas 'it is a fundamental creed with me'. That this was indeed true, is revealed by the following statement from Jawaharlal Nehru's autobiography (p.84) Non-violence according to him, could not be a 'religion or an unchallengeable creed or dogma. It could only be a policy and a method promising certain results'. Nehru was arguing for a more rational approach. Others like him took the argument further and it was this, along with several other compulsions, which found expression in the formation of the Congress

Socialist Party in 1934.

In the post-1935 period, Congress Socialism became an important force in U.P. politics. Let us see what some of the members of this party had to say about truth and non-violence. The leader in U.P., Acharya Narendra Dev, felt that truth and non-violence were 'noble ideals' and 'every decent man must have high regard for them', but these principles should not be used by the Congress ministry to justify reactionary measures. Asok Mehta, though not a U.P. leader, when asked at an Allahabad CSP gathering in May, 1934, what he would do if someone snatched away his hat, had replied that he would adopt violent methods in order to regain it.

Swami Sahajanand, the Kisan Sabha leader who had a large following in the 1930s had said in a public meeting that Gandhi himself would not let oppression go unresisted, and if during the resistance, violence had to be used, there should be no hesitation. Sahajanand's interpretation of the Gandhian method was no doubt, fairly accurate, but it is significant that he chose to highlight just this one aspect of Gandhism.

M.N. Roy's critique of non-violence was rather incisive. Non-violence, according to him, 'does not allow the movement to grow stage by stage to a point where the movement completely demolishes and overthrows the state and captures power for itself'.

The late 1930s was a period of renewed mass mobilization in many parts of the country, especially the U.P. While the Gandhians concentrated on this constructive work and rural development, Congress Socialists organized unions and fomented strikes in the unorganized urban sector as well as anti-landlord struggles in the rural areas; the Communists concentrated on organized labour especially in Kanpur and the ex-HSRAites like Jogesh Chatterji, Pt. Parmanand and Bhupendranath Sanyal worked among the peasantry, the youth and labour.

Mass mobilization involved considerable rhetorical activity and we shall now look at some of the speeches delivered in the U.P. countryside during these years. Shibbanlal Saksena, the well-respected Congress leader and MLA from Gorakhpur, in a speech at Kanpur in April 1937 talked of the need to 'destroy' the Government which had caused incidents like Jallianwala Bagh. In another speech in June 1939, he advised tenants to kill their *zamindars*. Attacks on, and murders of *zamindars* were reported from Sultanpur, Allahabad and Gorakhpur at this time.

It appears that, as the Congress became increasingly ruralised, the

resort to violence correspondingly became more frequent. Violence was also one of the ways in which the tenants could resist *zamindari* and *taluqdari* oppression, especially in this period, when the proposed U.P. Tenancy Bill had roused the landlords of U.P. to resort to panic-stricken behaviour.

Of course, the U.P. Kisan Sabha did advise the peasants to resist *zamindari* oppression by passive resistance and by boycotting troublesome *zamindars*. In Ballia, for instance, Chiltu Pande had told the *kisans* that if the *zamindars* forcibly ploughed their fields, they should ask an old man of the family to lie down in the field and be killed, so that the authorities would have to arrest the *zamindars* for murder. From several parts of U.P. there were reports of the boycott of *zamindars*. In the Hasanganj and Purwa *tahsils* of Unnao district, the social boycott of *zamindars* was reportedly so effective that the latter found it difficult to get even the services of barbers and washermen. While such boycott was effective in certain areas, it failed in others. In the Lalitpur sub-division of Jhansi, for instance, tenants and agricultural labour had to face daily beatings from *zamindars* when they peacefully resisted the imposition of *begar* (forced labour).

Of course, the typical U.P. peasant especially in the Awadh region, had traditionally suffered oppression and was capable of tolerating and internalizing a great deal of violence. But the 1930s were a transitional stage when they were being made aware of their rights and the prevailing injustices. The fact that the state was now, at least partially, in Congress hands and therefore not likely to defend the big landlord interests as was done in the past [It may be recalled that in U.P., the landlords, whether of Agra or Awadh, had been the traditional allies of the British Government until 1936.] must have given the peasants a greater amount of confidence. Local-level leaders, who may have been partially inspired by Communist ideals, were exhorting them not to suffer oppression quietly. They could either complain to the authorities and be more hopeful of getting justice, or they could resort to retaliatory violence. If they adopted the latter course, however, they would be on the wrong side of the law and even the Congress Ministry would not be able to defend them.

It must be remembered that, ultimately, it was the peaceful constitutional activity in the U.P. legislature which secured more for the U.P. tenant than the violent activism in the countryside. The U.P. Tenancy Act of 1939 gave the peasants of Awadh and Agra hereditary status and placed restrictions on the amount of land a *zamindar* or *taluqdar* could own as *sir*. The process was set in motion which

culminated in the *zamindari* abolition of 1952.

Let us now turn to the anti-imperialist rhetoric in U.P. during the 1930s. Despite Mahatma Gandhi's insistence on removing all violent thoughts from the mind, prominent district-level Congressmen in U.P. had no hesitation in using the rhetoric of violence. Bishambhar Dayal Tripathi of Unnao was a typical case in point. The following speech is reminiscent of the spirit of Chauri-Chaura: 'In this district there are 13 *thanas* and in every *thana* 12 or 13 constables are posted.... In every *thana* the population is about 30,000.... Even if 100 men attack the *thana* they will eventually be successful. There is no difficulty in conquering the British Government.' [Speech delivered on 3 September 1939.]

Tripathi's fellow Congressman from the district, Jata Shankar Shukla, employed more picturesque language: 'Imperialism is now standing on the bank of a river and if a violent push is given the British Government will be swept away.' [Speech at Kanpur on 4 October 1939.]

It is necessary to mention here that both the above-mentioned leaders were followers of Subhas Bose by this time. They were therefore, opposed to Gandhi for his treatment of Bose. Anti-landlordism was thus finding expression in the rhetoric of violence.

However, Bose himself in a speech at Pabna on 5 June 1939, had declared that the Forward Bloc would pursue 'the method of non-violent non-cooperation' even though he had lost confidence in the 'principles and policies of Mahatma Gandhi'. In other words, he intended to practice the Gandhian method on his own. He did so, with rather disastrous consequences in April 1940, when he launched a civil disobedience movement on his own steam. There was very poor attendance at his meetings and those who followed his instructions were immediately arrested. This attempt proved costly for the Forward Bloc because, following this, many members resigned from the Party.

From November 1939 onwards, after the resignation of the Congress ministries, there was a considerable increase in the incidence of violent speeches. In early November, Acharya Kriplani, General Secretary of the AICC, wrote to Mahatma Gandhi that 'anonymous placards had been circulated asking people to cut wires and tear up rails'. Some leaders were arrested, but the speeches continued through 1940. Azamgarh district (in eastern U.P.) reported the maximum number of such speeches wherein references to the take-over of police stations, jails and courts, looting of government treasuries, telegraph and wire-cutting and the smashing of railway lines were mentioned. Other

districts which had a fair share of such speeches were Sultanpur, Gonda, Fatehpur and Muzaffarnagar.

What made this particularly ironic was the fact that, just at this time, Gandhi was issuing instructions for the committees and calling for the resignation of those Congress members who did not want to follow the Gandhian programme.

Yet, this is not to suggest that the U.P. Congress failed to follow Gandhi's instructions. By July 1940, there were 15,200 *satyagrahis* in U.P. compared to 2,765 in Tamilnadu, 1,991 in Bihar and 1,771 in Gujarat. And what was more, the districts of eastern U.P. showed greater enthusiasm for the Gandhian programme than the western districts. As the Individual Satyagraha campaign proceeded through the months of February and March 1941, it was obvious that the U.P. was considerably ahead of the other provinces.

All this reveals that the U.P. had a peculiar propensity for going along with the Gandhian programme even while criticising it and trying to pursue alternative methods. However, one wonders whether, in the long run, this ambiguous approach to the Gandhian principle of non-violence was not counter-productive. While the practice of questioning a leader's methods is a healthy one, opposition for the sake of opposition alone can be rather damaging.

After 1948 there was no one to insist upon the principle of non-violence in everyday life and politics. Gradually as caste-based movements began to gain strength, the principle of non-violence was replaced by violence. Communalism added its own fuel to the fire and the destruction of the Babri Masjid was the culmination of a process of dismantling all that Gandhi represented. Since the Congress organization had been questioning the utility of non-violence for so long, it was natural that it would follow in the footsteps of several other political parties as far as violence was concerned. The incident of 21 October 1997, with which we began this piece, is already indicative of this.

*Postscript:* Since the Congress is now engaged in a process of revamping and revitalization, it would be beneficial for the party to re-examine the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and see whether they can be productively used to build an organizational strategy.

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