

From the Reminiscences of M. O. Mathai

Gandhiji baffled me on several matters:

- 1) Preaching Ram Rajya of Hindu mythology. Millions of Muslims and other minorities had no use for Rama Rajya. They became alienated by Gandhiji's continued preaching of Rama Rajya.
- 2) Preaching of cow worship and incessant writing about it in the *Harijan*. Apart from Muslims and other minorities, as well as some sections of Harijans and tribal people and adivasis, who were alienated by this, millions of educated Hindus wanted to worship nothing or at least something better than a cow.
- 3) Preaching of celibacy for married couples. Few except Morarji Desai and some others were converted to this. Some, who practised it, eventually gave up; and some developed psychological problems.
- 4) Advocating support for the Khilafat movement in India. This was one of the most opportunistic adventures of Gandhiji's. When Kemal Ataturk came up and abolished the Caliphate, Gandhiji looked foolish. Gandhiji was trying to forge Hindu-Muslim unity on quicksand.

5) Gandhiji's unscientific and staggering remark early in 1934, to the effect that the Bihar earthquake had been a punishment for the sin of untouchability.

6) Fierce condemnation of smoking by the workers of the textile industry in Lancashire thrown out of employment owing to the boycott of British cloth in India.

7) Savage treatment of a Congress worker who could not give full account of a small amount placed at his disposal. Gandhiji asked him to walk over a hundred miles during the height of summer to get back to his village, even though he was personally convinced that the man was honest and innocent. C.F.Andrews, who witnessed this harsh treatment, took the man aside and gave him his train fare and a few rupees from his pocket without Gandhiji's knowledge.

8) Fanatic advocacy of Hindi, one of the least developed languages of India, surpassing that of any chauvinist in the Hindi belt.

9) Giving the world, in a quixotic gesture, his ideal nominee for the office of Head of State in India—an untouchable girl “of stout heart, incorruptible and crystal-like in her purity.” However, at the appropriate time, he advised Lord Mountbatten to accept the invitation of the Congress to become the first Governor-General of independent India. He also advised Mountbatten to move out of Viceroy House and live in a simple home without servants. He wanted Viceroy House to be converted into a hospital. He did not fail to give further advice to Mountbatten to grow his own vegetables and clean his own toilet!

10) Gandhiji's letter to Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, written early in June 1940, as Hitler had just overrun Holland, and Belgium was about to fall. The letter read, “This manslaughter must be stopped. You are losing. If you persist, it will result in greater bloodshed.

Hitler is not a bad man. If you will call it off today, he will follow suit. If you want to send me to Germany or anywhere else, I am at your disposal. You can also inform the Cabinet about this."

There is no record of the Viceroy having forwarded to the British Cabinet Gandhiji's "momentous" letter, nor of the sensation it created at 10 Downing Street!

11) Gandhian economics—it is a sure way of achieving eternal backwardness and perpetuating poverty in India. Gandhiji had been advocating decontrol of foodgrains and other essential items of daily use, and the scrapping of rationing soon after the Government of India passed into Indian hands, even though the food situation was very critical. At the instance of Nehru, John Matthai called on Gandhiji and talked to him for an hour. Matthai reported that throughout the one hour he had the definite impression that he was addressing a wall. The matter came up before the Cabinet, which was equally divided. The decision in favour of Gandhiji's demand was taken by the Prime Minister's casting vote. It had disastrous consequences; and the country and its people had to pay a very heavy price for adopting Gandhian economic. Sarojini Naidu once said, "Many will never know how much it cost to keep that old man in poverty."

12) During one of his fasts Gandhiji said, "If I have acetone in my urine, it is because my faith in Rama is incomplete!"

13) Gandhiji's advice to women faced with rape in the Punjab during partition was to bite their tongue and hold their breath until they died. Confucius gave different advice to a young girl. He told her, "If you find yourself in a situation where rape is inevitable and there is no chance of escape, my advice to you is to lie back and enjoy it."

14) Gandhiji's rejection of modern birth control methods to curb population. What was acceptable to him was the one he himself practised—continence. He refused to make allowance for human frailty.

I never considered Gandhiji had anything to teach me about nonviolence, ends and means, detachment (*nishkama karma*), compassion and loving one's enemies, because these were preached and practised far more eloquently about 2,000 years ago by Jesus Christ. G.K. Chesterton once said, "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it had been found difficult and never

tried" On a smaller scale, this is how I felt about Gandhiji. I could never have been a follower of Gandhiji's however much I tried. In fact I did not want to try.

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The last phase of Gandhiji's life constituted his finest hour, more especially the last month of his earthly existence (January 1948). He was exercised over two matters:

1) For weeks, representatives of Muslims had been asking him for advice as to whether they should risk death or give up the struggle and migrate to Pakistan. Gandhiji's advice was, "Stay and risk death rather than run away." Delhi and surrounding areas were overflowing with Hindu and Sikh refugees crying for vengeance on all Muslims staying in India. They had seized mosques and Muslim homes all over the city and surrounding areas. Gandhiji wanted them to return those homes to their Muslim owners and go back to their camps.

2) The Indian Cabinet decided to withhold payment of the partition debt of Rs 550 million to Pakistan. The Cabinet did not want to disturb the already disturbed public opinion by giving Pakistan the money which was likely to be used to pay for arms which would be used against India in conditions existing at that time. Lord Mountbatten feared that the decision to withhold payment might drive a desperate and bankrupt Jinnah to war. The Cabinet refused to listen to Mountbatten. Gandhiji considered the Cabinet decision as immoral.

On these two issues Gandhiji's last fast (13 to 18 January 1948) took place. Sardar Patel tried to argue with Gandhiji about the payment of Rs 550 million to Pakistan. Gandhiji's only reply was, "You are not the man I once knew." (Gandhiji was deeply distressed at two speeches Patel delivered during the previous two months at public meetings in Lucknow and Jaipur severely criticizing him.) Within three days of Gandhiji's fast the Government of India announced that it had ordered immediate payment of the amount to Pakistan.

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by Gandhiji's beside and gave the undertaking to preserve communal peace not only in Delhi but also throughout India. The High Commissioner of Pakistan was also present.

Gandhiji could be devastating in his comments about people. One of his undated letters to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, who gave it to me as a present, read:

You have asked my opinion about Govind Das after having done the mischief. I have bitter experiences about him. He is ambitious, vain, vulgar, crooked and unreliable. His ventures have resulted in losses. This is the opinion of those who have had dealings with him. I know him well. He used to be like a son to me. I used to think well of him. But I soon discovered that he was a schemer. Now he rarely comes near me. I am sorry, but such is my experience. I hope you haven't dropped much.

Nehru once expressed the view that Gandhiji's approach to events was feminine, that is, intuitive, and was more of a reaction than the result of logical reasoning. An extract from Nehru's letter dated 3 June 1942, addressed to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur reads:

I was glad to see Bapu and have a talk with him. This cleared up some matters, but I should like to see much more of him and find out exactly what is in his mind. I find his approach to events is rather feminine, if I may say so. That is to say it is intuitive and is more of a reaction than the result of logical reasoning. Much can be said for this, but it is a risky business sometimes.

As everyone knows, Nehru was the draftsman of the Congress regardless of who was its President. Practically all its resolutions and correspondence with British authorities were drafted by him. Below is a letter to Lord Pethick Lawrence dated 6 May 1946, drafted by Nehru and corrected by Gandhiji, for Congress President Maulana Azad to sign:

My colleagues and I followed with care the proceedings of the conference yesterday and tried to understand what our conversations were leading us to. I confess to feeling somewhat mystified and disturbed at the vagueness of our talks and some of