Remembering Gandhi

My memories of Bapu

Barun Das Gupta recounts the compassion of the Mahatma that he witnessed first hand.

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My earliest memory of Bapu goes back to when I was just a kid. It was 1939. He was staying at the Khadi Pratisthan Ashram at Sodepur near Kolkata. The ashram, for promoting Gandhiji’s constructive work programme, had been founded by my father Kshitish Chandra and my uncle Satish Chandra who was known as the “Bengal Gandhi” in those days.

The room in which Bapu was living had two other adjacent rooms – all three opening on to a long verandah, at the end of which was a bathroom. In the room next to his, Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru were talking face to face – Subhas babu (not yet “Netaji”) with his face to the door and Panditji with his back to the door. Bapu came out and walking along the verandah went to the bathroom. While passing, he noticed the two engrossed in discussion. While coming back, he stopped at the door of their room and found them still talking animatedly. Then he said something in English. Panditji turned back and then all three of them broke into a broad, beaming smile. The memory of the three smiling faces was etched on my mind for ever. An old ashram inmate who was there later told me that Bapu had said: “You my old enemies, follow me everywhere!”

The next I saw him was in 1945. He came and stayed in the ashram from December 1, 1945, to January 22, 1946, with two visits to Midnapur and Guwahati in between. On January 2 he told a gathering of Congress workers that he did not believe Subhas Babu was dead. (The news of his death in a plane crash had dismayed the entire nation.)

Bapu used to take morning and evening walks every day and I often became one of his “walking sticks”. During those days I was a witness to the amazing self-control this frail old man had. He used to reply to his letters during and after his lunch. His steno was Parashuram. I often found while dictating a letter, he would stop in the middle of a sentence and tell Parashuram, “I am going to sleep for five minutes.” In seconds he would start snoring. He would wake up after five minutes – almost to the second – and without even asking Parashuram where he had left his half-finished sentence, he would start dictating from where he had ended.

There was a memorable incident during his 1945 visit. The ashram was infested with snakes. Once during his morning walk, we noticed a snake crawling towards the path. We asked Bapu to stop and let the snake pass. He did not stop, saying, “The snake would do us no harm.” Indeed, it did not. It stopped about a yard from the path and let us pass. Then it began to crawl again and crossed the path.

His caring concern for those whose presence was usually not noticed and often dismissed from mind was touching. The day he left Sodepur for Madras on January 22, 1946, I was down with measles and running high fever. The special train for him was waiting at Sodepur station. All his associates who were usually referred to as “Gandhi party” had left for the station and so had the ashram inmates. Only my father was with his sick child.

Shortly before five Bapu emerged from his room with Dhirendra Chatterjee (Abha Gandhi’s elder brother) and started walking briskly towards the station. Halfway, he suddenly stopped and said “I have completely forgotten Babua.” (my nickname). And he started walking back. Chatterjee asked: “Where are you going?” Bapu replied: “How can I go without taking leave from the bed-ridden child?” Chatterjee protested: “But you will get late.” Unperturbed, Bapu said, “Let me be late for the child.”

He came to our cottage, tenderly passed his hand on my face swollen with measles rashes and said, “Main ab bhag ja raha hoon (I am running away now)”. As he came out of the room, my cousin sister, standing with a carbolic soap, a mug of water and a napkin, gently told him to wash his hands because he had touched me. With a mischievous smile on his face, he passed both his hands on my sister’s face and said: “Let you have the infection.” Nothing happened of course. This was Bapu. He remembered whom all else had forgotten.