ON TOUR WITH GANDHIJI

(By Bharatan Kumarappa)

December Gandhi’s Coming to Bengal Sodepur (1st Dec 1945 to 19th Jan 1946)

To Calcutta

Gandhiji arrived promptly on the platform at Wardha at the time the Mail from Bombay was due and was ushered into the waiting room till the compartment was made ready for him. He gathers a crowd round him so quickly that he creates a traffic problem for the station authorities if he stands on the platform. Hence this device. The Railway people attached a special third-class carriage for him, consisting of four compartments. We were about twelve in the party and he did not want to monopolise so much space when others had so little on the train. We therefore occupied two compartments with a corridor in between. He wanted us all to be in one, but as there was much luggage and some ladies also in the party and the compartments were not large, a few chose to keep out of his compartment. We were also to allow others into the second compartment. But when people saw we were Gandhiji’s party they kept away, probably out of respect for him and consideration for us; the next day however a few joined us in the morning when there was no question of sleeping accommodation.

Between Wardha and Nagpur, a distance covered in about one hour, Gandhiji had several interviewers. At Nagpur, the crowd on the platform was enormous. This was my first experience of a seething mass of humanity, which moved on the platform like one solid stuff. Every possible inch of space on both sides of our compartment and for some distance was occupied by people eager to catch a glimpse of him. The train stood for an entire half hour, and every minute seemed for us an age, as we were anxious to get him away from the noise and din. “Mahatma Gandhiji ki Jai” rent the air on both sides of us. If he sat on one side of the compartment, the people on the other side demanded his presence there. I was told by some friends in Nagpur that the crowd this time was rather more than usual for their city—perhaps because Gandhiji stood for the “Quit India” attitude, which has been smouldering under the surface and which was being fanned into an irrepressible outburst of fire by the I. N. A. trials. In many places the people shouted also “Subhas Bose ki Jai” thus showing that for them the one thing that mattered was freedom, and Subhas Babu and Gandhiji a like fought for it.

All the way between Wardha and Calcutta the enthusiasm of the people for Gandhiji seemed to be unbounded. In some cases it had developed into a passion which was beyond control. For instance, at about 10 p.m. when ho had gone to sleep and vast crowds demanded his darshan. Wo tried to placate thorn by saying that ho was very tired and had gone to sleep, and it would not do to disturb him. But some of thorn shouted hack saying: “Wo mush see him at least for one second. Wo have come long distances and we will not allow the train to move till we see him.” The train stopped long thorn. We triad our host quieten. The mob was getting unruly and some volunteers even fainted in their effort to maintain come. Finally the people had their way. He had to come to the window and only then were they satisfied.

Everywhere as usual Gandhiji collected money for the Harijan Fund. Sometimes he held his chaddar (upper doth) bending his head below the top berth, sometimes lie held his hand out, and at other times ho was busy signing autographs and receiving a fee of Rs. 5 for each. At every station he was doing this besides putting up with the strain of people thronging round him, trying to touch or garland him or shower flowers on him and shouting slogans.

Towards night he was getting no tired with the noise and the shouting that he sat in his seat exhausted, with his fingers in his ears. It was a pathe-tic sight. He went to bed at 9.30 p.m. with cotton wool stuffed in them to prevent himself from hearing. As we approached stations and heard “Mahatma Gandhi ki jai”, we began to shudder instead of being gladdened by it. But it must ho said to the credit of the people and their leaders that after 10 p.m. they made as little noise as possible, though they still assembled in large numbers.

At 5 a.m. wo arrived at a station, where, from the noise, I gathered that there was a big crowd. It was cold and dark, and my Darshan literally means view. It is used only in the case of God or great men the sight of whom is regarded an being fraught with blessing.
sleep had been interrupted practically at every station throughout the night that I did not feel like stirring out of bed. But before long I found that there was perfect silence as though there was not a single person on the platform. I was curious, for the silence continued without break. I go t up to see what had happened, and there was Gandhiji at his post again by the window, wrapped up against the cold and with his hand outstretched receiving money.

The crowd being so quiet reminded me of children crying - so lately for their mother till who comes and picks them up in her arras, and all the crying stops and there is calm and peace.

When I saw Gandhiji, who had gone through all the strain and fatigue of a day’s journey, sitting by the window in the cold reaching out for money, I was saddened, thought: Is it worthwhile his collecting pice and annas in this way? Should his strength not be conserved - od for a better purpose, for after all just a postcard from him could suffice be bring thousands of rupees to him by return of post. But then reflected also that he would not in that case give an opportunity for m many people to contribute their mite to the cause. Besides people wore eager to show their affection for him by giving money to him. I saw some, including women, with a few annas in their hand, struggling through the crowd, oven after they had got what they came for, viz. a sight of him, to give him their contribution. They had to undergo torture to got to him, but the pleasure of giving something to him helped them to hour it. One old woman with her sari over her face, came through the crowd with great effort, and with both her hands placed two annas in Gundhiji’s hand. It was a touching sight.

At Gondia Gandhiji was presented with a silver tray. He auctioned it for the Harijan Fund and obtained Rs. 1500 for it. The purchaser presented it back to him. He auctioned it again and then again till that tray fetched him Rs. 4501 in all and was presented back to him. During the journey between Wardha and Calcutta he was able to collect over Rs. 7500 above Rs. 3000 in cash mostly in small coin and Rs. 4501 in promise.

Many, young and old, rich and poor, stood in his presence as before a god in reverence, and put their hands together as in worship-It usual today to regard religion and religious reverence, which are often said to be a special characteristic of India, as things to be ashamed of and to be got rid of. When I saw people bowing in respect to one who for them stood for renunciation of material goods and was peculiar trait of our national character it was a thing to be proud of, for civilization does not lie in love of wealth, power and display but in rising above these, which attract men only superficially and temporarily, to an appreciation of spiritual pursuits, which alone finally command the respect of all. We should, it seems to me, regard our sensibility to things of the spirit as a sign of our hoary culture which has taught our people, whether they be of high or low estate, to turn away from the cheap showy things of life to things unseen but lasting and permanent.

Gandhiji’s food on the way consisted of 12 ozs, of milk, gol papri (jaggery toffee), three plantains and three oranges at 11.30 ; and of three oranges, one pice of gol papri, one tomato and one raw carrot at 4.45 p. m. The rest of us had chapatis, some mango pickle and murabba (jam), oranges and plantains at noon, and chapatis, vegetables, curds and a sweet dish at night. Next morning at 6.30 a.m. Gandhiji had 1 lb. of mosambi juice and gur at 10 a. m. orange juice and two oranges and at 11.30 12 oxs. of milk. About 9 a. m. the rest of us had chapatis, a vegetable and chutney, and some friends provided us with milk and tea. As some people presented Gandhiji with a basket of oranges we had plenty of thorn to eat. We could easily have obtained all we wanted and more in the way of food from friends on the way who asked us repeatedly what we would like to have. But we refused to take anything from them as Gandhiji was particular that we must not give trouble to others or be a burden to them in any way.
During the day he was busy with his usual programme of reading, writing, editing and spinning. He rested at noon. Promptly at 7 in the evening he had prayers. His work went on with the regularity of a clock. He gave an interview to press representatives on the train the next morning. All day several cameras clicked at him.

He was taken away at a wayside railway crossing about 15 minutes before we got to Howrah Railway station. The result was that when we got to Calcutta we had a whole lot of volunteers and others to pay exclusive attention to us. They cordoned us off from the crowds and escorted us to cars which were waiting for us. When we got near Sodepur, where we were to stay, the American military who were policing the street refused to let our cars pass. I anxiously asked why. They said that it was because we did not have the flag on the cars. Thinking that they insisted on our flying the Union Jack, I was preparing to get out and walk the distance. But to my utter surprise I was told that we were required to fly the national flag for without it or the American flag, on car or lorry would be allowed by the people to pass on the streets. So far as the British flag went, Calcutta had led the way in making it quit India. We were thrilled therefor on our very arrival in Calcutta.

**Our Calcutta Hosts**

Two or three hours before we got to Calcutta, a man along with a few others entered our compartment and sought admission to Gandhiji’s. As usual we prevented them. Thinking that they were like the innumerable others who came for darshan. We discovered however that they had been sent all that way with food for us from the Khadi Pratisthan. Sodepur, where we were to stay during Gandhiji’s Calcutta sojourn. We thus came under the care and protection of our hosts even when we were still 70 or 80 miles away from Calcutta.

At the wayside railway crossing, where Gandhiji was removed from our train, he was received by our host, Sir Satish Chandra Das Gupta. At that time a few workers of the Khadi Pratisthan boarded our compartment and went along with us. They had been allotted special duties. Some were to put us in cars when we reached Howrah and to escort us to Sodpur others to collect our luggage and bring it in a lorry. There was no hitch, no dispute or discussion. Everything was managed quietly, smoothly and well according to plan.

The Khadi Pratisthan is 10 miles out of Calcutta. Before Gandhiji started the non-cooperation movement, Satish Babu, as our host is called for short, was connected with Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works and was, it is said, the brain behind that firm. He was a chemist and was earning thousands there. But when Gandhiji called for men to organise work for the poverty-stricken masses, of our land, he left the Bengal Chemicals and founded in 1924 the Khadi Pratisthan to help the spread of spinning and manufacture and sale of pure khadder. In 1927 he and his wife renounced all their property due to the influence of Gandhiji on their lives. The decision was precipitated by the death of two of their sons, one at the age of 19 and the other at the age of 13, which occurred in the years 1926 and 27 and to whom they were greatly devoted. Satish Bubu had bought some land in Sodpur not far from the Bengal Chemicals and was putting up a garden house there for his eldest son. But with the death of his two soon, he decided to regard all, especially the poor, as his own children, and turned over the building and land and his money to Trust which was to administer them in the interest of promoting khadi and other cottage industries.

The garden house in a fine building forming three sides of a square and is situated in about 10 acres of land. on a part of this land, fruits and vegetables are grown, and in another part, especially that in the front and side of the house, is a beautiful flower garden abounding in roses, jasmines, marigolds, and queen of the night.

Gandhiji and we of his party were given two wings of the house. They were fitted up for us with electric lights and water taps. Roads were built in the compound, especially for Gandhiji to take his morning and evening walks in the garden undisturbed by crowds. The whole place looked neat, orderly and clean. We ate in a common dining room adjoining the kitchen. All the inmates of this colony, about 120 boys and men, were turned into workers and volunteers to attend to the many tasks connected with entertaining Gandhiji. Innumerable volunteers were required merely to guard the roads and the gates to prevent the crowds from rushing into the compound to see Gandhiji. Barricades had to be put up
everywhere for this purpose. Errands had to be run. Telephone calls attended to, visitors escorted in and out, cars arranged for, provisions brought from Calcutta, hundreds fed in batches, guests looked after for their food, bath and washing of clothes, the rooms and the roads swept, and all this went on smoothly and systematically.

I was struck by the care and thought devoted to every detail, and the very efficient way in which everything was organized. Judging from this, I thought that it was no wonder that Satish Babu was so successful with the Bengal Chemicals. But when I complimented him on it, he said to my utter surprise that he nothing to do with it. It was all being managed by his wife, Hemprabha Devi. His giving her all the credit was not just chivalry on his part, as I soon discovered. For, if anything had to be done, it was always Ma, as they called her, who was approached. She was not educated in the modern sense and could not speak English. But she was the central pivot round which the whole machinery operated so efficiently and without friction. And yet unless one took the trouble to enquire one could not find out that it was she who was responsible, not merely for the temporary arrangements made for us but also permanently for the entire management of the Khadi Pratisthan. Even if Satish Babu wanted anything he had to obtain her sanction. She looked after the finances and so had the final say as to what might or might not be done.

And the Khadi Pratisthan is no small institution. During 1944 its spinners numbered as many as 4500 and its weavers about 150. They were scattered in about 60 villages. They produced Khadi worth Rs- 1,14,000. Dhenki-husked rice amounting to Rs. 318,000, mustard oil from ghanis to the extent of Rs.2.98,000, pure ghee to the value of Rs-1.88,000, hand made paper amounting to R9.2.805 leather, bone-meal etc. valued at Rs. 30,000, honey worth Rs. 1,755 and simple medicines manufactured in the Khadi Pratisthan amounting to Rs. 2.555 were sold during the year* This amount excludes medicines distributed free- The match industry was closed owing to the war, and Condensed milk production has been recently started the total income and expenditure of the institution in 1944 was Rs. 10,00,541-3-0 and Rs.10,77,489—12-8 respectively.

The Khadi Pratisthan is entirely self-supporting. No appeal is made for funds. If there is a deficit, expenses are curtailed, and if there is a profit it goes into the work. Satish Babu and Hemprabha Devi have managed to get around them a few devoted workers who like them obtain only their maintenance from the Pratisthan. Only such people are given responsibility, not those who receive pay. The greater the responsibility the less the salary. Service and sacrifice are thus the basic of success in this institution. The relationship of Satish Babu and Hemprabha Devi to the inmates of the colony is more or less that of parents to children. For them Arun, their son, is not much different from the other boys and men in the colony, all the inmates being on the same footing. The ordinary family relationships practically ceased for them when they founded the colony, and now their aim is to regard the whole colony as their family in a very real sense. Students who come for training are given instruction not only in cottage industries and business management but also in moral and spiritual matters. One of the conditions laid down for admission is willingness to do scavenging and to treat all alike, including the so- called untouchables. Satish Babu devotes himself primarily to training and research. He has several simple ingenious devices to his credit and has written voluminous and authoritative works “titled Home and Village Doctor” and “The Cow in India.’

Satish Babu’s brother, Sri’ Kshitish Chandra Das Gupta, is as busy as a bee, rushing about the place attending to general work like roads, building, garden, taps, lights and sanitation. He is to be seen almost everywhere at the same time. His special field however is Bee - keeping which is flourishing under his watchful care. He has made several inventions in the way of Bee-keeping equipment. Satish Babu’s only surviving son, Arun, has grown up in the- Khadi Pratisthan than, doing the various types of industrial work carried on there, and engages himself now chiefly in the manufacture and dispensing of simple and cheap medicines useful for those doing village work, and also in looking after a small hospital attached to the institution. Besides him Satish Babu has a daughter who is married to a very successful Calcutta Solicitor- She stayed in Sodpur during our visit there and was given the task of looking after the food arrangement for us guests. Our number was legion, and it was by no means easy to cater to each person’s desires and needs. But she did it with the greatest composure and ease and to the satisfaction of everybody. She also helped in serving, and always enquired at the end of the meal if we had had all that we wanted.

Such was the gifted family with whom we were privileged to stay during our visit to Calcutta. They were an inspiration to us as they combined in themselves great practical ability and high idealism.