Punctually at 3.30 a.m. on Friday, January 30, 1948, Mahatma Gandhi awoke to greet the last morning he would ever see.

He was in the tense atmosphere in Delhi, staying at the ground floor guest room of Birla House, the mansion of industrialist and benefactor G. D. Birla located in Albuquerque Road. Gandhi had arrived in the strife-torn capital of newly independent India on September 9, 1947 from Calcutta, where he had performed a miracle of peace-making. By January 30, almost four months had passed since his 78th and last birthday. It was 12 days since the successful end of his fast to bring about a reunion of hearts in Delhi. But 10 days before, there had been an aborted attempt on his life during the evening prayer meeting at Birla House. With the situation in Delhi having stabilized, Gandhi was again looking to the future but his life was in grave danger and he knew it.

The Mahatma's last day would be as methodical as any other. Upon getting up from his wooden plank, he roused the other members of his party. They included attendants Brijkrishna Chandiwala and Manu and Abha, his grand nieces. His physician, Dr Sushila Nayar, who was normally with him, was away in Pakistan. He brushed his teeth with a twig like any ordinary Indian.

At 3.45 a.m., prayers were held at the same cold verandah where the party had slept. With Sushila away, Manu led the Bhagwad Gita recitation. They recited the first and second shlokas. Another female member had failed to arise in time for the prayers. This disturbed Gandhi. He mused whether she should leave him, and concluded by saying, “I do not like these signs. I hope God does not keep me here very long to witness these things.” When Manu asked Gandhi which bhajan she should sing for him, Gandhi chose a favourite Gujarati hymn. The song begins “whether weary or unwearied, O man, do not tarry, stop not, your struggle if single-handed continue and do not tarry!”

After prayers, leaning on his ‘walking sticks’, Manu and Abha, the old man moved slowly into the inner room where Manu covered his legs with a warm blanket. It was still dark outside as Gandhi began his day’s work. He corrected the draft of the proposal for the new Congress Constitution written the previous night. This document was to become known as The Last Will and Testament to the Nation. At 4.45, he drank a glass of lemon, honey and hot water and an hour later, his daily glass of orange juice. While working, because of the weakness caused by the fast, he became tired and allowed himself to sleep.

Waking after only half-an-hour, Gandhi asked for his correspondence file. The previous day, he had written a letter to Kishorlal Mashruwala. One of the two matters the letter discussed was the tentative plan for Gandhi to soon leave Delhi and go to Sevagram. Manu had also wished to convey a message to Mashruwala who had recently left Gandhiji’s services. She asked Gandhi whether they were returning to Sevagram on February 2, in which case they would be seeing Mashruwala soon anyway. Gandhi replied, “Who knows about the future? If we come to a decision regarding Sevagram, I shall announce it at the evening prayer meeting. It will then be relayed on the radio at night.

Also, as a consequence of his fast, Gandhi suffered from a cough. To treat it, he would take palm jaggery lozenges with powdered cloves. But by this morning, the clove powder had finished. Instead of joining him in his morning walk, a stroll up and down the room, Manu sat down to prepare some more. “I shall join you presently,” she said to Gandhi, “otherwise there will be nothing at hand at night when it is needed.” But always focusing on the here and now, Gandhi replied, “Who knows what is going to happen before nightfall or even whether I shall be alive. If at night I am still alive, you can easily prepare some then.” Manu, although well aware of Gandhi’s principled stand, could not refrain from offering him penicillin lozenges instead. Unyielding, Gandhi asked her how she could offer him such things, when his faith was in Ramanama and prayer.

The Mahatma’s first appointment for the day was at 7 a.m. with Rajan Nehru who was going to America. Gandhi spoke with her, while taking his morning constitutional in the room. He had not yet regained enough strength for his customary long walk in the open air. Next, Gandhi was to have a massage. Passing through his secretary Pyarelal’s room, Gandhi handed Pyarelal his draft submission for the new Congress Constitution, written for the forthcoming Congress Working Committee meeting. Gandhi asked him to go through it carefully, “Fill any gaps that you may find in my thinking,” he instructed, “I have prepared it under heavy strain.” Brijkishna gave Gandhi the half-hour massage in a room adjacent to
his sitting room. Two electric heaters were needed to warm the chilly air. While lying on the table, Gandhi digested the morning newspapers.

After the massage, Gandhi asked Pyarelal whether he had finished the revision. Gandhi also requested him to write a note on how, in the light of his work in Noakhali, he believed the impending rice crisis in Madras provinces could be handled. Manu then gave Gandhi his bath. During this, he asked her whether she was doing the hand exercises he had prescribed. Manu told him that she did not like the exercises, and then listened to a long but gentle rebuke from her master, who told her of the responsibility he had taken for her health and moral development.

After the bath, Manu weighed the little man, (who was about 5 feet and 5 inches tall). He was 1091/2 pounds. He had regained two-and-a-half pounds since ending his fast. His strength was returning. Pyarelal thought he looked refreshed after his bath. The strain of the previous night had disappeared. When someone told Gandhi that a woman member of Sevagram Ashram had missed the train that morning because there was no conveyance for the several mile ride to Wardha station, he asked in all seriousness “Why did she not walk to the station?” Then, Gandhi did his morning Bengali writing exercise. Today, he wrote, “Bhairab’s home is in Naihati. Shaila is his eldest daughter. Today, Shaila gets married to Kailash.”

By now, it was 9.30 and time for Gandhi’s morning meal. The meal included cooked vegetables, 12 ounces of goat’s milk, four tomatoes, four oranges, carrot juice, and decoction of ginger, sour limes and aloes. While eating, Gandhi talked with Pyarelal about the draft Congress Constitution, to which Pyarelal had made some alterations. Pyarelal also reported on the outcome of the meeting with the leader of the extremist Hindu Mahasabha, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee. Gandhi had sent Pyarelal to inform Dr. Mookerjee of speeches of a particular Hindu Mahasabha worker, inciting the assassination of some Congress leaders. Could not Dr. Mookerjee stop inflammatory speeches? Dr. Mookerjee’s reply was halting and unsatisfactory, reported Pyarelal to the Mahatma. Pyarelal observed Gandhi’s brow darken as he repeated Dr. Mookerjee’s reply. Gandhi and Pyarelal then talked at length about the volatile situation at Noakhali, and told him to wait until he returned to Sevagram. Pyarelal was surprised at this request, for it was unusual for Gandhi to delay anyone returning to his or her post. Mid-morning also, an old associate from Gandhi’s South African days, Rustom Sorabjee called in with his family.

Next, at about 10.30, Gandhi again slept. The soles of his feet were rubbed with ghee. At midday, he awoke and drank a glass of hot water with honey. A little later, he walked alone to the bathroom. It was the first time since the fast that he walked unaided. “Bapuji,” Manu called out to him, “How strange you look walking all alone!” Gandhi laughed and said, “It’s nice, isn’t it? Walk alone, Walk alone!” These last words were Tagore’s.

Morning had given way to afternoon. At about 12.30, Gandhi talked about a plan of a prominent local doctor to build a nursing home and orphanage. He wanted very much to help. Soon, Gandhi was visited by a delegation of Delhi Muslim leaders who were calling daily. Communal tensions and the refugee crisis still darkened the atmosphere in the capital. Gandhi discussed with the leaders his wish to go to Wardha to see about his institution there and attend a conference on February 2. He would be back in Delhi by the 14th. He sought their permission to leave Delhi. “I do expect to be back here by the 14th. But if Providence has decreed otherwise, that was a different matter. I am not sure whether I shall be able to leave here even on the day after tomorrow. It is all in God’s hands.” The leaders gave their permission for Gandhi to leave Delhi. He would announce his plans at the evening prayer meeting.

On his last days, Gandhi also spoke about his late beloved secretary, Mahadev Desai. A biography of Mahadev was to be written, but there was disagreement over financial terms. Gandhi expressed his frustration at this. Mahadev’s diary also needed to be edited and compiled. The ideal candidate, Narhari Parikh, was in poor health. The task, Gandhi decided, should fall to Chandrashanker Shukla. Mashurwala had been another candidate. The Mahatma also met with Sudhir Ghosh, who mentioned an apparent campaign in the British press to highlight a rift that had developed between Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru and Deputy Prime Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel. Gandhi would raise the matter with Patel who was calling this afternoon, and with Nehru, who, with Maulan Azad, was calling at 7 p.m. this evening.

Gandhi lay down in the afternoon January sunshine and had his abdominal mudpack. To shade his face, he donned the peasant’s bamboo hat he had brought from Noakhali. Manu and Abha again pressed his feet. A journalist who was there asked Gandhi if information that he was leaving for Sevagram on February 1 was correct. “Who says so?” Gandhi asked. “The papers have it”, replied the journalist. “Yes,” rejoined Gandhi, “the papers had announced that Gandhi would be going on the 1st. But, who that Gandhi is, I don’t know”.

At about 1.30 p.m., Brijkrishna read out to Gandhi a statement by Master Tara Singh which angrily advised the Mahatma to retire to the Himalayas. Time was ebbing away. It was now mid-afternoon.

The usual daily round of interviews began at 2.15 p.m. Representatives from all over India and beyond sought an audience. Two Punjabis spoke about the Harijans of their province. Two Sindhis followed. A representative of Ceylon accompanied by his daughter asked Gandhi to give a message for Ceylon’s Independence Day on February 14th. The girl obtained
Gandhi’s autograph, the last he was to leave. At about 3 p.m., a professor who called in told Gandhi that he was preaching what had been advocated in Buddha’s time. At about 3.15, a French photographer presented him with an album of his photographs. He met a Punjabi delegation and a Sikh delegation that asked him to suggest a president for a conference to be held in Delhi on February 15. Gandhi suggested Congress president, Rajendra Prasad, and added he would give a message himself.

Gandhi finished the last interview by 4 p.m. when the Sardar was due to arrive. Gandhi rose from his sitting place and walked towards the bathroom. He asked Brijkrishna to arrange his railway journey to Wardha for the very next day, Saturday.

Gandhi was still in the bathroom when Patel and his daughter and secretary Mani arrived. Patel and Brijkrishna chatted for a few minutes. When Gandhi emerged, he and Patel immediately fell into conversation. Gandhi told Patel that although earlier he had believed either Patel or Nehru would have to withdraw from the Cabinet, he now agreed with Mountbatten, the new Governor-General that both were indispensable. He told Patel that he would make a statement to this effect at the prayer meeting; he might even postpone his departure to Wardha if he felt there was any trouble between the two.

As Gandhi and Patel were speaking, two Kathiawad leaders came and told Manu they wished to see Gandhi. She enquired of Gandhi whether he would see them. Said Gandhi in Patel’s presence, “Tell them that I will, but only after the prayer meeting, and that too if I am still living. We shall then talk things over.” Manu conveyed Gandhi’s reply to the visitors and invited them to stay for the prayer meeting. Yet again, Gandhi had spoken about his possible imminent demise, and on this occasion in front of the man with prime responsibility for his safety. While Gandhi talked, Abha served him his meal. She included goat’s milk, vegetable soup, oranges and carrot juice. Gandhi then asked for his charkha, which he plied lovingly for the last time.

For Gandhi, this fateful Friday had been, more or less, a normal day. But for Nathuram Godse, a 37-year-old Hindu extremist, it was a momentous one from the second he awoke that morning in Old Delhi Railway Station’s retiring room No. 6. For today was the day he was going to kill Mahatma Gandhi.

Early in the morning, fellow conspirators, Narayan Apte and Vishnu Karkare, joined Godse. There were actually eight men involved in the plot to kill Gandhi. The three who would carry out the group’s second assassination attempt spent the day working out the details of their planned murder and preparing for the awful deed. They would stand at the outer rim of the crowd towards the right as they faced the elevated platform on which Gandhi sat. Godse would shoot at Gandhi with a seven-chambered automatic pistol from a distance of about 35 feet. The other two would fend off anyone who tried to interfere. Godse had little experience with guns.

In the mid-afternoon, they left the railway station and went to Birla Temple. The other two prayed but Godse did not. At 4.30, Godse, dressed in a newly bought khaki jacket, — it would be a confrontation of khaki versus khadi — left the temple by tonga for Birla House. Five minutes later, Apte and Karkare took their own tonga.

Before five o’clock, Godse reached Birla House, followed by Apte and Karkare. Since the assassination attempt on January 20, Gandhi had acceded to the wishes of Patel and Nehru, and permitted about 30 policemen, uniformed and plainclothes, to be stationed at various points around Birla House and its surroundings. Not to agree, Gandhi would have only added to the burden on the shoulders of the leaders. But he drew the line to agreeing to the searching of those entering the grounds to attend his prayer meetings. Upon arrival, the conspirators found that the ground had been increased, and with great relief, that no one was being searched. All three entered the ground without difficulty. They walked and parading the rear of the mansion, carried on their conversation.

It was 5 p.m. Afternoon was fading to evening as the winter sun dipped low. Five o’clock was the appointed time for prayers. Gandhi disliked being late, especially for prayers. But he was not wearing his famous Ingersoll watch. These days others were his timekeepers. Manu and Abha saw the hour but dared not interrupt such an important conversation. At 5.10, they could wait no longer. Abha showed Gandhi his watch. But he was distracted. Finally, in desperation, Manu intervened, and with Gandhi saying, “I must now tear myself away”, the talk ended.

Gandhi got up and put on his chappals and stepped through the side door out of the room into the twilight. He wore a shawl for warmth. As usual, he leant gently on his two ‘walking sticks’. Manu was on his right and Abha on his left. As usual also, Manu carried Gandhi’s spittoon, spectacle case, and rosary and her notebook. Brijkrishna was behind them, together with some members of the Birla family and a few others, including the two Kathiawad visitors. Sushila Nayar, who normally walked in front of Gandhi, of course, was not there. Nor momentarily was another attendant, Gurbatchan Singh, who with one or two men, was usually in front of Gandhi. Also absent from this position at Gandhi’s side was A.N. Bhatia, the recently introduced plainclothes policeman. He had been assigned elsewhere that day and no replacement had been appointed. The congregation had wondered why the punctual Gandhi was late, but now they could see him coming.
Thus, Mahatma Gandhi set out on his final 200-yard journey, his final trek, and his final march. He had come from Porbander, to Rajkot, to the Inner Temple, to Bombay, to Durban, to Peiternaritzburg, to Johannesburg, to Phoenix Settlement, to Tolstoy Farm, to Champaran, to Yeravda, to Dandi, to Kingsley Hall, to St. James Palace, to Sevagram, to Aga Khan Palace, to Noakhali, to Calcutta, to Delhi.

Today, he did not walk as usual through the leafy arbour to the right side of the grounds. Being late, he took a short cut directly across the lawn to the steps leading to the terrace where prayers were held.

Despite everything, his mood was light. He joked about the raw carrot that Abha had served him that day. “So, you are serving me cattle fare!” he exclaimed. Abha replied that Ba, Gandhi’s deceased wife, would have called it horse fare. Retorted Gandhi as they hurried along, “Is it not grand of me to relish what none else would care for?”

Abha and Manu teased Gandhi for neglecting his watch and timekeepers both. “It is your fault that I am 10 minutes late”, he responded. “It is the duty of the nurse to carry on her work even if God himself should be present there. If it is time to give medicine to a patient, do not hesitate, even by a minute.”

With this, the party had finished the first 170 yards of the journey and had reached the foot of the six curved steps that led on to the prayer ground. Gandhi also insisted on his party stopping all jokes and conversation before they entered the prayer ground. Gurbachan Singh caught up with the group, but did not move in front of Gandhi. Around India and the world, numberless friends and coworkers, old and new, were carrying on in the knowledge that Mahatma Gandhi still lived. Reverend John Haynes Holmes was at his home in New York, Mirabehn was at her ashram in the Himalayas, Mountbatten was at Government House, Nehru was at work in Delhi, Pyarelal was on his way to Birla House, the Life magazine photographer, Margaret Bourke-White was just a few streets away, Patel was returning to his bungalow, an American journalist, Vincent Sheean, who also had an appointment with Gandhi that evening, was only a few yards on the Birla House terrace, himself part of the throng.

The hushed crowd was some hundred thick (including possibly about 20 plainclothes policemen). At the top of the steps, Gandhi brought his palms together to greet the gathering. As usual, the people parted to make a passage for him to the wooden platform. Critically, today there was no one in front of Gandhi.

The supreme moment had come. Gandhi trod his final steps to eternity.

Through the parting, Godse saw Gandhi coming straight towards him. Godse then made an instant decision to completely change the plan, shoot Gandhi there and then from point blank range. The Mahatma had just taken a few paces from the steps. Godse elbowed his way through, parting from the other two, and approached the Mahatma with his palms joined. The tiny black Italian Beretta pistol was concealed between them. He bowed low and said, “Namaste, Gandhiji”. Gandhi joined his palms in acknowledgement. Manu thought Godse was going to kiss Gandhiji’s feet, a practice the Mahatma did not like. She motioned him away. “Brother, Bapu is already late for prayers. Why are you bothering him?” she said.

Gandhi had been expecting another attempt on his life. As this incident occurred, he might have understood… this was it.

No police intervened. Godse pushed Manu forcefully aside with his right hand. The items in her hands fell to the floor. For few minutes, she continued arguing with the unknown assailant. But when the rosary dropped, she bent down to pick it up. At this precise moment, a burst of deafening blasts ripped apart the peaceful atmosphere as Godse fired three bullets into Gandhi’s stomach and chest. As the third shot was fired, Gandhi was still standing, his palms still joined. He was heard to gasp “He Ram, He Ram” (Oh God, Oh, God). Then, he slowly sank to the ground, palms joined still, possibly in a final, ultimate act of ahimsa.

Smoke filled the air. Confusion and panic reigned. The Mahatma was slumped on the ground, his head resting in the lap of both the girls. His face turned pale, his white shawl of Australian wool was turning crimson with blood. Within seconds, the Mahatma was dead. It was 5.17 p.m.

Early that very morning, foreseeing the manner of his death, Gandhi had said to Manu, “If someone fires bullets at me and I die without a groan and with God’s name on my lips, then you should tell the world that here was a real Mahatma…” Gandhi had journeyed through a lifetime from Porbander to Delhi. He had journeyed against disfranchisement in Natal, to one against British rule in India, to want for peace and justice in free India. He had journeyed from an ordinary young man to a Mahatma. He had journeyed from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, from death to immortality. His teachings had journeyed from India to the four corners of the world.

(Note: As Mr Stephen Murphy’s article has been written after consultation of various books, some details in the article may vary.)