Remembering the Martyr’s Day

Gandhiji And Ramanama

Manubehn Gandhi

The incident narrated below took place in course of Gandhiji’s peace march in the District of Noakhali, which is now a part of Bangladesh. An atmosphere of bloodshed, cruelty, suffering, loss of lives and property prevailed everywhere in the district. The law enforcing machinery was ineffective in controlling the violence and destruction. Mahatma Gandhi prompted by his inner voice undertook a walking tour to make the people to shun violence and return to sanity. Gandhiji in normal times used to move with a big entourage. But while on his peace march on foot in Noakhali, he had announced that he would like to move along with only a companion or two to help him. All other members of his entourage were directed to spread out in the district in different centers, work for peace and they were also asked to sustain themselves on their own.

The writer of this anecdote, Manubehn Gandhi was one of his great granddaughters and a constant companion during his last days. Other two names that appear in the anecdote are, 1. Nirmalbabu and 2. Dr. Sushila Behn. Late Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose (Nirmalbabu), noted anthropologist, had volunteered to help Gandhiji during his peace mission, whose mention is found in the incident below. Dr. Sushila Behn to whom the author of this anecdote has referred was personal physician of Gandhiji and a regular member of his entourage. But during his Noakhali peace march, Gandhiji had directed her also not to stay with him, but to work on her own independently at a different village. Many readers of Ishani may recall that Late Dr. Sushilabehn Nayyar had served the country as the Health Minister in the Central Government of independent India. She had also served as the president of Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust for many years. We have reproduced the anecdote in this issue of January, the month of Mahatma’s martyrdom. We are also reproducing below a brief extract from the article written by Mahatma’s secretary late Pyarelal which describes Gandhiji’s last moments.

At Amki I could not get goat’s milk for Bapu. I tried my best to procure it but failed. So I had to inform Bapu who said to me, “What does it matter? For goat’s milk the white juice of the coconut will do as well and fresh coconut oil will serve the purpose of ghee.”

Bapu showed me how to prepare them and accordingly I gave them to him. As he usually took eight ounces of goat’s milk he took the same quantity of coconut milk too. But he could not digest it and so had an attack of diarrhoea. The frequent motions made him weaker and weaker till in the evening when he was coming back to the hut he felt a reeling sensation and was about to fall. Generally symptoms like yawning, perspiration, coldness of hands and feet etc. would precede such a reeling sensation in his case. I thought from his yawns that he was about to feel giddy but I was mistaken. Bapu who was walking with my support was already collapsing. I held his head with care and shouted for Nirmalbabu. He came and we both helped Bapuji to bed. Then it struck me that I should call for Dr Sushilabehn who was in a village near-by. I feared that I would be taken for a fool if Bapuji’s illness suddenly took a serious turn and if I did not call for her in time. I wrote a chit and just as I was giving it to Nirmalbabu for despatching, Bapu woke up from his trance and called out, “Manudi” (that was Bapu’s term of endearment for me), “I do not like your calling Nirmalbabu. As you are still young, however, I can excuse you. But at such a time I expect you to do nothing else but take Ramanama instead of shouting for Nirmalbabu. As you are still young, however, I can excuse you. But at such a time I expect you to do nothing else but take Ramanama instead of calling for Nirmalbabu. Now don’t inform Sushila or call her. The real doctor is Rama. As long as Rama needs service from me, He will keep me alive. When He does not, He will call me back to Himself.”

A shiver passed through my body when the words “don’t inform Sushila or call her” struck my ears. I snatched the chit from Nirmalbabu and tore it to pieces. Bapu saw this and remarked, “So you had already written to her.” I had to admit the fact. Then he said, “Today the Lord has saved us both. On reading the chit Sushila would have left
her work and immediately run to us. I would not have liked it at all. That would have made me angry with myself
and you. Thank God I was tested today. I am convinced that I shall not die of sickness if Ramanama has
penetrated deep down into my heart. This rule is for everybody. One has to suffer for one’s mistakes and in that
spirit I passed through the pain. One should have Ramanama on one’s lips till one’s last breath but it should not
be repeated parrot-like; it should spring from the heart as was the case with Hanuman. When Sitaji presented a
pearl necklace to him he broke the pearls to see if the name of Rama was written in them. We need not care to
find out whether the incident actually happened or not. We may not be able to make our bodies as strong as that
of Hanuman but we can certainly make our souls as great. One should have Ramanama on one’s lips till one’s last
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“Now you have understood what my attitude is towards the sickness of anybody, be it you, me or any one else.”
And that very day he wrote to an ailing sister: “There is only one panacea in the whole world and that is
Ramanama. But His name could only prove effective if the rules pertaining to it are strictly adhered to. But who
cares to do so?”

Strangely enough the above incident occurred on the 30th January 1947, exactly a year before his death.
That unshakable faith in Ramanama remained with him till his last breath. I did not then imagine that on the
same day a year later I should have the heart-rending experience of hearing Rama, Ra........ma as the last audible
words of the great departing soul. Mysterious indeed are the ways of the Lord!

Bapu-My Mother, (1955), pp. 63-65
1977.