

The Retrieving Memories of Gandhi's Peace-mission: Noakhali Riots 1946, East Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

In 1946, Gandhi visited the Noakhali district in Eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh) to bridge the communal rift of the Hindu-Muslim communities just before the British Empire divided the subcontinent into two new countries: India and Pakistan. This sojourn is almost forgotten now, and no concrete attempt has been made to study Gandhi's peace-mission in a Muslim majority area from a historical perspective of Hindu-Muslim relationship as Gandhi would have wanted. This article attempts to understand Gandhi from the perspective of Muslims who saw him and how they subsequently remember him. Therefore, the article explores how Muslim people recollect Gandhi's visit and his ideas as a relevant way to make harmonious relations between antagonistic communities. The aim of this article is to recall Gandhi and, through recollecting him, create a reflective mindset that underscores the communal harmony embedded into core values of an equal and harmonious society. Through their neglect, the partition historians have safely buried Gandhi's chapter in Noakhali, but historians could potentially use this "peace-mission" of dealing with communities torn apart by riots. Therefore, it can be safely stressed that to have a just society in South Asia and to learn from past errors, then memories of Gandhi's visit must be remembered collectively as a mode of returning to the past and reshaping the present through memories of the adults who witnessed it and passed it down to their descendants.

Literature Review

Marian Hirsch argues that the totalitarian regime and the Nazis's erasures of records was a way to suppress and eradicate history. Yet the postmemory of survivors drawn from family and social groups works to counteract or to repair this loss. She also focuses on "reactivat[ing] and re-embod[y] more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation."¹ The aim is to retrieve and engage with the generations who have been less directly affected and can be an archive of the memories of the familial descendants. This is called postmemory. Public memories, as Aleida Assmann writes, "reflect a general desire to reclaim the past as an indispensable part of the present, and to reconsider, to revalue and to reassess it as an important dimension of individual biographies and historical consciousness."² Telling stories is a way to transmit memories from one generation to another, but it also helps to recognize the victims, make new archives of stories, and above all, attempt to liberate the individual through sharing. Sharing a story can cause the individual to let go of trauma and the past. Remembering the past through memories is also a powerful weapon to eradicate disinformation, fabricated news, biased interpretation, insular narratives; it is also a weapon to heal. It is a way of interpretation and an insertion of the past that comes down to us in the present.

As the British Empire was withdrawing from India in 1946, riots erupted in the Hindu-Muslim community of Noakhali, where Gandhi went to restore harmony between the two communities. The Hindus were victimized and targeted in Noakhali as a retaliation of the Great Calcutta Killings in 1946, where Muslims were killed. Their homes were pillaged and set on fire.³ Women were not spared. Gandhi went to Noakhali with his "peace-mission" to bridge the gap between Hindus and Muslims. There are still memories of his visit, and these memories are being passed on from generation to generation, an act of collective remembrance and dispelling the hatred of the past.

1. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 33.

2. Aleida Assmann, "2. Re-framing Memory. Between Individual and Collective Forms of Constructing the Past," in *Performing the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*, ed. Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay M. Winter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048512027-004>, 39.

3. Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 161-205.

Transmitting Memories across Generations

"For an experienced event," wrote Walter Benjamin, "is finite—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before and after it."⁴ This resonates with the similar impression that I am inquiring about Gandhi's sojourn to Noakhali when a communal riot flared up in 1946. Right after his visit, stories about him have been elaborated, interpreted, and misinterpreted through the memory of the people in the community. Much in the same way, oral historian Alessandro Portelli said that an event's importance lies on the ground upon which collective memory and imagination built a cluster of tales, symbols, legends, and imaginary reconstructions. To foreground his narrative, Portelli also quoted Hans Magnus Enzensberger who stated that "History is an invention which reality supplies with raw materials. It is not, however, an arbitrary invention, and the interest it arouses is rooted in the interests of the teller."⁵ Through remembering Gandhi, people in Noakhali collectively recollect him while telling stories of his journey, often creating contesting narratives of him and passing them on to the immediate generation. It is where the strength of Gandhi's visit was grounded as people still think about it, making it a special event from many accounts and obviously making many speculations about what they saw.

It has been almost 76 years since Gandhi's sojourn to Noakhali in 1946 where his monument was recently erected to commemorate his memory. The villagers have shared the sojourn through storytelling, remembering about where he opened camps and the food that was served, the road he took and so on. A substantial number of people have discussed and occasionally challenged who visited with him; one particularly important mention was about his granddaughters who accompanied him. Public memories are quite vibrant in the community, and researchers have long been communicating with the people who saw him and the memories they have in order to make the past into the historical present. This community was the last to see him in living memory. There are numerous people who came close to him in Noakhali, and artists later painted his picture to hang up in people's drawing rooms. Some people also reiterated his ideas on religion to commemorate him. For example, Lutfunnessa Abbas recalls that she saw Gandhi put on a loin cloth due to the deficiency of cloth in the Indian subcontinent. She also recollected that Gandhi wanted people to be able to eat and dress properly before he himself would put a cloth to cover his entire body.⁶

4. Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1.

5. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 2.

6. Tofael Ahmed, *Mahatma Gandhi in Bangladesh (East Bengal)* (Dhaka:

Lutfunnessa also highlighted Gandhi's understanding of religion as something that should be a matter of the soul and kept out of politics. No one would intervene to hinder people from carrying out their religious duties freely. He believed that Hindus and Muslims must coexist together without fear of one another.⁷ And yet during the time of riots, religious people committed heinous acts.

When riots broke out in Noakhali in 1946, the mob attacked the houses of the Hindu people; these stories later propagated from one person to another. Many individuals do not think incidents like these could have happened during the chaotic rioting. Targeted people were encircled from all directions and fire was set in the areas that people wanted to escape. Moreover, a substantial number of people were not interested in believing something that they did not witness directly through their naked eyes. However, the military crackdown which followed a number of deaths in the Bangladesh war of independence in 1947 convinced people to believe that people can be as heinous as they want. People believed the stories of the riots and what had happened during the time. Mominul Haque did not believe the stories of the riots, but he then asked his sister, Asrafun Yasmin, about the brutalities in Noakhali during the riots. She said what he had heard was right. This is called "communicative memory" which is biographical, factual, and witnessed by someone as an adult who passed it on to their descendants. Marianne Hirsch remarks that family is a crucial unit of transmitting memories across generations.⁸

It is not my intention to compare the Noakhali riots to the Holocaust but to give an idea concerning how memories are transmitted; I bring up the example of *Maus* to show how inside the family stories get told among family memories. *Maus* is a comic book written by Art Spiegelman through interviewing his father who had a terrifying account of the holocaust. It is not only a story of devastation, massacre, and torture—unspeakable tragedies— but it was also about haunting stories shared between son and father. This comic books tells how children "affected by collective trauma inherit a horrific, unknown, and unknowable past that their parents were not meant to survive."⁹ The Noakhali riots are not comparable in any sense to the massive killings of the Holocaust but can be remembered as a traumatize event related to the ideas of displacement, home, exile, and a sense of belonging.

Remembering the Past

Public memories of Gandhi can be used to counter disinformation and

Panchgaon Prokashoni, 1992), 63.

7. Tofael Ahmed, *Mahatma*, 63.

8. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 34-6.

9. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 34.

recover the past, redefining it to understand community, which cannot be possible through traditional archives and books. This way of remembering is powerful as it exposes how masses accepted Gandhi in their community. Gandhi was one the most well-known people in the Indian subcontinent and beyond and people irrespective of religious affiliation joined him in his prayer meetings. His recitations in the prayer meetings were taken from Quran, Gita, and Tripitaka and Bible, a way of acknowledging multiple faiths. The Muslim people of Noakhali talked about Gandhi in a deified manner, ignoring the fact that he was just a man and instead treating him as a prophetic personality. Thus, an image reverberates through time of Gandhi as more than just a man who went to both Hindus and Muslims and preached nonviolence. He is remembered for the power of his ideas and the aura that tied people's minds in one thread. For example, when masses of people had never chanced to see India nationalist towering leaders, let alone Gandhi, they were suddenly mesmerized by him, the man of simple living who held no hate for the people who he knew were rioters. When Muslims remember Gandhi, they often share stories of how Hindus were victimized, and this is because of Gandhi's impact. They do not hide the truth even though it casts their own community in a negative light.¹⁰

Through his aura (Gandhi was a spiritual energy), people who set entire villages aflame, murdered families they had lived beside, and committed unimaginable cruelties still acknowledged their depravity. Gandhi had purified them just like separating clean water from polluted water through chemical reactions. In the book *Mahatma Gandhi in Bangladesh (East Bengal)*, Tofael Ahmed discusses how among Muslim people of Noakhali, "in 1946, there was a big procession and training of rioters in the clay-drenched areas; it was drizzling, and one person directed the training of rioters in the yelling tone, a tone filled with insolence and hate. People marched to Hindu houses and attacked them."¹¹ Riots ensued and people were killed who had been living together for generations. In the upsurge, dwellings, huts, and shops were burnt and looted. The sky of the area was ablaze with smoke. People were forced to convert to Islam. This happened in Panchgaon, Noakhali.

The Hindu of Noakhali were forced to wear lungi (a sarong Muslim men wear) instead of dhotis (a type of sarong that outwardly resembles trousers and is worn by Hindus). The people who wore lungi were also forced to go the Mosque for prayer. Gandhi's visit had settled many problems even before he reached there. The miscreants were scared of Gandhi and went to seek vindication for their mistakes

10. Mr. Jitu Mia and Mr. Abul Kalam, interview with author, December 2020.

11. Tofael Ahmed, *Mahatma*, 3.

from the people upon whom they had inflicted pain.¹² They were trying to repent and letting the Hindus who were converted return to their own religious rituals. Gandhi came with his peace-mission in the community to heal the scars left by the rioters. Tofael Ahmed shared¹³ that he was reading in class five and had no idea why Gandhi came, but he and his friend named Bashirullah ran diagonally through a dry canal. Having reached the primary school field, they immediately saw Gandhi almost without any clothing, only wearing dhotis and thin frame glasses. He shares that “the only memory I have of him is that he preached among the people. But I had no idea what he was delivering as Gandhi was not speaking Bengali, which is our native mother tongue.” He also said that “I have not seen any prophets or messengers but Gandhi.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, one person was translating it into Bengali, and he went there to see him, not to listen.

Gandhi could instantly understand people and their problems and get a sense of the place where he was. Judith Brown remarks that “Gandhi’s school of politics was rough and ready because there was none to help him, and he was pushed into action by the pressures of the situation in which he found himself.”¹⁵ For example, during a hearing, Gandhi patiently gave Mahbubur Rahman, a Muslim in Noakhali, a full 30 minutes to speak. His choice to listen to the Muslim first was crucial and made Rahman feel proud. Gandhi always took time to give people an opportunity to show others what they could each contribute to what was going on in the village. This demeanor is still remembered by the villagers. His voice was soft and gentle, and he allowed people to share as much as they wanted. He had lived in the Muslim community as one of them and did not distinguish people based on the religion they followed. Having come to Noakhali, he says, “I have come to stay here with you as one of you.”¹⁶ Gandhi’s version of the Hindu-Muslim relationship was despised by his opponents, who accused him of pro-Pakistani attitudes and made a point that had outraged his assassinator, Nathuram Godse. The assassinator and his idea of India lies in making a Hindu rashtra (state), while Gandhi, through his life and acts, comprehensively countered this

12. For further reading, see Shahid Amin “Gandhi as Mahatma,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 288-350.

13. Tofael Ahmed, *Mahatma*, 3.

14. Tofael Ahmed, *Mahatma*, 4.

15. Judith Brown, *Gandhi’s Rise to Power Indian Politics 1915-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 3.

16. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi, Publications Division Government of India, 1999), vol. 93, 8. All references to Gandhi’s works will be abbreviated as CWMG.

communal feeling. Through his open politics, he marginalized the idea of a Hindu rashtra (state) and reduced those people, like Godse (his assassinator), as useless in the Indian public life.¹⁷ He did not believe India to be a country for Hindus; it was a country where Muslims would also get equal respect and rights, a notion despised by his opponent.

The Powerful Gandhi's Absence

For so many people in Noakhali, Gandhi's absence was as powerful as his presence. For example, Noni Bala Bonik is a survivor of the riots who is in her nineties. She also joined Gandhi's prayer meeting once. In a personal interview, she shared that after Gandhi returned to Bihar from Noakhali, "we have a very peaceful time and situation. None has the courage to perpetrate violence and created condition for their favor. However, we had spent few days after Gandhi was assassinated thinking people would come again."¹⁸ But nothing transpired. Abul Kalam, now almost 95 years of age and whom I have interviewed, joined Gandhi's prayer meetings in Noakhali. He recalls that "Gandhi also recited from Quran and told the villagers the meaning of Scripture."¹⁹ People like Kalam saw Gandhi as someone impressive and he frequently shared this kind of spiritually charged moment with young people and researchers when they visited him. He had such a presence that Kalam is still deeply influenced by Gandhi and his teachings that he continues to follow them to this very day. He also mentioned how Gandhi's mission in Noakhali quickly brought peace to the area. His presence and prayer meetings settled so many questions that people asked.

Gandhi's ideals also played a large role in the concept of power and nonviolent aggression in the civil rights movement, during which Dr. Martin Luther King said that nonviolence "does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding." King also stressed that "non-violent resistance is not a method for cowards; it does resist."²⁰ He argued that if someone is merely lacking in violence that person is not truly nonviolent. King also used the same tactics that Gandhi used in Noakhali: attacking the forces of evil rather than the individual

17. Dharendra K. Jha, *Gandhi's Assassin: The Making of Nathuram Godse and his Idea of India* (India: Vintage, 2021), 168.

18. Noni Bala Bonik, interview with author, December 28, 2020. See also Parvez Rahaman, "Gandhi's sojourn in Noakhali," *The Daily Star*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/in-focus/news/gandhis-sojourn-noakhali-3133786>.

19. Abul Kalam, interview with author, December 28, 2020.

20. M. L. King, Jr. *Stride toward freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Beacon Press, 2021), 90.

who happened to be doing the evil.²¹ This approach is characterized by a willingness to accept suffering rather than retaliating. It is nonviolence that is intended to endure pain without responding violently in return. It is an idea to endure the blows that come from the opponents and wait for the time when the perpetrators will change their minds. King also stated that if going to jail is necessary for nonviolence, he would go “as a bridegroom enters the bride’s chamber.”²² The violence in the United States of America during that time and now suggest we now need more of Gandhi and his ideals in this country than ever. According to King, “nonviolent resistance is a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation, to accept blows from the opponent without striking back.”²³ At some point, the opponent will understand and retreat from violence, and violence will breed violence, nothing else.

Conclusion

Remembering Gandhi is a way of addressing concerns particularly associated with religion and race. These are two prevalent problems that the world is fighting against with the former in the Global South and latter in North America. Gandhi came to Noakhali like a messenger, and Tafazzal Husain, a literary person from Noakhali who wrote a book on Gandhi, has compared him to a prophet.²⁴ He gave equal respect to the women and men and only used two pieces of clothing. Just like a prophet, he used a portion of white cloth without stitching. Gandhi sought the true meaning of life in simple living with minimum clothing. The white cloth was meant to be a sign of purity. A monument was erected in Noakhali to honor Gandhi. When people see this monument of Gandhi with a walking stick in his hand, they immediately have the chance to recall him. The monument gives all people a chance to remember him and his ideals of nonviolent philosophy. It also brings back the past to which we belong and allows us to envision a future that we can look forward to with hope.

21. King, *Stride toward freedom*, 91.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Tafazzal Husain, *Smritikana* [Bits of Memory] (Dhaka: 1978), 93.

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