

Mahatma Gandhi's cremation special

Editor's notes:

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Mahatma Gandhi's Asthi, (the Indian name for the ashes removed from the funeral pyre), was conveyed by a special train from Delhi to Allahabad for immersion at the Sangam, the confluence of the Ganges, Jamna, and the mythical Saraswati rivers. The train left Delhi at 6.30 a.m. on February 11 (*Editor's note: the year is 1948*), and reached Allahabad the next day at 9 a.m. The rake of the special consisted of five freshly-painted third class bogies, of which the centre coach had been modified suitably to carry the copper urn containing the Mahatma's ashes.

The middle compartment of the centre carriage was converted into a hall by removing the wooden benches. A large table, covered with the tri-colour national flag of India, was fixed in the centre of the compartment, and on it was placed the palanquin supporting the urn. Overhead was another national flag serving as a canopy. The floor was covered with white hand-spun cloth, called khaddi, from which also were made curtains for the doors. Three lights were fixed on pedestals on each side of the table to floodlight the urn, which was visible to the millions who marched past the carriage in the early hours of February 11 at New Delhi, and throughout the following day and night at stations en route.

The special carriage was distinguishable by the national flags flying half-mast fixed on either side. The Asoka Chakra and the lion's seal, the national emblem, were painted outside the coach. Communication between the Asthi compartment and the compartments on each side was provided by removing the wooden partitions. These compartments carried the near relatives and close associates of Mahatma Gandhi, important political leaders, and officials. The rest of the train was occupied by the Mahatma's select devotees and pressmen. Police and military guards took positions in four corners of the hall and stood on each side of the compartment.

The running of the train had been planned in great detail. It was arranged that the centre of the special coach should be opposite the main entrance of the ceremonial platform and the stopping stations en route. To ensure this, a whitewash band, 6 in. wide, was drawn on the platforms and the permanent way to enable the driver to stop accurately. A pilot covered the route 20 min. ahead of the train, which was under the direct control of an officer of the rank of Divisional Superintendent. Senior officers were posted at all important points on the journey. The train was seen off by the Prime Minister and Dr. John Matthai, Minister of Transport, who laid the Ministry of Railways' wreath in front of the urn. The Chief Commissioner of Railways, Mr. K. C. Baklile, travelled in the special carriage.

All the persons who travelled on the train were required to carry their own food with them. This precautionary step was taken to keep off vendors of foodstuffs, who would have been in the way of the huge crowds, which thronged the stations to have a glimpse of the Asthi. Passengers on the train and those present on the platform were required to remain bare-headed and were forbidden to smoke and chew betel leaves. To mark the solemnity of the occasion, station bells were not rung for the arrival and departure of the special; the blowing of one short whistle by the guard and a short blast by the driver served as the starting signals.

In spite of the crowds, the train ran punctually to the minute and covered its long journey without incident. This was a fitting tribute by the railwaymen of India to Mahatma Gandhi, who valued punctuality and orderliness highly. Their performance on this occasion was acknowledged by the Minister of Transport during the course of his budget speech in the Indian Parliament on February 16.

The special third class carriage which carried the Asthi is to be preserved as a national memorial and has been sent to Lillooah Workshops, where is kept also a coach used by another great Indian, Dr. Rabindra Nath Tagore, on his last journey from Santiniketan to Calcutta.❖

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