

Rami and the immersion of Mahatma Gandhi's ashes



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Assassination

30 Jan 1948. The news stunned the world. Mahatma Gandhi was shot dead while he was on his way to his evening prayer meeting. The assassin was Shri Nathuram Godse. Like Gandhi, Godse was a Hindu.

Godse was a well-educated man. Godse felt that Gandhi's policy of nonviolence and appeasement was harming Hindu interests. He had seen for himself in refugee camps, and elsewhere, the victims of atrocities meted out to Hindus on the Pakistan side of the border: hands cut off, noses chopped off, little girls raped. Hindu families had lost properties, savings, and relatives.

Much has been written since then in support and against him and his beliefs.

My friends and I were teenagers in high school in Mysore, an insulated Princely State that had merged into India after Independence. The news did not evoke much reaction. Rumours were floating in the evening that Gandhi was wounded, had died, etc. Radio was the only means of communication. Hardly a handful in our *mohalla* had a radio. So for the news to gain authenticity and spread, we had to wait for until next morning, when Kannada newspapers would arrive from Bangalore; English language newspapers from Madras (now Chennai) later in the day.

(Mysore had no morning newspapers – only a couple of evening newspapers. They were single sheet editions, in Kannada. The newspapers were mostly one-man shows. To gather the news, the editor would pedal on his bicycle to the police station, district courts, municipality, and a few other public places. And he would talk to his friends who gathered for morning coffee at his desk, contributing gossip. Other than this, the editor copied the headlines of the Bangalore morning newspapers. With the help of a typesetter-cum-printer, the editor brought out the paper, and a few poor students distributed it.)

The next morning, the newspapers carried the news of assassination. My school mate from S. Street and I reached Saturday school with anticipation of a holiday. The significance of the loss was lost on us, as it was on most of the city's population. In those days, students were afraid of their teachers and parents, and would not cut classes on their own. Most of them had arrived and gathered noisily in their respective classrooms.

I think the Headmaster had called all the teachers to his chamber. Perhaps after some discussion, he had sent someone to the nearby office of the education department for some instructions on how to handle the news. After what could be nearly an hour, we were all told to assemble in the school's spacious quadrangle. We were asked to stand in rows, section wise. Then the

Headmaster called the boy who always came handy on such occasion to come on the dais. After some mumbling, that boy sang *Vaishnava Janato* (one of Gandhi's favourite *bhajans*), followed by some verse from the Quran.

Then the Headmaster told us the significance of the tragedy in his own words, and exhorted us to follow the ideals of Gandhi. Another senior master, who always wore Khadi, spoke about non-violence and its importance. Then there was a pause. Perhaps the Headmaster had to decide whether we should end with National Anthem or the Mysore State anthem. Finally, we sang both, a cacophony of voices.

Next, we were asked to disburse and go home.

But most of us were in no mood to go back to our homes, where we would be subject to parental supervision and chores. In any case, in those days, nothing to eat would be available in the home except two square meals, one of which we had finished before coming to school, and the second one had to wait till the evening. If we went home, we would be given some errands or asked to look after younger ones. So some of us drifted towards Maharaja's College, some towards the market, and some towards Kukkarhalli Lake. A few who were diligent went home.

My friend and I friend went to the Maharaja's College precincts, where almost all the people had departed. Even the canteen, mockingly nicknamed "health kitchen", had a deserted look, except for a small group at one corner. A goatee professor in shabby khaddar was arguing with some students about the tragedy. Obviously, there seemed to be some who had a different view. This discussion did not interest us, and, reluctantly, we went home.

My classmate who was with me was a Boy Scout, and he perhaps went to his other friends. I had no interest in Scouting. My mother was not interested in anything except studies. She was definitely not interested in activities which entailed spending from her frugal resources. We could afford neither the uniform nor their camps. My mother, after a cursory enquiry about my early return, put me on to household chores.

Rami

It was late afternoon before my friend Rami returned from another school. Like me, had finished some chores before he could come out to the lane to play. Rami was two years younger than I was. He lived in a large joint family, which lived in a big house opposite our vestibule house. In this large family, Rami was not seen, not heard, nor had any recognition in the house.

The patriarch of the family was an Iyengar pundit well versed in Sanskrit and Vedas, respected by the then Maharajah. It was said he got *khillat* (gift of money) from the Palace every year. He was a prominent person who was held in veneration by the elite of the city. By 1948, he was no more. He had many sons, none up to his calibre. A few of them had managed to get Government jobs as petty officials, and others made their living as petty businessmen, music teacher, dance teacher etc. All of them lived in the same building.

The building, no doubt, was of good construction by the standards of those days. It was a two storied with Madras terrace at the front, and the kitchen had a tiled roof. The main building had an area of about 300 sq. m. There was an open backyard, with a well, bath and dry latrine, converted to waterborne. There was a high compound wall, and a small door at the back for entry of menials and sweeper.

The home was modest in every respect. Brahmins were required to be of "modest living and high thinking." If they made money, it was mainly from offerings from rich princes and landlords.

Some of the Brahmins were absentee landlords, with the lands gifted by their patrons. Brahmins invested mainly in gold jewellery, or silver vessels used mostly in religious ceremonies.

The layout of the house was a central flight of steps from the lane to the home, *jugli* (a sort of a verandah where people from other castes sat down or waited,) a hall cum passage and rooms on either side. The hall led to a kitchen and then to an open yard. So there was not much space. Almost all of them except for the youngest son had married. Each family had one room; each family cooked separately. With common bath, and sanitary annex, quarrels were frequent.

As was common those days, births and deaths took place regularly. Children were everywhere, from babies to grown-ups. I do not think any one of the family could count how many children were there in the house. Rami was the eldest of the four of a son of the middle order, who did not, as I remember, have any marketable qualification. So he had opened a corner shop a little distance away from the house. The shop sold some provisions of daily use. It hardly attracted good customers, and mainly depended on the daily wagers, milkmen, etc from the nearby streets. His wife was perhaps from a poor family.

As an unsuccessful person always short of money, Rami's father had developed a quick temper and would take it out on Rami, his eldest son. He thought Rami was not born under auspicious stars, and all the father's misfortunes were due to Rami. Most of the members of that joint family were orthodox and believers of astrology. Some of them also treated Rami badly. No one called him by his name. Everyone shouted at him as *Shani mundede* ("Bastard son of Saturn". It was believed that Saturn, the Hindu God of misfortune, would enter the life of a person periodically, and stay there seven and half years in one cycle. During that period, that person would have mishaps one after another.) Others in the house took advantage of the father's abandon and dumped all kinds of odd jobs on Rami.

His mother and widowed grandmother alone sympathized with him, consoled him but could do little else in that male dominated family.

This harsh treatment had made Rami rebellious and a devil-may-care type. He preferred to spend most of his time in the street. Though skinny, he was quick to defend himself with all his might. He did badly in school and took pleasure in disobeying his father.

My father had passed away a couple of years ago, without leaving any money for the family. My mother managed the household frugally with help of my grandfather and with some assistance from my uncle. She was not authoritative but would remind us we were a family of five, and it would help her if we studied well, kept out of trouble and assisted her in running the family. So I must say I enjoyed considerable freedom, which helped me throughout my life to take independent decisions.

However, Rami was a buddy's buddy and we would go any length to be together. We made a perfect pair. We went together to learn how to swim without informing parents. We went away into nearby villages, raided gardens for fruits, fought with other children on what we considered just, etc.

Condolence meeting

That day, Rami suggested we should go towards Town Hall. That was a welcome idea. He was sure there would be a procession and condolence meeting – some excitement in otherwise our dull existence. I agreed with him, and both of us were off to Town hall, which was near the centre of town. True to our guess, arrangements were being made for a condolence meeting. An old

decrepit lorry had brought some chairs, floor mats, and floor spreads. There were the familiar Chicago Microphone Company loudspeakers and monstrous sound boxes.

It was perhaps the Mysore Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC) which was arranging the meeting. One or two emaciated volunteers in torn khadi and dirty Gandhi caps along with a few coolies were disgorging the contents from the lorry and arranging around the western verandah, with usual shouting and abuses. In those days, MPCC had very little money, and mostly existed on some membership collection (four annas a year) and the benevolence of a *Sahukar* (rich businessman cum landlord) who, for some unknown reason, was supporting the cause without expecting any return. So none of the volunteers was well built or had a paunch, as is common now.

After an hour of fussing and shouting, the dais, mike and mats on the grass field took shape for the conduct of the meeting. A few dignitaries arrived in a tonga, a horse drawn carriage. The Sahukar and his friends arrived in his Chevrolet, and the meeting started. Of course, in the background beyond the floor mats, children were playing football. Our earlier attempt to join them had been rebuffed. Most of the boys were Muslims, and they would not let us Hindus join them.

Whenever the Sahukar was present in the town, he always presided over a meeting. After an invocation and *Vaishnava Janato*, one by one the prominent Congress office bearers went on drilling the crowd as to the great loss the country had suffered, and how the communal acrimony had grown in spite of their efforts. He warned us that the dark days of violence were ahead for us if we did not follow the path of Gandhiji.

The speakers also urged the assembled to eschew violence and live peacefully. Some used the occasion to emphasize how close they were to Gandhiji and Pandit Nehru (India's Prime Minister) and went on to recollect incidents from their meetings with them. Often these remarks were met with snide remarks from some members of the audience who knew of the dark deeds of those speakers and their worth.

One of the speakers went theatrical, shed tears and told the crowd that he could not sleep the entire night he could not sleep. And, when he barely closed his eyes towards morning, he saw Gandhiji ascending to heaven in the winged chariot.

This did not go well with some listeners sitting in a distant corner. There was a loud laugh and a very audible remark. "Ha, ha, saw the winged chariot, did you? You son of a widow (bastard), you must have seen the Satan coming towards you." The people on the dais ignored this and proceeded.

It was eight in the evening when the meeting was over. We walked all the way to home. My mother, who was waiting with my usual bowl of rice gruel, asked me where I had been. I gave an exaggerated account of how Gandhiji was killed, and the great crowd that had assembled in the town hall. My mother, as usual, murmured, "I don't know why you go to such places and why you cannot stay home and teach your younger sister to read." She also said what my grandfather used to say, "I do not know what evil will befall us now that British have left."

After washing my feet and gulping the gruel, I spread the sheet and the pillow on the floor beside my brother. In my dream, I think I saw some white apparition rising and rising towards the heavens. The next few days were eventless, except for some meetings at some street corners in the city.

Immersion

A week later, there was a buzz in the streets that a casket containing Gandhi's ashes would come to Bangalore. From there it would be brought to Paschimavahini, where at the Ghat it would be immersed in the river. A short distance upstream of Sriranga Pattana, the one-time capital of Tippu Sultan and Wadiyars, the Cauvery river splits and flows encircling the town to join again some distance south on its journey towards Madras. It was because of this natural barrier and abundance of water that the town had been a capital.

The town had a temple of Lord Ranganatha (another name for Lord Vishnu), well known and venerated in Mysore State. As is common with Hindu religion, legends had been woven around the place and the temple bestowing on it high status in the hierarchy of holy places. So a number of ghats, mini temples, *choultrys*, etc. had come up at various times, some built by kings and some by other rich people, all of various designs and shapes.

One of the ghats was reserved for performing the last rites and immersion of ashes. The faithful among us believed that if the last rites were performed here and ashes immersed, it was as good as these rites being performed at the confluence of Rivers Ganga and Yamuna at Allahabad, which was supposed to be gateway to Hindu heaven.

The day before the immersion day, newspapers announced that the Railways would run two special trains to Paschimavahini (and perhaps from Bangalore also), to facilitate people's participation in the ceremony.

This news electrified Rami.

"Why not we go?" he suggested.

I said "Why not? But ..."

Rami said "But what?"

"We don't have money. I have only half an Anna with me."

Rami said, "I have one Anna."

I said, "It won't cover the fare."

Rami said, "What fare? It is *Gandhi* that day." The term *Gandhi* was colloquially used in Mysore to indicate anything free.

I demurred. "What if we get caught travelling without a ticket?"

Rami gesticulated and said, "What will happen if we get caught? We don't have anything. They would let us off after sometime."

Anyway, the excitement of undertaking an adventurous trip and doing something my other classmates might not do overwhelmed me and washed away the fear. We decided that we should keep it a secret. Not a word to anyone in the house. A holiday for schools had already been announced for that day. So, we would be free to go.

Next day, just slightly before the appointed time, we went to the railway station. We could not dare go early. By the time we arrived, the train was jam-packed. People were on the roofs of the carriages. I found it impossible to get in, but not Rami. He sneaked in between legs of two people

and tried to drag me in. I was sandwiched but not for long. Rami poked a pin in one of the legs and it was lifted with a big “Ouch”. I slithered in. That man could never make out as to who hurt him; he just growled all around.

We could not stand up erect in the compartment. Neither of us could see anything except a patch of the roof as everyone was taller than us. The train did not start on time, as the railway men found it difficult to cope up with rush. Obviously, most of the passengers had thought it was *Gandhi* all the way. After much confusion, the train started but it crawled, stopping at many scheduled and unscheduled places, as many along the track wanted to join and pushed themselves in.

I was feeling suffocated. I think somewhere before the next station I must have passed out. Seeing me faint, Rami raised a big howl, which I think saved me. Immediately some people around me made way, took me to the window made me sit down, and someone in the crowd sprinkled water on me. I woke up to hear some cheering me and some shouting at me, “Why you skinny bastard, why you have to venture into such a crowded train?” Anyhow, for the remaining part of the journey both Rami and I had a somewhat comfortable journey near the window.

We arrived in the nick of the time. By that time, special trains from Bangalore also seemed to have arrived. The Chief Minister, Mr. K Chagalaraya Reddy, his entourage, and other dignitaries had also reached.

Every available space – correction, all space – around the small Ghat was already crowded, including the trees. For both of us there was not an iota of chance to go anywhere near the place of immersion. After some futile attempts, we gave up.

Still, we wanted to make the best of this escapade and ran towards the river on the eastern side. After crossing the road, we came to the Bangara Doddi canal, and the sugar cane fields around it. Bangara Doddi canal construction is linked to royal romance with a wayside girl. Legend has it Doddi, a rustic beauty, and Maharaja Ranadheera Kantirava Narasaraaja Wadiyar (1638-1659 AD) chanced to meet when he was on hunting expedition near Paschimavahini. She was carrying a basket of cow dung. He made love to her. Enamoured by her charm, he took her as a courtesan. When asked what she would like to have in return for gratification he had, instead of asking something for herself she asked that water be brought to her village from River Cauvery, as the village was suffering from water scarcity.

The Maharaja, true to his word, got built a canal to the village, which even today irrigates about 800 hectares of land besides providing drinking water.

The canal lazily meanders round, losing very little height through sylvan surroundings. In one quiet place, we decided to swim naked. When we were completely exhausted, we slept a little, and then moved around.

Walking home

Suddenly, it occurred to us that we had to return to Mysore. We hurried to the Railway station, chewing some sugarcane we had uprooted. On our way back, we passed the Ghat, which was now deserted but was full of marigold, jasmine and other flowers, basil and other leaves, paper and other rags, food remains – generally untidy.

Much to our horror, the special train had left and there was no prospects of any train coming from Bangalore until 8:30 pm. Faced with the prospect for waiting for long, having no money to board a regular train and being caught by the ticket checker, we decided to walk back Mysore along the

road. The walk would be 12 miles (almost 20 km). It was already nearing six in the evening. The prospect was daunting but we could not think of any other way.

The Mysore-Bangalore highway was the primary highway in Mysore State. The road, one and a half lane wide, one of the few roads tarred all the way. It was a meandering road, as was common those days. Very few people owned cars. A few people went by bus. Most preferred the train, as it was cheap and affordable. Mostly bullock carts plied on the road, carrying goods and passengers between villages and neighbouring towns.

After walking some distance, we came across a bullock cart carrying some household goods, kerosene tins, etc. The bullock cart's driver had his wife and a child on the cart. We tried to explain our plight. The wife, who was chewing *paan*, took pity on us and asked her husband to accommodate us. He said he would branch off to his village after two miles or so. Small mercies should not be refused. We jumped in to the cart.

He was curious to know the reason for our trip. We eagerly told him about Gandhi and the assassination. He, but not his wife, had heard about Mahatma Gandhi. So we explained. The wife asked, "Were we not ruled by Maharajah?" We said yes, but explained that he was also under British. Their ignorance enthused us to tell what little we knew. How much went into their head – who cares? The couple shared some fried grams with us, which we accepted with great gratitude.

We got down from the cart when we arrived at the road junction. By now the sky had grown dark, as it was winter. There was a chill in the air. The rest of the journey till the Krishna Rajendra textile mill at the outskirts of the city was uneventful. Occasionally a truck or a car passed us but no one stopped at our request. The mill was a venture of the earliest attempt to industrialize, before Bangalore was chosen as the city for industrialization, and Mysore as the cultural and educational centre.

In those days, the mill was famous for *banians* (vests) and long cloth. It was at the zenith of its business cycle then; it closed down later on. The mill perhaps worked in two or three shifts and was buzzing with activity. Lights shone and were visible from a long distance. We dragged ourselves to the cigarette shop, which was still open. We were awfully thirsty. We asked for and got water, which we drank copiously.

The shopkeeper and his few cronies were curious about what two city bred boys were doing in the night. We explained about our escapade. They had a hearty laugh and it earned us some bananas in return.

Luckily, two of the factory workers, who had stayed behind for gossip with the shopkeeper, offered to take us up to St Philomena Church in the town on their bicycles. We reached the church around 9 pm. From there, we walked to our home, where we reached after 10 pm. The mohalla was fast asleep. People slept around 9 pm, as there was not much to do after that hour. Street dogs greeted us raucously, giving an early warning to people that something was happening.

By the time we arrived in home, there was quite a lot of commotion as Rami had been missed by 8 pm. My mother was worried. My brother had found out that we two had gone out in the morning together. Rami's father was furious but had decided against going to police. My mother, being a widow and knowing I was with Rami, perhaps prayed for the best. Hell broke out in Rami's house when he met his father. It took quite some time for his relatives to pacify him.

Next day I found out that I was the only person from my class who had been to the immersion. I exploited this, and went on telling things about the ceremony, stretching it for days.

Rami

Shortly after that, my family had to move to a distant part of the town because our landlord wanted to raise the rent by Rs. 5 per month. My mother could not afford the higher rent.

After we moved, my meetings with Rami grew rarer and rarer, and then they ceased. Rami failed in his Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examination. His studies discontinued. His help in the shop also did not yield results. One day I was told Rami had run away after a violent quarrel with his family.

Even to this day, I feel sad for Rami. I think he was a normal child with average intelligence, even-tempered, helpful, more courageous than I was, and having many interests outside academics. His father's excessive belief in astrology, finding a proxy for his own failure and taking out his frustration in life on Rami, took a toll of Rami's normal life.

I still harbour a strong belief that a person like Rami would not fade away. Somewhere in this wide world, he must have found a suitable niche and flourished. ❖

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