UNIT 13 NOAKHALI

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13.1 INTRODUCTION

When the national movement was reaching a crescendo in 1946-47, there were tremendous expectations of the impending freedom all round. At the same time the idea of having a free Pakistan, which the Muslim League had been demanding and mobilising for, had also been agitating human emotions. Communalism, which had attacked a composite Indian nationalism, was coming to the centre stage and there were violent overtones of the communal mobilisation that could be seen from across the country. On 16 August 1946, Calcutta, the capital of the Bengal Presidency witnessed one of the worst communal riots, which consumed the life of many a people in a span of four days. Seven weeks later the easternmost districts of Bengal bordering Burma, Noakhali and Tippera, burst into violence. There were attacks on people of different communities and violence overtook the humanitarian outlook. It was in such a situation that Gandhi decided to come to Noakhali.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand

- The context of dilemmas prior to the Partition
- Gandhi's peace mission in the riot-affected areas
- The moral and courageous stand of Gandhi in a critical phase.

13.2 WHY NOAKHALI? GANDHI'S MISSION

Gandhi, it seems, had already seen in the Calcutta riots of August 1946 the potential for greater, escalated violence probably on the scale of a civil war: 'We are not yet in the midst of a civil war', he said, 'but we are nearing it. At present we are playing at it.'

It was, however, the news of violence in Noakhali and Tippera that prompted him to come to Bengal. In the meantime violence erupted in Bihar in an unprecedented manner and a very large number of minority population was either killed or rendered homeless. 'Why and why only Noakhali whereas rioting had been taking place in Ahmedabad, Bombay or for that matter in the neighbouring Bihar', was the question repeatedly asked of him. 'Why do you want to go to Noakhali? You did not go to Bombay, Ahmedabad or Chapra, where things have happened that are infinitely worse than Noakhali. Would not your going there only add to the existing tension? Was it because in these places the sufferers were Hindus?' Gandhi's answer to this question was that 'he would certainly have gone to any of the places mentioned (not Bihar) by the friend if anything approaching what had happened at Noakhali had happened there and if he had felt that he could do nothing without being on the spot'. Thus, it seems, he attached greater significance to the happenings in Noakhali despite the fact that the number of people killed either in Calcutta or Bihar far outnumbered those killed in Noakhali.

The Noakhali riot was qualitatively different from the earlier communal riots including the Calcutta killings of August l946, which immediately preceded it. It may be that Gandhi could sense that the difference lay in the transformation of a communal discourse, as a politics based on religion, to one in which violence was sanctified by religion. It was evident from the pattern of violence that a total rupture of an essentially peasant society had occurred and that communal ideology could entrench itself in that social milieu and could legitimise itself as a source of valid and just political action. It was not difficult for Gandhi, being an astute reader of the peasant psyche as he was, to understand the impact of such a rupture. Noakhali, therefore, became important not only because it demonstrated an intensity of violence, but also the power of an ideology, i.e., Communalism.

At the end of the elections of 1945-46, it was quite clear that the League had achieved some sort of a mandate of being the representative agency fighting for the partition of the country based on Two-nation theory and sought people's support. Neither the Muslim League nor its leader Jinnah had ever espoused a critique of colonialism, so that the movement for achieving Pakistan could be galvanised by critiquing the Colonial power. Instead it was the Congress, which the League argued, was the representative of the Hindu population that was attacked. By the forties, it was not only the Hindu Congress but also the general Hindu population that was depicted as opposing the creation of Pakistan.

Gandhi, it seems, was practical enough to see the writing on the wall. In September l944 itself, he sensed the increased hold of Jinnah on the Muslim masses, and therefore, while writing to Jinnah he acknowledged the latter's hold over them. His meeting with Jinnah was basically an acceptance of this realisation. Aware of the significance of 'symbols', he wanted to attack the idea of 'two-nations' by attacking communalism. He was prepared to accept any kind of partition as long as it was not based on this theory. He forewarned Jinnah regarding the dangers of its operation.

The Noakhali riot presented for Gandhi the first field demonstration of the ruin that he had already envisaged in 1944. In Noakhali, it came in a form most intense and most frightening. And it is here that one finds a very serious effort at conflict resolution tried at a societal level. 'In any war', he said, 'brutalities were bound to take place; war is a brutal thing'. Once Gandhi accepted this, he started looking beyond the violence and the violations taking place there. He told his audience at Dattapara, 'Whether you believe it or not, I want to assure you that I am a servant of both the Hindus and the

Mussalmans. I have not come here to fight Pakistan. If India is destined to be partitioned, I cannot prevent it.' Instead he concentrated on 'discovering the political intentions working behind the move and the way of combating them successfully'.

While it was 'the cry of outraged womanhood' which brought him to Bengal, (*Harijan*, 10 Nov. 1946, p. 396. 'It was the cry of outraged womanhood that had peremptorily called him to Noakhali', *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p.65) he was equally aghast at the religious intolerance shown by the local populace. He took it upon himself to combat the operation of the 'two-nation theory', while also delegitimising the violence of its apparent religious sanctions.

This attitude of combating the war brought out a novel form of experience in its train significantly entitled Gandhi's Noakhali experiment. In this experiment, Gandhi's principles were at stake. 'My own doctrine', Gandhi said to N. C. Chatterjee, 'was failing. I don't want to die a failure'. But what was his doctrine that was failing? Throughout his sojourn he would mention about this failing doctrine but one does not come across any specific instance where he is explicit about his doctrine. It raises a very serious question. The Noakhali riot was no different from other communal riots as such. Then, why was it that only in the case of Noakhali, Gandhi would talk about the failing of his doctrine? It seems to us that it was phenomena like forced conversions and the way that religion was made to legitimise violence, which shook Gandhi's previous understanding of communalism.

13.3 BIHAR RIOTS AND CRITICAL DILEMMA

While he was fighting this uncertainty vis-à-vis the Noakhali situation, there erupted in the neighbouring province of Bihar ghastly communal riots. Many were slaughtered in the process of taking revenge of the rumoured massacre of people of their respective communities in Noakhali. In Bengal, however, this made Gandhi's mission in Noakhali very delicate. The number of casualties in the Bihar riots was much more than those in the latter. Though there were conflicting reports about the casualties, the Bihar Government had given the figure of 5,246, which is suggestive of the intensity of the violence that swept across the area. Therefore, the Muslim League Ministry in Bengal, which from the very beginning had been trying to minimise its own responsibility in the Noakhali riots, now found some justification for asking Gandhi to shift his attention to Bihar instead of Noakhali. The details of the Bihar riots were exaggerated and made the centre of projection. The Bihar riots were presented as another stage of the vicious campaign led by the Congress Ministers, which, according to the Muslim League, wanted to annihilate their culture and religion.

The League workers opposed Gandhi's visit to Noakhali for they felt that the world attention would get focused, projecting to be in connivance with rioters. It, therefore, exerted pressure through propaganda and personal insinuation against Gandhi. Even those holding responsible positions attacked Gandhi and asked him to leave Noakhali, and attend to the Bihar situation. Gandhi and the relief workers were put to tremendous pressure so that they would perforce leave the place. Members of the Feni sub division of the Muslim League sent Gandhi a post card, containing a copy of the resolution passed by that body, which read:

It is appreciated that Mr. Gandhi's presence in Bihar is much more useful than at Noakhali where the situation is normal. He is therefore requested to leave for Bihar.

Gandhi remained undeterred by these attacks. His reply to the Feni sub division was direct. He wrote that he was unable to follow their advice as it was based on ignorance of the facts. 'In the first place, I know that the situation is not normal here and that so far as I can contribute to the Bihar problem, I have to inform you that such influence as I have on Bihar can be and is being efficiently exercised from Srirampur.'

Gandhi was well aware of the magnitude of the Bihar riots and could see the logic of communalism and the relationship between the Noakhali and Bihar riots. He perceived that Noakhali was the disease, while Bihar was just an outgrowth or casualty of the former. Gandhi's reply to the statement of Hamiduddin Choudhury bears out this understanding. He wrote:

It will not serve the cause of peace if I went to Bihar and found the Bihar Muslims League's report to be largely imaginary and the Bihar Government's conduct substantially honourable, humane and just. I am not anxious to give them a certificate of good conduct as I am to give you, much though you may not want it. My spare diet and contemplated fast, you know well, were against the Bihar misdoings. I could not take such a step in the matter of Noakhali misdoings. It pains me to think that you, a seasoned lawyer should not see the obvious.

With the society showing heightened polarisation and intolerance and when there were attempts to portray Gandhi as a Hindu and the greatest enemy of the Muslims, this seems to be a sound judgment. He was aware of his ability to influence the Ministers and people of Bihar even from a distance. His presence in Noakhali, on the other hand, was a deterrent for any further retaliatory action anywhere else. At another level, he neither had a hold on the Ministers in Bengal, nor did he have any strong influence, as he had witnessed, on the local populace of Noakhali, many of whom had even condemned him as an arch enemy of their faith.

Gandhi, on his part, faced all these charges with the simple statement that he was as much a friend of the Muslims as he was of the Hindus. However, this was increasingly disbelieved by the villagers, and towards the end of his sojourn they not only boycotted his prayer meetings, but also dirtied the roads which he used everyday from village to village. He accepted this as the misdemeanours of those who had failed to understand him and his work. But he, Bose says, resolved not to 'surrender his own love for men even if they were erring'.

Though outwardly unfazed, the situation in Noakhali, the Bihar riots and its reaction, the strong and entrenched opposition from the Muslim League quarters in Bengal, and his own search for a way out, created some intense moments of self doubt, and consequently, Gandhi was not at peace with his inner-self. This forced him to put his 'will' to the test. He not only reduced his food intake and retained but two of his aides, he also experimented with his personal purity. Though it created a stir even among his close aides, this shows the desperation with which Gandhi was fighting the last battle of his life a battle against communal ideology.

13.4 GANDHI'S LONELY JOURNEY

Gandhi was in Noakhali from 6th November 1946 to the end of February 1947. Beginning his tour with the villages of Gopdirbag, he reached Srirampur on 20th November 1946, where he decided to spend the next one and half months. His visits to

these villages on the one hand stirred the entire area with new life, and on the other strengthened his own determination to contest communal politics, with Noakhali as his battleground. In combating communal ideology and the forces that represented it, he sought to heal the societal rupture that had sustained the communal breach. The battle was a difficult one, be-cause the communalisation of the population was complete. This made him more determined to fight it with all his strength.

After a long sojourn in Srirampur, which had soon become the nerve centre of his mission in Noakhali, Gandhi embarked on his journey into the interior of Noakhali and Tippera from 2 January 1947. He repeatedly expressed his desire to be left alone on this journey, and in fact, desired that the military protection provided to him be with-drawn. He felt it prevented him from showing the people that his concern was genuine, and that they could approach him without any fear. He wrote to Suhrawardy on 8th January 1947,

All my attempts at bringing about real friendship between the two communities must fail so long as I go about fully protected by armed police or military.... The fright of the military keeps them from coming to me and asking all sorts of questions for the resolution of their doubts....

13.5 THE IDEA OF FEARLESSNESS AND COURAGE

Gandhi felt that the anger that is being openly expressed would clear avenues for dia-logue, rather than continue with the present scenario of sullenness. He wanted both the communities to be brave but, as he wrote, 'Unfortunately both lack this very neces-sary human quality'.

In almost all the villages he visited and the congrega-tional prayer meetings he addressed, he urged them to be fearless. He was aware of the fear that prevailed, and of the fact that the Hindus were really in danger, without adequate protection. The total social rupture that was demonstrated by the brutality of the commu-nal attacks was soon compounded by instituting false cases against Hindu villages, at times with the active connivance of the local authorities. Even the army found it difficult to tackle the situa-tion.

Therefore, talk of fearlessness in such an atmosphere of all-pervasive tyranny of fear was seen by many as unwise. Leaders of political parties demanded military protection for the Hindus of Noakhali. Contesting this line of argument, Gandhi refuted the claims that he was not practical in advocating military protection for the Hindus. 'I am an idealist', he said to the Hindu Mahasabha delegation, 'but I claim to be a prac-tical idealist'. And as a `practical idealist', he must have realised that any talk of army protection would make the Muslim villagers more belligerent against the Hindus, as well as hamper the return of a normal social existence in these villages. In the same vein, he contested the idea of the 'segregation of Hindu population in protected pockets'. For him, this `would be interpreted as preparation of war' by the Muslim League. 'For myself', he declared, 'the path is different.' He wanted one worker in each village 'to steal the heart of the inhabitants'. It did not matter, he added, if there was only one or many Hindus in a village. His prescription was that they should stick to their posts and even face death if necessary with courage and willingness. If they live in clusters it would only mean accepting the 'Two Nation Theory'.

Here, the idea that the villagers, irrespective of their religious affiliations, should take responsibility for each other was a very fundamental one for Gandhi. It was this idea of responsibility that he attempted to use as an antidote against the atmosphere of violence,

created in order to legitimise their acts of *irresponsibility*. It is on this level that a face-to-face community could be validated against an abstraction, which was proving to be negative and anti emancipatory. Therefore, the path he chose was dif-ferent. The talk of migration was in the air but in his opinion if it had to take place, 'it must be complete'.

'No police or military would protect those who are cowards' (Ibid.,). Gandhi emphasised the need for Hindus to be courageous and shun their inferiority complex. On 12 November at Dattapara he said that he 'had seen the terror-stricken faces of the sufferers. They had been forcibly converted once and they were afraid the same thing would be repeated. He wanted them to shed that fear.' In fact, he tried to attack the tyrannical hegemony of fear that the communal violence had created in the minds of the people. It was here that he reflected on his idea of an imminent civil war that communalism posed at this stage. Therefore, Gandhi in his talk with Nalini Mitra and Rasomoy Sur of Noakhali, at Srirampur, concluded that 'the present problem was not the question of Noakhali alone; it was a problem for the whole of Bengal and the whole of India' (Srirampur, 22 November, 1946, ibid., p.145). This was why Gandhi was so perturbed about Noak-hali. In fact, his determination to go back to Noakhali, even after the Partition, reflects his idea of attacking communal ideology and the `two nation theory' from here. Thus, unlike his `search for light', as far as his actions were concerned, he was determined that Noakhali was going to be his testing ground.

Noakhali in his mind was like Champaran or Bardoli the 'model site' for launching his movement. His speech at Nabagram reflected what was going on his mind. He said, 'Noakhali offered an almost ideal situation for testing whether ahimsa could effectively be used by a small number of people against an almost sullen if not hostile majority all round.' He was conscious that 'the problem here was also complicated by the fact of the existence of a popular Government controlling the destinies of the people'. About the contrasting psyche of the two communities in Noakhali, he stated that he had been 'moving amidst a sullen population on the one hand and a frightened one on the other'. Conciliation, he resolved, was to be achieved through one's openness and the other's fearlessness. Gandhi's presence and his attempts at meeting people in `their home' were itself a symbolic attack on the prevailing atmosphere marked by fear.

Gandhi was very upset by the targeting of violence against women, who were the worst victims. The male population in most of the villages had to run for their lives and the women lived in great fear and danger. Gandhi asked them to be courageous without sounding patronising – he shared their grief. Manubehan Gandhi, his grand daughter, who was there with him, wrote:

As the husbands and sons of some of them had been murdered, they were plunged in grief. With sobs and tears they poured out their stricken hearts to Bapuji. 'The only difference between you and me,' he consoled them, 'is that you cry and I don't. But my heart sorrows for you. Your grief is my grief; that's why I have come here. There is no remedy for our pain except faith in God. Is the one, most efficacious panacea dead? If one imbibes this truth, there will be no cause for such outbursts of grief.'

Later, Gandhi in a sad tone told Manubehan, 'the meeting with those sisters is still vivid, who knows how many more tragic sights like this I am fated to see'.

Speaking at Jagatpur on 10th January 1947, he advised his audience 'about courage and the need of never surren-dering one's honour even on pain of death' (Bose, *My Days*, p.126). Gandhi's presence, his prayer meetings, which encouraged women to come out

confidently in the open after a long time, and his constant evocation of courage, fearlessness, honour and death, had a significant impact. Women began to come out and share their tales of woe with him. In Bansa, they put before him their dilemma, 'what is a woman to do when attacked by miscreants run away or resist with violence'. Gandhi shared their concern and advised them to come out of the trap of violence. He said,

My answer to this question is very simple. For me there can be no prepa-ration for violence. All preparation must be for non violence if courage of the highest type is to be developed. Violence can only be tolerated as being preferable always to cowardice.... For a non violent person there is no emergen-cy but quiet dignified preparation for death.

He asked them to be like Sita and Savitri who by their deeds refuted the fact that women were 'weak'. While speaking at Bhatialpur he noted, 'It was often said that women were naturally weak they were *abalas*'. His advice to women was that they should not believe such things. They could be, he opined, as hard as men.

While advising Hindu women to become courageous and fearless, he at the same time asked them to help the neighbouring Muslim women shed their igno-rance and illiteracy, as also in other aspects where they lagged behind the former. As Gandhi's journey progressed, a sense of confidence built up in the Noakhali villages. Women started coming out more often and they even displayed the courage that Gandhi was exhorting them to live with. Bose wrote that after one prayer meeting a girl came up to tell her story without the slightest fear, and on being asked whether she would be able to go back and stay once more in the midst of scenes she could never forget, the girl answered in the affirmative. Bose recorded that she answered in this manner because now she knew that she could save herself by dying. This forced Bose to think about the transformation Gandhi had caused. Though equivocal in his judgement, he could not negate the influ-ence of Gandhi's speeches on that girl. -

When told that the Muslims were willing to receive the refugees back in their villages, provided they withdrew the criminal cases arising out of the disturbances, Gandhi provided the guilty with two alternatives either they could admit the crimes and justify their conduct on the ground that whatever they had done was for supporting in the creation of a separate nation or they should report and submit to penalty of law by way of expiation. But he negated any compromise such as dropping the cases. Hence, personal responsi-bility was to be accepted, as also the root of those acts, which had forced people to create such a situation.

He rejected the idea of the Hindu Mahasabha that the entire Hindu population should be segregated in pockets. Gandhi's counter argument contained his idea of responsibility. For him, the former was an unworkable proposition. He said to N. C. Chatterjee:

Put yourself in Mr. Suhrawardy's shoes; do you think he would favour it, or even the Muslim residents of Noakhali? For it would be interpreted as a preparation for war.

He could see that by putting forth that demand, they would practically be conceding the logic of Two-nation theory. He opined, and quite forcefully, that if migration had to take place, it must be systematic and complete, and it was not therefore to be thought of so long as there was any hope of co operation. And so long as there was any hope, efforts were to be made for a permanent solution to the communal problem. It is here that he could see the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League actions as complementary to each other. Gandhi, on the other hand, insisted that for a permanent solution responsibility

as well as proximity were absolutely neces-sary and was against running away in fear giving up their hearths and homes. He said that he ‘ wanted to see every Hindu family settle down in its own village and face the situation fearlessly and with courage’.

13.6 THE IDEA OF RESPONSIBILITY

While Gandhi asked them to seek protection through their inner strength, he also tried through the Peace Committees to create bridges between the communities, to come into physical proximity with one another, which again would bring moral responsibility into the social life of the population.

The enactment of this idea of the sense of responsibil-ity lay in his idea of Peace Committees of the local population. Initially, the idea to have Peace Committees was mooted by the Bengal Muslim League Government while Gandhi was in Srirampur. The plan was to have equal number of Hindu and Muslim members in these Peace Committees, with a government official as Chairman. Gandhi was favourably disposed to the idea be-cause it fulfilled his idea of *responsibility*. This is why he asked the Hindu members to give it a chance to succeed when the latter insisted on first bringing the miscreants to book. Gandhi advised them not to summarily reject the proposal by placing any conditions. Thus, the Hindus had to trust and honour the work of these Committees. The functions of the Peace Committees were defined as:

a) Undertaking intensive propaganda work to restore confi-dence;

b) Helping in constructing shelters for the return-ing refugees, and in processing and distributing relief, e.g., food, clothing etc.;

c) Drawing up lists of disturb-ers of peace, who should be rounded up. These lists would be checked with the First Information Reports already lodged with the police, and arrests would be made on verification. If an innocent person was found to have been arrested, the Peace Committee would recommend to the Magistrate his re-lease on bail, or unconditionally as the case might be;

d) Preparing a list of houses destroyed or damaged during the disturbances.

Similarly Gandhi asked the people to trust representa-tives of the Government. When the Government’s efforts proved wanting, Gandhi even went to the extent of advocating that ‘one brave man’ in a village could achieve the desired peace, if he was ready to lay down his life when the occasion arose rather than shun responsibility. He felt that a single man could change the entire complexion of societal thought by his acts. He was glad to meet the Maulvi at Muraim who ‘helped in sustaining his theory that one individual can transform the entire society’. There was no riot in Muraim where, according to Pyarelal, the Maulvi was like an oasis amidst the desert; he saw to it that there was no panic among Hindus and made himself responsible for their well-being.

13.7 MORAL AND ETHICAL CRITIQUE

The notion of responsibility therefore was a crucial link in Gandhi’s idea of reconciliation. Gandhi’s battle in Noakhali Tippera was an attack on communal ideology from a high moral and ethical plane. First, he emphasised the right of every individual to profess or follow any religion as long as it did not negatively affect the others’ religious creeds. He was appalled to witness the religious intol-erance shown during the riot and which continued during his visits.

He then appealed to the 'Muslim brethren' to assure him 'of that freedom which is true to the noblest tradition of Islam. There was no sense of appeasement, in his words and the prayer meetings testified to his fight for religious freedom. Here again, it will not be out of place to suggest that prayer for him broke all religious and communal boundaries and, in addition, it even gave voice to the protesting soul. The prayer meetings of Gandhi brought people out into the open for the first time after 10th October 1946, and thereby, broke the tyranny of fear. Gandhian defense came as an attack on that particular undercurrent of communal ideology, which legitimised religious intolerance'.

Further, by bringing up ethical-moral questions, Gandhi tried to delegitimise the forces of communal ideology, which, in fact, claimed religious sanction for their agenda of violence. In retrospect this seems quite significant, because clerics of religion, and religion itself, had become the main prop and legitimising factor in the Noakhali riot.

Gandhi's encounters during his visit made him realise that the acts of communal violence and attacks on religion during the riot had the strong sanction of the clerics and religious teachers. The large scale of conversions was a living testimony of that. He requested the Muslims to join the Peace Committees to restore the confidence among the Hindus that they would be able to pursue their religious practice in freedom.

He himself referred to Jinnah so that the local Muslim Leaguers did not commit misdeeds by using the latter's name. He said,

Qaid i Azam Jinnah has said that every Muslim must show by his conduct that not a single non Muslim need be afraid of him, the latter would be guaranteed safety and protection. For, thus alone can the Mussalmans command honour and respect.

Gandhi proclaimed that 'if people had known the true meaning of their scriptures, happenings like those of Noakhali could never have taken place'.

13.8 SUMMARY

By advocating fearlessness, invoking a sense of responsibility and discoursing at an ethical moral plane, Gandhi prioritised his ideological fight against the ideology that had created the circumstances in which violence of this kind took place. He understood, from the very beginning, that the hegemony of communal ideology was partially a reflection of the socio economic structure of that society. And this was quite significant because his own earlier understanding of communalism was not as focused as it was beginning to look like now. This makes his efforts at reconciliation a matter of not only historical importance but also of significant contemporary relevance. It is here that the question of communal violence becomes quite crucial. Quite often, historians and social scientists equate communal riots with communalism. They are however not the same thing- neither analytically nor in their nature. Violence in the form of the communal riot itself is not the cause of communalism; rather it is the product. Violence can certainly be a reflective index of the communalisation of society but there can be communalisation without any violence. Therefore, escalated violence and its aggressive insensitivity indicate the intensity and depth of ideological penetration that has taken place. A discourse on violence without taking cognisance of the ideological apparatus is to naively ignore the entire process that went into making that violence. Communalism, given its ideological apparatus, legitimises, sanctions and creates occasions for violence. And it is here that one needs to see that the reconciliation efforts should not merely attempt at stopping violence but try and critique the ideology that produces such violence.

13.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What was the mission envisaged by Gandhi in Noakhali?
2. Critically analyse Gandhi's ideas of fearlessness and courage in the Noakhali context.
3. How did Gandhi envisage the meaning of responsibility? What meaning does the ethical perspective hold?

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