

Memoir on meeting a Gandhian

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Almost a year after the dastardly assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984 a travel worn Gandhian, Baba Amte arrived at Gandhi gram, an agricultural Gandhian Village fifty kilometers away from the temple city of Madurai, Tamilnadu, South India where I was a student.

I was aware that the religious strife and backlash between Hindus and Sikhs emanating from the killing of Mrs. Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard, had threatened to a certain degree, the otherwise cordial communal relationships among all religious faiths which had existed in India. In my role as a student journalist with "The American Express," the college newspaper of the American College where I was a student, I sought to meet and interview Baba Amte about the current religious animosities in India and at the same time to elicit from him first hand impressions of the Mahatma Gandhi who was himself assassinated by the rather mentally deranged Nathuram Godse in 1948.

Sitting under the shade of the generous trees by the rice fields, I asked Baba Amte how and why he had met Gandhi. Baba Amte, a teenager fuelled with the dream of an independent India had enlisted as a youth activist in Gandhi's "Quit India" movement. Far from being motivated to carry arms in the resistance to British rule, Baba Amte and his colleague youth activists were challenged to adopt "ahimsa" or non-violence, for which they were taught moral rearmament codes including fasting, prayer and meditation. Contrary to my expectations that such training might goad the youth on to rebellion, I was amazed to learn that the Mahatma had taught the dignity of avoidance of violence and anger to repressive force, and sacrifice as a way of living, to Baba Amte and his cohorts.

"At the stroke of the midnight hour" Pandit Nehru declared at India's Independence on August 15, 1947 " a new nation will be born" but, not from blood sweat and tears, rather, as Baba Amte averred, from the pursuit of ennobling freedom through spiritual and moral discipline. Baba Amte was lucid in his memory of the Mahatma Gandhi as an astute

spiritualist, a pacifist, qualities which, he emphasized had deeply impacted on his psyche. Almost 37 years after the death of Gandhi, Baba Amte was still inspired by his life and message. He had embarked on a walking journey from Cape Comorin (Kanyakumari) in the South of India to Kashmir, to the North of India, to spread the Gandhian message of peace, tolerance and non-violence as panacea to a tense India in the threat of going up in flames through religious intolerance.

Observing some resonances of the Gandhi in this living Gandhian, I asked Baba Amte whether he had aspired to the immortality of Gandhi in the India of the times, his response in the closing of the interview intrigued me, "I cannot lift the cross he carried, I can only stand in his shadow."

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My favorite photograph of The Mahatma Gandhi as I remember him from my Hindi language Textbook in Grade 5 (1972)

