

Encounter with Mahatma Gandhi

Late Rev. Dr. Yesu Das Tiwari

(This article was written in October, 1996 and is found in one of his note-books, still in editorial stage. It is reproduced here as it is, except in some places where I have used my editorial discretion for clarity, and that too in parenthesis.-- Ravi Tiwari)

The events I am going to relate here happened after my conversion and baptism into Christianity. I had experienced that Christ is living and that He is my saviour. This implied discipleship, renunciation, asceticism and heroism, which appealed to my youthful idealism.

But I discovered that Christians were very worldly people! I discovered that even our theological students at Serampore and Calcutta were like that. According to my immature youthful thinking those days, the word 'Christian' meant to be a saint, a **sadhu**, a **mahatma**, but our teachers were professionals and were training pupils for a profession.

So I got my head shaved and put on a sadhu's garb and left Serampore College and began my long journeys in the villages of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh as a Christian *Sadhu*. During these jounies, I happened to meet an English disciple of Gandhi, named Miss Mary Barr. She was working as a village worker according to the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. She said to me: "It seems to me that you are trying to live the Christ-life, a life of a true Christian.... *I believe that the greatest Christian living today is Mahatma Gandhi.* You should go and meet him at his Wardha **Ashram**." I told her, "how will I be able to meet such a great world figure. Will he have time to meet me?" Miss Mary Barr said, " I shall write to Gandhi about me (you) and he will give some time to me (you) on my recommendation". After this, I informed my father that I had become a Christian pilgrim.

My father at Agra, and Hindu Congress leaders, came to know about my plans that I was planning to visit him. So they also wrote to the Mahatma that British missionaries have misled and baptized me, and that he should bring me back to **Brahamism**.

So before I reached Gandhi's Ashram, Wardha, a file has been opened there about me. Both Christians and Hindus have requested him to take me in the ashram and see what can be done to help and enlighten me. Ofcourse, I myself was equally eager to learn how to be Christian in the contemporary situation. Thus there was no difficulty in joining the *Ashram*. My father agreed to bear my expenses during my stay at the Ashram.

Most of the Ashramites were Hindus. But there were some very fine Muslims, like Abdul Gaffar Khan and his young **Pathan** followers. There were some very fine Christian inmates living and working in the *ashram*, e.g., the economist J.C.Kumarappa, his younger brother, Bharatan Kumarappa, who had a doctorate from London University in Western Philosophy and another doctorate in Indian

Philosophy from Edinburg University, the educationist Aryanayakam, one English woman from Birmingham, Shanta Ben. But, as I said earlier, most of the people were very fine Hindus.

When opportune time came, Gandhi showed me the file about me. He said this was his custom not to hide any thing but to keep every thing open. This act of openness, of course, won my heart and respect for him. A lesser man would have kept that file hidden; but he was indeed a Mahatma and he kept me fully informed about matters relating me.

Gandhi had taken a vow that he will give equal respect to all religions. Not “merely tolerance” but positive equal respect to Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. etc. So he would never start a dialogue or discussion on a religion. But he openly declared that he had entered politics because he wanted to realize God.

Gandhi never discussed with me the doctrine of virgin birth or about miracles or the doctrine of Atonement. He never argued whether Gita was greater than the Gospel or vice versa.

Gandhi had become a staunch pacifist. In this he was influenced by Ruskin (Unto the Last) and Tolstoi (Kingdom of God within You) and not by Greek and Latin fathers and evangelical Protestant missionaries. From him, I learnt the importance of **sweeper's** work, leatherwork and the work of weaving. How to apply ancient gospel teaching to modern problem. All this was against my Brahmanic ways and **Manu's** teachings.

At Wardha and Sevagram I had a great opportunity of meeting men and women from east and West, bound by love and loyalty of a great leader (Gandhi). This was indeed breeding atmosphere for dialogue. But I discovered that what I needed was the fellowship of Christian Church. So I moved to Quakers, Anglican Church etc. Also my personal need to learn deeply the sacred languages and (live in a) multicultural (community) and yet to keep my Christian identity. Mahatma Gandhi did not like these plans of leaving the Ashram. He wanted that I should keep on living in the ashram where I had liberty to teach about the life of Christ, Parables of the Kingdom, Sermon on the Mount etc. His view about me was: A rolling stone gathers no moss. Also he said, “You have struck at my heart with your fist”. Please revise your decision and continue to live at the Ashram.

But my mind was made up, and I left him. Who was right? , God alone knows. The problem remains: I want to live a heroic Christian life with the help of God's grace. My latest inclination is to be a third order Franciscan (Tertiary Order) belonging to the Church of North India.