

## CASTE OR DEMOCRACY

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pages 71 – 73 | **Gandhiji: who “lay nearer to the engine?”**

It was in the last week of December 1947 that there was a knock at about ten in the evening at our door of the house in the Darya Ganj area of Delhi. When I came out to enquire, I was told that Rafi Saheb wanted to meet me at that very hour, even though it was very late. He had sent his own car to fetch me - Mr. Rafi Ahmed Kidwai was then a Cabinet Minister. I was somewhat taken aback by the summons, its timing and its urgency, particularly when I had never met him before. I took a few minutes to dress myself properly and after I had readied myself for the interview, I accompanied the very untimely messenger. I had no idea at all why I was being fetched in the Minister's own car. On reaching Rafi Saheb's house on King Edward Road, now it is Maulana Azad Road, I was ushered into Rafi Saheb's room. I was told that there was an assignment for me which Rafi Saheb hoped I would agree to execute. On my asking what could it be, he said that Gandhiji had, in the last few days, been hearing contrary reports about the Meos in Gurgaon. Some reports said, they did not want to leave for Pakistan but were being forced to vacate their houses so that refugees coming from Pakistan could be accommodated, others said, no compulsion of any kind was being applied; on the other hand, those who wanted to leave for Pakistan were being provided with the necessary facilities. Gandhiji would like me to go to Gurgaon on the following day and report to him by the evening. I said I would go, see the things myself and report. Rafi Saheb said, I would have his car sent early on the following day for me to come and see him before I left for Gurgaon.

I met Rafi Saheb as had been arranged and he introduced me to three others who had arrived there earlier. They were Mohan Lal Gautam, a senior politician of U.P. who later became a Cabinet Minister of his State, Mridula Sarabhai, a close associate of Punditji, it was she, who sent every morning a red rose which Punditji wore in the button-hole of his achkan and was never seen in public without it, and the third person was Nayantara, daughter of Mrs. Pundit. The introduction over, all four of us left by car for Gurgaon. We stayed there the whole day, meeting as many people as was possible. We had divided ourselves, so that more people could be met.

We met together at a pre-arranged place and time to exchange views. All of us had only one story to tell which was that no Meo was willing to leave behind his home and his land. Meos are an agricultural community. As there was nothing else to do, we returned and went straight to Birla House where Gandhiji was staying. The group asked me to be its spokesman to acquaint Gandhiji what we had seen and heard. I met him for the first time. I briefed him in a few words with the day's activities and our assessment of the situation. He said in reply that he would not stay in the way of those who desired to go to Pakistan but would see that those who had no such wish were not forced to leave in or-

der that one plan or the other of the Government could be implemented. On hearing what Gandhiji wished, Gautam and I decided to go again to Gurgaon and stay there for some days and keep Gandhiji informed.

On our arrival in Gurgaon the Meos put us up in a room of the local school which was closed, owing to the troubled times. They also took care of our safety and provided us with meals. We had been there for two or three days when we were informed that a special train full of Meos was getting ready for departure. We rushed to the Railway Station and found the news given, correct. Immediately, we accosted the Guard of the train who said he was under orders to take the train to Delhi and was waiting for the army personnel who would be accompanying the train. **We said that the train would move only on our dead bodies.** Having said it, we both jumped down to the track and laid ourselves on it, our heads resting on the rail lines. A small crowd had, in the meanwhile, been collected and seemed to view the drama with a mixture of surprise and unbelief. It appeared that the Punjab Chief Minister, Dr. Gopi Chand Bhargava, was camping nearby, because very soon we saw him standing on the platform with folded hands, requesting us to come up on to the platform to talk the matter over. We said that there was nothing to talk about, either he ordered the Guard not to take away the train, or, if he must comply with the orders already given to him, the Guard could certainly carry it over us. Seeing us determined in our resolve, he yielded and gave necessary instructions to the Guard. The Meos in the train, men, women and children, with their small belongings started leaving their bogies and seeing us on the platform with the Chief Minister and other Government officials, thanked us in words and by gestures. They asked us, whether they could now go to their homes, we said, why did they leave in the first instance. Their reply was that they were told that Government needed their homes as well as lands for those coming over from the other side of the border and that they themselves, on arriving in Pakistan, would be provided with homes and given lands more than they possessed here.

When I saw Gandhiji next time, I narrated the incident. On hearing it, he seemed very amused and asked, whether we felt very uncomfortable on those hard track stones. My reply was, not much. We had our sweaters on. He smiled and then asked, were we frightened, I said, a little. **He then put the question which seemed to be uppermost in his mind - which of us lay nearer to the engine?** I said, we had decided that if the train moved, we would clasp each other strongly as if in embrace and thus allow the wheels of the engine to crush us almost simultaneously. He smiled again and gave me a look of appreciation.

More days passed and one day we decided that we had done our work as well as we could and it was time that Gandhiji was invited to address the people of Gurgaon. So, Gautam and I went to Delhi and held out the invitation. It was accepted readily and a day in the third or fourth week of January fixed. **On that day, we and many others, accompanied Gandhiji to Gurgaon. Quite a sizeable crowd of both Hindus and Muslims was waiting for us. Gautam spoke first, followed by me and then Gandhiji was requested to say a few words.** He appreciated the work done by us both, in bringing together, as before, the two communities, and hoped that the good work would not be allowed to be undone and Meos and others would live in peace and harmony. We could see from his face that he was feeling very happy to see Meos in their thousands staying where they had been for centuries. Later, we came to be informed that Gandhiji was really happy because he won the battle of Mewat against the wishes of Government which had decided to vacate the entire Muslim population of Punjab including Mewat to accommodate those coming from the other side of the border. The policy succeeded and, only Mewat, a Muslim pocket, had remained to be emptied of Muslims. The special train which was stopped, was the first of the several trains reserved for the purpose. Our success seemed to upset Government's apple cart. **The Meos remained in India in such large numbers in their part of the then Punjab, that Maulana Azad, in 1957, stood in the General Elections for the Parliament.**