



Experiments of Mahatma Gandhi to establish Communal Harmony and Peace in Noakhali and Tipperah districts in 1947: A Study in Geography of Peace

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Abstract:

Communal harmony and peace are essential for the holistic development of any region. The social, economic, political, and cultural development of any region can only be possible in a peaceful environment. Violence always creates spite, atrocity, bitterness, etc. The geography of Peace is the recent branch of geography that studies the processes of establishing peace and harmony in any region.

The incidence of communal riots in the Noakhali and Tripperah districts of former East Bengal (now Bangladesh) is a black chapter of modern Indian history. When every Indian was awaiting independence, the various parts of the country in general and the Noakhali district in particular burned in the communal violence. It was a very horrific and inhuman communal riot in which more than 5000 Hindus were killed, hundreds of Hindu women were raped and thousands of Hindu men and women were forcibly converted to Islam.

Mahatma Gandhi, "the man of the millennium", emerged as a great messenger of peace and humanity during that critical time. He left no stone untouched to maintain communal harmony in Noakhali. He walked barefooted village after village in Noakhali and Tripperah district of East Bengal, in a hostile atmosphere created by riots. Gandhiji worked hard to establish peace and social harmony in such riots affected villages.

He adopted several techniques and measures, such as arranging prayer meetings, delivering post-prayer speeches, creating refugee camps, and fasting, to establish peace in the riot-affected areas. Because of his hard labour and sincere efforts, he succeeded in establishing communal harmony in Noakhali.

Keywords:- Violence, peace, harmony, prayer meetings, fasting

Introduction

Geography of peace, developed as a new branch of geography, studies the techniques for establishing peace by ending the tension, violence, and unrest spread within a particular area or on the border. Generally, peace is understood to mean resolving international border disputes or stopping war, but the meaning of peace is broader. "Peace is understood not only in relation to war but in relationship to the concept of justice, development, security and human rights- all of which have rich literature in geography (Koopman, 2017)." Mahatma Gandhi's science of peace is based on justice, security, development and human rights. He spent his entire life ending the disturbance spread in human life and its habitat. Therefore, Mahatma Gandhi is called the Messenger of Peace. His experiment for establishing peace started in 1893 AD in Durban, South Africa and ended in 1947 AD in India's Noakhali (now Bangladesh), Bihar and Punjab. Be it unrest arising due to economic-social reasons or tension and violence arising due to communal reasons, Mahatma Gandhi was the first and everyone's favorite. The present world is also going through a period of unrest and tension. At such a time, Gandhiji's principles appear relevant.

Hypothesis

1. Peace, truth, non-violence and heart to heart talk are the important techniques to stop the communal violence in any region.
2. Gandhian approach is based on humanism for the establishment of peace.
3. Gandhian approach to the establishment of peace is relevant in the present time.

Objectives

1. To analyse Gandhi's peace mission from a geographical viewpoint to maintain communal harmony in Noakhali in 1947.
2. To find out the techniques, processes and programs adopted by Gandhi to maintain communal peace in East Bengal during partition.
3. It will find also its (peace, truth & non-violence) relevance in the present time.

Methodology

· This study is mainly based on secondary sources of data. These sources include several governmental and non-governmental organizations and different internet websites etc, from where data has been collected.

· Several interviews with some noted Gandhians have also been organized for the collection of important information.

· Maps of various scales have been prepared to explain the theme.

Study area- Noakhali and Tipperah districts were the most riot-affected areas, where large-scale violence and massacres took place between Hindus and Muslims. The magnitude of the riots can be gauged from the fact that a large number of people, including women and girls, were missing. Their houses were destroyed and they had neither food to eat nor utensils to cook with (Agarwal, 2009, p. 104). The geographical characteristics of these districts can be seen as follows –

Location and extent- Noakhali and Tipperah districts are located in the south-eastern part of the then East Bengal of India (East Pakistan since 15 August 1947 and currently Bangladesh) at 22° 70' North and 91° 7' East. Noakhali and Tipperah districts are spread over 1658 and 2531 square mile area respectively.

Structure & Physiography- Situated on the tidal flood plain of the Meghna River delta, these districts represent an area of extremely low relief. It is mainly an integral part of the wide flat coastal and delta region, which is formed from alluvial soil deposited by the Ganga-Brahmaputra and their tributaries.

Climate- A tropical monsoon climate is found here. The average annual temperature here is 25.6°C and the average monthly rainfall is 3302 mm. The dry season is of short duration and the wet season is of long duration.

Population- Most of the population here is rural where the Muslim community is in majority. Hindus are in the minority here. The population of both the districts according to the census of 1941 can be seen in the following table no. 1 –

Table no.-1
Population of Noakhali and Tipperah district according to census 1941

Sl.no.	Religious community	Population	
		Noakhali District	Tipperah District
1.	Muslim	1,803,937	2,975,901
2.	Hindu	413,465	884,238
3.	Total	2,317,402	3,860,139

Source: Census Department of India

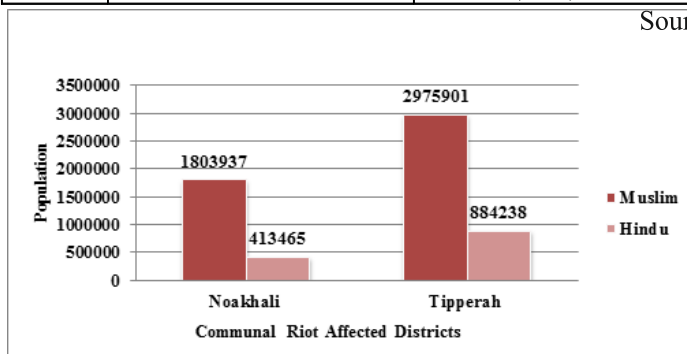


Fig.No.-1 Population of Noakhali and Tipperah Districts of Former East Bengal (Present Bangladesh) According to Census Year 1941

It is clear from the above table no.1 and fig. No.- 1 that according to the census of 1941, the Muslim population in Noakhali was 18 lakh and the Hindu population was a little more than 4 lakh whereas the Muslim population of Tipperah district was around 29 lakh 75 thousand and the Hindu population was around 9 lakh. This makes it clear that these districts were Muslim dominated.

The confluence of two different religious communities

This area has been the center of meetings of two different religious communities. From the religious point of view, there were many differences in the customs, rituals, worship methods and food habits of Hindus and Muslims, which could never be met, but some geographical factors forced them to live with mutual love and brotherhood for a long time. This land was a boon for them due to geographical factors like farming on flat and fertile land, doing business through it due to its proximity to the sea, doing fish farming and feeling of cooperation due to the flood-prone area, etc. No one would want to leave such a fruitful field. Therefore, both communities were living with love and brotherhood for a long time.

Causes of communal riots and tension

“Most often communal riots occur because of previously existing multi causal factors like social problems, economic problems, possibly psychological problem and political problem (Chaturvedi, 1992, p. 489).” The main reason for communal riots and tension was the division of India based on religion. On the demand of the Muslim League, on the basis of the two nation theory proposed by the British government, the Hindu majority area was divided as India and the Muslim majority area was divided as Pakistan. On this basis, a new nation named West Pakistan was formed comprising the Muslim-majority provinces of East Bengal, East Pakistan and the Muslim-majority northwestern region of India.

Due to division based on religion, the problem of large-scale migration of the population had arisen. Both the communities were not happy with this partition and both were blaming each other for it. No community wanted to leave the land on which they had been living for centuries and for which they had attachment and love. In this sequence, rumors, falsehoods and news of tension between the two communities were spread by some fundamentalist people. The result was that hatred, violence and unrest immediately arose in both the communities. Due to this, violent clashes started between the two communities. A large-scale riot broke out. There was a loss to both people and money. In this way, the entire area of Noakhali and Tipperah was burning in the fire of unrest, tension and violence, which Mahatma Gandhi had to come to calm down.

Techniques and measures used by Gandhiji to establish peace

Mahatma Gandhi had visited the riot-affected villages to establish peace in Noakhali and had done the work of establishing peace through various techniques and measures. The techniques and measures used by Gandhiji to establish peace are as follows:

Visit several riot-affected villages

Gandhiji first visited the riot-affected villages to establish peace. He visited the villages in two phases.

Table no.-2

Day to day visit of Gandhiji in communal riot affected villages of Noakhali district in 1947

Sl.no	Date of visit	Name of Villages	Sl.no	Date of visit	Name of Villages
1	6.11.1946-7.11.1946	Chandpur	34	23.1.1947	Dalta
2	6.11.1946	Goalundo	35	24.1.1947	Muriyam
3	6.11.1946	Kushtia	36	25.1.1947	Hirapur,
4	7.11.1946-8.11.1946	Chaumuhani	37	26.1.1947	Bansa
5	8.11.1946	Gopairbag	38	27.1.1947	Palla
6	8.11.1946-14.11.1946	Dattapara	39	28.1.1947	Panchgaon
7	11.11.1946	Noakhali	40	29.1.1947	Jayag
8	11.11.1946	Sonachaka	41	30.1.1947	Amki
9	11.11.1946	Khilpara	42	31.1.1947	Nabagram
10	14.11.1946-20.11.1946	Kazirkhil	43	1.2.1947	Amishapara
11	17.11.1946	Dashgharia	44	2.2.1947	Satgharia
12	19.11.1946/10.11.1946	Madhupur	45	3.2.1947- 5.2.1947	Sadhurkhil
13	25.11.1946	Ramganj	46	5.2.1947	Srinagar
14	26.11.1946-1.1.1947	Srirampur	47	6.2.1947	Dharampur
15	2.1.1947	Chandirgaon	48	7.2.1947	Prasadpur
16	2.1.1947-7.1.1947	Chandipur	49	8.2.1947	Nandigram
18	7.1.1947	Masimpur	50	9.2.1947-11.2.1947	Bijonagar
19	8.1.1947	Fatehpur	51	11.2.1947	Hamchandi
20	9.1.1947-10.1.1947	Daspara	52	12.2.1947	Kafilatoli
21	10.1.1947	Jagatpur	53	13.2.1947	East Keroa
22	11.1.1947	Lamchar	54	14.2.1947	West Keroa
23	12.1.1947	Karpara	55	15.2.1947-17.2.1947	Raipura
24	13.1.1947	Shahpur	56	17.2.1947	Devipur
25	14.1.1947	Bhatialpur	57	18.2.1947	Alunia
26	15.1.1947	Narayanpur	58	19.2.1947	Char Dukhia
27	16.1.1947	Ramdeopur	59	20.2.1947	Char Larua
28	17.1.1947	Parkote	60	20.2.1947	Birampur
29	18.1.1947	Badalkote	61	20.2.1947	Bishkathali
30	19.1.1947	Atakhora	62	21.2.1947	Kamalpur
31	20.1.1947	Sirandi	63	22.2.1947	Char Krishnapur
32	21.1.1947	Kethuri	64	23.2.1947	Char Soladi
33	22.1.1947	Paniala	65	24.2.1947-2.3.1947	Haimchar

Source:-1. The Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, volume 86 & 87, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, New Delhi.

2. Dalal, C.B.(1971): Gandhi:1915-1948 A Detailed Chronology, GandhiPeace Foundation, New Delhi

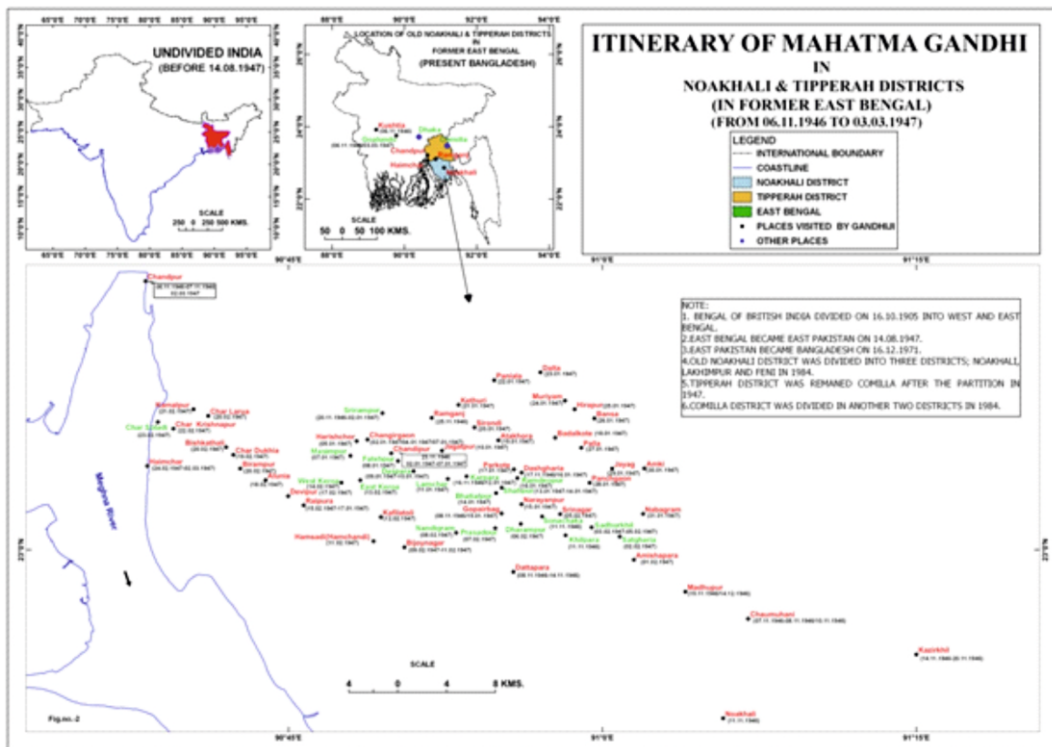


Fig.No.-2 Itinerary of Mahatma Gandhi in Noakhali and Tipperah Districts of Former East Bengal (Present Bangladesh) to establish communal harmony and peace.

The first phase lasted from 26 November 1946 to 4 February 1947. During this period, it visited about 45 riot affected villages like Shrirampur, Chandipur, Masimpur, Daspara, Fatehpur, Bhatiyapur, Ramdevpur and Atkhora (Table no.-2 & Fig. No. 2).

The second phase lasted from 5 February 1947 to 1 March 1947. The second phase started at Srinagar village and ended at Haimchar village. Even in this phase, Gandhiji visited about 20 villages. Gandhiji used to go to the villages on foot and also used to stay at night in the villages. He used to visit villages on foot. During this time, he used to travel through rough and rocky roads, due to which blisters appeared on his feet. While going to Narayanpur on 15 January 1947, he faced dense coconut bushes and difficult roads (Gandhi, 1957, p. 75). He went to the villages and made an emotional appeal to all Hindu and Muslim men and women in the social atmosphere of violence to give up violence and live together peacefully.

Formed relief committees

Gandhiji had formed a relief committee for the relief of the people affected by the riots during his peacekeeping tour. The relief committee had the following functions:

- Making arrangements for the rehabilitation of people displaced by the riots,
- Building refugee camps in which riot-affected people can be provided temporary accommodation.
- To arrange medical facilities for the treatment of persons injured in the riots.
- To arrange money for the relief fund
- Making arrangements for food and clothing for the riot-affected people.
- To solve immediate problems of riot sites.

In this way, the Relief Committee worked keeping the above mentioned objectives in mind. The relief committee worked at many levels. At the top was the Central Relief Committee and below

that were the District, Panchayat and village level relief committees.

Formed Volunteer corps

Gandhiji had also formed a group of volunteers. He used to form volunteer teams in every village he visited. Volunteer teams are used to perform the tasks given by the relief committee. Cleaning the damaged houses, removing debris, transporting injured persons to relief camps and distribution of various materials etc. were the main tasks of the volunteers. Volunteers were the mainstay of the management of this man-made disaster.

Formed Panchayats and peace committees

Gandhiji also formed Panchayats and Peace Committees to establish communal harmony. He also suggested the local Muslims to form a peace committee in their village (Gandhi, 1957, p. 64). In this, one good person from each community of each riot-affected village was kept as a member. Apart from these, there were also Gandhiji's associates and members of Congress. Panchayats and Peace Committee had the following functions:

- Visiting each riot-affected village and holding meetings among the communities,
- Talking to the village people and strengthening them mentally by changing their minds and thoughts,
- Making action plans for the welfare of the villagers in coordination with the village head and enlightened people,
- To make every possible effort to increase peace and harmony, and
- Preparing reports on relief operations and monitoring them.

Arranged prayer meetings and delivered post-prayer speech

The most effective technique for establishing peace was to hold a prayer meeting and make both communities sit and talk about peace, love and brotherhood. In India, emotional upliftment through prayer meetings is considered an effective solution. Gandhiji had done the same. Gandhiji used to highlight the similarities in the literature of both religions by highlighting them in his speeches. Gandhiji's prayer meetings were held in every village. On January 2, 1947, in a prayer meeting in Chandipur, East Bengal, he had said that he had come here to establish friendship among the different communities and not with the idea of organizing one community against another. Therefore, only when Hindus and Muslims give up mutual fear and suspicion, true unity can be established (Gandhi, 1998, p. 347). According to him, all religions are true and all give the same teachings. Hindu and Muslim are the two eyes of India. Gandhi (1998, p. 383) has said that tolerance is the key to the solution of communal conflict, in which lies the well-being of mankind and its religions. While addressing a prayer meeting in Chaumuhani (a village in East Bengal) on 7 November 1946, Gandhiji had said, "The Muslims are in such overwhelming majority in East Bengal that I expect them to contribute themselves guardians of the small Hindu minority (Mazumdar, 2003, p.55)."

In this way, the techniques and measures adopted by Gandhiji had a great impact. As Gandhiji's journey to establish peace progressed, the self-confidence of the people of the entire East Bengal including Noakhali and Tipperah continued to increase. Hindus and Muslims had surrendered before Gandhiji and had pledged to give up violence and tension.

Geo-politically viewpoint

Gandhi has concluded that Hindu-Muslim bitterness threatens to postpone India's freedom. He also 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. Therefore, the Muslim league workers opposed Gandhi's visit to Noakhali for they felt that the world's attention would get focused. That is why the league passed the resolution that Mr. Gandhi's presence in Bihar is much more useful than at Noakhali. He is therefore requested to leave for Bihar.

Relevance of the Gandhian approach in the present time

In the present times, it can be said that when not only India but the people of the entire world are living under the shadow of hatred, contempt and terror, the relevance of Gandhiji increases even more. An environment of peace can be established by following the thoughts and ideals of Mahatma

Gandhi. Many works are being done at many levels for this, which can be understood by some examples- A Gandhi peace foundation was established by many Gandhians who are working in various places for the betterment of people. A Gandhi peace mission was organised from Kolkata to Noakhali in 2015. Many Gandhians are working for the holistic development of people in various parts of India in particular and the general world based on the Gandhian approach, for example, in Ralegan Siddhi village of Anna Hazare. A zamindar's house of village Jayag has been converted into an ashram. It is now the centre of social development programmes.

Conclusion

It is clear that Mahatma Gandhi's stormy tour to end communal tension and organization of prayer meetings played an important role in re-establishing brotherhood, love and communal harmony in the riot affected areas. Hence, it can be said that love, brotherhood, equality and harmony are necessary for a peaceful environment. Violence always creates spite, atrocity and bitterness, etc. The relevance of the Gandhian approach becomes necessary in the present time.

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