

Gandhiji looked more ethereal than what I had imagined. His eyes were serious and detached. He seemed to be looking at no one. Yet, I could feel within myself a kind of avuncular warmth. After a while, he closed his eyes. Some one said a few words and the ladies sang two *bhajans* (*hymns*). He opened his eyes when the singing stopped. Folding his hands towards all of us, he got up, and walked back just as he had come earlier for the meeting. I was baffled why Gandhiji had not spoken. Only afterwards, I learnt that he observed Monday as a day of silence!

From mid-November till the assassination of Gandhiji, I was a frequent visitor to the Birla House. By going early, I could always ensure a place close to the dais. I had caught the attention of Dr Sushila Nayyar, a medical practitioner and trusted aide of Gandhiji. Soon enough I started addressing her as *Didi* (*big sister*). I also like most others looked at Gandhiji, as *Bapu* (*father*).

One day, I asked Didi if there was a way to get Bapu's autograph. I was told that Bapu gave his autograph only if he was paid five rupees for his Harijan Fund. It was a lot of money at that time, and especially so for a refugee boy! I was, however, left in no doubt, when Didi said: *'If you are ready to do that, then come tomorrow an hour before the start of the prayer meeting and see me.'* Back home, I could persuade my mother to give me the money.

The following day I took my niece also along with me to Birla House. After entering the gate, as we turned towards the living rooms of Gandhiji, the big-turbaned Rajasthani gate-keeper stopped us. We were told that the visitors were not allowed on that side. I explained to him that we were there on the express advice of Didi and if he had any doubt, he could check with her. And I added: *'Look, how can we ever lie if we are going to Bapu?'* There was a whiff of a smile on the face of the *Darwan* (*gate-keeper*), and he said: *Accha jao* (*okay, you can go inside!*)

Moving up towards Bapu's living room, we saw Bapu stretched on a bed with a backrest, basking in the sun and talking to a couple of persons seated in front on chairs. Close at hand was also Didi. She saw me and my niece. Making a gesture, she beckoned us to

sit quietly on the steps of the living room which were just behind Bapu's bed. Bapu was engaged in a lively discussion. Little did I realize that one of the visitors was none other than Dr Rajendra Prasad, who later became the first President of India! In the course of the meeting itself Bapu was served some kind of a soup in a wooden bowl. As he finished the soup, the meeting too was over.

When he got up to move towards the living room he took note of us. I immediately stretched out my hand with the autograph book. Bapu said smiling: *Eik ke liye panch, do ke liye dash* (*for one five rupees, for two ten rupees*). I replied: *'Bapu bus eik'* (*Bapu, it is only one*). Bapu took the five rupee note first and thereafter, the autograph book. He asked for a pen and scribed his signature.

Holding me lightly by my right ear, he raised the autograph book and asked me: *'Yeh kahe me likha hai... English main ya Hindi mai* (*in which script have I written my name...in English or in Hindi?*) I

Gandhiji's autograph

replied: *'Bapu yeh to English main hai* (*Bapu, you have written it in English*). Regaling, Bapu explained that the way he had written his name, it could be read both in English, and in Hindi! As I looked leisurely later, Gandhiji had contrived the 'm' to also look like 'ma' in Hindi, 'k' to look like 'ka', and likewise, the surname Gandhi, read like it was written in English or Hindi. I took great delight in showing the autograph to others putting the same question as Bapu had asked me. It seems so amazing that even in contriving his signature, Gandhiji had put in such extra effort.

It used to fascinate me seeing national leaders like Nehru, Maulana Azad and Sardar Patel engaged in conversation with Gandhiji. I had no idea then of what they might be talking about. But history does give a lot about those tumultuous times and how shattered Bapu was with the events that followed the partition of the country. He opted more for a death wish than to witness India burn in communal fury!