
Part One

‘You know this business about the *thana*—the burning etc.—all this leads back to him—to Gandhi Maharaj’.

— Ramji Chamar, Chotki Dumri, 19.8.1991

‘ . . . Little reported activity preceded the massacre of the police at Chauri Chaura’.

— Police Abstracts of Intelligence, U.P., 11.2.1922

Impressions

‘And then an insignificant hamlet in the United Provinces, in a district whose Commissioner was proud to have used no special powers to keep the peace, wrote its name of Chauri Chaura into the record with the slaughter of twenty-two policemen by a maddened crowd.’

—Francis Watson, *The Trial of Mr Gandhi* (London, 1969), p. 49

‘The Chauri Chaura occurrence which took place in the month of February 1922 is unique of its kind [*sic*] in the annals of the world.’

—Abhinandan Prasad, to Collector, Gorakhpur, 7.5.1923

‘There is no parallel in the whole history of the British rule in India to the tragic event of Chauri Chaura . . . I see in it the beginning of a French Revolution in India.’

—‘The Hero of Gorakhpur Tragedy’ from a correspondent,
The Leader, 22.2.1922

‘I must confess that I do not see the atmosphere for it [Civil Disobedience] today. I want to discover a formula whereby sufficient provision can be made for avoiding suspension by reason of Chauri Chaura.’

—Gandhi, early 1930, *CWMG*, xlii, pp. 376–7

‘. . . there has been a second Chauri Chaura at a police station in Ghazipur district, the police station burnt and the staff murdered.’

—Governor, United Provinces, to Viceroy, 18.8.1942

‘*Babu! Apne dil se samajh leen! Ab kahwān le biyān kihāl jā?*’ (Now Sir! Fathom it after your own heart! How much more can one narrate?)

—Naujadi, Chotki Dumri, 21.2.1989

The Riot and History

On 4 February 1922 a crowd of peasants burnt a police station at Chauri Chaura in Uttar Pradesh, killing twenty-three policemen. Gandhi's prompt condemnation of this 'crime' led to the relocation of this day within the life of the Indian nation.¹ To be a Gandhian in the spring of 1922, and for some time to come, was to share in an authoritative recollection of this anti-nationalist riot.

The unforgettable event was largely forgotten in nationalist lore; it came to be remembered only as the episode which forced Gandhi to call off his all-India movement of non-co-operation with the British. The 'true' significance of Chauri Chaura in Indian History lay outside the time and place of its occurrence. A spontaneous and mindless riot, it was quarantined within a consequentialist past: nationalist verse, political prose, and the memoirs of distinguished Indians all invoked the event only in order to explain the termination of a particular phase of our Freedom Struggle. Chauri Chaura became 'Chauri Chaura': the event, with all its distinctiveness and specificity and multiple peculiarities, was written out as it was recounted.

STOPPAGE OF THE NON-CO-OPERATION MOVEMENT OF 1921

This was the rubric under which a long demotic poem, published in 1931 to mobilize the nation, retailed the happenings of 4 February 1922. *Gandhi's War, or A History of Satyagraha*, to give this broadsheet its full title, had no place, being a 'proper'

nationalist history, for an ‘incensed “public” [that] burnt the police station’; Chauri Chaura was the place where that normal history was made to stop. So strong was this desire to immunize Indian nationalism from the violence of Chauri Chaura that, oblivious of chronology, the poem ends the Non-Co-operation Movement with the calendar year 1921, a month before the infamous event actually brought about its suspension.²

Nationalist prose of that time could be equally ungainly on the subject of Chauri Chaura. In a prefatory sketch of the Non-Co-operation Movement, the ‘serious riots’ of ‘the month of February’ are phrased with an emphasis on Gandhi’s intentions and reactions. Babu Rajendra Prasad’s awkward sentence, quoted below, illustrates the manner in which ‘Chauri Chaura’ was later recollected in nationalist historiography.

In the month of February, serious riots took place at a place called Chauri Chaura, in the district of Gorakhpur, and Mahatma Gandhi who had proceeded to Bardoli to lead a campaign of mass Civil Disobedience and had gone so far as to issue his message to the Viceroy and Government intimating his intention of mass Civil Disobedience had to suspend the campaign as a consequence.³

It would be tedious to recount exactly how ill this necessary footnote within Indian history has fared at the hands of professional historians and nationalist Indians. The former have sometimes even got the date wrong, and there has been some understandable confusion about the exact number of policemen killed.⁴ I say this not as a disappointed local enthusiast who was born fifteen miles down the railway track from the scene of that bloody encounter. When historical significance is attached to an occurrence independent of the event, the facts of the case cease to matter. And where all subsequent accounts are parasitic on a prior memory, documentation seems almost unnecessary.

Indian schoolboys know of Chauri Chaura as that alliterative place-name which flits through their history books around the year 1922. Invariably, the riot is mentioned as a part of the activity

of another subject, notably Mahatma Gandhi, and often the struggles of a nation. The number of policemen killed, Gandhi's torment, the suspension of an all-India movement because of localized violence—these are the images that school primers convey with their abbreviated allusion to the riot at Chauri Chaura.

I have no desire to memorialize the riot as if it were an *autonomous* event. Mine is neither a deliberately stark contrast against that narrative tradition, nor an attempt to celebrate some universalist notion—the encrusted economic interests of the peasantry, within the autarkically local—reduction of rents, opposition to landlordism, etc. The exclusion of *beliefs*—about the wondrous and the momentous, about Gandhi and the nation—would be equally distorting in the other direction. The interest of my story lies in its entanglement of a local affair with the affairs of Indian nationalism—as ideology, as practice, as history. To locate the rioters of Chauri Chaura outside this frame, to assign them agency only as genuine anti-Gandhians, is to write misleadingly; it is to be impervious to the paradoxes of political action and to be ignorant of the ways in which meanings get glued to events and the ways in which memory plays upon the certitude of facts. It is also to impoverish story-telling.

My story must begin with Gandhi, even though he disavowed himself from 'Chauri Chaura'. To begin any other way would be erroneous, because Gandhi is still the site upon which the contest over 'Chauri Chaura' takes place.

A Narrative of the Event

In late-1920 Gandhi was able to push through a radical programme of non-co-operation with British rule. Termed *asahyog*, this involved a boycott of the commodities and institutions through which England was able to rule India with the aid of Indians. Gandhi, the author of this movement, toured the country, campaigning for the boycott of foreign goods (especially machine-made cloth) as well as the legal, educational, and 'representative' institutions which had been newly introduced, while arguing also for a symbolic refusal by Indians to participate in the colonial system of rewards and honours. Two dramatic affirmations, *swadeshi* and *ahimsa*, were to accompany this quintet of Great Denials and presage in tandem the transition from Raj to Swaraj.*

The movement towards *swaraj* was made possible by the creation of a new nationalist-activist—the *satyagrahi*-volunteer. It has been suggested that Gandhi's ideas about the *satyagrahi* underwent a marked change after the violence which accompanied the first all-India mass campaign he organized against the Rowlatt Acts of 1919. There was in him 'little concern', till 1919, 'about the distinction between leader and *satyagrahi* and the masses . . . or about the organizational or normative safeguards against the inherent unpredictability of a negative consciousness playing itself out in the political battleground.'⁵

* *Swadeshi*: (campaign for) Indian-made goods; *Ahimsa*: non-violence; *Swaraj*: lit. self-rule; an ambiguous term which in the early 1920s meant 'freedom' of various sorts. A polysemic word, *Swaraj* was open to different interpretations and understandings.

Summing up the experiences of his triumphant train tours of 1920 Gandhi wrote: 'The Congress is a demonstration for the mob . . . Though organised by thoughtful men and women . . . our popular demonstrations are unquestionably mob-demonstrations.'⁶ This nationalist manifestation of the people as a mob was now in need of an urgent disciplinary solution.⁷ In September 1920 Gandhi put forward a twenty-point programme for controlling this 'mobocracy' of *darshan*-seeking crowds.* To overcome 'this mobocratic stage' of political development, it was obligatory for 'everyone to obey [the] volunteers' instructions without question'; 'It is no part of the *audience* to preserve order. They do so by keeping motionless and silent';⁸ 'Before we can make real headway', Gandhi concluded, 'we must train these masses of men who have a heart of gold, who feel for the country, who want to be taught and led.' And then he added: 'But a few intelligent, sincere, local workers are needed, and the whole nation can be organised to act intelligently, and democracy can be evolved out of mobocracy.'⁹

Mobocracy—'an ugly word greased with loathing, a sign of craving for control and its frustration'¹⁰—required Gandhian volunteers to purge it of its originary, subaltern impurities. Volunteers, almost by definition, had to stand apart from demonstrators: they were to discipline nationalist exuberance by acting as the 'people's policemen'.¹¹

By the winter of 1921 not 'a few' but many thousand volunteers had overrun the nationalist arena. In fact the numerical strength of these volunteers in a district (or its jail) came to be regarded as a manifestation of the nationalist spirit in a particular locality. The signing of a paper called the Pledge Form, which started after the various volunteer organizations had been outlawed in November 1921, was documentary proof of mass civil

* *Darshan* : Paying homage to a holy object or a saintly person by presenting oneself in the vicinity of the personage.

disobedience. These pledge forms were formidable three-part affidavits. They were constructed to function as a nationalist record and had therefore to be filled out in triplicate: one copy to be retained in the village, the other two to be lodged at the district and provincial headquarters. People became volunteers by pledging ‘in the name of God’ to wear *khaddar*,* practice non-violence, obey the ‘orders of officers’, ‘oppose as a Hindu the evil of untouchability’, uphold the principle of religious amity and unity in a multi-religious society, suffer all manner of hardships (including imprisonment), and refrain if arrested from asking for financial support for kith and kin.¹²

In mid-January 1921 a village unit (*mandal*) of such volunteers was set up in Chotki Dumri, a village one mile west of the Chauri Chaura police station.¹³ A functionary of the Gorakhpur District Congress and Khilafat Committees had been invited for this purpose by one Lal Mohammad Sain of Chaura. Gandhi’s desire to fuse his campaign for non-co-operation with the Khilafat Movement—launched by Indian Muslims in 1919 to prevent the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and ‘preserve intact the spiritual and temporal authority of the Ottoman Sultan as the Caliph of Islam’—was an organizational success in Gorakhpur.¹⁴ In the winter of 1921–2 the Khilafat and Congress Volunteer Organizations were merged into a composite National Volunteer Corps.¹⁵

Hakeem Arif, the man invited to Chauri Chaura from Gorakhpur, gave a lecture on nationalism and Gandhian political economy, appointed some ‘officers’, and took the evening train back to his district headquarters. The peasant officers of Dumri *mandal* then went about their business. Pledge forms were filled out, subscriptions were collected, and, with a characteristic extension of the Gandhian message, meat, fish and liquor, rather than retail outlets of foreign cloth, became the target of picketing.

* *Khaddar*: homespun, handwoven cloth.

The famous apocalyptic clash with the police had its roots in this mundane and vociferous attempt by local volunteers both to stop trade in these articles and to enforce a just price for meat and fish in the nearby Mundera bazaar. Some days before the main event, police officers beat back volunteers and also administered a salutary thrashing to one Bhagwan Ahir, a demobilized soldier from the Mesopotamia campaign (and therefore a government pensioner) who had no business to be so demonstratively disloyal to the Raj. The leaders of the Dumri mandal sent letters to other leaders in neighbouring villages, informing them of this oppression on the part of the local police.

Volunteers were urged to congregate at Dumri on Saturday, 4 February, a bazaar day at Mundera. Arrangements were made for this gathering at the village threshing-floor (*khalihān*): raw sugar was collected for refreshments, gunny cloth was spread on the floor, and garlands prepared to welcome the volunteer chiefs. The meeting was eventful: a debate on the best course of action took place, and 'influential persons' sent by the *thanedar* to dissuade the crowd were disregarded even as their bona-fides were questioned.* The 'real' leaders were garlanded. Nazar Ali, one such leader from Chotki Dumri, bound the crowd together by oath, and the volunteers marched in serried ranks to the thana to demand an explanation from the thanedar and then mass picket the nearby Mundera bazaar. It was this procession of volunteers which clashed with the police on the afternoon of 4 February 1922.

Gupteshar Singh, the thanedar, was expecting the crowd; additional policemen had been sent for from Gorakhpur. Eight armed guards arrived by the morning train and these, along with local constables and *goraits* and *chaukidars* (rural policemen) from neighbouring villages, were assembled in an intimidatory fashion

* *Thanedar*: station officer, in-charge of a police station, or *thana*. Also referred to as S.I. or Sub-Inspector (of Police); called *daroga* in indigenous parlance.

to dissuade the crowd from marching on to the bazaar. The symbolic display of force failed, however. Influential leaders had once again to be pressed into action to parley with the leaders (*mālīks*) within the crowd.¹⁶

Allowed to pass unhindered in the direction of the bazaar, the crowd celebrated the ineffectiveness of the police with derisory claps and by shouting a common north-Indian abuse: the thanedar, and by extension the government (*sarkar*), it said, were 'shit scared'!¹⁷ The police officer sought to recover lost ground by firing in the air. This signal was disregarded. It was as if an amber light, a cautionary sign of 'danger ahead, retreat', was read as the precursor of green, 'go ahead'.

'Bullets have turned into water by the grace of Gandhiji' was the construction put by the crowd on the failure of the police's symbolic firing. The crowd then responded by rushing and brick-batting the police. This time, cornered, the police's firing was real; three of the crowd were killed and several injured. But the hail of stones which came in return from the adjacent railway track, where the furious peasants now stood, was overwhelming. The policemen retreated into the thana. The crowd locked them in and set fire to the building by sprinkling it with kerosene oil seized from the bazaar. Twenty-three policemen, including the station-officer, were battered and burnt to death.

The death of the policemen was not the end of this riot. Police property was systematically destroyed, rifles were smashed, and the bits of brass with which police *lathīs* were capped (to make them deadly weapons) were taken off.* Over three dozen chaukidars managed to escape by throwing away their conspicuous red turbans and milling into the crowd. The police turbans (*pagrīs*) of these rural policemen were torn to shreds.

The crowd dispersed by nightfall. Many among it did not return to their homes but ran to relatives in distant locations. A

* *Lathi*: a stout bamboo staff.

violent inversion of the role assigned to volunteers came about with the 'abolition of the thana', which was proclaimed by them as a sign of the advent of 'Gandhi raj'. By the time reinforcements reached the smouldering thana, Dumri and the nearby villages were deserted. In police parlance 'the rioters had absconded'.

The repression was immediate. Chotki Dumri was raided early next morning. But the leaders were not at home, and the identity of the other rioters had to await the naming of names and the discovery of incriminating documents. The fact of having signed the pledge form was now documentary proof of being a volunteer and, by extension, of participation in the riot. Lists of volunteers were compiled from police and nationalist records, and where names tallied with an identification in a confessional or in an eyewitness account, the peasant found himself in the dock as a Chauri Chaura accused.¹⁸

The Gorakhpur nationalists moved quickly. Members of the District Congress, along with some other 'public men', were at the thana the next day. An emergency meeting on 9 February ordered the dismantling of volunteer groups in the villages around Chauri Chaura, and an end to aggressive nationalist activity in the district altogether.¹⁹ Devdas Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's son, rushed to Gorakhpur and issued a statement on 11 February.²⁰ Mahatma Gandhi had already proposed a general suspension of 'mass civil disobedience'. Civil disobedience was suspended all over India on 12 February.²¹

In consultation with local leaders Devdas helped set up a Chauri Chaura Support Fund. Its immediate aim was to show 'genuine sympathy' and 'offer monetary help' to 'those in trying circumstances on both sides'; the ultimate objective was 'to atone (*prāyashchit*) for this sudden and inauspicious mishap'. While every district in the province was to raise up to Rs 2000 for this project, the guilty people of Gorakhpur were to contribute an almost punitive Rs 10,000.²²

Gandhiji suspended the satyagraha movement. Branded with the stigma of violence, the people of the region endured all manner of suffering for years to come.²³

So says the demi-official history of the freedom struggle in Gorakhpur district in 1972, fifty years after the event. It was not just some peasants who had rioted that day. The dead weight of collective guilt had fallen on an entire population—of Gorakhpur district in particular and the nation more generally.