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# AT PRAYER WITH GANDHI

## A New Zealander Looked On

(Written for "The Listener" by W. NEIL JOHNSON)

I WAS fortunate enough to be in Calcutta when Mahatma Gandhi paid a visit early in August, 1947. On the Sunday someone suggested attending his prayer meeting, and I welcomed the opportunity to see this great man at his meeting and maybe to meet him.

Any ideas that this prayer meeting would be a semi-private affair gradually disappeared as our lorry travelled out of the city along the Barrackpore Trunk road the five or more miles to the Ashram where Mahatma Gandhi was staying. It soon became evident that the lorry-loads of shouting, flag-waving Indians were also taking advantage of the holiday to see Gandhiji (the -ji is a term of respect mainly used when referring to popular prominent people). The crowds of vehicles thickened as

we approached the Ashram and extended a quarter of a mile or more each side of the smaller road leading to it. Lorries and cars were parked all over the place and movement was very slow with vehicles from both directions trying to pick their way through. Our driver persevered and so was able to park very near the entrance.

We joined the inward movement but soon came to the outskirts of the main crowd and found that there was no hope of getting anywhere near the dais from which the prayer meeting was to be conducted. This was in the main open space of the Ashram round which were buildings presumably residences and work centres. I think it was partly garden and grass, but all that could be seen were people, the dark skins and white clothes of hundreds of Indians. They filled the square and overflowed on to the porches of the houses, some even trying to get on the roofs and other points of vantage. The general noise of feet shuffling on the gravel and continual movement and conversation was augmented by shouts of "Gandhiji Ki Jai" (Glory to Gandhi). Though voluntary helpers tried to direct people and maintain some order, damage to plants and trees must have been considerable. We found a position at a distance, where we were able to see the dais over the heads of the crowd and catch a glimpse, though it was too far away to see clearly, of the speaker when he stood to the microphone.

### Koran Readings Too

Mahatma Gandhi was a Hindu, though he felt that all the great religions of the world can lead man to the truth. The prayer meeting started with readings from the sacred Hindu books, and continued with a chant to which the whole crowd was asked to respond by clapping in time. Readings were however often taken from the Koran, the Mohammedan sacred book, as well, though this latter practice led to trouble on occasions. Later, when Gandhi went to hold one of his prayer meetings in a refugee camp in Delhi, the Hindu refugees (who had suffered at the hands of Moslems) objected so strongly to the inclusion of extracts from the Koran that the meeting had to be given up. Though Gandhi probably planned what was read, this part of the meeting was conducted by one of his followers. After about 20 minutes, Gandhi spoke about how he had come to Calcutta, and wanted to go on to Noakhali, but that



"Religion was his politics"

the situation in Calcutta, with the continual disturbances between the Moslems and Hindu communities made him feel that he had better stay and try to persuade the people to live together peaceably. He spoke in Hindi, and the speech was afterwards read out in Bengali, the language of most of the people present. It had taken some time, and necessitated personal appeals from Gandhi himself, to quieten the crowd enough to start the prayer meeting, but when he spoke the meeting was remarkably attentive, considering the shuffling and moving around inevitable in such a large open air crowd, especially when even with the loud speakers it was often difficult to hear what was said. I myself didn't feel particularly attentive, not understanding a word of what was said, and comments of some with me showed that I was not the only one. One Bengali student said, "We'll be able to read the English version of his speech in the newspapers to-morrow, anyway."

### A Closer View

I was able to see him closer up after that meeting, as I was with people who knew him. He came into the grounds round the house where he was staying, and acknowledged the salutations of his friends waiting there with a nod, it now being his period of silence. He then took his exercise walk round the garden, and though leaning on the shoulder of a friend, looked very healthy for a man who had done as much as he in his life. He was still a very busy man, and despite many visitors and their demands, he prepared his speeches, coped with a large amount of correspondence with the help of secretaries, and wrote articles

(continued on next page)

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