

'Flash Urgent. Gandhi shot 4 times. Point blank. Worst feared'

Reuters correspondent Doon Campbell, who arrived in India in March 1947 fresh from covering World War II, spent the next 15 months in Delhi — a period which witnessed the independence of India and birth of Pakistan as well as the tragic assassination of Mahatma Gandhi a few months later. Campbell, 77, who is now retired and living in England, says Gandhi's assassination was the biggest story in his career. In this eighth and last article in a series on that tumultuous period in Indian history, he writes about the events of January 30, 1948, the day when — in Nehru's words — "the light went out of our lives."

BY DOON CAMPBELL

I did not expect much copy from Mahatma Gandhi's prayer meeting on January 30, 1948. Two recent events were on my mind, though: a bomb attack at a similar prayer session, and that less than a fortnight earlier, Gandhi had fasted for 121 hours for Hindu-Muslim unity.

Gandhi said that communal peace would revive his desire to live his full span, adding: "That span, according to learned opinion, is at least 125 years, some say 133."

He broke the fast with a glass of orange juice only after members of the government, and heads of all parties, communities and organisations had signed a pledge to implement seven

conditions he had prescribed for communal amity.

I had a hunch the Mahatma might threaten another fast again over dissatisfaction with the way they were being carried out.

Gandhi's fasts had stopped riots, turned hymns of hate into songs of love, averted disasters, achieved miracles and saved countless lives.

His last fast, with terminal possibilities because of his 78 years, had had the country in suspense. We could not afford to miss or to be late with any hint of another.

While not actually anticipating headlines, these thoughts crossed my mind when P.R. Roy, a keen young man always looking for jobs but so relatively new in the office I hardly knew his name, volunteered to go to the prayer meeting at Birla House.

The prayer meeting, "Phone if it's hot": I was due to visit Madras (now Chennai) and Sri Lanka on February 1, although Gandhi's condition and the way he was exposed and vulnerable to extremists was a continuing worry.

A recent profile I had written on the weak little bundle of bones on whom peace or communal massacre depended ran: "The wiry old Hindu in a loin-cloth who within a few days alternately threatened to kill himself by not eating and to live to be 133 is the most powerful force and human influence in Asia today..."

January 30 was a routine news day.

Nothing politically exciting had happened and minor news items had trickled in.

There was no reason to suppose Gandhi's prayer meeting would amount to more than the usual sermon or rambling dissertation, perhaps a recital from Buddhist scriptures or the Quran and hymn-singing by the Mahatma.

I had attended several prayer meetings, mixing with the crowd on the carefully tended lawns behind Birla House. I had watched Gandhi, muffled up in white homespun cotton, small and frag-

ile, head sunk in meditation or smiling, pass through the arbour'd walk from his bare room by the rose garden to the red sandstone summerhouse or to a wooden platform.

"Watch out for any word of another fast," I told Roy as he went off about 4 pm. "Bring anything you get back to the office, phone only if it's hot."

Four shots fired, point blank. Worst feared: My desk phone rang at 5.13. The connection went like this: "Man fired four shots at Gandhi... man fired four shots at Gandhi point-blank range."

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"Man fired at Mr Gandhi, Mr Gandhi — man fired at him..."

"Who's speaking?"

"Me."

"Who're you?"

"Roy. Man fired four shots, point-blank range at Gandhi..."

"Is he dead? Dead? Must know — is he dead?"

"Man fired four shots... don't know if he is dead, nobody knows... worst feared..."

"Stay there, Roy, don't move. Get a story ready. Did you see the shooting? Who did it? Say nothing to anyone, Roy. You don't know a thing. You haven't seen a thing. Just say there, we're coming right round."

Roy might have been the only reporter

counter. "London's got it," he said.

Roy was waiting with the horror-numbed crowd at Birla House. When Gandhi fell, blood staining his white cotton clothes from neck to abdomen, Roy had bolted for the house phone. Luckily he got through at once and dictated his flash. To a menacing mass clamouring for the phone, Roy snapped: "Don't interfere."

Now, quite composed, he showed us exactly where the shooting had taken place, across the lawn and the rose and petunia beds. Roy gave us a clear, connected account: "About 500 people waited for the Mahatma to begin prayers. Gandhi

walked from the house to the platform from which he speaks... As he approached, the crowd divided, leaving

a lane for him to pass. A young man fired four shots from the hip. No one realised at first what had happened. As Gandhiji fell under the assassin's bullets, he folded his hands in salute to the congregation..."

Sobbing, desolate devotees blocked the way to Gandhi's room, with a simple cot and spinning wheel, where he lay dying. There had been only one other foreign reporter at Birla House — Bob Stimpson of the BBC — so I told Roy to keep quiet if other correspondents tried to pump him.

The passing of a legend: Back at the

office, the phone rang again. "Gandhi dead," said one message. "A member of Gandhi's entourage announced to a silent crowd: 'Bapu is finished'," said the next.

And the stories ran: "Mahatma Gandhi, apostle of nonviolence, was assassinated today. Four shots fired at close range hit him in the chest as he walked to his prayer meeting at Birla House. He collapsed and died within a few minutes..."

"Gandhi's death at an assassin's hand has hit and shocked India with an impact of atomic force. It is more than a national tragedy: to millions of Indians, it is the passing of a God..."

"Gandhi's death pulled down the blinds and closed the shutters in the capital of India. Newspapers rushed out special black-edged editions and millions of Indians from the Himalayas to the tip of Cape Comorin prayed and fasted."

All this for a man Winston Churchill had contemptuously described in 1931 as a half-naked fakir. Lord Louis Mountbatten had reached Birla House not long after the murder. He knew that if the killer was a Muslim, Hindus and Sikhs might rise against the entire Muslim population of India, leading on to war with Pakistan. So when a scaremonger told him: "It was a Muslim who did it," Lord Mountbatten snapped back: "You fool, don't you know it was a Hindu?"

I went to All India Radio, its doors and

corridors guarded by the armed police, to hear Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru declare: "The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere."

Nehru also went to Birla House, where Gandhi's body, draped in a cotton sheet with his face uncovered, was carried to a terrace, with a spotlight on him as other lights were switched off. Someone in the huge crowd shouted: "The Mahatma is not dead. Doctors are hopeful of his recovery."

Nehru climbed on the gates of the residence and in a choking voice said that Gandhi was dead. "In this crisis, let us not lose our balance of mind," he said.

Millions weep at funeral: The funeral and cremation and removal of the ashes were tremendous scenes — two million people weeping, wailing, praying, silent, chanting, wading up to their necks in the holy water of the Ganga and the Yamuna to get a closer view of this dish of ash pouring out of a plain copper pitcher into the river water. I can think of no story, not even D-Day, or the German surrender, which produced such spontaneous intensity. Gandhi's assassination was a unique experience. It gave me the most intense 48 hours of activity, mental and physical, I'd ever known in war and peace.

Many Indian newspapers carried nothing but Gandhi — not one line of other news in 12 pages. One published a completely blank leader page with only the words, "Father, Forgive Us." (Reuters)