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Monument to a historic meeting

The Cathedral Road branching off Anna Salai (previously Mount Road) at the Gemini Circle flyover point, is a quiet highway with leafy trees shading the footpath and old-world bungalows that had housed prominent Madras citizens.

Walking along the footpath, a visitor to the city is struck by a short, three-sided concrete structure. On the two sides facing the street, the left part carries text in Tamil under the heading: Gandhiji Dreamt Here. On the right side is the English text, and in between a vertical Tamil script reading: Truth *Non-Violence *Peace.

"The nation remembers," proclaims the English text on the monument. And the lengthy text itself turns out to mark a milestone in the history of India's freedom struggle under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership. It reads:

"In this premises known as 'Tilak Bhavan' Mahatma Gandhi spent the restless historic night on 19 March 1919 when the sad tidings of the passing of the humiliating Rowlatt Bills enveloped him. Before the day dawned the idea of all-India hartal occurred to Gandhi in a dream which later blossomed into non-violent non-co-operation movement."

"Referring to this memorable event Gandhiji writes: 'I was still in that twilight condition between sleep and consciousness when suddenly the idea broke upon me. It was as if in a dream... that we should call upon the country to observe a general hartal... the whole of India from one end to the other, towns as well as villages observe complete hartal on that day. It was a most wonderful spectacle'."

Then at the foot of the monument is added this interesting piece of information. "It was here when Gandhi met Rajaji for the first time and stayed as his guest."

Under what circumstances the two Titans of Indian freedom struggle met for the first time? Why did Gandhi make the trip to Madras for that? Wading through innumerable volumes of Gandhiana, one is guided to Gandhi's autobiography, first published as far back as 1927, for the necessary facts.

The year 1919 proved a turning



This monument in Madras stands where Gandhi met Rajaji for the first time.

point in Gandhi's attitude to British rule in India. Returning from South Africa, he had ardently supported the British World War I effort, even taking a lead in recruiting soldiers to the army. He was eagerly expecting that the much-heralded Montagu-Chelmsford reforms would usher in peaceful transfer of power to India. But his hopes were shattered by one Satanic act of British authorities: the Rowlatt Act to put down all patriotic activities in India under the convenient umbrella of sedition.

Ardent patriots like Vallabhbhai Patel, Sarojini Naidu, Shankarlal Banker and Umar Sobani urged Gandhi to lead a national agitation against the unjust act. Though he had just then recovered from prolonged illness and an operation, Gandhi resolved to launch a satyagraha campaign if the British refused to withdraw the act. This was in February 1919.

About this time, rather unexpectedly Gandhi received a letter from G. V. Vijayaraghavachariar, the eminent Congress leader of Tamil Nadu who was to preside over the Nagpur Congress session in 1920. Recalling the complicated political situation facing the country, the letter informed Gandhi that "most of us here are intensely anxious to consult you before we could think of making up our minds. Could you think of visiting Southern India for a few days as early as possible and help us with your advice?"

"I appreciate your letter and it makes me feel like running to Madras immediately," replied Gan-

dhi. "I have been thinking of going there for a long time. The delicate state of my health has come in the way, as it still does." He was, however, able to recover fast to be able to undertake a two-week tour of Madras in March 1919. From March 18 to 31, Gandhi visited Madras, Tanjore, Trichy, Madurai and Bezwada, addressing large gatherings throughout.

"I have ever felt at home in the South. Thanks to my South African work I felt I had some sort of special right over the Tamils and Telugus, and the good people of the South have never belied my belief," writes Gandhi of his first visit to South India.

Much to his surprise he came to know that the man behind the invitation was C. Rajagopalachari who had then recently left his native Salem to settle down for legal practice in Madras.

Since the bungalow that Gandhi and party were staying in belonged to Kasturi Ranga Iyengar, editor of "The Hindu", the Mahatma was under the impression that Iyengar was the host. But from Mahadev Desai he learned later that actually Rajagopalachari was the host. "From his innate shyness, Rajaji kept himself constantly in the background. But Mahadev put me on my guard. 'You should cultivate this man,' he said to me one day. And so I did," Gandhi notes in his autobiography.

From the first meeting, the two leaders were drawn to each other.

S. Radhakrishnan