

November 26, 2019

Life with the Mahatma

By: Rudrangshu Mukherjee

The first volume of the translation of the diaries of Manu Gandhi, niece of Mohandas Gandhi, give a detailed account of life at the Aga Khan Palace jail in Pune where the Mahatma was interned during the Quit India movement, and where Kasturba Gandhi died.

This book falls into two separate but interrelated parts. One part is the actual diary of Manu Gandhi covering the first two years she spent with Gandhi. The other is the introduction to the diary written by Tridip Suhrud, which uses the diary to delineate some crucial aspects of Gandhi's inner spiritual quest.

Manu (Mridula) Gandhi (born 1927) was the youngest daughter of Gandhi's nephew Jaisukhlal Amritlal Gandhi and Kasumba. After her mother's death, Gandhi --- probably at the urging of her father --- had Manu brought to Sevagram in May 1942. From that time, till he was killed by a Hindu bigot, Manu's life became inextricably linked to Gandhi's. In fact, Gandhi's killer, Nathuram Godse, when carrying out his heinous act had to push aside Manu thus throwing the Mahatma's rosary beads and *bhajanavali* to the ground.

|| The diaries thus offer a view from the inside of not only Manu's growing up but also of Gandhi and Kasturba's life and what it meant to be the inmate of an ashram and live the life as an *ashramite*.

As a growing adolescent in Gandhi's *ashram*, Manu was instructed by Gandhi to keep a diary as an exercise in self-expression and self-discipline. On keeping a diary, Gandhi expressed the view: "For a person who has dedicated himself to the pursuit of truth, it serves as a means of keeping watch over himself, for such a person is determined to write in it nothing but the truth."

Manu started keeping a diary in accordance with this instruction, and in the early days she had to show it to Gandhi in the evening and he would correct her language and sign to show that he had read it. The diaries thus offer a view from the inside of not only Manu's growing up but also of Gandhi and Kasturba's life and what it meant to be the inmate of an ashram and live the life as an *ashramite*.

It is difficult to think of a more detailed day-to-day account of life with the Mahatma. The only comparable text is the diary of Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's trusted secretary and disciple. There are, however, some crucial differences even though both offer very detailed accounts of Gandhi's life and activities. Desai's diary is more to do with the external life of Gandhi --- his political life and public appearances.

Manu's diary is more intimate, concerned as it is with life in the *ashram*. Most importantly, Desai's diary comes from the pen of an adult male, Manu's from that of young girl somewhat uncertain, anxious, eager to prove herself and therefore submissive. The registers are different though both are extremely valuable. Moreover, as a chronological accident, Manu's diary begins after Desai's death in the Aga Khan Palace.

These diaries, written in Gujarati, have been at the National Archives of India in New Delhi as part of its Private Archives. They consist of twelve volumes: six volumes of Gandhi's prayer speeches (which she wrote as he spoke), one volume of copies of letters written by Gandhi, one volume of her "English workbook" and four volumes of diaries. This is the first translation into English of the four volumes of diaries and they are of immeasurable value to anyone interested in Gandhi. The translation is to be in two volumes, the first which has been published covers 1943-44, the second to be published next year will cover 1944-48. We are all in Tridip Suhrud's debt for translating, editing and annotating this invaluable text.

From the time Manu entered Sevagram her life became synonymous with service, which in turn became an integral part of her education. As is well known, Gandhi was arrested at dawn of August 9, 1942 on the eve of the Quit India Movement. Along with Kasturba, Mahadev Desai, Pyarelal, Sushila Nayyar, Sarojini Naidu and Mirabehn, he was detained in the Aga Khan Palace in Poona. As the Quit India movement gained momentum, women of the ashram decided to join it.

Manu at the age of 14 and wearing a sari for the first time, joined the protest. She was arrested and sent to Wardha jail and then transferred to Nagpur Central Jail on September 2, 1942. On February 10, 1943, Gandhi began a 21 day fast; Kasturba's health was also failing fast. Under these circumstances, after nine months in prison, Manu, as a prisoner, was moved to the Aga Khan Palace on March 19, 1943 to look after Kasturba which she did till Kasturba's death on February 22, 1944. The first entry in Manu's diary is dated April 11, 1943.

There are accounts of lessons with Pyarelal and Sushila Nayyar and of walks with Bapu where he explained to her the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita* chapter by chapter.

The entries record a young girl trying to adjust her life to the strict discipline of the ashram (that had been recreated within the Aga Khan Palace), doing her best to looking after the two Gandhis with dedication, especially Kasturba, and to winning their approval. She had difficulty getting up early in the morning for prayers and quite often Gandhi himself had to wake her up. She records how on occasions she went back to sleep after the prayers and then again in the afternoon. When Kasturba was in some discomfort in the middle of the night, it was Manu who got up to be with her; when the young girl failed to wake up at such moments of pain for Ba, she suffered pangs of guilt which she records.

There are accounts of lessons with Pyarelal and Sushila Nayyar and of walks with Bapu where he explained to her the philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita* chapter by chapter. It was an unusual growing up and an extraordinary education. Away from her father and mother, Ba, Bapu and the other inmates of the Aga Khan Palace became her family. There is no hint of any regret in the diaries or of being away from her biological family though she loved receiving letters from her relatives.

Some entries *indirectly* record how much Manu missed her mother. Here is a poignant one dated April 21, 1943:

I remained more or less awake tonight because Ba had severe pain on her sides. But till about 3 o'clock Sushilabehn slept by Ba's side. After 3 o'clock I slept by her side. Ba caressed me with deep love. It has been four years since the death of my mother. Four years ago, I would sleep by my mother's side and she would caress me affectionately and put me to sleep. I recalled that experience and felt that after four years Ba made me sleep by her side, just as my mother used to. And she touched me with her loving hand, it gave me limitless joy. And the memories of my mother, which had faded, came alive. It brought tears to my eyes. Today, it was as if my mother had caressed me, such was the joy.

This entry from the pen of a 16-year-old reveals caring, love and yearning.

There is a very detailed, moving account of Kasturba's death to which Manu was an eye witness. For her, it was the loss of a mother a second time round. This was also around the time that Manu was released from prison. Gandhi specially requested that Manu be allowed to stay with him as he wanted to continue teaching her. Manu was soon to realize that she had been given a third mother.

Manu noted in her diary:

Bapu is more than a mother ... I had a complete experience of him as a mother. Bapu is Bapu and also a mother. After my mother's death many would say to me, 'Behn, mother is after all a mother, can father ever take place of the mother?' But having lived with Bapu, this proved to be wrong. Bapu knows well how to do all that a mother does. One morning I was fast asleep. Bapuji came to wake me up for the prayers [at 5 o'clock] ... I have the habit of fastening the drawstrings of my *salwar* very tight ... Bapu placed his hand on me through the mosquito net. Bapu could see that I had fastened my *salwar* very tight. He woke me up and showed me how to fasten the drawstrings. He said, 'The drawstrings should not be fastened so tight, this could affect health adversely. Especially at night the knot should be loose, otherwise it prevents the flow of blood. Your mother died when you were young and therefore could not teach you such things; hence I teach them to you' ... Bapuji cares for me in many such small matters.

This revealing statement about Bapu as her mother provides the perfect entry to Tridip Suvrud's meditative introductory essay on Gandhi's spiritual quest; it also provides a clue to understanding the most controversial episode of Gandhi's personal life. That episode is the decision by Gandhi taken at the end of 1946, while he was in the violence-scarred villages of Noakhali, to sleep in the same bed as Manu.

This experiment or *yajna* as Gandhi called it was carried out with Manu's full consent and it ended when she withdrew her consent. Given that Manu saw Gandhi as a surrogate mother, it is not difficult to comprehend her consent. What she felt during the experiment will perhaps be available in the diary entries (in the next volume) pertaining to these days. And they might also help explain her withdrawal of consent.

Gandhi's ideal of *brahmacharya* did not indicate only the conventional sense of celibacy and chastity: he went to the root of the word and thus saw it as conduct (*charya*) that leads to truth (Brahman).

Gandhi's reasons for carrying out this experiment, in spite of the disapproval of some individuals very close to him, were revealed in a conversation that he had with Horace Alexander during this period. Alexander reported Gandhi as saying that "it would be a great thing for mankind to have it demonstrated that men and women could so purify themselves in mind and spirit that they could share a bed without either being put to shame." (Quoted in Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi: the years that changed the world, 1914-1948*, Allen Lane: New Delhi (2018) p.815)

Tridip Suhrud situates this episode in the wider context of what Gandhi called his *yajna*. Gandhi defined this term not in terms of a ritual to be performed but, according to Suhrud, as a "duty that could not be forsaken." Gandhi's ideal of *brahmacharya* did not indicate only the conventional sense of celibacy and chastity: he went to the root of the word and thus saw it as conduct (*charya*) that leads to truth (Brahman).

Suhrud explains Gandhi's *yajna* with a quotation from Gandhi's autobiography where he wrote: "What I want to achieve --- what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years --- is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*. I live and move and have my entire being in pursuit of this goal." Suhrud notes that this search for self-realization had a public realm of experiments and a deeply private one of *sadhana*. The latter, Gandhi admitted, could not always be articulated through language.

Suhrud adds, "The implications of this quest become apparent when we situate it in the site of the experiments, which is the Ashram; the modes of experiment which are Truth, Ahimsa (non-violence or love) and *Brahmacharya* and their manifestation in Swaraj." (It should be added here that when Gandhi used the word *swaraj*, he did not use it only in the sense of political independence. In *Hind Swaraj* he wrote, "It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves." Swaraj was for every individual to attain for himself and herself.)

Suhrud is emphatic that the experiment or *yajna* (if one prefers that term) was "not [to] test either his or Manu's celibacy."

In late 1946 with large parts of Bihar and Bengal engulfed in communal violence, Gandhi came face to face with what he perceived to be the incompleteness and inadequacy of his own quest. He asked himself the following questions: "Where do I stand? Do I represent this ahimsa in my person? If I do, then deceit and hatred that poison the atmosphere should dissolve." He chose, in November 1946, to live in physical isolation in the village of Srirampur in eastern Bengal, a village whose inhabitants had suffered from communal violence. His only two companions were his Bengali teacher and interpreter, Nirmal Bose, a well known anthropologist, and his stenographer, Parusuram.

Bose recorded how during this period he often heard Gandhi muttering to himself, "*Kya Karun? Kya Karun?*" He felt lost and saw himself enveloped in darkness. It was at this moment, when all seemed lost and dark, that Manu re-entered Gandhi's life. She came, as she had to the Aga Khan Palace, to work closely with and for Gandhi. Manu wrote to Gandhi, "I am eager and anxious to be with you, if only you will let me help you and look after you."

It was soon after Manu's arrival that Gandhi decided to engage himself with the controversial experiment involving Manu. He believed that his commitment and advocacy of *ahimsa* had failed and that this failure was related to the failure of his *brahmacharya*, not in the sense of celibacy but in the way that he had defined the term. Suhrud is emphatic that the experiment or *yajna* (if one prefers that term) was "not [to] test either his or Manu's celibacy."

Without in any way undermining Suhrud's interpretation, it needs to be placed alongside Gandhi's own explanation of it as put forward by him to Horace Alexander. According to Alexander, Gandhi told him, "The necessity of it all arose from the need to test the girl, and her claim to be pure from all sexual feeling." The immediate context for such a test was that Pyarelal (and on his behalf his sister Sushila) had been pursuing Manu and may have even proposed marriage to her.

Manu had turned down all such overtures. She made it clear to Gandhi that she was utterly innocent of any sexual feeling for anyone. And according to Gandhi (to Alexander) “she had felt it necessary to test her sincerity”; Gandhi had then asked her “if she was prepared to undergo the severest test with him. She had said ‘Yes’ and that her feelings towards him were as to her Mother.”

By this version, it was Manu who had subjected herself to a test to prove her “purity” to Gandhi. It is possible that when she felt she had passed the test (or came to realize its futility) she withdrew from it. It would not be an exaggeration to say, staying with Alexander’s report of what Gandhi told him, that the agency of the experiment was with Manu.

What impact did it have on Manu, a growing woman, not yet twenty? What did consent mean when the request came from someone like Gandhi?

Suhrud in his introduction depends very heavily on what Gandhi himself wrote. He tends to overlook other sources of evidence and interpretations of other scholars. He thus does not take into account Horace Alexander’s testimony which Ramachandra Guha quotes *in extenso*. He writes about the withdrawal of Manu’s consent without placing it in its proper context.

Rajmohan Gandhi in his biography (*Mohandas: A True Story of a Man, his People and an Empire*, New Delhi, Viking, (2006), p.578) notes that Amritlal Thakkar --- or Thakkar Bapa --- had watched Gandhi and Manu “from day to day” and was convinced by “the sight of their perfectly innocent and undisturbed sleep” of the integrity of the experiment. He had been forced by his observations to abandon his apprehensions. But he asked Manu to request Gandhi to suspend his *yajna*. She did and Gandhi agreed to suspend it --- for the time being.

There is a huge difference between a suspension (by definition temporary) and a withdrawal of consent. Suhrud does not address this at all. Equally importantly, Suhrud does not raise important issues and implications that arise from this episode. What impact did it have on Manu, a growing woman, not yet twenty? What did consent mean when the request came from someone like Gandhi? How much of what Gandhi saw as *brahmacharya* was a typical male construct?

[I]t was Manu who in an inspired moment introduced the line *Iswara Allah Tere Nam* to the song *Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram*.

These are questions that no modern scholar of Gandhi, even an admiring one, can avoid. It is worth recalling that none other than Kamala Nehru once commented in writing (in Hindi) to her husband Jawaharlal that “there is no one else like Gandhi in the world but as regards women’s rights he is no better than other men.” (Quoted in S. Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, vol 1, London: Jonathan Cape, (1975), p.196 n2.)

Manu and the Mahatma shared an ineffable bond. These ties sometimes had poignant articulations. Suhrud does not note this but it was Manu who in an inspired moment introduced the line *Iswara Allah Tere Nam* to the song *Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram*. Gandhi was overjoyed and approved of making the line an integral part of the song. Writing to her in May 1947, Gandhi placed on her an onerous responsibility.

He wrote, “But if I should die of lingering illness, it would be your duty to proclaim to the whole world that I was not a man of God but an impostor and a fraud. If you fail in that duty I shall feel unhappy wherever I am. But if I die taking God’s name with my last breath, it will be a sign that I was what I strove for and claimed to be.”

On January 30, 1948 in the early evening when Godse shot Gandhi, Manu was by Gandhi’s side and heard him taking God’s name with his dying breath. She knew he was what he strove for and claimed to be, a seeker of Truth.

Gandhi too was present when Manu died aged only 42. It was the year of his birth centenary.

Their lives were inextricably linked.