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Always by Gandhi's Side

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The second volume of Manu Gandhi's diaries chronicles a turbulent time. Living with Gandhi in Noakhali in 1946 and travelling with him, she emerges as a confident caretaker, a person with opinions, and a willing participant in a particular, if unique, experiment in Gandhi's spiritual journey.

Having reviewed the first volume of Manu Gandhi's diaries (edited and translated by Tridip Suhrud) for *The India Forum* (26 November 2019), some of the facts and my general interpretative line in that review are necessarily repeated here, making the present review a complement of the previous one.

The volume reviewed too is a continuation of its predecessor, despite a chronological gap between them. This occurs because Manu was not with Gandhi from mid-1944 to late 1946. It was when Gandhi moved to violence-scorched Noakhali in remote eastern Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) in late 1946, both to be in isolation and to work among villagers scarred by Hindu-Muslim violence, that Manu returned to his side. This would turn out to be a very critical and anguished period of his life. From this time on, she never left Gandhi's side till he was killed by a Hindu fanatic.

Apart from the chronological divide, there is another crucial difference between the two volumes, as Suhrud notes and underlines in his introduction. In 1943, when Manu first started keeping a diary at Gandhi's insistence, she was only 15. She had been arrested during the Quit India movement, and from Nagpur Central Jail had been moved to the Aga Khan Palace where Gandhi, Kasturba and others close to Gandhi had been incarcerated. Gandhi began a 21-day fast on 10 February 1943, and Kasturba's health was deteriorating fast. Manu came to the Aga Khan Palace to look after the two Gandhis, especially Ba.

> After her mother's death, Manu's father brought her to Sevagram. Thus began Manu's association with Gandhi, which ended only with his assassination.

Manu (born 1927) was the daughter of Gandhi's nephew, Jaisukhlal Amritlal, and his wife Kusumba. After her mother's death, Manu's father brought her to Sevagram. Thus began Manu's association with Gandhi, which ended only with his assassination. Once she came to the Aga Khan Palace, Gandhi insisted that she keep a diary and show him what she had written. The diary was written in Gujarati. He signed after reading each day's entry.

The first entry of Manu's diary (in the first volume) is dated 11 April 1943. The first volume, which ends in 1944, brings out Manu as an adolescent girl, somewhat overwhelmed by the circumstances in which she found herself. In awe of Gandhi and Kasturba, she was eager to learn and equally eager to please. She dedicated herself to serve, but was also a little lonely, especially after Kasturba's death (22 February 1944), which she witnessed.

The second volume (beginning at the end of 1946; the first entry has the date 19 December 1946) shows a different grown-up Manu, which is in contrast to the first volume, as Suhrud points out. Here, Manu is more confident, more certain about how best to look after Gandhi; able to speak her mind on certain important matters; and, most importantly, a participant in a particular, if unique, phase of Gandhi's spiritual quest.



For Gandhi, the striving for *ahimsa*, *abhaya*, and *swaraj* were inseparable from his longing to attain complete purity and truth. He believed that this would bring him face to face with God and thereby fulfil his lifelong *sadhana*. In his autobiography, Gandhi wrote, "What I want to achieve-what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years-is self-realisation, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha. I live and move and have my entire being in pursuit of this goal" (quoted by Suhrud in his Introduction to Vol 2, p. xxi).

Anchored as Gandhi's spiritual journey was in these beliefs, he believed that all that was happening around him in 1946 and 1947-the partition of India, widespread communal violence, the direct or indirect complicity of some of his handpicked associates in the process of dividing India-were related, in ways that he never quite articulated, to his own imperfections, to lacunae in his own *sadhana*. In a lament from the heart to Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi wrote on 5 November 1946, "And the cry came from within: why should you be a witness to this slaughter? If your word, which is clear as daylight, is not heeded, your work is over. Why do you not die?"

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In *Harijan* on 20 November 1946, he explained his reasons to go into isolation in Noakhali. "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. It is only by going into isolation from my companions, those on whose help I have relied all along, and standing in my own two feet that I shall find my bearing and also test my faith in God" (both quotations from Suhrud's Introduction to Vol 2, p. xliii).

The second volume of Manu's diaries is an immediate and first-hand account of Gandhi's life in isolation. The only other comparable source are the recollections of Nirmal Bose (*My Days with Gandhi*, New Delhi: Orient Longman; 1974), who was also with Gandhi in Noakhali. Twelve volumes of Manu's diaries are at the National Archives of India. Of these, six volumes contain Gandhi's prayer speeches, which Manu took down as he spoke, and one volume of his letters that she had copied. These have been included in Gandhi's *Collected Works*. There is also one volume of Manu's English workbook from her time at the Aga Khan Palace and four volumes of her diaries. Suhrud has translated these four volumes in two parts and annotated them in great detail.

The second volume of the diaries brings out Gandhi's life in quotidian detail from late December 1946 to his death on 30 January 1948. Some of the details about the Noakhali days are significant. First, Gandhi's "isolation" was not absolute. Manu and Nirmal Bose were there with him. Some others were regular visitors and participants in his walks, which covered more than 100 miles around 47 villages. Pyarelal and his sister Sushila Nayyar, who lived and worked in nearby villages, came regularly; as did Kanu and Abha Gandhi (nee Chatterjee). A.V. Thakkar (Thakkar Bapa) came and stayed for six days, and even Nehru and Kripalani visited in late December. There were other visitors too.

Second, Manu records how Muslims, especially women, often ran away or shut themselves up when they saw Gandhi approaching. On one occasion, some Muslims had deliberately dirtied the path on which Gandhi was to walk. Gandhi himself cleaned the path. Later, Manu would go ahead to check if the pathways were clean enough to walk on. It was thus not easy for Gandhi to win the trust of the people, but win it he did.

Third, and perhaps most important, the diary reveals the inter-personal tensions and petty jealousies directed at Manu. She was often the target of jealousy, envy, and rudeness from Sushila Nayyar and Abha Gandhi. They resented Manu's closeness to Gandhi and the trust she enjoyed. Moreover, Sushila kept badgering Manu to marry her brother, Pyarelal, who did the same, much to Manu's exasperation and occasional anger. Sushila even tried to poison Gandhi against Manu. Such displays of human frailties must have added to Gandhi's sorrow and anguish since this kind of behaviour struck at the very root of what he conceived to be ashrama life-a life of piety, tolerance, and love.

> Gandhi decided to sleep on the same bed with Manu to see if their proximity would arouse any carnal desires in either or both of them. This episode is arguably the most controversial in Gandhi's life.

One of the most important details is in the entry for 1 February 1947 (p. 97). Manu writes that on this day she sang a new composition during the prayer. It went thus: "*Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram, Patit Pavan Sita Ram;/Isvar Allah Tere Naam, Sab Ko Sanmati De Bhagvan*." To a Vaishnavite Ramdhun, Manu had added "*Isvar Allah Tere Naam* …" giving the song a different and profound dimension. In her own characteristically self-effacing way, she added that she had first heard this sung by a *kathakar* in a Sudama temple she had visited as a girl with her mother.

Gandhi's stay in Noakhali was the period when he decided to undergo a test or an experiment with Manu, or to use his own term, *yajna*. He decided to sleep on the same bed with her to see if their proximity would arouse any carnal desires in either or both of them. This episode is arguably the most controversial in Gandhi's life. It earned him widespread displeasure and for a time alienated him from almost everybody who was close to him-Vallabhbhai Patel, Devdas Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, Abha Gandhi, Sushila Nayyar, and many others. Perhaps because of the controversy, Suhrud devotes a considerable amount of space to this "experiment" of Gandhi's to place it in the context of his *sadhana*.

To digress, it is worth noting that Nehru had nothing to say about this. Did he take it in his stride? Or did he remain silent out of his love for Bapu? Did he disapprove, as Rajmohan Gandhi suggests? In passing, it is not irrelevant that perhaps the only account of physical contact, completely asexual, that there is in this diary is Manu's account of how, after a disagreement with her, Nehru laughed and hugged her.

But before we come to Suhrud's disquisition, what is significant is Manu's attitude to sleeping next to Gandhi. She places no special emphasis on it and takes it as par for the course. Her place was by her Bapu's side-when he walked and when he slept and at other times as well. She accepted this as Gandhi's daughter-she wrote about him and thought of him as her mother. The problem or the controversy was in the minds of other people, not in the minds or the bodies of Manu and Gandhi.

> It would appear that Gandhi's 'yajna' ended not because it had been completed or because its purpose had been fulfilled, but because of the talk and the innuendos about it.

Thakkar Bapa, who observed the two of them sleeping side by side, noted Manu's innocent and undisturbed sleep. Gandhi himself commented to Manu, "What has convinced me about your purity is your sleep. You sleep like a dead body, which I like very much" (p. 107). Manu stopped sleeping by Gandhi's side on the same bed at the advice or suggestion of Thakkar Bapa, who believed that this was the only way "to bring an end these black tongues" (p. 165). The same thought had occurred to Manu earlier, as noted in her diary (p. 145). It would appear that Gandhi's *yajna* ended not because it had been completed or because its purpose had been fulfilled,

but because of the talk and the innuendos about it.

Was it then an incomplete or a failed experiment with Truth? Suhrud does not address this question. But something that Manu wrote in her diary when she was with Gandhi in Patna indicates that his *yajna* had been abruptly halted and he was unhappy.

According to Manu, Gandhi told her, "What am I to do. I am helpless. I am your mother but for the world I am a man and for that reason there were cries of disapproval. I did not, even then, vacillate. You wished to satisfy Bapa [Thakkar Bapa] and I did not want to be an obstacle. Otherwise, why should you thus be separated? It does bother me, but that is God's will." Manu added, "This was the churning of a mother's heart. Why should a daughter be separated from her mother? Each word dripped with the pain of his loving heart" (pp. 174-75).

Gandhi, according to Suhrud, did not understand *brahmacharya* in the conventional sense of celibacy. He broke up the word into *charya* (conduct) that is the way to Truth (Brahma). *Brahmacharya* thus to Gandhi was the path to the God who he was seeking-abstinence from sex was an integral part of that quest. Similarly, *yajna*, for Gandhi, was not a ritual to be performed with a sacred fire as its centrepiece. Gandhi saw *yajna* as a "duty that could not be forsaken". In 1946-47, Gandhi's fire was within himself. He made Manu his partner in the *yajna* to test her and his own purity-to discover if they were both on the path to Truth.

Suhrud believes, following Gandhi's utterances and writings closely like a devotee, that the experiment in Noakhali-*yajna* if you will-had nothing to do with a celibacy test for the two participants. He emphasises the point in his introduction to both volumes that Manu was a willing partner in the *yajna*.

> Gandhi's ingrained sense of humility made him see himself as an ordinary man. Yet, he was the Mahatma, even to those who called him Bapu and to someone who thought of him as her mother.

This raises the thorny question of what being a willing partner meant given the nature of the relationship between the 77-year-old Gandhi, who had an overwhelming stature as an individual, and a 20-year-old Manu, who was committed to serving Gandhi. Was it guru-shishya, master-disciple, or male-female? Manu knew she was being put to the test. But the problem is made to disappear by reiterating that she saw Gandhi as her mother.

Actually, residues of the problem remain. Could daughters deny/defy their mothers in the 1940s? Is it possible that Manu had so internalised her dedication to serve Gandhi that she saw her participation in what Gandhi called his *yajna* as another way to serve him? The reverence that Gandhi enjoyed from everybody close to him-the Sardar, Nehru, Mahadev Desai, Pyarelal, Mirabehn, Sushila Nayyar, Abha Gandhi et al. and most emphatically Manu-made his being a partner bereft of any notion of superiority almost impossible.

This was not Gandhi's fault. He did not see himself as superior and rarely, if ever, imposed his superiority, but this is what the situation or the predicament was. Gandhi's ingrained sense of humility made him see himself as an ordinary man. Yet, he was the Mahatma, even to those who called him Bapu and to someone who thought of him as her mother. It is pertinent to point out in this context that Manu thought of Gandhi as "the greatest of human beings" (p. 145).

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The second volume of Manu's diaries is not just about the days in Noakhali. They stretch from Gandhi's stay in Noakhali to his last moments on earth. Unfortunately, Suhrud, in his otherwise sensitive and poignant introduction, has nothing to say about the period following Noakhali to the assassination. This period, nearly a whole year, is left without the editor providing any kind of context. I find this lapse on the part of a very careful and responsible editor rather incomprehensible.

Gandhi left Noakhali in early March to travel to Bihar by way of Calcutta. Parts of Bihar had witnessed communal killings on a scale greater than what had taken place in Noakhali. Gandhi had received the news of this violence as he was preparing to leave for Noakhali and while he was there, news from Bihar kept coming in. Pressure began to mount on Gandhi to visit Bihar. The last straw was a letter from Syed Mahmud (a Congress leader from Bihar), which was brought by Mahmud's private secretary, Mustafa Sahib. Manu's summary of that letter (p.161) makes terrible reading.

Immediately after his arrival, Gandhi began to hold prayer meetings, talking to the people, and touring the violence-stricken areas-this time, given the distances, he often travelled by car. Manu was with him and her diary provides a record of his tour and of some of his

conversations.

> Nirmal Bose, having closely observed Gandhi and Manu together even at night, did not think what Gandhi was doing was wrong, or that it was adharma.

Manu's diary entry for 3 March 1947 (pp. 202-204) registers the important fact that Nirmal Bose left that day. She describes this as a "sensational development". There is the very suggestive following line-"Nirmalda is upset that Bapuji still continues to be partial to Sushila behn and Pyarelal." Was this the real and only reason? It is certain that Gandhi's *yajna* was not the reason. Nirmal Bose, having closely observed Gandhi and Manu together even at night, did not think what Gandhi was doing was wrong, or that it was *adharma*. His departure is thus a puzzle that demanded an editorial exegesis in a footnote or in the introduction.

Leaving Patna on 30 March 1947, Gandhi arrived in Delhi the next day. Delhi at this time was, of course, agog with negotiations on independence, transfer of power, and methods to restore peace across the country. Manu noted pithily on 1 April 1947 (p. 230), "It is already quite hot. There is the natural heat and the heat of political future of the country." Gandhi, as Manu tells us, was overwhelmed with visitors and meetings.

Meanwhile, the situation in Bihar deteriorated and Gandhi with Manu decided to leave for Patna in the middle of April 1947. From 18 April to 26 May, Manu was unable to maintain a diary as she was seriously unwell. She had to undergo a surgery for the removal of her appendix in Patna on 15 May. Gandhi donned a surgical mask to be present during the procedure (p. 259, n 438).

At the end of May, Gandhi and a convalescing Manu were back in Delhi. That independence would come with the partition of India was by now a *fait accompli*. Manu writes in her diary on 2 June 1947, "It seems that partition will happen. Only God can save Hindustan. A new history is being created in India …" (p. 267).

The next day she recorded, "Bapuji has not liked this [the decision to partition India] in the least … Bapuji remained silent. 'May Rama protect all, may He give good sense to all.' That was all that he said. He sighed deeply. I have not seen his face so grave in the recent past. Bapuji's visage was dark" (p. 268).

In early August, with Independence Day a week away, Gandhi decided that he would spend 15 August in Noakhali. But when he arrived in Calcutta, he found the city seething with communal hatred. He decided to stay in Calcutta and he was there the day India gained independence. His presence and appeals calmed tempers and emotions in the city, and Independence Day saw moving scenes of unity and jubilation.

But the harmony was short-lived. Violence erupted again in late August and Gandhi announced that he was going on a fast from 2 September till peace was restored. Manu recorded in her diary the many conversations he had with political leaders of Bengal while he was on the fast. When these leaders assured Gandhi that they would be responsible for maintaining peace and harmony, he broke his fast on 4 September.

> When Gandhi arrived, he discovered that Delhi was no longer the city he had known. There was terror all around in spite of the city being under a 24-hour curfew.

That night, at 10.30, Manu notes in her diary, "People with guns, ammunition, and bombs came and surrendered them to Bapu. Bapu looked at the weapons with interest and said that they should not have any pain while surrendering the weapons. They assured him that they were not sorry to do that" (p. 380).

Gandhi left Calcutta on 8 September for Delhi. When he arrived, he discovered that Delhi was no longer the city he had known. There was terror all around in spite of the city being under a 24-hour curfew. It was so unsafe that Gandhi, against his wishes, had to stay in Birla House. Manu noted how "Jawaharlalji runs from one incident to another trying to quell it." Nehru told Gandhi, "I am angry with myself. All of this is going on and we move around with guards" (p. 386).

Gandhi got down to do what he considered to be his duty-being with the people, working with them to spread the message of *abhaya* and *ahimsa*. Amidst all this, his daily routine of prayer and spinning continued. It was while he was walking to a prayer meeting at Birla House that a Hindu bigot shot him, an old and unarmed man, at point blank range on the evening of 30 January 1948. Abha and Manu were to his right and left as the shots were fired. He died as he had wanted to with the name of Rama on his lips.

The assassin did not know that by killing Gandhi he had led Gandhi to his ultimate triumph. With his characteristic honesty, Gandhi had told Manu, "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." His death announced he was a simple seeker of Truth. His life and his death were his message.

The last pages of Manu's diary-the only ones Gandhi never saw-were written at 2.30 am on 31 January and they document in poignant detail what happened on the evening of the day before.

Gandhi's death left Manu bereft of her calling. Manu Gandhi's occupation was gone. She left Delhi on 21 February 1948 - a gem of purest ray serene. Kasturba and Manu's mother -- Bapu -- embraced her in 1969 in their centenary year. She was only 42.

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