

# **BLISS WAS IT TO BE YOUNG WITH GANDHI**

## **CHILDHOOD REMINISCENCES OF NARAYAN DESAI**

### **1. O LORD, OPEN THY GATES**

THE SITE OF Mahatma Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram his home province of Gujarat, has a significance of its own. This ashram lies on the banks of the broad Sabarmati River, facing the industrial city of Ahmedabad from across the water. It is said that somewhere near here, ages ago stood the ashram of Dadhichi, the hermit who gave up his bones to be made into a thunderbolt for god India. The story of Dadhichi is an example of supreme sacrifice. But the story of the Mahatma - (Great Soul) - who built his ashram here in modern times is no less inspiring.

This is a good spot for my ashram, Bapu used to say, (We all called him "Bapu", "Father"). 'On one side is the cremation ground. On the other, is the prison. The people in my ashram should have no fear of death, nor should they be strangers to imprisonment.'

One of us would chime in, 'Yes, Bapu, and across the river are the chimneys of the textile mills, reminding us of the forces we must contend with, as advocates of khadi - homespun cloth.'

My earliest memories of Bapu are intertwined with those of Sabarmati Prison. Bapu would go for a walk each morning and evening. He would put his hands on the shoulders of those either side. These companions would then be Bapu's ("walking sticks"). We children were always given top choice for this job. Whether his human walking sticks were really any help to him, perhaps only Bapu could say. But as for us, being chosen always made us swell with pride. In fact, in our eagerness to be chosen, Bapu's "sticks" would sometimes clash together.

Each morning and evening we would start out from Bapu's place, walk to the main gate of Sabarmati Prison, then turn back. At any time, Bapu's pace was too brisk for us. But as we neared the prison gate - if he wasn't engaged in serious discussion - he would almost run the last fifty yards or so. Sometimes we would remove Bapu's hands from our shoulders and dash to the gate. Sometimes Bapu would put his entire weight on our shoulders, lift his feet off the ground, and shout, 'Come on, Boss, let's

see how you run!' Bapu used to nickname those he cared about, often bestowing more than one name. Among the many showered on me was ("Boss"). Of course, he meant it in fun, and at that age, it certainly never aroused in me the quality the name implied.

On the way back, Bapu would begin his visits to those in the ashram who were ill. Experiments in the ashram encompassed every aspect of life. Naturally, this included health. In its pursuit, quite a few factors were taken into account. Regularity and restraint were important rules of ashram life. We stayed close to nature. Standard medical practice had been set aside, replaced by experimental, natural treatments. Different types of bath were tried. Mud packs on the head and abdomen were advocated by some. Above all, Bapu liked to experiment with diet. If an ashramite wanted to try out a special diet, Bapu would go all out to encourage it. Some would eat only raw food, others would drink peanut milk, still others would take to bitter *neem* leaves. What was amazing was that Bapu was an expert adviser in all these fields of experiment.

But in the midst of them all, the best medicines were always Bapu's personal care, his faith, and his sense of humour. In fact, you could say that illness here was a boon, since it was rewarded with two visits a day from Bapu. For Bapu, this meant a complete round of the ashram.

The ashram in those days was very different from what it is today, both in appearance and atmosphere. Compared to today, one might think it was too small and isolated. But it was also cleaner and more peaceful.

As today, the prayer ground lay on the river bank, between Bapu bungalow and Magankuti - the home, while he lived, of Bapu's nephew Maganlal Gandhi. But in those days there wasn't the brick embankment as now, between the prayer ground and Magankuti. Also, in those days, three *neem* trees stood on the prayer ground, Bapu would sit under the one on the north side. This tree and one other have since perished in the flood waters of the Sabarmati. Near Magankuti, away from the river, where today stand the modern but simple buildings of the Gandhi Museum, there was then a field. The whole spirit of the place was different - more rustic, more natural. In his rounds visiting the ill, Bapu would always pass by the small cottage between his bungalow and the river. This was at first the home of Miraben - Bapu's English disciple, Madeleine Slade. She was invariably along with Bapu already, on his walk. Later the cottage was taken by Vinoba, a saintly scholar and diligent worker later known as Bapu's ("spiritual successor"). Though lean and rickety, Vinoba was seldom ill. But on the other side of Vinoba's cottage, Bapu often had to stop at

Nandini, ("Giver of Joy"). This was where guests usually stayed. Often one of them would be ill.

Past Nandini was what is now a girls' dormitory. In those days it was known as Udyog Mandir, ("Temple of Crafts"). Spinning and weaving went on there, and sometimes classes. Farther on was a dormitory for girl students. I don't recall what so many girls came there to study, or how long they would stay. But the building was fairly full, and Bapu often had to stop there to see the sick.

Moving away from the river, there were two chawls (buildings made up of a row of small apartments). Many of the colleagues on whom Bapu most depended lived here. I do not remember whether any dignified name had been given to these chawls - "professors' quarters", or some such. We all just called them the front chawl and the back chawl. My family too stayed in the front chawl for a number of years. This was the chawl for families in the ashram. In my early years, the ashram was the only world I knew. So I felt as if all the young children living were in that front chawl.

Farther from the river were spread a dozen cottages and bun gallows. Among these was the cottage eventually built for my family - Anand Nivas ("Abode of Joy"). This then was the extent of the Sabarmati Ashram, in the years 1927 to 1930. Today it has been expanded greatly, with the museum and social services operating there. Though Bapu paid special attention to the sick, he also kept close contact with every person in the ashram. He maintained a deep interest in their diet and living conditions. In every aspect of their individual or collective discipline, Bapu guided them directly or indirectly.

In this way, Bapu could be seen as the patriarch of a large, extended family. Certainly the ashram was a patriarchy. But my personal view of Bapu - and I believe the view of the other ashram children - was completely different. Bapu was father to the ashram, leader of the nation, Mahatma to the common Indian. But to us children, he was above all simply a friend.

The ashram had its rules - strict always, often stern, sometimes harsh as well. Bapu made these rules. His word was final in how they were applied. But to us children, again, he was never the stern disciplinarian, never the dictator. Between him and us, the only rule was friendship.

Let's take the example of the dining hall. The rule was that all the ashramites eat their meals in the community-dining hall. (At one point my father objected to this, and received permission for us to eat in our home. Even then, my mother had to help in

the common kitchen. But all that came later.)

Mealtime was signalled by the ashram bell. In the ashram, this bell wielded an authority perhaps next only to Bapu's. It rang to mark the time for each activity, from rising in the morning to going to sleep at night. Once we figured out that the bell rang fifty-six times a day. At mealtime, it would be rung three times. The first ringing called us to the dining hall. At the stroke of the second ringing, the dining hall doors closed. With the third ringing began the prayers.

Once, I was late getting into the dining hall. Just as I was climbing the stairs, the bell rang for the second time. The dining hall doors slammed shut. Now, what child anywhere on earth has adhered to the rules and regulations regarding meals? Just the same, a shut door now stood between me and my food.

I began imagining the scene on the other side of the door. People-would be sitting on the floor in four rows. Their plates would have been filled with rice, vegetables, milk and slices of yeast bread. My mother, working in the kitchen, would be worrying over my absence. Bapu, sitting near the door, would be looking around at everyone with a smile.

I don't remember whether it was someone else's idea or my own, but standing at the closed door, I began to sing.

Open the gates, O Lord, open the gates of your temple.

When the late poet Narsinhrao composed this prayer at the demise of his child, could he have foreseen such a use of his verse?

It was all-quiet in the dining hall, so my young voice carried inside. Bapu burst into laughter, and the doors swung open for Babla!

## **2. CHILDHOOD PRANKS**

THE OFFICIAL NAME of the ashram on the Sabarmati was Satyagraha Ashram ("Satyagraha") means ("Truth-Force"). It is the matchless moral weapon Bapu discovered in his fight for justice in South Africa, and that he had now introduced to India.

But for a while he changed the name of the ashram to Udyog Mandir, ("Temple of Crafts"). Perhaps ("Satyagraha Ashram") seemed too heavy to him. ("Temple of Crafts") was a little less ambitious, perhaps more realistic. In a way, though, the names were connected. The root of ("ashram") was ("shram"), or ("labour"). And ("Udyog") contained ("yoga"), the science of enlightenment. Of course, Truth is an essential element of such a science.

But one place in the ashram never had its name changed; the prayer ground. How could Bapu ever change the name of that sacred place? The ideal of Satyagraha took root on that ground. On it flowered Bapu's life as a seeker of Truth.

When only the ashramites were at prayers, Bapu would take each one's problems, and delve into how a seeker of Truth would resolve them. To him, Satyagraha was not only a means to fight the British government. It encompassed one's entire way of life. So all facets of life were tested on the prayer ground on the anvil of the seeker of Truth. Why is someone a late riser? Why does someone doze off during prayers? Why does one ejaculate in his sleep? Is it hard to conquer the disease of anger? Does an ashramite need jewellery? How does diet, affect the mind?

The prayer ground - how pleasing the site was. On one side was Bapu's cottage, Hridaykunj - ("Abode of the Heart). On the other was an ancient shrine to the holy sage Dattatreya. On the third side was the Sabarmati River - most of its bed dry in the summer, roaring with floodwaters during the rains, yet all year round washing the bank by the prayer ground.

My memories of times on the prayer ground between my fourth and seventh years are as delightful as those of the sparrows and winter-birds and peacocks that came there as well.

Bapu used to sit under the tree on the north side. Facing Bapu, the men would sit on one side, the women on the other. When I began attending prayers, I found my place right away. I fixed myself in Bapu's lap. When I think of it today, I realise what a privilege it was, and what a responsibility it gave me. But at that time, I knew only that Bapu's lap was the centre of the prayer assembly, of the ashram, of our entire world.

After some time I had a competitor. My friend Prabodh Choksi-came to stay in the ashram for a few days with his grandparents, and he too began coming to the prayer meetings to sit in. Bapu's lap. Before this, I had been the youngest: But this boy was

younger still, and so couldn't be denied the privilege. Bapu solved the problem by sharing his knees between us.

But after a few days we were promoted and told to sit quietly among the others. Small children were allowed to sit with either sex. Sometimes in the male section we ashram boys would choose someone special, and focus all our skill on imitating him. At times, sitting in the female section, we would achieve supreme satisfaction from tying the braids of women trying to commune with the Almighty.

Could anything happen in the ashram without Bapu hearing of it? 'Bapu, I ate an extra date piece today.' 'Bapu, should I use warm water in my bath, or cold?' In all such matters, Bapu was the sole arbiter. Our mischief just begged to be reported. How long could it take to reach him? 'Bapu, the boys are harassing us at prayer-time!'

We figured, now we'll be put on trial. We'll need a lawyer to plead for us, and witnesses. Or should we just boldly confess our offence like the civil disobedience people?

But we needn't have bothered about it. Without even questioning us, Bapu ruled, 'How could our prayers keep the children's interest? Arrange a separate program for them.'

Hurray! We got what we wanted. But to tell the truth, I don't remember what went on in the prayer meetings set up for us. Except, I remember they would end with stories from the Ramayana. The Ramayana is the epic poem on which all Hindu children are raised, the life-story of Rama, incarnation of God. But actually, even from these stories told to us, I only remember hearing two. One was the battle of Rama and his friends with demon king Ravana. The other was the meeting of Rama with the monkey god, Maruti.

Still, whatever we heard or said in our evening meeting affected us more deeply and quickly than the adults would be affected in their own. Once, my Mother was returning home from her work in the kitchen. She was at that time responsible for supplies. Before she had taken over, the men in charge would always make some mistake or other in bookkeeping. But once the women began managing the supplies, the bookkeeping was faultless. Mother was proud and happy about it. But it meant more work for her.

This particular day, she was coming home late and exhausted. As she approached Anand Nivas, she saw Babla perched on the wicket-gate, his hands and face painted over with tar.

'For Heavens' sake! What do you think you're doing?'

'Stitching rags to make a tail as long as Ravana's throne,' I proclaimed, 'Maruti, I am Maruti!'

In a way, Babu liked our child's play. In fact, when he had the chance, he would often play a little with us. But at other times, he would meet our mischief with some training device designed to discourage it. This often proved effective. One frequent device was to assign a late riser the ringing of the morning 'wake-up bell. In a similar way, he would give each of us some responsibility, to curb our exuberance and our pranks. I remember one such incident in regard to myself.

Naturally, Babu's ashram attracted many visitors. This often inspired us to monkey around. Once, one of us was asked for directions to the ashram manager's residence. The visitor was led to a men's rest room. Perhaps due to such incidents, the job of guiding an American woman around the ashram was once given to me by Babu. He knew that, once assigned a task, I would acquit myself faultlessly.

I led the woman around the entire ashram. With the help of her interpreter, I explained everything as best as I could. In one of the cottages, she was amazed to see flour-grinding stones. They were the kind commonly used all over India to hand-grind corn and cereals. She had never seen anything like it. I was more amazed at her than she was to see the stones. I rotated the top stone, showing her how it worked. She was simply charmed. She immediately took my picture.

When we moved on, she tried to tip me with a small coin. I wouldn't take it. She coaxed me to accept. I firmly refused. Then the interpreter told me she was offering it because she was pleased to do so. So there was no harm in taking it.

I told the interpreter, 'I didn't show her around for money. I did it because Babu told me to. If she wants to give money, she can give it to the ashram manager. I won't touch it.'

In this precept of social ethics I do not remember having been coached. I learned it from the self-respect generated from Babu having entrusted me with the job of guide.

But I can't claim I was never tainted by corruption. Agents of the Central Intelligence Department - the intelligence agency of the British government ruling India - often came to the ashram. One of them was Ismailbhai. He was heavy, dark, and wore a fez. We children were very fond of him. He used to succeed in bribing us. I don't know whether that was his only interest, or whether he genuinely cared for us too. But whenever he came, he would always bring sweets. In return, all he wanted to know was, 'And what is Gandhiji up to, nowadays?'

Having sweetened our tongues with Ismailbhai's gifts, we wouldn't hesitate to leak some information. 'Nowadays, Bapu is experimenting with eating spreads made from bitter *neem* leaves!'

And the simple man would diligently take that down in his notebook. On one hand, Bapu - scientist of Truth that he was - really was as interested in experiments with neem spread as he would be in the solution of any social or political problem. On the other hand, this poor representative of the British government seriously believed that a recipe for neem spread was as important to note as a secret meeting! But then, who knew which of Bapu's formulas, which experiment, would prove powerful enough to shake the foundations of British rule? Who could know that gathering a pinch of salt would send tremors through the Delhi throne?

Here, of course, I refer to Bapu's Salt March in 1930, which launched one of the most serious challenges to the British government in the history of its rule. The events I relate now are from the days leading up to that march.

At the time, I was barely six. But the entire ashram in those days was going through a political awakening. So at an age when other children could scarcely begin to understand, we knew well the meanings of prison, police, C. I. D., court. The songs we were hearing in the ashram ran; "Don't kill, learn to die - this is what Gandhiji teaches. Think of prison as a temple, and you will be free." Mixed with songs of such sentiment were others saying, "The spinning wheel is an arrow that will pierce the government's heart. Victory to the revolution," "Oh, you with the hat, how did you come to our land?"

As for myself, my impression is that I may have harboured anger towards some unseen power called the government, but none towards any of its representatives - light or dark, high or low. On the contrary, we were friendly with people like Ismailbhai and others we came in contact with. For this attitude, Bapu's own approach was as much or maybe more responsible than was our own childlike nature.



In the midst of national ferment, authority to launch a resistance movement was given to Bapu by the Indian National Congress - the organisation of national leaders in charge of the independence struggle. Then Bapu wrote a letter to the Viceroy, head of the British government in India, expressing India's grievances. After that, the entire country was intent on the drumbeats of the approaching battle.

Then, on March 12, 1930, Bapu announced that he would march to the coast village of Dandi and there break the law by collecting salt from the beach.

Naturally, this announcement produced mixed feelings. Many national leaders privately questioned its wisdom. Of course, everyone knew the injustice of the government's salt laws. These gave the government a monopoly on producing salt, in order to ensure the tax levied on it. This tax on an essential item was especially hard on the poor. Still, was this the base on which to mount a serious challenge to British rule?

In the ashram, it was presumed that Bapu would be arrested before he could set out. But as the day approached, everyone in the ashram was eager to go with Bapu on the march. When Bapu announced his selection, the chosen seventy-nine were joyful.

We children were indignant at being left out.

On the eve of the march, the prayer ground proved too small for the multitudes assembled. The congregation had to be moved to the vast dry bed of the Sabarmati. The roaring voice of Pandit Khare, who led our hymns, proved too weak to reach such crowds.

People continued to gather through the night - hundreds of thousands of them. Beneath the ashram's ancient tamarind tree were parked what seemed like all the cars then in Ahmedabad. Pandit Khare, surrounded by the crowd, could not reach the prayer-ground. So from where he stood he began the hymn, "Raghupati Raghav Rajaram" - "Rama, heir of Raghu, is the great Master". I believe it was from this time on that this hymn became known as the Gandhian hymn.

Hundreds of thousands waited to see Gandhiji in his march. But after prayers, Bapu visited the sick. Three children had recently died of smallpox. One of them was Pandit Khare's son. Yet Panditji was at the head of the march.

At the sight of the marchers, our teacher Premaben was mad with joy. She clipped a badge on Bapu's shawl and embraced him. Another ashram woman placed the traditional dot of red paste on his forehead. Homespun yam garlands were slipped over the heads of the marchers. To the strains of "Vaishnav Jan" - "Vishnu's Devotee" - and the chanting of Rama's name, Bapu set out. The entire city of Ahmedabad walked with him to the next village to give the marchers a send-off.

We children were left behind in the ashram. After Bapu started off, we raised our flags and began our march - in the opposite direction - straight to the gates of Sabarmati Prison. We weren't going to be left out!

### **3. ALL-CONQUERING LOVE**

I once had a personal taste of Bapu's style of fighting. The incident went like this.

Wherever my father went, he made friends. A few among them became close, and these would become close to the rest of the family as well. Once, one of these friends sent some toys for me from Bombay. There were plenty of places to play in the ashram, but few toys. So we were always happy to get them.

But to our misfortune, the toys sent for me were foreign-made. At that time, the national boycott of foreign goods was in full swing. Bapu had himself initiated this, to stop the draining of India's wealth by industrial nations. So when the toys arrived, Bapu confiscated them before they ever got to us.

Our "Secret Police" informed us that some toys had been sent from Bombay for Babla, and that Bapu had hidden them. We prepared to take up arms against this gross injustice. To launch our struggle, we decided to send a deputation to Bapu. Since the toys had come in my name, I was selected the spokesman. Bapu was then residing in Magankuti. My father, who was Bapu's chief secretary, was sitting as usual at Bapu's side, writing. Other ashramites were there as well. Our delegation arrived.

I fired the first volley: 'Is it true that some toys have come from Bombay?'

It helps to extract a confession of fact from the opponent before the war commences in earnest!

Bapu was just then busy writing. But he looked up from his work and said, ' Oh, its you, Babla. Yes, it's true about the toys.'

In the second volley was the inquiry into the whereabouts of the goods.

'They are over there on the shelf,' said Bapu pointing. The goods were not hidden at all. And there was a whole basketful of them! 'Hand over those toys!'

When justice is on your side, why beat about the bush?

But then Bapu began to set out his own argument. 'You know the toys are foreign made, don't you?'

If Bapu himself had set up the boycott of foreign goods, how could Ashram children play with foreign made toys? That was Bapu's line of reasoning. But at our age, how could we understand such a thing?

'I know nothing about Indian or foreign. I only know they're my toys, and they've been sent here for me. So you have to let me have them.'

I asserted my rights. I was sure Bapu would not deny me my rights.

But suddenly Bapu gave the argument a new twist.

'Can we play with foreign made toys?'

In the word "we" Bapu played his trump card. In just one sentence, Bapu had placed him and me on the same side of the fence. As I was losing my right to play with those toys, Bapu was giving up his own. And the moment it was shown to me that my opponent had shared that right, the responsibility he had taken on also became my own.

Where did our arguments vanish? Where could our delegation make its stand? When the enemy himself sides with you, the contest becomes completely unbalanced. 'We have ourselves launched the boycott of foreign goods, and if we play with foreign toys here at home....'

But Bapu didn't have to pursue the argument. Seeing their spokesman unnerved, the other members of the delegation were already slipping away.

The noted child psychologist A.S. Neill once said that love can be defined as "taking sides". Even by that rough analogy, Bapu often showed his love for us. Here is another example.

That there was a school in Satyagrah Ashram was unknown to us until Miss Premaben Katak came to teach us. On her arrival we became aware of the school. She was zealous as a teacher. In fact, it was almost impossible to escape her.

Today I associate Premaben with the meaning of her first name, which is "love". But in those days we thought her surname - "thorns" - was more appropriate. When Bapu later began promoting handicrafts as a basis for public education, one teacher was reported to say: "I already combine the use of the hands with learning. When the children get out of control, I use the cane in my hand, and teach them a good lesson!"

Premaben must have been trained in this concept of education. Once we were placed in her hands she made liberal use of them to expand our horizons of knowledge. Like Premaben, we too were determined - determined to get away from her. Under one pretext or another, we would play hooky from the class or workshop. If we were caught, Premaben had various ways of punishing us. One of these was making us skip a meal. But in the domain of Bapu, we would offset the punishment by gorging ourselves on tomatoes and other vegetables from the ashram fields.

An instance of playing hooky. It had rained. Of all the Indian seasons, it is only the season of monsoon rains that announces its arrival with a bang. Potholes and streamlets had appeared all over the ashram. On this morning, I had set out from home for the school. But on my way I noticed a rain filled pothole beneath a small tree and observed that ants were drowning in it. The saviour in me was awakened. Instead of going to the class, I decided to save the ants. I took a leaf from the tree, lifted one ant out of the water with it, and brought the ant ashore.

Why only one ant? Not exactly what you'd call a mass rescue operation! But I did mean to save all the ants. Only I intended to save them one at a time. That way, all the ants would be saved from drowning in the waters of the school.

But Premaben wasn't the kind to be gotten around so easily. She insisted on 100% class attendance. To ensure it, she would make a round of the entire ashram. While I was engrossed in rescuing the ants, she came up from behind the tree and grabbed hold of my ear. Under those conditions, it would not have been wise to start a tug-of-war. Without a word, I meekly followed her along. She must have fallen head-over-heels in love with my ear, because she wouldn't let go of it until we reached the classroom.

Bapu wasn't in the ashram just then. So I wrote him a letter. Or rather, I dictated it. Because our correspondence with Bapu started long before I could write. Once a week, Pandit Khare would write down the letters to Bapu we dictated. By this arrangement I related to Bapu the incident of the tree and the ants, and lodged a complaint about the treatment given to my ear. I also asked him, with his belief in non-violence, how violence could be used at any time in his ashram.

There is room for differing opinions on justification in this incident. Possibly Premaben remembers it rather differently. But what was certain was that Bapu was on our side in our fight against the elders. After a few days Premaben received a letter from Bapu. I don't know what was in it. But I do know that at that point her experiment in thrashing was abandoned.

There were other times Bapu took my side. But for now, I remember another incident from the time Pandit Khare was acting as our scribe.

In our weekly letters to Bapu, each of us usually included a question. Each week, Bapu's replies would come written in his own hand, all on a small piece of paper. We would eagerly await these answers. There was also competition to see who could ask the most intelligent question, and who received a reply of what length. While competitiveness resides in the human heart, how could it vanish from the ashram? One week I dictated: 'Bapuji, so many of us children send you so many questions, and you reply on such a small piece of paper. In the Bhagavad Gita that we recite here in the ashram, Arjuna asks only one question, and in reply Lord Krishna recites a full chapter. Why then do you give such a short answer?'

The Bhagavad Gita, the holiest of Hindu books, was a special inspiration to us in the ashram. It describes the discourses given by Krishna, incarnation of God, in response to the queries of his disciple Arjuna. My question was much admired by the elders. So I figured it had taken on some significance. Bapu's reply was eagerly awaited. In addressing even his terse replies, Bapu would shower pet names on us with the enthusiasm of a lover. His reply to my question began with one of many such names he had for me. Unfortunately, I don't now have the letter. But I remember the message Bapu wrote:

Your question is a good one. But remember, Krishna had but one Arjuna, and I have so many Arjunas such as you.'

#### **4. ASHRAM MEMORIES**

HOW MANY INCIDENTS can one remember from the first seven or eight years of life? As many as can be counted on one's fingers. Yet it is in these seven or eight years that we form the ideals that carry us through the rest of our lives. Impressions of these years are like a moonless night. No large body dominates it. But myriads of stars beautify it. On such a night, our eyes do not reflect the light of the

single moon, but the lovely pattern of the star-filled sky.

The first seven or eight years of my own life - that is, 1924 to 1932 - have left an impression on my mind like the galaxy on such a night. Yet it does at times have the glow of the sun and the moon - Bapu and his wife Kasturba, whom we called "Ba", "Mother". And sometimes it has the steady, different light of the planets Jupiter and Venus - my father and Narharibhai, his close friend in the ashram. But more than that, it has so many twinkling stars that adorned Bapu's sky, In that sky, no one star is the champion. But together the many stars form an admirable composition.

When I try to reconstruct and order those nights, two colours dominate the sky. They are the colours of the two basic human emotions, joy and sorrow. My memories of ashram life are divided in such a fashion. Sometimes an incident intermingles joy and sorrow, but in the incidents I now relate, I will treat them separately.

The joyful incidents concern celebrations in the ashram. The sorrowful ones concern deaths.

When I begin to think of the ashram's festival days, my entire childhood seems to blend together into a continuous festivity. Even at ordinary times, childhood itself inspires joy. Here was a nest full of a score of chirping children; the rushing Sabarmati River; elders who spoke of sharing the joy of life; creative minds who even in the normally drab atmosphere of the ashram loved to read and translate fine literature. And woven through all was the resounding voice of Pandit Khare, embodiment of the union of devotion and music. What more could one wish? Even so, the festival of Gokul Ashtami, birthday of Lord Krishna, holds a special place in my memory.

On that day, the entire ashram would join in chanting the Bhagavad Gita. Dressed like Krishna in his youth as a cowherd -bare-chested with loin-cloth and red turban - we children would start out to graze the ashram cattle. On the way home, our mouths would be full - not with the curds and butter that usually come from the cattle-yard, but with sweets made from the milk produced at the dairy.

Then, in my memory, unfolds the festival of Rammvami, birthday of Rama. The air would be full of the strains of the Ramayana. The lead singer was Pandit Totaram, who had helped spread improved methods of agriculture from the province of Uttar Pradesh as far as the Fiji Islands, and had wound up in the ashram, in charge of its fields. Ordinarily our relationship to him was confined to running into his fields to pluck and devour tomatoes, carrots, radishes, and the like, whenever Premaben Kantak denied us a meal. Of course, we did not want to be thought of as thieves. So

we would give him prior warning of our raid by shouting in to the drainpipe that ran from his house.

Sometimes he would catch us red-handed, and lock us in a room. But sometimes, locked in with us, we would find a whole basket-full of tomatoes. These tomatoes too would soon be on their way into our stomachs. We would loudly gloat over our triumph - but not a little too soon, and we would be moved to an empty room. Release from this prison could be gained only by crying loudly.

But on Ramnavami, without demanding, without even understanding, we would eat to our hearts' content the fruits of his- cultivation of the spirit. Today I realise that the taste of these spiritual fruits was far sweeter and enduring than that of tomatoes and carrots.

But the festival which surpassed all others was Bapu's birthday. How could this be? The celebration of Bapu's birthday in his own ashram! Was this his ego showing through? But Bapu never considered it his birthday. Celebrated by the Hindu calendar, it fell on Rentia Baras - Spinning Wheel Day. And to Bapu, that's just what it was.

Today on Rentia Baras, people treat Bapu's cottage at Sabarmati as a temple. Prayers are offered before his photo. But in the picture in my mind, there is no photo of Bapu. The central figure is always the spinning wheel. In fact, it took a couple of such celebrations before we realised that the day was Bapu's birthday!

So Bapu could freely join in the ashram celebration. And here, he didn't have to flee the crowds. Here, he could be just an ordinary ashramite. He would keep time in the running race. Sometimes he would join the older boys in their sports. He would swim with us in the Sabarmati, if it wasn't flooded. He would serve at supper. And when we children presented plays and dances in the evening, Bapu wouldn't have to sit on the stage, as he would have elsewhere. He sat in the audience, like everyone else. On this day, of course, spinning continued non-stop. We children would enthusiastically compete against each other and various records. One of us would spin for eight hours at a stretch. Another with a companion would spin relay for twenty-four hours. After evening prayers, there would be a contest to see who could spin the most yarn in a given period.

Singing always went along with spinning. The first song would always be "Raghupati Raghav Rajaram". We would sing songs from the ashram prayer book, which all of us children knew by heart. Marching songs from the civil disobedience

campaigns found a proud place. And we would sing stanzas from the Ramayana, Bhagavad Gita, and other holy works. No sooner would one singer finish a stanza, than someone else would begin a new one deriving from the last word of the previous stanza. The smart ones among us children knew such stanzas of the Gita that had endings tough to carry over.

It seems to me on the whole that the women's contribution to the ashram festivals was greater than that of the men. Not that their cooking skills found great scope in each festival. On Rentia Baras the ashram skipped a meal. (In our home, though, my father always ordered sweets to serve in place of that meal, saying, 'Today, at least, we will have the finest food. A break from austerity!') And on the evening of that day, we would get only fruits and nuts. But the energy of the women in serving even these simple foods! What impressed me was the devotion they brought to each task - decorating the stage, piecing together garlands, whatever.

Of all the ashram women, the one that stands out most in my memory is Kashiben Gandhi. Just the mention of the holy city of Kashi (Benares) evokes reverence in an orthodox Hindu. In the same way, when I remember Kashiben, my spiritual devotion is rekindled. At her ripe old age, her voice had the dulcet sweetness of a ripe pear. When she sang of the tinkling bells on the feet of the child Rama, I'm sure she was seeing before her the first steps of that child, the way he would falter and fall. Because, on us children of the age of the monkey-soldiers of Rama's army, she showered a warmth and affection like that of Rama's mother, Kaushalya.

I have a similar memory of Gangaben. Her endearments worked greater wonders on us than all her medicines. Once, everyone in the ashram had contributed wages from voluntary labour to the Bengal flood relief program. I was the youngest. Who would hire me? Then Gangaben gave me the chore of rinsing her medicine bottles. What she paid me for that work was much more than I had really earned, as I well realised. But she did it out of sheer affection.

But now perhaps I have said enough about festivals. Now I must go on to the subject of deaths.

Death first came close to me in the passing away of my childhood friend Vasant Khare. At the time that Pandit Khare was acting as scribe to us children, his son Vasant was our reader. Vasant was only eleven months my senior, but in reading, he had progressed rapidly. So he would read to me each day from Aesop's Fables. One day he came down with fever. Others in the ashram had this fever at times. At that time, many were down with it. But the others developed clear symptoms of



smallpox. Vasant showed no such signs. Still, the infection spread within, and he passed away.

Panditji poured out his grief in the hymns he led during prayers. His wife Lakshmben was denied this outlet, in tending their daughter, also down with smallpox. We children neither sang hymns nor wept. We understood nothing. But that death so pierced my heart that, today, whenever I see death, I see Vasant standing before my eyes.

That time, smallpox claimed the lives of three children. The veteran Imam Saheb died around this time, Bapu's nephew Maganlal, and Rasik, one of Bapu's grandsons, had died earlier. At such times Panditji would sing, "Open the Gates, O Lord," or "Now We Will Be Immortal and Shall Not Die." Bapu would say something after the prayers. I believe when Maganlalkaka died, Bapu broke the silence he observed one full day each week. (There was one other time Bapu broke this weekly silence, but I will come to that in time.)

But to the dear ones of the deceased, more soothing than Bapu's words, would be the way he came to them and embraced them. It was as if he was absorbing their agony into his own heart. If away, Bapu would write to them daily.

But why mention Bapu alone? The bereaved were never left alone in their grief. The young girl who had lost her father to the smallpox became a favourite of my mother. With Vasant gone, I felt as if I had taken his place in Panditji's lap. And Vasant's sister now oiled my hair in place of his. We even shared equally the sorrow in the death of Lankapati, the ashram dog.

Festivals and deaths in the ashram were poles apart. But they had one thing in common. In the ashram, joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, were shared by all.

## **5. "KAKA", MY FATHER**

IF GANDHIJI WAS "Bapu", - "Father" - then what did I call my own father? I called him "Kaka" - "Uncle". So that's the name I will use here, from hereon. During my childhood Bapu and Kaka were both like guests passing through our home. Of course, Sabarmati Ashram was their base. But when did they ever spend much time there? They were either travelling around the country, or in prison. My entire childhood seems to me an alternation between the periods when the elders were in prison, and the brief periods they were free. When Kaka came home from a

time in prison, while Mother was busy preparing some tasty dishes, I would ask him. 'When are you going back?'

Kaka would burst into laughter and say, 'Whenever the government again chooses to make me its guest, and whisks me away.'

For the people of India, this period in the freedom struggle was a formative one. For the first time, reputable citizens looked on imprisonment as a badge of honour, on prison itself as a palace. As for us ashram children, we were used to the government's invitations to hospitality. Once when the black police van came to pick up Kaka, I said to him, 'Why do you get such short prison terms? This time get a longer one!' And now my memories revolve around the prison visit. Cut-off pants and short-sleeved shirt, striped blue. Normally Kaka looked smart in any style of dress. But the prison uniform demeaned him. He would talk to Mother about household matters. But all my questions would be about the world inside the prison. The barracks, the food, the work, his fellow-prisoners - the stories he told about these came from a land that was to me completely alien.

In the freedom struggle, imprisonment was not only a central aspect of the various non-violent campaigns. It played several indirect roles as well. For one thing, it conquered people's fear of the government. Imprisonment itself was no longer seen as a dire threat. Second, prison life toughened those in the movement, preparing them for later rigours. Third, prison became a university for self-directed study. Each of these aspects came into play during Kaka's time in the Hindulja Central Prison, in what is now Karnataka State. All his prison terms affected our family. But this time the police went to our home village to try to collect Kaka's fine. The way my grandmother Ichhaben stood up to the policemen's insults and refused payment showed how the movement had bred fearlessness even among those in remote villages.

Kaka suffered greatly in this prison term. This was mostly due to loneliness, especially while in solitary confinement. For a long time, none of us were allowed to visit him. After that, correspondence with Mother and me was banned, because the warden could not read Gujarati, the native language of our province, and neither Mother nor I knew English.

After many months, when we finally got to see him, his looks had changed. The few hairs on his balding head had turned grey. There were wrinkles on his face. He had lost a few teeth. He showed all the signs of old age. He was being kept apart from his fellow political prisoners. The ordinary prisoners were not allowed to talk with him. But Kaka had a word of praise for a Moslem prisoner who had wordlessly shown his

affection by taking on some of Kaka's labour.

During this imprisonment Kaka translated into English Bapu's Anasahti Yoga (The Yoga of Selfless Action). He also wrote a treatise on the Bhagavad Gita. This was later published in English under the title *The Gita According to Gandhi*. Apart from his journals, this book may be his best. The prison took away Kaka's youth, but in return, it gave him the Gita.

Such are my memories of Kaka and prison. For a memory of Kaka on his travels, I turn to a time when I was with him and Bapu in the city of Poona.

Kaka had brought me along for a few days. During this time, Bapu started a three-week fast. At the same time, I came down with malaria. It was a trying time for Kaka. However stoically he might bear his own pain, Kaka would become unnerved when anything happened to me or Mother. And Bapu's fasting always drained him, mentally and physically. In each of the quite a number of fasts before this, I had found that Kasturba and Kaka would lose the same number of pounds as did Bapu. Bapu from not eating, and Kasturba and Kaka in spite of it. So Bapu's fast and my fever together put a double strain on Kaka.

My fever was high. For two days it stayed at 105°. Kaka set his desk next to my bed. He was working mostly on correspondence. Sending news of Bapu's condition to people around the country and abroad; politely discouraging people from coming to visit Bapu to inquire about his health. He would stop his writing often to put a wet pack on my forehead, or to walk over to see Bapu.

This was my first time away from Mother. So in my fever my constant refrain was, 'Send for Mother, I want Mother.' But there were already people there taking care of me, so it wasn't necessary to send for Mother. Kaka was more concerned that Bapu shouldn't worry about me. But on the third day, my fever went up to 106°. I started chattering deliriously. My brain was out of control, but my refrain for Mother continued. Kaka wasn't saying 'yes', and couldn't say 'no'.

At one point Manuben Gandhi came and sat by me. I asked, 'Is that you, Mother?' Kaka could no longer hold back his tears. When Manuben saw what was happening, she told Kasturba about it, who in turn told Bapu. Bapu called for Kaka. When Kaka came in, Bapu said, 'Mahadev, take down a telegram.' So Kaka took up paper and pen. But when he realised the telegram was to send for Mother, Kaka protested. 'Why send for Durga? There are already plenty of people here to look after Babla. His fever is common malaria. He'll be over it by the time she arrives. Why waste money....?'

But Bapu cut him off in mid-sentence. 'I sent for you to take down a telegram, not to argue with me. I have seen Bapu and Kaka argue. On a policy with national import, on a point of historical interpretation, or of philosophy, or the use of a single word, or a single mark of punctuation - the discussion would sometimes shift from verbal exchanges to written, and go on for days. But at that moment, concerning that telegram, it was not Mahadev's prerogative to argue. Bapu had given an order. And once Mahadev received an order, he acted on it.

The telegram was sent and Mother came. By the time she arrived, my fever was gone, and Kaka's desk had been moved from its place next to me, back to its place near Bapu. When Kaka told me this story, two or three days later, it was with a smile.

## 6. SALT MARCH

SABARMATI VILLAGE, across from the liquor shop that stood behind the prison, the ashram women stood in vigil, singing of the evils of drink. Newspaper reporters and others had gathered to find out what the women were up to, and what would happen to them. Catching hold of one of the women's hands, I too had joined the chorus: "Drinking has destroyed everything, oh addict. Give it up!"

A new chapter in the freedom struggle was opening before my young eyes. All over India, women began picketing the liquor shops that raised tax revenue for the government while drawing the hopeless poor into even more hopeless drinking. People had doubts about this new tack of Bapu's. The Ahmedabad relatives of one of our ashram women were afraid drunkards might abuse her. But in the days following Bapu's Salt March, the women were full of a fearlessness Bapu had generated in them. Perhaps this was his most important accomplishment in this period. Sarojini Naidu, a woman of culture and refinement - known for her voice as the Nightingale of India - directed the non-violent assault on the government-owned Dharasana Salt Works. There she stood for the entire day beneath the blazing Indian sun, a picture of stoic calm in the midst of turmoil. In the Gujarat city of Borsad, women organised a procession to protest against government policies, in defiance of government orders. Women from the ashram took part in this. Led by old Gangaben, they braved police batons with smiles on their lips. Gangaben's white homespun sari turned pink with the blood drawn by a baton blow to her head. Lilavatiben Ashar was arrested, and brought alone into a room of the Borsad police station. There she was showered with abuse by a ranking officer. Auntie Lila remained silent, though normally she flared up at the mildest affront. These and many other examples kindled the spirit of Indian womanhood.

The involvement of women was a new wave in the life of the country. The national prohibition campaign itself was restricted to women. This move of Bapu's reserved a special place of pride for women throughout India.

In these days following the Salt March, the ashram hummed with constant activity. From around the country, reports poured in of actions in defiance of unjust laws, and government efforts to repress them. Bapu's simple act of marching to the sea and taking a pinch of salt from the beach had aroused the nation as never before. Kaka was addressing public meetings in Ahmedabad, where the audiences ran into the hundreds of thousands. He would speak without a microphone. In these meetings, seeing was more important than hearing. Still more important was the auction of a pinch of salt illegally produced. This salt would bring in a huge sum of money. And the sale itself would again defy the salt laws.

Bapu was released from prison, and for a short while returned to the ashram. In his sacred fire, Bapu was always offering one sacrifice after another. One day he called a meeting of the few women still in the ashram. We children were not allowed in, but we heard about it later. Bapu had asked these remaining women to court imprisonment. This included mothers, like mine.

Bapu's call was the call of the nation, the call of abused humankind. There was no question of denying it. But this would be the first time both Kaka and Mother would be in prison. I wasn't the only one troubled by that. Mother and Kaka too were perplexed. Anasuyaben Sarabhai, one of Bapu's rich benefactors, had offered to put up all the ashram children in a hostel she kept for Harijan (untouchable) children. But Kaka and Mother wanted to make special arrangements for me. So I went with two other children to stay with another friend of the ashram, where our studies would be well looked after.

But even though this friend's house had more to offer us, we were not prepared to stay separate from the other ashram children. We stayed there for one night. But I cried all night. We were then moved to Anasuyaben's hostel. But despite all Anasuyaben's affection, the hostel was not well equipped to handle us. Bapu returned to prison with a historic vow: 'I would rather die like a dog or crow than return to the ashram before India is free.' And why should the ashram remain untouched while the government confiscated the land of farmers? So he wrote to the government, voluntarily surrendering to it all the ashram holdings and grounds. To the city of Ahmedabad he donated the ashram's library, which included the books

Bapu had brought from South Africa, and Kaka's books, some ten thousand volumes in all.

Most of the ashramites, male and female, wound up in prison. The rest returned to their home provinces to work there for the movement. The ashram turned desolate like the land of Braj when Lord Krishna, a constant player in its orchards, came of age and left home. The ashram cows bore witness to it. Even though they were moved far away to the cattle-yard, they would rim back wailing to the ashram, where they would scrape and smell the ground.

Once, we came back from Anasuyaben's place to see the ashram. The sight brought tears to our eyes. Once full of our games and songs, the ashram now bore a stony silence. The ashram buildings looked frightful. Some were missing a door or window. The grounds, once faultlessly groomed under Premaben's supervision, were covered by tall weeds, which had already withered. Worst of all, the heart in "Abode of the Heart" - Bapu - was absent.

We didn't feel like staying long. But for a little while we sat beneath the ancient tamarind tree. It was the biggest tree in the ashram, and had been there long before the ashram was built. It hid sheltered the tents of Bapu and the others when they first arrived. It had seen the ashram buildings gradually rise up. The black jail van had stopped beneath it many times. Many times, too, the limousines of the Ahmedabad rich had parked there. Beneath this tree, not so long ago, the ashramites had taken leave of Bapu as he began his march to the sea.

For a while we sat there, wordless, feeling that the tamarind tree too must be sighing.

## **7. BASIC EDUCATION**

IS A rare privilege when your own heartbeat and the heartbeat of the nation coincide. I had the fortune to experience that shared rhythm. The incident was personal, but its import was far-reaching. In 1933, Bapu had moved his base from Sabarmati to the city of Wardha, near the very centre of India. In 1936, he again moved, to the nearby village of Segaon. After a while he renamed this Sevagram, "Service Village". There, a new ashram began to spring up. Meanwhile, Kaka had stayed behind in Wardha at Maganwadi - "Maganlal Orchard", named after Bapu's deceased nephew - to look after the mail and guests arriving in the city.

Mother and I were still at Sabarmati. For years we three had not lived together as a family. Kaka would either be in prison or on tour. In 1932 Mother too had been jailed. So we had been blown this way and that. But now, figuring that things would soon settle down, Kaka brought us to Wardha.

It was decided that I should go to a good school while in Wardha. The school was chosen on the recommendation of Jamnalal Bajaj, benefactor and colleague of Bapu. Its principal, Sri E. W. Aryanayakam, had taken over there only recently, after working at Santiniketan, the school of the great poet, artist, and educator, Rabindranath Tagore.

While at Sabarmati, I had graduated from fifth grade in the elementary school of Gujarat Vidyapith, a nationalist institute of learning. In this new school I was to be placed in the seventh grade to see how I would do. Someone walked me to school the first day.

From the moment I entered the classroom, I felt disoriented. At Gujarat Vidyapith, I had been ahead of my class in Hindi, India's national language. But here the Hindi wasn't quite the same. And I couldn't at all follow the way English was pronounced here. Geography was my favourite subject. Yet I couldn't answer a single question the teacher asked me. I had studied India's geography only, and the questions were about some country in South America.

But the problems in understanding class work were secondary. The main problem was different. I felt suffocated by the school atmosphere. When the teacher came into class, the students rose. I had never learned this customary show of respect. It seemed to me a sign of slavery. School had just resumed, following vacation. The teacher started telling us how he had spent his. He was in gay mood. That was alright, so far. But he went on to spend the entire period cracking jokes - to boys of twelve and thirteen - about marriage and married life. I couldn't stomach that. Outside the class, between periods, almost all the teachers were smoking. Most of them weren't wearing khadi (homespun cloth). Khadi had been vital to the national boycott of foreign goods, and was still the base of Bapu's village industries program. Everyone who supported the freedom struggle was supposed to wear it. In those days, I considered those who didn't wear khadi almost as a different breed. When I got home, the first thing I did was to bawl. Then I announced, 'I don't care what happens, I won't go to a school like that.' Kaka tried to reason-with me. But he didn't try very hard. His own enthusiasm had been dampened by my description. At last he said, 'I suggest you write everything to Bapu and take his advice on the

matter.' So I wrote my story to Bapu. When he received my letter, he called me to Sevagram to talk.

Meanwhile, Sri Aryanayakamji had heard about my resolve not to attend the school. He reasoned with Kaka: "I have just taken charge of the school. Soon I will have improved the atmosphere. But really, Babla is only making excuses, so he can stay home and play. Some day he will regret not going to school and blame you, just as the other ashram boys blame their parents for not sending them.'

Aryanayakamji then came to Sevagram to discuss it with Bapu. On Bapu's walk that day, he made me his "stick" on one side, and Aryanayakamji on the other. After we two had debated for a while, I told Bapu, 'He's a very learned man. I can't answer his arguments. But my decision not to attend the school is firm.'

Bapu patted my back, saying, 'O.K., that's all I need to hear. Now I'll take over and plead your case before Aryanayakamji, and bring him round.'

After that I took part only as a witness to the discussion. When Aryanayakamji had concluded his arguments, Bapu said, This cannot be called education! I would not recommend such a school to any child. On top of that, Babla is an ashram boy, and has himself decided not to attend the school. Then how could I - or as a competent educator, how could you - force him to attend?

Aryanayakamji's arguments continued for over a day. The outcome was that Bapu convinced him too to leave the school.

Around that time, under the new constitution of limited self-rule granted by the British, the Indian National Congress had come into power in many provincial governments. These governments were giving thought to the system of education. Bapu had been writing on this subject in his journal Harijan. An Indian system of education could not be based only on book learning, he had said. It had to be oriented toward productive skills as well as be financially self-supporting.

Bapu's lifetime of experience, deep thought, and far-sighted vision provided the basis for these ideas. In the course of a year, they evolved into the system called "new education", or "basic education." In this system, students would learn handicrafts or agriculture, from which they would be led to other fields of knowledge as well. This concept has since been acclaimed by educators the world over.



Amazingly, to head the first institutional test of the new system, Bapu chose Aryanayakamji and his wife - who became world-recognised authorities on this form of education.

Well, it had been established that I would not attend a conventional school. But then what would I do? I don't remember how it came to me, but an idea flashed into my head, and I exclaimed to Bapu, 'I will stay and work for you, and learn from that!' And Bapu, as my advocate, picked up the idea. Though actually, it seems to me now that he may have led me to it in the first place.

What work? Learn what? Study how? How could I reply to such interrogation at that age? But Bapu delivered his ruling: Babla will stay with Mahadev, do as he instructs, and learn whatever he teaches.

The secretary of Mahatma Gandhi had to be an adviser, cook, water-carrier, and beast of burden. Now he had an added job - full-time teacher of his own son. Kaka shouldered the burden. But he told me, 'Look, Babla, you know that many ashram boys have been dissatisfied with the schooling in the ashram, and have opted instead for British-style education. I just want you to know that if you ever want to change your mind and do the same, I'll support you in your decision. But I won't try to change your mind now, either. While you're with me, I'll teach you as best as I can. But mostly you'll have to teach yourself. I'll help but most of the work will be yours.'

From this time began the confluence of two streams - my own studies, and the national movement for a new education.

## **8 . RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

CENTURIES OF POVERTY and the ignorance it bred had so weighed on India's rural populace that its social fibre had developed a kind of inner paralysis. No event, no incident, seemed able to kindle its spirit. What little vitality had been left to the village-folk seemed to have been drained off completely by the events of the early 1930s. In the middle of that decade, India was just healing its wounds from the 1930 and 1934 civil disobedience campaigns. But there were no signs of a possible new campaign. And in the midst of the world-wide depression, the country's economy had naturally deteriorated still further.

It was at this time that Bapu chose a path that would prove arduous and painful. He turned his steps toward the villages.

What kind of villages had captured Bapu's attention? The average resident of prosperous Gujarat could hardly imagine. In the villages that held Bapu's concern, none had the strength to raise his head against poverty. Filth and disease had numbed the people.

From the beginning of his stay at Maganwadi, Bapu had begun going to an adjoining village to clean faeces from the streets and yards, where people normally relieved themselves. This was no jungle hamlet far from the railroad track, but a village right by the city of Wardha! By the time I came to Maganwadi, Bapu had moved to Segaon. But my father had started going to the village in his place.

This work had two purposes. One was to encourage the villagers to adopt better habits of sanitation. The second was to show that proper Hindus could undertake such work. The job of "sweeper" normally belonged to the untouchables, outcasts of Hindu society, who because of their status could not be further defiled by it. Proper Hindus normally would not dispose of their own faeces. So human prejudice required an outcast community to fulfil this function.

But teaching such lessons to villagers was no easy task. For months on end the villagers looked on Bapu, Mahadevbhai, and their companions, as ordinary sweepers. Only, these were better, because they took no money for their work! 'Go over there. It's dirtier on that side.' So said one who had just eased himself, pointing to the spot he had soiled.

In Sabarmati Ashram I too had taken my turn at emptying toilets. But this only meant to dump the buckets of "night soil" into compost pits, and to scrub the buckets with a coconut-leaf broom. But here fresh faeces had to be lifted directly with a tin dustpan. And when the faeces were stale, they were full of worms. My father diligently collected all of it.

Once, at Segaon, I asked Bapu, 'What good is this work? It doesn't affect the people. In fact, they just point to other places they've soiled, and tell us to clean over there.' Bapu said, 'Is that all that's bothering you? Are you giving up so easily? Ask Mahadev how long he's been at it. There is devotion in his work. You too must acquire this spirit. The bane of untouchability is no ordinary blemish on our society. We will have to perform a prolonged penance to remove it.'

I was not so easily convinced. 'But Bapu, what's the good of it, if they don't improve?'

Bapu took a new tack. 'Why, it's good for the person sweeping, isn't it? It's good training.'

'But the villagers too need that training.'

Bapu smiled and said, 'I see you are a lawyer. But there is truth in what you say. If we knew how to train them in this, I would dance for joy.'

Pursuing his thoughts further, he said, 'If I were, in your place, I would keep careful watch. When I saw someone getting up from his squat, I would run right over. If I saw anything wrong with his stool, I would approach him and say politely, "Friend, you are having bowel problems. You must take such and such steps to remedy it." In this way I would win his heart.'

My silence would only feed Bapu's enthusiasm. 'If I had my way, I would be out there sweeping those roads myself. Not only that, I would plant flowers there and water them daily. Where there are dung heaps today, I would make gardens. Sweeping is an art in itself!'

He had himself started working in Segaoon village. At the same time, he had begun setting up institutions to handle various aspects of village development nation-wide. The headquarters of each of these organisations served in part as a research centre. The All India Village Industries Association was headquartered at Maganwadi. In one area we were running bullock-powered oil presses; in another, paper was made by hand. Beehives that we had constructed were scattered around the orchard. Bapu would lose himself in experiments with different kinds of millstones for hand-grinding wheat. Alongside the research was a school for training village development workers in these industries. The brothers J.C. and Bharatan Kumarappa were the pride of Maganwadi. They had studied economics abroad, and were convinced that India's economic emancipation lay in developing its village industries. A weekly called Village Industries Bulletin was edited by the elder brother, J.C., in his own vociferous style. Kaka often jokingly called him "the violent exponent of non-violence."

Mingled with this research were Bapu's experiments in diet and food preparation. In those days there was much talk of the benefits of soya beans, so we tried them. But the effort eventually wore off.

We also tried sunflower oil. Experiments with bitter neem and tamarind spreads were going on. Bapu used to say, Tamarind is the fruit of the poor. Hundreds of thousands of villages would benefit from a spread made from it. But it must be in the interests of nutrition, not taste.'

Bapu wanted to find out what kind of hearth used the least wood in cooking. Experiments were carried out to develop lanterns that could run on food oil. From these experiments came prototypes named the "Magan Hearth" and the "Magan Lantern", in honour of Bapu's deceased nephew, Maganlal. Experiments were also carried out on production methods for raw sugar, date juice, and much else.

The All-India Village Industries Association in that period produced a number of workers deeply devoted to this aspect of village development. Even today, if you come across good work being done on village industries anywhere in the country, you will stumble on some worker trained at Maganwadi.

Experiments in production of Khadi - hand spun, hand woven cloth - had gone ahead of those in other village industries. But in that period, a vital decision was made in regard to khadi finances.

The way khadi activity was organised was this: Spinners would sell their yarn to the All India Spinners' Association, which would then have it woven and made into clothes, for sale at khadi outlets in cities and towns. In this way, the poor and unemployed were provided work to relieve at least part of their burden of poverty. At this time, there was a great deal of khadi activity in Wardha and nearby Chanda districts. But then Bapu discovered that the women spinning the yarn got only five paise for a full day's work - next to nothing. This made him shudder. He called a meeting of the All India Spinners' Association, and urged the organisation to raise the wages. He stressed that the spinners should receive a full living wage - eight annas for 3 day's work. The Association's managers at once began calculating how high this would drive the cost of khadi. In the end, it was decided that the spinners would be paid three annas a day.

The cost of khadi doubled. But consumption didn't drop in the same measure. And hundreds of thousands of spinners could now relieve at least half their hunger. Bapu was like the saint shivering at the sight of the uncovered beggar who trembled with cold across the street. Blanket after blanket was heaped on the saint, but still he shivered. Finally the beggar was covered, and the saint shivered no more. In the same way, Bapu's hunger was satisfied only when the spinner's wages were increased.

When Bapu footed on village life, each of his activities revolved around just one consideration; will the hungry receive succour from it? Just as the strings of an instrument resonate to a singer's Voice, Bapu's heartstrings would reverberate with the slightest cry of agony from the hungry, the needy.

## 9 . YERAVDA MANDIR

IRON GATE in the outer wall of the Yeravda Central Prison swung open, as the gate in the inner wall swung shut Then the inner gate opened, as the outer one closed behind us. Passing by police in khaki uniform and yellow-capped prison guards, we entered a small yard enclosed by walls so high that they seemed to hold the sky above us prisoner. In this yard stood a small mango tree, and below the tree on a cot lay frail Bapu.

We approached, made our bows, and stepped aside. He was too weak to pat me on the back and call out as usual, "Hello, Boss". But he gave a slight smile. It was the smile of a soul that defied all brute force.

It was the seventh day of Bapu's fast. The body that could normally handle fasts of three weeks had this time wasted away within a week. It was now a matter of hours before Bapu might pass away, or the fast might end. The question was, which would come first?

In London the year before (1931), in negotiations for possible independence of India, much of the talk had centred on separate electorates for minorities, Moslems, Sikhs, untouchables - these and others were demanding to elect their own candidates directly to a national legislature. Bapu opposed all such arrangements, because they would keep India divided.

But it was in regard to the untouchables that he felt most strongly. At that time, he had said, 'If the untouchables are given a separate electorate, I will resist it with my life.' Those who did not know Bapu thought it only a figure of speech. Some who knew him must have seen it as a threat. But for Bapu this was a matter of life and death. If the untouchables were made a separate constituency, they would retain the social stigma of untouchability for all time.

Now the British had decided on just such an arrangement. It was to be included in the new constitution of limited self-rule for India. Untouchables would elect their own candidates, while also voting in the Hindu electorate. So they would have double

voting rights. Surely Gandhiji, who had always been on the side of the untouchables, would not object to that! But Bapu had held firm. While still in prison, he had begun his fast against it.

Meanwhile, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar who had only recently gained recognition as spokesman for the untouchables, was manoeuvring to see how much he could salvage in case Gandhiji managed to obstruct the double franchise. Caste Hindu political leaders had assembled to negotiate with the untouchable spokesman, sometimes in Bombay, sometimes in Poona, the site of Yeravda Prison. Meetings were also being held in Simla, the British summer capital. Cables dispatched news continuously to government officials in England, while others relayed back instructions.

After many meetings, and more concessions than would normally ( have been made, Ambedkar was appeased. The British Prime Minister had agreed to revoke the plan if all Hindu leaders, caste and untouchable, agreed. But Bapu had seen nothing to that effect in writing from the government. It was rumoured in Poona and elsewhere that London had issued such orders. But who knows what red tape was keeping the official message from reaching one who might breathe his last at any moment? Colleagues had gathered around. National leaders rushed here and there. Also present were many who too had been interned here during the recent national campaign. Their faces showed worry, but no despair. Their character had impressed the prison authorities. So they had been allowed to move freely within the prison. None had abused this trust.

'Gurudev should have arrived by now. Why hasn't he gotten here yet?' Someone, asked. "Gurudev" - "Great Teacher" - was Rabindranath Tagore, poet, musician, artist, educator, philosopher. It was Gurudev himself who had first called Gandhiji "Mahatma".

'Maybe he's been stopped by the police, Devdas, please go and look around outside.' Gurudev's car had in fact been stopped by the police. He would have been delayed still longer if Devdaskaka had not faced him.

When Gurudev came near, Bapu gave him a long embrace. This was not the time to try to bow.

Kaka told Gurudev, 'It's good you came. Bapu was eagerly waiting your arrival.' That my coming will help solve the nation's dilemma. I make no mistake to assume. But I am pleased immensely to know- it has given him some satisfaction.'

There was no more talk. For a while, Gurudev sat beside Bapu's cot. Bapu's body was weakened, but not his mind. In talks on the matter at hand, he would delve as deeply as he normally would, But with Gurudev the exchange of thoughts was wordless. And today the silent voice of this Mahatma, lying almost on the funeral pyre, had reached the millions and millions of people of India. Neither the intrigues of political leaders, nor the prejudice of centuries, could muffle this voice. And so all India strained to know how a settlement could be reached, to save the Mahatma's life. At last, the prison authorities came and presented the orders from London. There was joy on their faces. Bapu read the communiqué solemnly. Then he made his colleagues read it. On the whole, it seemed satisfactory to each. Still, it was given to Pandit Kunzru, who was asked to clarify the meaning of each word. Then Bapu was satisfied with it But before he would break his fast, Bapu showed the communiqué to Ambedkar. Ambedkar too indicated his assent, Bapu was then ready to break the fast. A glass of orange juice was brought, and handed to Kasturba. There were prayers. It was a privilege to be present at such prayers, Gurudev sang his "When the Heart is Dry and Parched", in his soft, almost effeminate voice. Then Kasturba made Bapu drink the juice slowly. After that, the assembly sang "Vaishnav Jan". Fruits and sweets were passed around to all.

Such was the conclusion of Bapu's fast. Gurudev Rabindranath later described the event to his colleagues at his school Santiniketan: 'It was in prison that the penance started, and there also that it met success. The one who performed the penance, and that success, became one. That is penance incarnate.'

## **10. THE ROSE THAT BLOOMED IN THE FIREPOT**

EACH YEAR, WORKERS in Bapu's village development programs, as well as some political colleagues, would gather for the national conference of the Gandhi Seva Sangh (Gandhi Service Society). This would be held in a different province each year. In 1938 it was held at Delang village in Orissa, near the coast city of Puri, a center of religious pilgrimage, especially known for its Jagannath Temple. ("Jagannath" is a name of God, meaning "Lord of the Universe".) It was normal for me to go with Kaka to the annual gatherings. But Mother came to Delang specially, because it was near Puri.

Bapu spoke in the regular conference sessions, of course. But each evening a public meeting was arranged for him too. Besides this, he had to present himself once or twice a day to the thousands of people who assembled there only to have a glimpse of him.

That was a fantastic sight Every morning and evening, thousands would assemble in the open. Despite the numbers, there would not be the slightest noise. Often these people would sit for hours on end, just to have a glimpse of Bapu. Bapu would come before them, stand on the dais, reach palms in the customary gesture of greeting, and leave again. The people would then return on foot to their far-flung villages, completely satisfied.

Thousands gathered at the opening of the village development exhibition that accompanied the conference. In his address, Bapu referred to the Jagannath Temple at Puri, saying, 'Until the doors of the Temple are flung open to the Harijans' - Bapu's name for the untouchables, meaning "children of God" - 'the Lord of the Universe worshipped there is not really Lord of the Universe. He is Lord only of the priests who make their living from the Temple. Bapu had been denied entrance to the temple, and even assaulted, while on tour on behalf of the untouchables.

Kasturba wanted to go to Puri, since we were so close anyway. Mother and Aunt Vela had come only for that purpose. Bapu asked Kaka to arrange a trip for them. Kaka wasn't interested in visiting Puri. But since Bapu mentioned it several times, he made the arrangements. I too joined the group along with others.

Now, Bapu assumed that Kasturba would go to Puri, dip herself in the sea (as was the customary observance), and return. But to Kasturba, going to Puri also meant a pilgrimage to the Jagannath Temple. Now, Kaka's understanding was that, even though Bapu himself would not enter the Temple, Bapu - in his great benevolence, born of his creed of non-violence - did not object to a visit by these others.

In regard to my mother, Kaka knew the prejudice of untouchability had no place in her. For years, Harijans had stayed in our house. Then, if she wanted to make a pilgrimage to the Temple, why should he shake her religious faith? So he did not prohibit her visiting the Temple.

We went to Puri, dipped ourselves in the sea, and walked around town. Then we went to the Temple. By the door was a sign prohibiting non-Hindus from entering. Aunt Lila and I stopped at the entrance. Kasturba, mother, Aunt Vela, and a few others, went in. While they were inside, I was outside arguing with the priests. They explained that the untouchables were born from the feet of god Brahma, while the priestly Brahmins were born from his head. So the untouchables were inferior to them. I rejected this, insisting that all children were equal in the eyes of God.

Coming out of the Temple, the faces of Mother and others shone with fulfilment. We then returned to Delang. In our group were a few mischievous people, They had been the first to enter the temple, and were also the first to blurt out to Bapu, 'Bapu the



whole of Puri is talking about Kasturba's visit to the Temple. Even the railway station master asked us, "Did Kasturba really enter the temple?"

Bapu had assumed that, even though Kasturba had gone to Puri, she wouldn't enter the Temple. And that, even if she had intended to, Mahadev would have explained Bapu's stand to her. Nothing of the kind had happened. For Bapu, this came as a rude shock. He told Kaka half-jokingly, 'Mahadev, the three of us will have to part company!' But there was more anguish than humour in it.

Bapu's blood pressure went so high that people started worrying. He sent for Mother and Kaka and said, 'Mahadev, you made a grave mistake. You did injustice to yourself, to me, and to Durga. It was your duty to explain the background to them again. You should have told them how I was abused in Puri. After hearing that, if they had still wanted to go, you should have brought them to me. If they had wanted to go even after that, we would have allowed them. It's not that we would want to coerce them. But how can we escape reasoning with them?'

Kaka did realise his mistake. But he believed it was all due to a misunderstanding. What he couldn't understand was why Bapu was so shaken by it. Kaka related the incident to the assembly of the conference. Bapu also laid bare his agony before them. 'If Ba had stayed away from the Temple, I could have now held my head high. Instead I have been affronted. The strength of my work seems to have failed. No doubt these people didn't realise what they were doing. But who kept them in the dark? Wasn't it us? There is no non-violence in allowing them to rest in ignorance. That is violence. Today even the Harijans believe we are frauds. They have every right to believe it, since we continue to visit the temples they cannot enter. How then can they believe we consider them one with us?'

Hearing this, Kaka was greatly distressed - with himself. 'If I have myself so grossly misunderstood Bapu's stand on untouchability, who am I to interpret his thought to others? If I have myself tortured Bapu to this extent, how can I protect him from others?'

Nights became sleepless. Kaka wept, Mother wept, Kasturba wept. Bapu didn't weep, but his blood pressure shot up. It occurred to Kaka to leave Bapu. On rising one morning, I discovered the gravity of the situation. Kaka said, 'Babla, we will go home to Dehen. I will plough the field and teach you.'

I refused point-blank. 'You go if you want. But I'm staying.'

Neither would Mother go along with this decision. And Bapu refused to listen to all. 'It is better to die at the hands of a friend than to live at the mercy of a foe. You nurtured your wife's superstition because of your blind love. You should have gone back to Puri with a group of Satyagrahis to atone for your mistake. Instead you sat crying. What cowardice!'

Kaka gave up the idea of leaving Bapu. The next week, he wrote an article on the incident in Bapu's Gujarati journal, Harijan Bandhu (The Harijan's Friend):

".....Again and again I asked myself, 'Isn't this all due to a slight misunderstanding?' Just as Shankar consumed poison, Bapu is used to swallowing a great many sins. Why then has he been so moved by a lapse of the mind? Isn't he making a mountain of a molehill?.

'That was my thinking at the time. Today, calmly reviewing the events, I feel: 'Who am I to question him, if what to me is a molehill seems to him a mountain? A person who has with an innate conscientiousness practised righteousness for half a century - will he better understand - what is right and wrong, or will I, so full of frailties?'

"And how could I ever feel offended by him? Away from him, where could I ever be? Could there be anything right in calling him a saint and bestowing on him the sanctity of the distant heavens? Me for one never considers himself a saint. He never believes himself to be a Mahatma. He considers himself a normal human being, like you and I. And that's why it is possible to stay with him. If for a while he become,- irritated, how can you condemn him? And which should we prefer. To escape his wrath, or to wish that God turned us to ashes in that wrath?"

When Kaka died the famous Gujarati poet Meghani wrote an article about him titled "The Rose that Bloomed in the Fire pot". This incident shows how apt that title was.

## **11. HARIJAN TOUR**

TRAVELLING BY TRAIN with Bapu was an enriching experience. At that time Bapu travelled in ordinary third-class cars. Only later did necessity force him to use compartments specially hooked up for him. Of course, even in the ordinary cars, people would at once move aside and make room for him.

Bapu's retinue was not exactly small. Ashramites, patients, guests, research workers - all were part of the herd. Nor was there much attention to the maxim, "Travel light". Baggage was always heavy.

This baggage was in the charge of Kanubhai, with me as his helper. It was our job to move it on and off the train. People would leave their bags with us before boarding, and give them no further thought, until they ran to us for them after leaving the train. We had evolved a routine to transport the baggage, shove it onto the train, organize it, and take it off. The bags would be counted once, twice, three times.

But because of the confusion around Bapu, the orderliness of our procedure could never be strictly maintained. For instance, those who joined us part way would add their bags to the load, and not bother to inform us. Once, to find the baggage of such a person, Kanubhai was forced to extend his train trip by many stations.

But we didn't really mind any of this, as long as Kasturba was there to assure us our "coolie charge". That was our name for snacks we received during the journey or at its end. Both Kanubhai and his assistant were brisk in carrying the baggage, as also in consuming the coolie charge.

The far corner seat was saved for Bapu. We took the platform sleeping berths above the seats. But once I was scolded by Kanubhai and Kaka for spreading my bedding on the berth above Bapu's seat. According to our travel code, no one slept in this berth, out of respect for Bapu. Most of the time Bapu would stay sitting by the window. But once in a while he would use a berth to stretch out on.

But it was hard for Bapu to rest on the way. Any hour of the day or night, at station after station, large or small, the crowds would allow him no rest. Before the train pulled into the station, we would hear shouts of "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!" ("Victory to Mahatma Gandhi!") And the same cry would echo after the train had pulled out. The period I'm now writing about - 1936 to 1940 - could be seen as a low point in India's freedom struggle. But there was never an ebb in the numbers wanting to pay their respects to Bapu. At night, we used to cover the compartment's ceiling light with a special blue cloth cover, so Bapu could sleep a while. But people would shine flashlights in his face through the windows. We would pull down the shutters. Then people would smash the windows in the compartment lavatory. At one station on the way to Delhi from Wardha, these windows were smashed both on our way there and on our return.

Sometimes Kaka would plead with the people: 'Gandhiji is sleeping now. Won't you keep quiet?' People would answer, 'He is a god. He needs no sleep.'

Such an argument would enrage Kaka. The gods you know are the ones you see in the temple. This god has to move around. He works for your sake day and night. Won't you let him rest?'

Once Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was with us. Seeing what crowds were coming to the stations, he told Kaka, 'Mahadev, tonight you rest. I'll take care of the crowds.' As soon as the train pulled into the next station, he stood at the compartment door. To the cries of "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!" were now added "Jawaharlal ki jai!" Pandit yelled, 'If you want to pay your respects, pay them to me. | Gandhiji is resting. I won't let you wake him.'

People in the crowd haggled with him, 'We will hear a speech from you, and get just a look at Bapu.' Panditji made a counter offer; 'If you want to hear my speech, you must let him sleep.'

So the crowd listened to his speech. Bapu was listening to all this, yet was trying to rest with his eyes closed. The discipline of the crowd softened Kaka. When the train was about to leave, he softly asked Bapu, 'Are you awake?' Bapu said, "Sleeping is out of question."

'Then, these people have remained extremely well-disciplined. Stand before them a while.' Panditji also consented. As the train pulled out, the entire station resounded with shouts of "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!"

At another station, In the daytime, even Panditji found it tough going. Seeing Gandhiji in the compartment, a man stood near it till the train started. The moment it began moving, he sprung up on the steps and tried to enter.

Panditji shouted, 'Don't come into this compartment. Gandhiji is riding in here.' At first the fellow argued the law. This is an ordinary third-class compartment. Anyone has a right to travel in it. I have a ticket.'

Panditji was fuming. "You are teaching me the law? Did you or didn't you know that Gandhiji is travelling in this compartment?"

The man softened. 'Yes, I knew.'

'And that's why you got on here, isn't it?'

'No. It was because the train was leaving.'

'An absolute lie! I'll see you get off this compartment!'

Panditji was trying to push him off the steps before the train picked up too much speed. But Bapu intervened and allowed him in.

Panditji didn't cool down for a long time. 'How rude the people are! They aren't ashamed to lie even before Gandhiji!'

The man asserted till the end that he had gotten on to this car by chance. He got off at the next station.

At many stops during the daylight hours, snacks, baskets of fruit, even full meals, would reach us from the crowd. The hungry eyes of Kanubhai and his assistant would watch for the "coolie charge".

Bu: Bapu's own hungry eyes would be elsewhere. At each station without fail, he would collect money for the Harijan Fund. I believe this practice began in 1934. When he toured the country on behalf of the Harijans, and it continued till the end. Bapu would stretch his hand out of the window, and they would at once be full of money. We too would put out our hands or kerchiefs. I couldn't understand why people gave away money to others. But we would see that all our palms were full. At times we would reach the next station before we could finish counting the coins from the station before.

Many times I thought, 'Do these people know why Bapu asks for their money? When they get home, will they give up the practice of untouchability? Will the Harijans condition improve by this giving?'

But in the eyes of those who gave, I could see faith. All they came for was to pay their respects to the Mahatma. Along with that, they offered some money. Of course, they must have heard the phrase, "Harijan Fund". Some of them must have known its meaning. But I came to realise that these people with their faith knew only one thing perfectly: that however busy Bapu was, he never forgot the poor.

It was true. For instance, many times the train would halt at a station, and Bapu would be busy writing. Bapu's writing would go on, but his other hand would be stretched out of the window. At those times he would not even ask for money. Yet his palm would be full of coins.

The Indian public worshipped one who cared for the poor. On seeing this poverty incarnate, the poorest of the poor turned donor. Through all the slavery, poverty, and

ignorance of centuries, it was such faith that had sustained the spirit of the common people.

This faith was evident throughout the country, but most of all in the provinces of Andhra and Bihar. Among the thousands that would crowd the Andhra stations, seldom one would understand a word of Hindi. But just a glimpse of Bapu would satisfy them.

The people of Bihar understood Hindi. But how could Gandhiji's words reach the hundreds of thousands of them? Still they would [loco; the route of Bapu's train. To get there, they would walk for days, carrying in a piece of cloth their sattu (baked chickpea flour), staple food of the poor. When hungry, they would untie the knot, eat a small bit, and resume their march, shouting, "Victory to Gandhiji!" Sometimes, distressed by the crowds in Bihar, Kaka would blurt out, 'All this is because of Tulsidasji. The people have turned this mad because of the praise Tulsidas showered on the people who flocked to see Rama.' (Tulsidas was the ancient poet-author of the Hindi recension of the Ramayana.)

I would answer him slyly, 'And Kaka, don't you know that nowadays you are doing the very thing Tulsidasji did?'

People in the compartment would burst into laughter. And by then the train would halt at the next station.

I can never forget an incident in the Champaran district of Bihar. The train service through that region was among the worst in India. If the lights turned on in the compartment after dark, we were lucky. The speed of the train was such that people could run alongside it.

Some youngsters were once taking advantage of this, running along next to the tracks. Some of them would climb onto the roof of the compartment, and let out screams of "Victory to the Mahatma!" Those running alongside would take up the cry. Sometimes one would pull the emergency chain and stop the train. At one point the train stopped for a long time. So Kaka got down to find out the reason, he brought back news that a young boy running alongside the train had accidentally been knocked onto the track. He was pulled off, but not before a wheel of the train had run over his feet. The boy was brought into the train guard's compartment, and would be taken to a hospital up the line.

'I saw him,' Kaka said. The wheel had run over both his feet. They're almost severed near the ankles. I don't think he has a chance of living. There was a pool of blood. But the boy was conscious. I told him how terrible I felt about what had happened. He said, "What's to be sorry about? I am crushed under Gandhiji's train, Am I not lucky?"

Kaka's eyes were full of tears. He said, 'Do we possess devotion such as his?'

## 12. KAKA AND BAPU

THE TWENTY-FIVE years Kaka was with Bapu, Kaka took off from work twice. These were the two times he was sick the first time, he was bedridden with typhoid. The second time, it was high blood pressure. He took an official leave and went to Simla for a rest. In his next illness, he took permanent leave, and passed away. In twenty-five years he took no other time off - no Sunday, no holiday, no summer vacation. Even when his father died, Kaka kept up his work.

It was in 1938, at Maganwadi, that his blood pressure shot up. At times he would get dizzy. The obvious cause was that each day he had to walk from Wardha to Sevagram and back again, in the Wardha heat. Some days he had to walk it twice - twenty-two miles altogether. Wardha's summer temperatures ranged between 115° to 120°.

Only Kaka could have taken on the burden of Bapu's assignments on top of such physical strain. For ten or fifteen years, I had watched Kaka work at least fifteen hours each day. When we moved from Maganwadi to Sevagram, the walking ended, but work hours correspondingly increased. Yet, after the day's work, before going to sleep, Kaka would find time to spend with a book. He was always up to date in his reading. Within the ashram, only the scholarly Valjibhai, and Bapu's other secretary, Pyarelal, surpassed him in that, Kaka's work entailed going through Bapu's mail, writing some replies, dealing with people who had come to talk with Bapu, taking notes of important discussions and meetings, and writing or translating articles for the Harijan weeklies. Besides these standard assignments, he might be preparing a book, writing articles for dailies, or addressing public gatherings.

Work with Bapu was an extraordinarily heavy load. What was amazing was how well Kaka coped with it. The key to this feat was the complete identification he had developed with Bapu. In this relationship was a rare fusion of devotion to a superior, and allegiance to a colleague.

In Ahmedabad in 1915, when Kaka had first gone to meet Bapu, Bapu had looked through the writings Kaka showed him, and said, 'Your place is beside me.' On his way home from that same meeting, Kaka had told his life-long friend Narahari Parikh, 'If I were to spend my entire life at the feet of one person, it would be this one.' It was this love at first sight that gradually matured into a complete identification.

Kaka had an independent personality completely different from Bapu's. Bapu's genius was strong like the sun. Kaka's was mild like the moon. Bapu's devotion was to his work. Kaka was devoted to a person. Bapu towered and shone like the Himalaya. Kaka had compassion as wide as the river Ganga. Yet, despite these differences, the degree of psychic unity between the two was astonishing. I will give a few examples. In writing, Bapu was pragmatic, a master of brevity. If one word served his purpose, he would use no more. Kaka, on the other hand, would fly in fits of fancy. His personal writings were lavishly lyrical, full of lovely figures of speech. And yet Kaka in his articles had mastered Bapu's style. Readers of the Harijan weeklies would often comment that, without the initials at the end of the articles, they wouldn't know whether the author was M.D. - Mahadev Desai - or M.K.G. - Mohandas K. Gandhi.

Whatever articles Kaka wrote for the weeklies would always first go to Bapu for approval. Bapu would go through all of them carefully and correct them if needed. But many times, Bapu would find an article so close to his own thinking, he would initial the article himself, and it would be published as his.

To save Bapu's time, national leaders - sometimes even Jawaharlalji - would talk things over with Kaka and be done with it. Not that everyone understood this special identification. Once a Punjabi gentleman wanted an appointment with Bapu. After discussing the man's business with him, Kaka told him, 'Now you don't need to see Bapu.' But the man wasn't satisfied. He left, came back, talked to Kaka again, and left again. As he left the second time, he told an ashramite, 'I am surely going to shoot Mahadevbai.' On hearing this, Mother was a little alarmed. But Kaka only laughed.

Kaka did not know shorthand. But his speed in writing things down was extraordinary. He would shorten some words. But he would not miss a single word of Bapu's. A few Americans once came to talk with Bapu. Kaka was taking notes in his usual way. A woman from the American group was also taking notes, in shorthand. The next day, she and Kaka compared notes. She was astounded.



'You beat me hands down,' she said.

But simple speed in transcription was not all that was required by Kaka in taking notes of Bapu. Bapu's speeches were always delivered impromptu, and they were not always organised or coherent. There was naturalness, but no order. Kaka would organise the speech as he wrote it down. At one important conference, as Bapu gave his speech impromptu in Hindi, Kaka wrote a re-ordered English translation directly onto a telegram form, for dispatch world-wide immediately afterwards.

Sometimes even Bapu's colleagues couldn't figure out what Bapu had said. But they would comfort themselves, saying, 'We will know when we get Mahadevbhai's notes.'

I once witnessed a remarkable example of the psychic unison between Bapu and Kaka. The two were standing in front of Bapu's cottage, talking. Suddenly Bapu said, 'Mahadev, take this down.'

Bapu began dictating, and Kaka, still standing, started waiting.

I was standing beside the two, and watching. After a while I saw that Kaka's writing had pulled ahead of Bapu's dictation. Before Bapu could say what he wanted to, Kaka would figure out what it was, and write it down. But at one point Bapu dictated a word different from what Kaka had set down. So Kaka interrupted him. 'Bapu, wait, I've written a different word here. Why did you use this other word instead?'

Bapu was somewhat amused. But he too was particular about words. 'Mahadev, how, could you use this other word? I would never use any word but the one I dictated.'

There followed a discussion on which word was more appropriate in Bapu's usage. That took more time than the actual dictation. In the end, the word that was kept was the one Bapu spoke - but only after Bapu conceded that the word Mahadev had written was also correct.

### **13. BAPU'S MENAGERIE**

KAKA ONCE DESCRIBED Sevagram Ashram as Gandhiji's menagerie. Bapu was always surrounded by strange people. At times, Sardar Patel - a political colleague of

Bapu, and a leading figure in the freedom struggle - would get irritated at some of them. Then Kaka would tell him, 'Bapu is a doctor. And doctors are always surrounded by patients, aren't they?'

I have no desire to describe all the peculiarities of the ashram men. Nor could I do so. In Sabarmati Ashram, there was one person who at each dinner would eat exactly fifty-five *chappatis* (flat wheat-cakes). If by mistake he was served fifty-four, he would shout, 'How stingy! Do you want me to starve to death?' If by accident he was given fifty-six he would yell, 'Do you take me for a ravenous demon?' In this-way he walked a thin line between starvation and demonhood.

In Sevagram there was another gentleman with whom I had the following dialogue: 'Well, what are you experimenting on nowadays?' (My question). 'Oh, there's always one thing or other. Right now, it's water.'

'Do you mean you're drinking boiled water? Or using a water therapy?'

'No, nothing to do with food or health. This time it is toilet water.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, how to use the least water to flush the toilet.' 'Oh, really?'

'Yes. Progressively reducing the amount, I now have it down to two ounces. Many areas of the country are suffering a severe water shortage. If we could save some water here. ..'

Of course, he did not explain how saving water in Wardha would help areas of the country where water was scarce. Using a child's prerogative of bluntness, I cut him short by suggesting, 'Yes, but bulls need no water at all.'

Yet these ashramites with their idiosyncrasies, had no dearth of valuable experience. To be around some of them was a rare privilege. One I think of in particular was full of ingenuity as well as idiosyncrasy. Normally he remained aloof. Yet once he shook the British government. He is Acharya Bhansali"- our Bhansalikaka.

Scene one: A dilapidated village house. A man - half-mad, half holy - is lying there. One of our workers appears on the spot.

'Oh! Is that you, Bhansalibhai? In this condition?'

In response there is thundering laughter. But not a single word. The worker helps him pull twenty-five or thirty thorns from each foot, and wipes the puss from wounds all over his body. 'Rest here for a few days.' But with the thorns removed, the holy man walks off.

The worker comes after him. 'Why don't you speak?' Bhansalikaka scribbles on a piece of paper: Twelve years! Silence.' 'My, my! Twelve years?'

With Bhansalikaka, no figure was ever small. His first fast lasted for forty days; his second, for fifty-five; and the famous one - the one that shook the government - sixty-three days.

The thorns and wounds were the outcome of his experiment with throwing himself on cactus.

But let us go back in time, to learn the beginning of this story.

Bhansalikaka was on his way by foot to the Himalayas from Sabarmati Ashram. His fifty-five days fast at the Ashram had somehow unhinged his mind. On his way to the Himalayas, he decided to observe silence for twelve years.

After a long trek through the mountains, he returned to the plains. One night, he was given a place to sleep in a cattle shed, awakened by the sound of the cattle moving about in the night, Bhansalikaka shouted out, 'Who's there?' He at once realised he had broken his vow of silence. From then on, he had on his mind a method to insure his vow even in sleep. He had hit upon the method right away. But he had to go far before finally finding a goldsmith who would apply it.

The goldsmith took a copper wire, heated it red hot, and stitched together Bhansalikaka's lips. The same technician made him a tube that could be inserted into his mouth at one end, and into which liquid could be poured. At that time, Bhansalikaka was on a diet of raw [lour and bitter neem leaves. The flour would now be made into a paste, and sucked through the tube. The neem leaves could still be pushed into his mouth from one end. Bhansalikaka thanked the expert, and left. When Bhansalikaka reached Sevagram Ashram, Babu ordered the wire removed. (That was Scene two.)

Scene three: Maganwadi. Bhansalikaka was sucking to his twelve-year silence. But Babu had argued him into making an exception of saying the name of God.

Bhansalikaka was suffering from boils in his armpits. Seeing them made one nauseous. Yet it didn't stop him from spinning. Each time he stretched out his arm to pull out the yam, blood or puss would spurt from his armpit. He would burst into a loud laugh - which would make the puss stream out afresh. Once, Bapu sent him to the hospital for treatment. The doctor inserted a thin needle to pull the puss out. At once Bhansalikaka roared with laughter. The doctor told Kaka, 'I've never seen such a patient in my life. I don't know if anyone has!'

Sometimes in the dead of night, sometimes during the day, Bhansalikaka would shout at the top of his lungs, 'God, Lord, Master!' This yell was like thunder. While shouting like this, we have seen him in tears, or in trance. Kaka believed Bhansalikaka had seen God. Bhansalikaka didn't deny it.

The debate between Bapu and Bhansalikaka continued. Bapu would speak and Bhansalikaka would scribble. Then Bapu persuaded him to break his silence for the purpose of the discussions. In time, he persuaded Bhansalikaka to break his silence also in order to teach. (Originally, Bhansalikaka had been a French teacher.)  
Scene four; Sevagram. I am sitting in front of my teacher, Bhansalikaka, his spinning wheel turning. Near Bhansalikaka is a basket full of carrots. In the course of the day, the entire basketful is consumed, though only a few carrots have been taken by the pupil. No other food is eaten by Bhansalikaka that day.

Another day, the basket is full of guavas. Now and then a bucket of skim milk replaces guavas or carrots. But whatever the food, the amount says the same. For a while Bhansalikaka was eating only dates. But he complained that they made him see spirits. So he gave that up. Then he started on garlic. Not just one or two cloves. Two or three hundred - handful after handful down the cube. That made him so ill, he was on the verge of death. Sardar Patel was at Sevagram at the time. He asked, "Bhansali, have you decided to kill yourself or what?"

'His will prevails.'

Sardar laughed and said, 'If you happen to meet Km, remember me to Him.'  
Another experiment: Bhansalikaka is sitting in a water trough for the cattle, chest deep, with a thirty-pound stone on his head. 'What's going on?'  
'Oh, nothing. I needed to keep cool somehow while meditating. Before this, I wanted to tie a rope to my feet and hang head down in the well. But Chimanlalbhai' - our ashram manager - 'said, I must first get Bapu's permission. So I wrote him, but he refused to give it. I wrote him again. "At least permit me to sit in the water trough." He granted that.'

'But why is that stone on your head?'

'You see, the first day I was sitting here, the cattle came right near me to drink. I'm keeping this stone on my head to make sure I don't get up quickly by reflex action at the sight of their horns.'

As soon as Bapu returned to the ashram, he stopped this experiment. However much Bhansalikaka would have liked to insist on something, he would not argue with Bapu if Bapu said no. Once a rabid fox bit some of us in the ashram. Bhansalikaka got three bite.

But he never told anyone. We discovered it only when someone noticed the bite marks. Then he refused to take injections for it. But he agreed when Bapu ordered it. Then he refused to be driven by car to Wardha for the shots. But again he agreed, on Bapu's orders.

Only once have I seen him maintain a stand against Bapu. Bapu had advised an ashram woman to leave because of a minor lapse on her part. She was a widow. Bhansalikaka thought Bapu was being unjust. He told Bapu, 'If she leaves, then I'm leaving too,' Bapu gave in.

Bhansalikaka would be deeply moved by the sufferings of the poor and weak. He would often flare up at injustice inflicted on them. After Independence, when the government began rounding up Communist guerrillas who had been fighting for land reform in Telengana district, he wrote the government, saying, 'Arrest me too. I too am a Communist - a Communist who believes in non-violence.'

Earlier, the mass rape of some women in Ashti-Chimur by British soldiers stirred him to the core. The resulting fast is an unforgettable chapter in Indian history. He spent the first fifteen days of the fast on foot. During that time he abstained even from water. For the next forty-eight days, he was bedridden.

Day followed day. The public, numbed by British repression of the 1942 uprisings, stirred afresh. The government had shown it could deal with destruction of railways, cutting of telephone wires, burning of mail-boxes - tactics resorted to by the Indian public when Bapu was removed from leadership by imprisonment. But the government didn't know how to deal with the moral weapon of fasting, wielded on a purely moral issue, by someone of saintly character. In the end, with government assurance of an inquiry, Bhansalikaka served the honour of Indian womanhood.

Today Bhansalikaka is in poor health. But he is devotedly engaged in village development work. If Sevagram was a menagerie Bhansalikaka was its lion - striding in all splendour.

## 14 . THE PRINCELY STATES

BEFORE INDEPENDENCE, most of India was being ruled directly by the British. But about one-third was still made up of the so-called "princely states". These were still governed by their traditional, hereditary rulers, under British overlordship. Movements for representative government had arisen in many of these states, as offshoots of the national freedom struggle.

For a long time Bapu's policy was to avoid personal involvement in these movements, and to keep the Indian National Congress out of them as well. This had two good effects. One was that Congress could focus all its strength directly against British rule. Second, the movements that arose in many states were independent, developing local leadership. After Independence, hundreds of these states swiftly joined the Indian Union. One factor in achieving this was that the public in many of them had already been mobilised by the local movements.

But despite his general policy, Bapu couldn't remain entirely aloof from these movements. Their leaders invariably came to Bapu for guidance, and when things got bad, it was Bapu who was their champion.

When atrocities were inflicted on the people of Mysore during their struggle for representative government, the leaders appealed to Bapu. Now, Mysore was the most prominent among the princely states. It had an efficient and capable Diwan (prime minister). How could he accept the charges of atrocities? He said, 'Come and see for yourself.' So Bapu sent Kaka to investigate. I went along as his typist.

When we arrived at the railway station in Bangalore, there were several cars waiting for us. One was the car of the movement leaders. Another was a state car. A representative of the Diwan told us, 'You are guests of the state. So we have arranged for you to stay in the state guesthouse.'

What could be found wanting in the guesthouse of the foremost princely state in India? Bangalore was a lovely city in itself. The site of the state guesthouse was lovelier still. In our rooms had been placed vases of flowers. The food left nothing to

be desired. Lover of beauty that he was, all this delighted Kaka. Then there was a long talk with the Diwan on the first day.

I felt that Kaka had been greatly influenced by this talk with the Diwan. In the afternoon, over coffee, Kaka was telling me about the progressive strides the state had made. After listening to this praise, I suddenly said. 'Kaka, you are going to meet the fate of Woodrow Wilson.'

Kaka asked, 'What do you mean?'

I said, 'You know what happened to Woodrow Wilson when he went to England at the close of World War I. He got an unprecedented welcome in London, and around the country. Weren't you telling me yourself that, in the midst of all the receptions, he lost track of the Fourteen Points with which he hoped to establish peace on the basis of justice? Well, it's like that now. Of course your reception here is impressive. But don't forget, you've come on an investigation.'

Kaka said testily, "Well, so you've turned my adviser, have you?"

But actually, he took my advice. After that, he neither praised the Mysore government, nor condemned it. He took everything in, without comment. We began our tour of the state. The stories of police atrocities that we heard in public meetings, in jails, in public and private visits, would have made anyone shudder. Some of them had taken place in the presence of state government officials, and in their interrogations. Hearing and seeing the evidence, Kaka's righteous indignation flared.

From this experience I learned that the struggle in the princely states was much more difficult than the struggle in British India. In the nationalist struggle, the opposition was a modern government that had to make at least a show of legality and justice. In the princely states, the governments were under no such constraints. No matter how progressive a state considered itself or tried to be, the institution of princely rule was itself medieval.

At the end of our tour, Kaka had another long talk with the Diwan. We also had dinner with him. But Kaka could not forget what he had seen and heard in those few days.

On our final day in Bangalore, an evening public meeting was arranged. Kaka could not reveal his findings, since he was obliged to report directly to Bapu. But he could

not resist some comment. He told the people there, 'I have seen your beautiful state, and have also heard stories of terrible atrocities. I have seen your beautiful Gersappa Falls, which could rank among the wonders of the world; and I have seen too that poor people tie ropes around their waists and risk their lives, lowering themselves into the cavity behind the falls, to collect for food a little of the grain stored there by pigeons. I do not know how a state bearing within it such stark poverty can be called progressive.'

Back in Wardha, we learned that the Diwan had not been pleased with the report of this meeting. He wrote to Bapu telling him that Kaka's investigation was one-sided. But Bapu considered Kaka's report final. (We also learned that the Diwan had dismissed some of the more notorious police officers.)

It was in Rajkot in 1939 that Bapu involved himself directly in a struggle within a princely state. Kasturba joined the movement first. She went to prison in Rajkot, at her advanced age, and while in poor health. Bapu fasted there twice. Finally, Sir Maurice Gwyer, Chief Justice of India, was entrusted with adjudication of the issues. Kaka went to him and presented our case. The adjudication came down completely on the side of the people of Rajkot. Naturally, the entire populace was jubilant. But the Diwan of Rajkot wasn't giving in so easily. He asked Bapu, 'Do you want to negotiate with me, or do you want to threaten me with the Gwyer Award?' Bapu's instinctive non-violence made him go along with his opponent at once. He said he could not convert anyone's heart with the Gwyer Award. 'I should negotiate without the support of any binding judgement. I have decided to set aside the Gwyer Award.' It took the people of Rajkot and the nation some time to appreciate the value of this act. They felt that Bapu was deliberately throwing away the victory already held in his - and their - hands. But for Bapu, the immediate outcome of the Rajkot struggle simply wasn't as important as maintaining a strict non-violence.

For Bapu, it was a question of purity of means. The outcome isn't in our hands, but in God's. What is in our hands is the way we get there. So we must always insist that our means be pure. Bapu insisted on it till the last.

To some of our national leaders, Bapu's stand seemed to lack political wisdom. It's true that success in the Rajkot struggle was delayed by Bapu's decision. But at the same time, it lent a new dimension to the struggle in the princely states. The leaders of these movements now realised that leadership by Gandhiji required their maintaining a golden purity in their means. The struggle took on a whole new look. The Rajkot struggle was to succeed ultimately. When historical forces were overwhelming even the British rule, how could the poor Diwan of Rajkot survive?



But this act of Bapu's gave a spiritual lustre to the struggle of all India. That was Bapu's unique contribution to the building of the nation's character.

## 15. ONE MASTER ENOUGH

I DON'T THINK Bapu ever set before the nation a single program of political or social reform that was not linked to some "constructive program" for village development or nation-building. The Swadeshi (Indian-made) Movement brought a boycott of foreign goods, and foreign cloth was consigned to bonfires. But along with this, Bapu developed a program of khadi (homespun cloth) and village industries, with an importance to the poor of India that has not diminished in fifty years. Along with the eradication of untouchability, he developed a program of village sanitation. In all history, perhaps no other leader has so well combined the clearing away of the decadent old, with the building of the new.

In the same way, to accompany the movement to draw provincial boundaries according to regional language, he set up a program to promote Hindi as a unifying national language. (India has sixteen major languages, and hundreds of dialects. Most Indians in the north can speak Hindi as a first or second language, but in the south among the educated, English is much more common in this regard.) Bapu asked the south Indians to learn Hindi, and the north Indians to learn one south Indian language. He had sent one of his own sons, Devadas, to the south to promote the learning of Hindi.

Sadly, Bapu's political programs were zealously carried out, but his constructive programs were not taken up with similar enthusiasm. If they had, perhaps our country could have avoided the black spots on its heritage created by riots against government language policies following Independence. (Today, English must still be maintained as a second official language, due to opposition to Hindi in the south.) Bapu had immense faith in the unifying power both of language and of "constructive work". At one point I had the job of reading newspapers to him for an hour each day, while he spun. One day he had a visit from Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the renowned philosopher, and later President of India. Seeing me with Bapu, he suggested I come and study under him at the well-known Benaras Hindu University, where he was Vice-Chancellor. I told him I had determined not to attend any school or college until India had won its independence.

He must have talked to Bapu about me later. Because the next day, when I seated myself before Bapu to read to him, he said, Today let's not read the newspapers. Let's

talk about your future. You did well to turn down Radhakrishnan's suggestion. Still, you need to decide what you will do with your future.

I said, 'It won't take an hour to talk about that. Five minutes will be enough.' So I read the newspapers for fifty-five minutes. Then I said, 'I have already decided what my future should be. Today some of your colleagues have turned to politics. Others have taken to constructive work. To me, either way by itself seems too narrow. I want to be a bridge between the two.'

That was all I had to say. In the next three minutes, Bapu gave me his guidance. 'I like your choosing to forgo the hour and to take five minutes. The choice you've made for your future is also good. There are two things you must do to fulfil it. One, study thoroughly the theory and practice of khadi. Two, study all the languages of India, That is necessary in order to know India.'

Bapu himself knew a little of the south Indian language Tamil, from his days in South Africa, when he campaigned against injustices to Indian indentured labourers. Taking his cue from Bapu, Kaka too started learning Tamil. Sri Arunachalam, who was Kaka's Tamil teacher, once told me, 'Though I was teaching Tamil to Mahadev-bhai, it was through him that I discovered many niceties of the language. You could also say I learned from him how to teach a language.'

There was never any constructive program of Bapu's that Kaka did not take up at once. His devotion to spinning was total. No matter how busy he was, spin he must. Toward the end of his life he made it a rule to spin 500 yards daily - an hour or so each day. He would teach me while he spun, since this was the only time he had for it. He continued to spin his 500 yards daily until the day before he died.

Speaking of Kaka and of language has reminded me of an incident I had better note down here.

We had been visiting a school in south India, in which the teaching of Hindi had been very successful. Jannalal Bajaj Bapu's colleague and benefactor, was with us. On the way back to Wardha on the train, we passed the place where the Krishna River flows from between two hills, forming an impressive sight. Today there is a dam there, strung with electric lights. But in those days, there was the grandeur of virgin nature.

This area was not far from the ashram of the saint Ramana Maharshi, which Jammalalji had recently visited. Telling Bapu now about his visit, Jammalalji was all praise for the ashram's spirit of holiness and peace.

Kaka was always thrilled by talk of spiritual masters. In eager reverence, he began questioning Jammalalji about Ramana Maharshi. The three of them were completely caught up in the subject. Suddenly Bapu suggested, 'Mahadev, why don't you pay a visit to this ashram?' Kaka was excited at the idea. Jammalalji encouraged him, 'Oh yes, it's definitely worth a visit. You can change trains at the station coming up, and you won't have to go too far, As long as you're this close, why don't you make the visit? When will you have the time again?'

Kaka asked me to pack his bedding. The train was approaching the station. Jammalalji was telling Bapu, 'The peace of mind I felt there, I have not experienced even in your own ashram;' After a while Bapu told Kaka, 'Don't be in a hurry to get back. If you find the same peace of mind there, stay a few days. Don't worry about work.'

Bapu had said this quite casually. But suddenly the idea of being away from Bapu for so long was more than Kaka could bear. He turned to me and said, 'Babla, unpack the bedding.'

I was astonished. Bapu too stared in surprise. He asked, "Mahadev, why do you want the bedding unpacked?"

'I've decided not to go!'

'Why?'

'One master is enough for me.'

## **16. COMPASSION INCARNATE**

IN THE HEAT of an Indian summer, who wouldn't want to spend time at the mountain resort of Simla? Pleasant breeze, a view of the mountains, isolated valleys to roam about in. Snow-white clouds and flocks of snow-white birds, making our spirits soar as well.

Each summer, to escape the heat of Delhi, the British officials would move their headquarters to Simla. Deserted during the winter and the fall rains, the town would come alive in summer with the antics of the Westerners. The Viceroy's personal guard would march back and forth before the Viceregal Lodge with the clatter of heavy boots. Down the mountain, Europeans on red horses would ride across the polo grounds. Dozens of dogs would stroll up and down the mall, held on leash by official's wives. The money spent each year on just one of these dogs would equal the yearly income of an ordinary Indian worker. And at Simla, to make the monkeys dance, the tourists would throw them nuts - a food that most Indians could seldom afford. Who would ever dream that this was the summer capital of a poverty-stricken country?

It was from Simla in 1939 that the Viceroy issued his declaration that India would join Britain in the fight against Hitler. But he had not bothered to first win approval of our national leaders. Naturally, this was a wound to India's pride. There were differences in Congress on what our policy toward the war should be. But there was full agreement that Bapu should talk with the Viceroy.

So Bapu, ambassador of the downtrodden, arrived in elegant Simla. The usual loincloth, the usual shawl, the usual simple, lustrous face.

And the face of Simla was transformed. Its Western-style grandeur was suddenly eclipsed by swarms of people coming for a glimpse of Bapu.

Part way through the negotiations, a halt was called. The Viceroy needed fresh instructions from England. It would take a week or so. We didn't mind. We had pleasant thoughts of wandering through the surrounding mountains. But then came Bapu's orders: Tack up! 'Where are we going?' 'Why, Sevagram, of course!'

'But the talks are starting up again within a week, aren't they?' asked Kaka.

'Yes, of course. But we'll have at least two days at Sevagram. 'What is so important for us to do at Sevagram?' Is nursing Parchure unimportant?'

To this, Kaka had no answer. But for us to understand the import of Bapu's argument, we will have to go back a few years.

One evening at Sevagram, an ashramite came and told Bapu, 'There's someone out behind the cattle pound who wants to talk to you. He wouldn't come close to me or show himself clearly. It seems he knows you.'

Bapu went to the cattle pound. The reclusive figure prostrated himself at a distance, and paid his respects by reciting Sanskrit verses.

'Why, it's Parchure Shastri! What are you doing here?'

Parchure Shastri was a profound scholar of Sanskrit. For some time he had stayed at Sabarmati Ashram'. Then he had left in order to take care of his children. While away, he had discovered he had leprosy.

Throughout known history, society has persecuted certain group out of sheer ignorance. One of these is a leper. References to the disease of leprosy have been recorded for thousands of years. In all times, in all parts of the world, lepers have been cast aside: It has been no different in India. In one part of the country, it is said that lepers were thrown into the sea and drowned.

Parchurc Shastri was saying, 'The disease has advanced. Society is not prepared to accept me. I have decided to die. I would like to pass my last days peacefully under your wing. So I have come to your ashram. I will need no more than two pieces of bread a day. Please be kind and permit me to stay.'

The heart of one who felt the agony of others as his own, now overflowed with compassion. 'You have my permission to stay in the ashram. But you don't have my permission to die. We'll take care of you, and not allow you to die.'

Up until this time, nearly all work with lepers in India had been done by Christian missionaries. Those of other faiths had not taken to this work. Bapu had to give some thought to the implications of his decision. Perhaps he had to consider the feelings of others in the ashram, and the possibilities of contagion. Lepers have been so dreaded because the disease has been thought highly contagious, Modern science has discovered it is not as contagious as, say, smallpox or tuberculosis. Still, some threat remains. Some of the missionaries caring for lepers had lost their lives by it. But Bapu was not deterred. Soon a small hut was built for Shastriji across from Bapu's, a little away from the others. Food for Shastriji was prepared in the hut itself. Systematic treatment began under Bapu's supervision. It was generally considered dreadful to touch a leper. Yet Bapu's personal nursing of Shastriji included massaging his body.

By the time Parchure Shastri reached Sevagram, his disease had already advanced to an incurable stage. It would eventually carry him off. Yet for a while he improved a little, under Bapu's care.

Besides that, a Hindu colleague of Bapu's, was inspired by this work, and founded a therapeutic leper colony near Wardha.

But now we must return to our question: Why did Bapu order the return to Sevagram from Simla, for perhaps only two days?

Bapu set no higher value on talks with the Viceroy than on nursing a leper. To him, acts of personal service and social revolution were one. So he would nurse a patient with the same devotion given to sewing the nation. As a result, any work he did on a personal level took on social importance. This in turn expanded his character, until it assumed the breadth of the horizon.

The nursing of a leper was in one way also symbolic. In it was a sign of concern for all outcasts from society. The uplift of all begins with the uplift of the lowliest. Bapu always had patients to nurse. But the nursing that surpassed all his others was the Christ-like nursing of Parchure Shastri, the leper.

## **17. KASTURBA**

ROLE OF the "better half" in the lives of great men in history would make an interesting study. Just like many other such wives, Ba played a significant role in the career of her husband. But her role had its special features too. At the beginning of her adult life, she was a simple, illiterate wife. But at the time of her death, Bapu said of her, 'She was the Universal Mother.'

How did someone seemingly so ordinary cover such a distance in her lifetime? Of course, marriage to someone like Mahatma Gandhi is not an opportunity everyone has. And Kasturba's own progress came mostly from being joined to one who was in all ways progressive. But marriage alone was not the reason. In a real sense, she had become not only a wife, but also a colleague.

Practising religion in the company of the Mahatma was no ordinary matter. As Kaka put it, it was like sitting on top of a volcano, Ba's complete devotion to Bapu allowed her to manage it. But in the midst of this devotion, she remained an individual. At times she even brought Bapu back on track.

Once, in South Africa, Ba had refused to clean the chamber-pot of a Harijan clerk who worked with Bapu and lived with them. In his anger, Bapu tried to throw her out of the house. Ba cried out, piteously, "Have you no shame? Where am I to go in this foreign kind?" Bapu himself used to relate this incident with tears in his eyes, as one that had opened those eyes when blinded by dogma.

After that, throughout her life, Ba kept her individuality. She shared his ordeals. Along with him, she changed her life-style. But all this was by her own free will. She would join sincerely in Bapu's prayers taken from different religions. But at the same time, she remained devoted to the customs of the traditional Hinduism she had been raised in.

The members of Bapu's extended family saw in Ba the reflection of their own mothers. But, unlike Bapu, Ba's larger family never made her care less for her own blood relations.

Her eldest son Harilalkaka put her through the most tortuous of ordeals. From the time of his youth, Harilalkaka had resented Bapu for denying him a formal education. He had been in revolt against Bapu ever since. After his wife died, he took to bad company and bad ways. All this pained Ba greatly. When he embraced Islam out of spite toward Bapu, Ba wrote him a pathetic letter telling him of her anguish. But Harilalkaka's reaction was, 'Ba didn't write this letter. Someone else wrote it and signed her name.'

Deep in his heart, Harilalkaka had warm feelings for Ba. Once, when our train stopped at a station on our way back to Wardha, we heard a cry from the crowd different from the usual: "Mata Kasturba ki jai!" - "Victory to Mother Kasturba!" We all looked to see who was shouting this.

It was Harilalkaka. He was emaciated. His front teeth were gone. His hair had turned grey. From a pocket of his ragged clothes, he took an orange and said, 'Ba, I've brought this for you.'

Breaking in, Bapu said, 'Didn't you bring anything for me?'

'No, nothing for you. I only want to tell you that all the greatness you have achieved is only because of Ba. Don't forget that!'

'Oh, there's no doubt of it! But now, do you want to come with us?'

'Oh, no. I only came to see Ba. Take this orange, Ba I begged for it, and now I give it to you.'

Ba took the orange. But Harilalkaka wasn't satisfied. He said, 'It's only for you, alright? If you're not going to eat it yourself, give it back to me.'

Ba promised to eat the orange. Then she too pleaded with Harilalkaka to come with us.

Harilalkaka's eyes were full of tears. 'Leave off such talk, Ba. There's no way out of this for me.'

There was no time to talk further. The whistle blew. The train started moving.

Harilalkaka was reminding her, "Ba, my orange is for you only!"

Our compartment had pulled away from him when Ba realised, 'I didn't even ask the poor boy if he wanted anything to eat! We had a basket full of fruits. My dear child must be dying of hunger!'

But by then the train had left the platform. Amidst the cries of "Gandhiji ki jai!", we could still hear the faint cry, "Mata Kasturba ki jai!"

All of Ba's sons were away from her. Manilalkaka was in South Africa running 'Indian Opinion/ the journal Bapu had started there. Ramdaskaka was supporting his family on an ordinary job in Nagpur. Devdaskaka was the managing editor of the prominent daily the 'Hindustan Times.' But Ba's grandchildren often stayed at Sabarmati or Sevagram, as did Bapu's nephews and nieces, and other young relations. So Ba did get the chance to exercise her maternal instincts.

Apart from these, Ba sometimes found herself taking on as her own some additional "relatives" of Bapu. Once, a few Harijans had decided to perform "Satyagraha" to protest against government discrimination. Their idea of Satyagraha was quite different from Bapu's, When Bapu offered Satyagraha to protest against injustice, he would risk his life. These Harijans intended to fast, as Bapu often did. But there wasn't much risk in it. One person at a time would fast, each for a day! The Harijans asked Bapu to provide space in his ashram for their "Satyagraha". Bapu told them to look around the ashram and choose any place they liked. After visiting



all the buildings, they selected on Ba's cottage! This cottage had one room about twelve feet square, a veranda, and a bathroom. The Harijans selected the large room and the veranda. They left Ba the bathroom.

Bapu asked Ba, 'What do you say? These people like your big room. Why don't we let them use it?'

Ba said, 'They're your children. Give them space in your cottage.'

With a smile, Bapu said, 'Aren't my children yours too?' Without another word, Ba vacated her room.

This "Satyagraha" lasted only a few days. When no new "Satyagrahis" came forward as replacements, it was wound up. But for as long as it lasted, the "Satyagrahis" were in command of Ba's space. They weren't clean in their habits, either. But Ba tolerated all that. Not only that, she would bring them drinking water, and inquire about their health. Once Ba had accepted them as her children, what did it matter if they weren't clean? Her duty was only to serve her children with love.

Usually Bapu took the job of serving meals. He would explain to the guests about his various dietary experiments: There is a spoonful of baking soda in this baked *chappati*. Do you know what this spread is made of? Taste it and you'll know. The taste of neem may be bitter, but not its effect! Garlic is good for blood pressure.' Ba would help Bapu serve. But she would serve things like butter, raw sugar pieces, and other sweets. We children were more interested in what Ba served than Bapu, and she too most enjoyed serving us children. If a package of sweets were delivered to the ashram, she would hold it for us. Even when travelling, she would make sure we were well fed.

She never grew too old to want to learn something new. Of course, Bapu's company by itself was a great education. But I have seen many who, even after having stayed with Bapu, remained as blunt as before. Not so with Ba. Her command of language was meagre. So the doors of knowledge were in that way almost closed for her. But this did not stop Ba. She approached new knowledge with a childlike eagerness. Once, she called me to her, and asked, 'Babla, what are you studying nowadays?'

I told her, 'English, science, geometry, carpentry, Hindi grammar, and the Ramayana.'

English and math were beyond Ba. So she said, 'Could you give me lessons on the Ramayana?'

I was perplexed. I said, 'Ba, you had better learn it from Ramnarayanji. He's the one teaching me. I'm just a beginner.'

Ba said, 'Oh, no, I don't know if he'd have the time. And anyway, I need someone who can explain it in Gujarati. I'll tell you what:

Whatever you learn from him during the day, teach me in the evening. I'm a beginner too!'

For the next few evenings, seventy-year old Kasturba took lessons in the Ramayana from fifteen-year old Babla. Even now, whenever I open the pages of that book, I see before me Rama's wife Sita, mother of the world, sitting beside that other mother of the world, Kasturba - both of them pure, serene, filled with devotion.

## 18. WORLD WAR II

AT THE BEGINNING of World War II, without even consulting India's national leaders, the Viceroy declared India on the side of the Allies. As time went on, preparations for the war affected the climate of the country. The government made it an offence to speak against the war effort. This restriction on freedom of speech, Bapu decided to challenge.

What an unusual challenge! Unlike the guns of battle, this challenge did not roar or clank. It was a moral protest against a government fighting a war in the name of freedom, yet suppressing the fundamental freedom of speech. The chosen form of Satyagraha was subdued. On this Issue of universal import, Bapu chose civil disobedience by individuals. Selected persons would speak out against the war effort, in defiance of government orders.

For the first act of disobedience, Bapu chose Vinoba, a colleague and disciple of great moral and intellectual stature, then living in a small ashram near Wardha. He later became known as Bapu's "spiritual successor". But at that time Vinoba was almost unknown to the public. Inquiries arrived from around the country and abroad; 'Who is this Vinoba?' Bapu introduced him by an article in his own exquisite style. He wrote in praise, 'Vinoba has unearthed all the latent power of the hand spindle.'

What was the world to make of this? How was this to satisfy it? Kaka wrote another article giving a somewhat fuller introduction.

After Vinoba was imprisoned, Bapu chose Jawaharlalji as the second to be arrested. Soon after that, the campaign expanded widely. Thousands of people all over the country thronged the prisons after publicly denouncing the war effort. These Satyagrahis were selected by Kaka on Bapu's behalf. Selections were made from a list of proposed names, and based on Kaka's own knowledge of the candidates, or on personal data. Because of this job, Bapu would not allow Kaka to offer Satyagraha until the close of the campaign.

In the time before the freedom movement, India had lain deep in a slumber of ignorance and apathy. For the quarter century before Bapu arrived on the political scene, national leaders had tried to arouse the country by inciting its passions. The all-important goal was to free the country from the British yoke and drive out the British.

To this emotional approach, Bapu added another element: spirituality. The attitude of Satyagraha was, 'Our fight is against British rule, not against the British as a people/ In this way, Bapu added prudence to passion. This creed was accepted by each individual according to his or her ability to appreciate it.

In this campaign, the exceptional traits of common people and the petty traits of the exceptional surfaced together in all corners of the land. People of no public prominence at all left their homes, their animals, their farms, going to prison for their country's sake, and there behaved as ideal Satyagrahis. On the other hand, some leaders of national stature went to prison only because they thought they had to, or to get their names on the published list of chosen resisters. Their prison behaviour was worse than that of ordinary criminals. This undisciplined behaviour, despite these prisoners' privileged upbringing, tore at the hearts of Kaka and Bapu.

In other ways too, reaction to prison life varied. For some, imprisonment meant only an opportunity to read the palms of fellow-prisoners, to exercise, or to bet on possible release dates. For others, it provided time to explore new avenues of knowledge. For still others, prison meant a time of in-depth study and contemplation. Out of such study and thinking was born the best writing of three decades.

In such varied reactions during the 1910 campaign, as again in 1942, the Indian populace was like a churning ocean. Emerging from that churning were both life-

giving elixirs and poisons. Two decades after Independence, India is still tasting both.

I should narrate an incident of this period.

One day Kaka came to me and said, 'Today you have a historic letter to type.' I knew that many of Bapu's letters had a historic importance. So when Kaka himself made a point of it, I was eager to know what the letter could be.

The letter was to Adolf Hitler. At that time, Hitler was the ultimate symbol of the destructive power of violence; Bapu, the unexcelled devotee of non-violence. The letter was a heart-rending appeal not to drag the world down to total destruction. God only knows whether, in the midst of the whirlpool of war, this letter reached Hitler. But even in the most demonic, there is a vein of human values, of human goodness. One can be converted if that goodness is rekindled. Bapu's letter was a sign of his firm faith that no one is beyond redemption.

When the letter was made public, the political experts saw it as naive. To the so-called wise, the appeal for peace of a lifelong devotee of non-violence seemed foolish. A quarter century later, talk of peace even by ordinary people is taken seriously. Bapu was at least this far ahead of his time. Perhaps we have still to catch up with him.

## **19. NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE**

IT WAS WHEN Sevagram was given a post office that we moved there from Maganwadi. A cottage was built for us, close to Bapu's. On one side was Ba's cottage, then Bapu's, then ours - a pattern symbolic of the trio, Bapu, Ba, and Mahadevbhai. Though our cottage was so close to Bapu's, and though Kaka spent most of his time with him, Mother and I rarely visited Bapu's cottage. We two and Kaka had decided that Bapu should not be given any added strain.

In 1942 Kaka's workload grew heavier. Often Kaka tried to get some essential afternoon rest. Before going to his room, he would bolt the cottage door and tell me, 'Babla, I'm retiring for a while. Don't wake me up for anyone.' To make doubly sure, he would add, 'Even if death knocks, tell him, "You'll have to wait. Kaka is resting, and I won't let you in."'

I didn't want to hear about death. So to change the subject, I would ask, 'What if Bapu comes?'

That question would get no answer. He could never imagine resting if Bapu needed him.

Ordinarily, Kaka and Mother didn't have much time even to talk to each other. Meals were about the only time. And that too in front of everyone! It would have been hard to have kept their affairs private.

In any case, there wasn't anything concerning the household they would try to keep secret from me. For example, Kaka got only a small salary from Bapu, which was never raised. Often we had trouble managing on it. Sometimes when we fell too far behind, Kaka would write newspaper articles to earn extra income. Sometimes there would be a decision to cut our expenses still further.

Kaka and Mother would include me in discussions on such matters. As a result, I too felt I had a stake in the affairs of the household. And for a few days I would make sure my shorts weren't torn while playing. I never had anything like an allowance, or wanted to ask for one.

But there was one time when I did overhear my parents talking secretly. It was one night while I was lying awake in bed, though they thought I was asleep.

Kaka: Did you hear what Bapu was saying?

Mother: Of course I did.

Kaka: So what have you decided?

Mother. What is there to decide? We must do as Bapu says.

Kaka: You realise it means almost certain death?

Mother If you tie yourself against the mouth of a gun, what else can you expect? But what should we do about Babla?

Here was the situation: Since the beginning of World War H there had been a debate among our national leaders on our position toward the British war effort Some of the leaders wanted to trade support of the war effort, in return for national independence. At first Bapu did not favour giving even moral support to the Allies' war effort. He felt that, however evil were Hitler's actions, war made criminals of both sides.

But later his position changed. When Poles laid down their lives in futile armed resistance to Hitler's forces, Bapu praised their heroism. He had always said that resisting injustice violently was better than retreating from it in cowardice. Yet even as he voiced support for such resistance, he was working out a way that required even more courage, a non-violent way.

The Japanese army had been marching across East Asia, and had finally come close to the eastern border of India. Bombs began landing on Indian soil. Though the Japanese never entered India, for a while an invasion seemed imminent. Miraben (Madeleine Slade) wrote to Bapu from the coast about a possible Japanese landing there. She asked what would be his advice to the people in that event? If the government was in his hands, how would he handle the situation?

In reply, Bapu gave a detailed picture of non-violent resistance to a foreign aggressor, by an unarmed populace and a government that had disbanded its armed forces. Beforehand, the would-be aggressors might be weaned from their intention by acts of goodwill and kinship, service, and a counter-force of love. During the invasion, unarmed volunteers would mass themselves at the border and offer themselves as cannon fodder, hoping to awaken the invader's consciences. If the aggressors pressed on into the country, they would be met by an entire nation that resisted them by such means as refusal to co-operate, or total boycott. One question about this plan was: If a "non-violent army" was to offer itself as cannon fodder, where were the people for it to be found? Bapu was prepared to face the invaders with a force of even a thousand. On the afternoon preceding Kaka and Mother's night-time conversation, Bapu had called together the ashramites and talked over this plan. This was what Kaka and Mother were discussing.

If Bapu readied his army, both were ready to join. There was only one thing that troubled them: What about Babla? May be Kaka should go, and Mother remain behind? But in the end they decided that, if Bapu called for volunteers, both would step forward.

'Babla is old enough now. We'll leave him in God's hands.'

## **20. JAMNALAL BAJAJ**

THE YEARS 1942 and 1943 were climactic ones in India's history. The country experienced changes in those two years such as it had not known in the previous twenty-five. For us in the ashram too, this period proved trying, in more ways than

one. In the period from February, 1942, to February, 1944, Bapu had to endure the loss first of Jammalalji, then of Kaka, and finally of Kasturba. Each death took away one closer to him than the one before. It is doubtful if he at any other time experienced such a series of personal blows so close together.

These were the years of supreme sacrifice in the freedom struggle. And in sacrifice, these three were unsurpassed. Jammalal Bajaj was a jewel in Bapu's court. On Jammalalji's death, Bapu wrote of this earlier incident:

'It happened twenty-two years ago. A young man of thirty came to me and said, "I have something to ask of you." Taken by surprise, I said, "Ask, and I will give it, if I can."

The youth said, "Treat me as your son."

'I said, "Granted. But what have you asked me to give up? Actually, you're the one who has given, and I have received."

The young man was Jammalal. The people of India have seen what a worthy son he became. To my knowledge, no one else has ever had such a son.'

At the time of that incident, Jammalalji was an importer: figure in the Indian National Congress. After a while, he told Bapu he wished to give up political action and dedicate himself to work for the villages. Bapu suggested he promote improved methods of cattle husbandry. This cause became to him dearer than life.

Jammalalji was a shrewd, capable businessman. Yet he had renounced all personal gain. When he joined Bapu, he dedicated all his wealth to support Bapu's work. He founded and supported dozens of institutions in and around Wardha. Yet he was not in the least vain about it. In fact, his attitude toward it was one of complete unconcern.

Jammalalji also loved to socialise. He received all Bapu's visitors that arrived at Wardha on their way to Sevagram. Famous or unknown, they would all be welcomed warmly. And he was a matchmaker to the vast number of young people he came in contact with. For this he earned from Bapu the nickname "Shadilal," "Wedding Man."

His knack of judging people surpassed the talent of any jeweller to assess jewellery. As workers and colleagues, he chose the finest individuals. He was a jeweller of

people. But with all those he drew to him, he retained humility, a willingness to be taught.

When Bapu learned Jamnalalji was ill, he set out from Sevagram to Wardha with natural medicine. But by the time Bapu arrived, Jamnalalji had passed away. Bapu took Jamnalalji's head in his lap and said, 'You were my fifth son. You should not have gone before I did.'

When Jamnalalji's body was brought out for cremation, I saw on his face a serenity and lustre that is rarely found. Practically the whole of Wardha, as well as a number of nearby villages, joined in the funeral procession. His wife Janakidevi wanted to immolate herself on the funeral pyre, according to old custom. But Bapu convinced her instead to dedicate herself to the work of developing cattle husbandry left by her husband.

Jamnalalji's search for fine souls had not been limited to the circles of Bapu's followers. He had found peace in the ashram of Ramana Maharshi. He had become close friends with the spiritual teacher Anandmai Ma. Anandmai Ma came to Wardha a few days after Jamnalalji's death. While talking with Bapu at Sevagram, she said in passing, 'Within six months, another great soul is to pass away.' Hearing this, Kaka presumed she meant Bapu. He became greatly agitated about it. Little did we know that the prediction would prove true for Kaka alone.

When Bapu began his talk of demanding that the British "Quit India," Kaka's workload began multiplying. There was a spate of visitors. The correspondence pile grew higher. More articles had to be written. To top it off, Bapu had declared, 'This time in prison will be different from earlier times. This time I intend to refuse both food and water. This further multiplied Kaka's worries. He didn't at all like Bapu's idea of fasting as soon as he entered prison. A flurry of notes passed between Kaka and Bapu within the ashram.

Kaka's health was suffering. The onset of the struggle seemed just around the corner. So Bapu persuaded him to take some time off to rest. Shri Birla, a benefactor of Bapu's, offered to take Kaka with him to the city of Nasik. It was decided he would stay there a week. Neither Mother nor I was to go with him.

A short time after Kaka left, a phone call came from Wardha. The message was that Kaka had gotten dizzy at the railway station, and so had not taken the train. Bapu sent a return message for Kaka to be brought back to Sevagram at once. But



meanwhile, Kaka had been taken to the hospital. I had never before seen Bapu look so worried.

It was a Sunday. Each week, Bapu would start his day of silence on Sunday evening, keeping it until the following evening. This Sunday, even after beginning his silence, he kept walking from his cottage over the small building next to it where the phone was kept, to find out the news about Kaka. He would write notes asking about Kaka's condition.

Finally the car came, bringing Kaka. He was brought straight, to our cottage. Bapu came running. Kaka was laid on the bed Mother had prepared. Bapu sat on the bed and took Kaka's head in his lap.

'Mahadev, how do you feel now?'

For the first time since his nephew Maganlal's death, Bapu had broken his weekly silence.

Time enough now. My wish is fulfilled. At the station, I thought my time was up. So I told them I didn't want to go either to Nasik or the hospital. I said, "If this is the end, I want to go with my head in Bapu's lap." 'But they took me to the hospital anyway.'

Bapu kept stroking Kaka's head. A few months later, when Kaka died as a prisoner in the Aga Khan Palace, his head was again in Bapu's lap.

## **21. DO OR DIE**

IN THE EVENING of August 8, 1942, Bapu electrified the nation by his impassioned appeal to the British Government to "Quit India" and his clarion call to the Indian people to "Do or Die" for the cause. He was speaking in Bombay at a meeting of the All India Congress Committee, which fully backed Bapu's new initiative. At the close of his speech, Bapu said, "I will write a final letter 'to the Viceroy. If I do not receive a favourable reply from him within two weeks, I will launch national resistance."

After the meeting, Bapu returned to Birla House, home of his benefactor. He held his usual evening prayer meeting there. Then, feeling at ease, he retired to a sound sleep.

But for two others within the house, sleep proved impossible: Kaka and Kasturba. My bed was next to Kaka's. The clock in the main room struck one.

Kasturba came in. 'What time is it, Mahadev?'

'One o'clock, Ba.'

'What do you think? Will they arrest Bapu tonight?'

'I think they will. I don't see how they can let him remain free after his speech this evening. But Bapu doesn't think they'll arrest him for at least these two weeks. Often what Bapu think doesn't seem reasonable, but turns out to be true anyway. So who knows?'

I was, by aims, dozing off and waking to the chiming of the dock. Two o'clock, Three o'clock, Four o'clock.

At four o'clock, Kaka said, 'Bapu may have been right after all. The Bombay their arrests. It's coming on dawn, now, so maybe they don't plan to arrest him yet. But they must have arrested Sardar. His speech yesterday was too scathing for them to leave him free for a minute. Let's phone over to where he's staying, and find out.' The phone didn't work. The line had been cut. One of us left to use a neighbour's phone. But he returned from the gate and announced, 'The hosts have arrived.' The warrant served on Bapu was somewhat odd. It ordered the arrest of Bapu, Miraben, and Kaka. But Ba and Pyarelalji, Bapu's other secretary, were given the choice of coming with Bapu or not.

Ba asked Bapu, "What does this order mean?" Bapu explained it to her. Then he asked, 'What do you want to do?'

We all believed that this time in prison would be the final one. Miraben was pleased to be able to share it with Bapu. But Ba was perplexed. She said to Bapu, 'You tell me what to do.'

Bapu said, 'Since you ask, I'd like you to get arrested separately by speaking in my place at the rally scheduled for this evening. But if you want to come with me, I won't object. If they arrest you separately, they may keep you apart from me. You must consider all this and decide.'

It was no easy choice. On one hand was their lifelong relationship. It was not certain Bapu would survive this prison term. And even visiting Bapu might not be possible. On the other hand were Bapu's own wishes.

Yet Ba made her decision in less time than it has taken to tell. She said resolutely, 'As for me, I would like to be with you in this hour. But even more, I want to fulfil your wishes. So I will stay.'

I stared dazedly at her, at this example of sacrifice. When Rama asked his wife Sita to remain home in his absence, she would not let him leave her behind. Yet here, Bapu had left the choice to Ba, and she had chosen separation in order to do as he wished.

I began to pack for Kaka. I had often said to him, 'Kaka, you never do any original writing. Whatever you write is either a transcription of Bapu's speeches, or a translation of a book.' Smiling, Kaka would reply, 'Original writing, I'll leave to you.' But then he would tell me he had plots for five or six novels ready in his mind. If he ever got a long vacation - in other words, a long prison term - he would write them. He also wanted to translate into Gujarati some songs of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore.

For a number of months I had kept a copy of those songs ready at hand, along with five or six pads of paper. Now I brought them to Kaka and asked him, 'I should pack these too, shouldn't I?'

But Kaka was indifferent. He said, 'You don't need to pack anything like that. Bapu's fast is hanging over my head. If he fasts this time, the government may let him die. I'm not going to live to see all this. I don't know if I'll last even a week in prison.' I said, 'Don't say such things,' Kaka didn't reply.

Before going with the police, Bapu said prayers. The atmosphere was charged. Bapu had already declared that after his arrest, each Indian would become a leader, and with non-violence firmly in mind, should take initiative in the struggle against the government. He had predicted the struggle would be short and swift. We were all greatly excited.

The four of them were brought to the police car. As Kaka was about to get in, I told him, 'We will meet again in free India!'

In reply, Kaka kissed my cheek. That was my last kiss from Kaka.

## 22. KAKA, NO MORE

ON THE MORNING of August 15, 1942, within six days of entering the Agakhan Palace as the government's prisoner, Kaka died. Mother and I were not informed by government officials, though they knew we were at Sevagram. We learned of it the next day, from friends who had heard it on the radio.

Kaka's sudden death caused rumours of all kinds to fly around the country. Some said the government had poisoned him. Some said he'd been electrocuted. We knew that Kaka had heart trouble, and also, how anxious he had been over Bapu's intended fast. So we paid no attention to the rumours.

At the time of Kaka's cremation, Bapu sent us a telegram. It took three weeks to arrive at Sevagram. It said, "Mahadev died yogi's, patriot death." Perhaps the contents explain why it was held up so long. In an attached letter, a government official expressed regret at the "inadvertent" delay. This letter really upset me. At this point, Mother and I asked for permission to visit Bapu. Permission was denied. We were given no information on where Kaka had been cremated. Even his ashes were withheld from us.

But we had come to know that Kaka had been cremated at die palace itself. We also learned chat Bapu visited die spot twice each day, to lay flowers on it. Later, we received from Bapu some-ashes he had preserved.

For Mother and me, the void left by Kaka's death could not be filled. For years after, we suffered from his loss. Besides our love for him, he had been our sole support. Yet never for a moment were we bitter toward the government. We felt it was all just part of the struggle against British rule. Willingness to sacrifice without resentment was the beauty of non-violent struggle. In fact, I felt a kind of pride that Kaka had died in prison.

Bapu never carried out his plan to fast on entering the prison. But he did undertake a fast the following February. Mother and I again asked to visit him. This time we were told it would be allowed. But we had to agree to stay on as prisoners and forgo contact with the outside. We accepted the conditions.

A barbed wire fence, eleven feet high, had been set up around the entire palace. Seventy-six gunmen were on guard day and night Bapu's cot had been placed

halfway along the palace's long veranda. It was the seventh day of his fast. When we bowed to him, the tears Mother had held back for six long months rushed out. Bapu tried to say something. 'Mahadev. ..' But his voice choked on this first word, and tears filled his eyes. It was the first time I had ever seen Bapu cry. We went off at once, so as not to strain him.

We remained in the palace another three weeks, but seldom talked to Bapu. However, I had almost continual talks with Pyarelalkaka, who had now taken over as Bapu's chief secretary. It was from these talks that I first discovered Bapu did not approve of the widespread acts of sabotage against government property. I had been in favour of such actions. I too had planned to bum mail-boxes on dark nights, in the company of a local gang armed with bamboo knives. One in the gang had begun to talk of carrying a revolver. I had at once been on my guard. I had told him firmly that there was no place for a revolver in non-violence.

Yet I had believed that, short of destroying life or private property, there was no act that non-violence ruled out. I had been glad to read about telephone lines being cut, and railroad tracks being pulled up. In several parts of the country, campaigns of sabotage had delivered the government into the hands of the people. I had felt proud at such news. I had myself begun to establish contacts with gangs of saboteurs. I had published underground bulletins. In all this, I had believed I was acting as Bapu would wish.

All this I told Pyarelalkaka. He patiently listened to all of it. Not only patiently, but sympathetically. Yet gradually me how damage to any property was violent, how any secrecy hurt a non-violent struggle. Violence was the government's way, not ours. I slowly came to understand that the path I had favoured was wrong. But I did not feel guilty about it. Bapu had labelled our lapses as follies. He had tried to find a way to bring the country back into the right track. But he had not denounced the errors of any who acted out of love for India. Because of this, the ordinary Indian was still willing to accept Bapu's guidance.

We had much free time in the palace. I was using mine to read an English translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Miserable*, Bapu was surprised to hear of it. He called me to him and complimented me. I felt bashful. Pyarelalkaka told Bapu, 'You still think of him as little Babla. But he discusses the national situation with me. We've been having an involved debate on non-violence.' I felt even more bashful.

Bapu said, 'Oh, I know. Even as a small child, he loved to argue. But this time, it was his knowledge of English that surprised me.'

He turned to me and said, 'Since you were discussing non-violence, you should know that my own idea of it has evolved. Earlier, I believed that if there was violence in one part of the country, it would not allow the use of non-violence anywhere. Today I believe that non-violence must shed its small light in the midst of even the fiercest ism of violence.'

I write these lines as we approach 1969, centenary year of Bapu's birth. It is a quarter century since Kaka passed away. What is a quarter century, or a century, in the passage of eternity? Yet even a moment's encounter with the righteous - in remembrances, as in life - can be a boat that bears you from the shore of this world, to the Eternal.

## **GLOSSARY**

The meanings of common tides and suffixes attached to names are discussed in the "Notes on Names"

**Ahmedabad** : A city close to Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram.

**Ashram** : A spiritual community. Residents are called (ashramites).

**Ba** : Mother. Name the ashramites used for Gandhi's wife Kasturba. (In this book, the name Ba is reserved for Kasturba throughout, and the author's own mother is called Mother.)

**Babla** : Pet name for the author.

**Bapu** : Father. Name the ashramites used for Gandhi.

**Bhagavad Gita**: Hindu holy book. Relates the spiritual discourses given by Krishna, incarnation of God, to his disciple Arjuna.

**Chappati** : A flat wheat cake.

**Civil disobedience**: In Gandhian terms, a form of protest in which the protester breaks a specific law, then willingly accepts the legal penalties.

**Congress** : See Indian National Congress.

**Durga** : The author's mother.

**Gujarat**: The home province of Gandhi and the author's family, the location of Sabarmati Ashram, in west Central India. The native language of the province is Gujarati.

**Gurudev** : See Tagore.

**Harijan** : Child of God. Gandhi's name for the untouchables. (See untouchables.) Also, the name of Gandhi's weekly journals, published in English, Hindi and Gujarati.

**Hindi** : The most widely spoken native language of India.

**Independence** : August 15, 1947, the date of India's gaining independence from British rule.

**Indian National Congress**: The political organisation reorganised by Gandhi to spearhead India's movement for independence from British rule. Commonly called simply "Congress". Not a government body, (After Independence, it became the dominant political party of India.)

**Jawaharlal** : See Nehru.

**Kasturbai/Kasturba** : Gandhi's wife. The second form is a cross between Kasturbai and Ba ("Mother"), the name commonly used in the ashram.

**Khadi**: Homespun cloth. An economic reform program of Gandhi's promoting decentralized production.

**Krishna** : To Hindus, an incarnation of God. Senior partner in the dialogue of the Bhagavad Gita.

**Maganwadi**: Maganlal Park. An estate in Wardha used by the Gandhians as one of their centres of activity. Named after Gandhi's deceased nephew,

**Maganlal Mahadev/Mahadevbhai**: Mahadev Desai, the author's father, and Gandhi's chief secretary.

**Mahatma**: Great Soul. The popular title given to Gandhi. Somewhere between a saint and messiah.

**Neem** : A tree with bitter leaves.

**Nehru, Jawaharlal**: A senior political colleague of Gandhi, and later Prime Minister of India for its first seventeen years of independence.

**Pandit** : A title of respect for learning, roughly the same as "Dr".

**Rama** : See Ramayana.

**Ramayana**: A Hindu holy book. Epic poem of the adventures of Rama, incarnation of God.

**Sabarmati**: A major river of Gujarat province. Also, a village on the Sabarmati River, across from the city of Ahmedabad. (See also Sabarmati Ashram.)

Sabarmati Ashram: Home base for Gandhi and his followers from 1917 to 1930.

Located next to Sabarmati village, on the banks of the Sabarmati River, near the city of Ahmedabad. The scene of the first chapters of this book.

**Sanskrit**: An ancient language of India, used for the holy books of Hinduism and from which most modern Indian languages are derived.

**Sari**: A women's garment, made up of a single piece of untailed cloth wrapped around the body

**Satyagraha**: Truth-force. Gandhi's form of non-violent direct action to achieve justice, based on refusing to co-operate with injustice, and taking suffering on oneself to awaken the opponent's conscience. Precludes harming the opponent, deceit, secrecy, retaliation, or hatred. In a wider sense, a way of life dedicated to the search

for Truth, and its realisation in practical affairs. A Satyagrahi is one who practises Satyagraha,

**Sevagram:** Service village. Common short form for Sevagram Ashram, home base for Gandhi and his followers from 1936 until his death in 1948. Also - and originally - the name given by Gandhi to Segaon, a village near the city of Wardha in central India, next to which Sevagram Ashram sprang up.

**Sikh:** Member of the Sikh religion, originating around 1500 in the north-west Indian province of the Punjab as a Hindu reform movement.

**Tagore, Gurudev Rabindranath:** A great poet, artist, philosopher, and educator of India. Gurudev is a title popularly given to Tagore, meaning "Great Teacher".

**Untouchable:** Someone from India's outcast group, normally confined to sanitation tasks that an ordinary Hindu would consider defiling.

**Viceroy:** Chief representative of the British colonial government in India.

**Wardha:** A city near the geographical centre of India. Also, the district surrounding that city. The national centres of Gandhian activity were located in this district beginning in 1933.

End