# CHAPTER X

GANDHI’S FAMILIES

W hen he passed through the prison gates, Gandhi left

behind him a country full of perplexed politicians and an

ashram full of two unhappy families: his personal family

and his adopted family of secretaries, disciples, devotees and hangers-

on. All of them, including Kasturbai, now called him Father,

‘Bapu’, or ‘Bapuji’, the ji connoting a Hindu mixture of respect

and tenderness. He received and gave a great deal of love.

Love made him indulgent. For himself, he had an extremely

strict code of conduct. With others he was tolerant. ‘Do not be

frightened by the wide implications of these views of mine,’ he

wrote to the women of the ashram. ‘There are always two mean¬

ings to everything — one wider and the other narrower. We shall

not be put out if you understand the wider implications but start

with the narrower.’

From young manhood, he was sweet and kind towards every¬

body except his wife and sons. A tension marred his early relations

with Kasturbai, but gradually it waned and he was able to relax

with her too. For instance, they frequently joked about their age;

they were born six months apart but they were not quite certain

who was younger and he would claim that he was and she that

she was. Gradually, as lust, in Gandhi’s words, yielded to love,

they became a model couple, she the acme of service, he a paragon

of consideration. ‘Ba,’ the Mahatma said, referring to Kasturbai,

‘takes tea in spite of the fact that she lives with me. She also takes

coffee. I would even lovingly prepare it for her.’ Tea- and coffee-

drinking were rather sinful in Gandhi’s eyes. Ba, in other words,

retained her personality; yet she attained a high degree of self-

effacement. She never behaved like Mrs. Gandhi, never asked

privileges for herself, never shirked the hardest work, and never

seemed to notice the small group of young or middle-aged female

disciples who interposed themselves between her and her illustrious

husband. Being herself and being at the same time a shadow of

the Mahatma made her a remarkable woman, and some who

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observed them for long years wondered whether she had not come

nearer the Gita ideal of non-attachment than he. He was too

passionate to be the perfect yogi.

As he aged, the passions submitted to more rigid rein, but he

never quite learned to be a father to his sons. He had an un-

Gandhian coldness towards them. Perhaps he had an impersonal

concept of immortality. 'But may not an artist or a poet or a great

genius 5 , insisted an interviewer, 'leave a legacy of his genius to

posterity through his own children?’

‘Certainly not, 5 Gandhi replied in Young India of November 20th,

1924. 'He will have more disciples than he can ever have children. 5

As he was more severe with himself than with anybody else, so

he was severest with his own boys. He expected Harilal, Manilal,

Ramdas and Devadas to be chips off the old block, but the block

did not chip. He was especially critical of his children when he

encountered a young man who did meet a difficult test. In a letter

dated Johannesburg, May 27th, 1906, Gandhi wrote to his oldest

brother Laxmidas. ‘Young Kalyandas Jagmohandas’s son is like

Prahalad in spirit. He is therefore dearer to me than one who is a

son because so born. 5

A popular myth, which, like so many other Hindu myths, was

tightly woven into Gandhi’s culture pattern, makes Prahalad the

son of a demon King Hiranya-kashipu. The King hated God, but

Prince Prahalad loved God. The King ordered tutors to teach

Prahalad that his father was more powerful than God. When the

teacher failed to convince the young man, the demon king sub¬

jected Prahalad to a series of cruelties: the prince was thrown from

a high hill and trampled by elephants and horses. Still he pro¬

claimed the supremacy of God. Finally, Prahalad was forced to

embrace a red-hot metal pillar. But when he continued to call

in His name, God emerged from the pillar in the form of a creature

half lion, half man, and tore King Hiranya-kashipu to pieces.

Gandhi regarded Prahalad as the first Satyagrahi, and the

Indian boy in South Africa who behaved like Prahalad was

therefore dearer to him than his own sons.

In the same 1906 letter to his brother, Gandhi wrote, ‘It is well

if Harilal is married; it is well if he is not. For the present at any

rate I have ceased to think of him as a son. 5 Harilal, Gandhi’s

first born, had remained in India in the hope of achieving personal

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independence. At eighteen, he wanted to get married; his father

thought it was too early and disowned him Tor the present’.

Six years later, still in South Africa, a young Indian married

woman successfully assaulted Manilal’s continence. When the

dereliction was discovered, Gandhi made a public scandal, fasted,

persuaded the woman to shave her hair, and said he would never

allow Manilal to marry. He only relented under Ba’s pressure,

in March 1927, when Manilal was thirty-five.

Gandhi leaned over backward to give his sons less than he gave

other men’s sons. The treatment contained an antidote to the

nepotism nourished by the strong Hindu family sense, but it was

unfair, and Harilal and Manilal resented it. They felt disgruntled

because their father, who had a profession, denied them a pro¬

fessional education. Gandhi contended that character building

outranked law and medicine. That was all very well, they thought,

but then why did Bapu send Maganlal and Chhaganlal, his second

cousins, and other young men to England to study?

When Maganlal died, Gandhi wrote in Young India of April 26th,

1928, ‘He whom I had singled out as heir to my all is no more.’

Why this partiality to a second cousin? ‘He closely studied and

followed my spiritual career,’ Gandhi declared in the same

obituary, ‘and when I presented to my co-workers brahmacharya

[continence] as a rule of life even for married men in search of

Truth, he was the first to perceive the beauty and necessity of the

practice, and though it cost him to my knowledge a terrific

struggle, he carried it through to success, taking his wife along

with him by patient argument instead of imposing his views on

her . . . He was my hands, my feet and my eyes.

‘As I am penning these lines,’ Gandhi wrote in a crescendo of

lament, T hear the sobs of the widow bewailing the death of her

husband. Little does she realize that I am more widowed than

she. And but for the living God, I should become a raving maniac

for the loss of one who was dearer to me than my own sons, who

never once deceived or failed me. . . .’

The Mahatma thought Manilal had deceived him. In 1916,

Manilal had in his keeping several hundred rupees belonging to

the ashram, and when he heard that his brother Harilal, who was

trying to make his way in business in Calcutta, needed money,

he forwarded the sum to him as a loan. By chance, Harilal’s

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receipt fell into Gandhi’s hands. The next day, Manilal was

banished from the ashram and told to go and apprentice himself

as a hand-spinner and weaver but not to use the Gandhi name.

‘In addition to this,’ Manilal recounts, ‘father also contemplated

a fast, but I sat all night entreating him not to do so and in the

end my prayer was heeded. I left my dear mother and my

brother Devadas sobbing. Father did not send me away com¬

pletely empty-handed. He gave me just sufficient money for my

train fare and a little extra.’ For two months, Manila! lived

incognito. Then the Mahatma sent him a letter of introduction

to G. A. Natesan, the Madras publisher, with whom Manilal

stayed for seven months. In the letter of introduction, Gandhi

recommended that Manilal ‘be subjected to discipline and should

be made to cook his own food and learn spinning’.

Following this period of penance, Gandhi dispatched Manilal

to South Africa to edit Indian Opinion. ‘During his lifetime,’

Manilal wrote after his father’s assassination, ‘I was able to spend

a very few years actually with my father. Unlike my other

brothers I had to live away from him in exile, in South Africa.’

Manilal came to India for occasional visits. ‘The longest period

I was able to spend in India, and most of it with father,’ Manilal

says, ‘was the whole of 1945 and half of 1946. Those were the

precious months . . .’ At this time, Manilal noticed that Gandhi’s

attitude . . . had so vastly changed since the time we were under

him in our childhood. It seemed to me that he spoilt those near

him by his extreme love and affection. They had become his

spoilt children, as it were, and much more so after my mother

had been called away from his life . . . One of the things that

struck me was the extreme softness in father’s attitude compared

with what it was when we four brothers were under him. He was,

of course, always forgiving though he was a very severe task

master. But he had grown extremely tolerant, which he was not

in our time . . . When I saw this, many a time I chafed and said

to father, “Bapu, you have vastly changed from the time we were

under you. You never pampered us; I remember how you made

us do laundry work and chop wood; how you made us to take

the pick and shovel in the bitterly cold mornings and dig in the

garden, to cook and to walk miles. And I am surprised to see

how you now pamper these people around you.”

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‘Bapu would listen and burst out in his usual hearty laughter:

‘‘Well, children,” he would say, “are you listening to what Manilal

is saying?” And yet he would love and caress them. 5

How much sorrow there is in all this for many lost years without

affection.

Manilal underwent punishment and banishment yet remained

a balanced human being. Harilal, however, suffered an inner

trauma. While his wife lived, he was outwardly normal. But when

she died in the 1918 influenza epidemic, and when Gandhi

frowned on his remarriage, Harilal disintegrated completely. He

took to alcohol and women; he was often seen drunk in public.

Under the influence of drink, penury and the desire for venge¬

ance, he would succumb to the offers of unscrupulous publishers

and attack his father in print, signing ‘Abdulla 5 , a Moslem name.

He had become a Moslem. Conversion to Islam, drunkenness

and profligacy were probably Harilal’s effort to hurt his father.

Early in the 1920s, Harilal helped to launch a new firm called

All-India Stores, Limited, and became a director. In 1925,

Gandhi received a lawyer’s letter on behalf of a client who had

invested money in the company; it informed the Mahatma that

correspondence addressed to the company was being returned

and that the whole thing seemed ‘a bogus affair 5 . The client was

a Moslem ‘whose respect for Mahatmaji led him to become a

share-holder 5 .

Gandhi reproduced the entire letter in Young India of June 18th,

1925, and appended his reply.

I do indeed happen to be the father of Harilal M. Gandhi.

He is my eldest boy, is over thirty-six years old and is father of

four children, the eldest being nineteen years old. His ideals and

mine having been discovered over fifteen years ago to be different,

he has been living separately from me and has not been supported

by or through me. It has been my invariable rule to regard my

boys as my friends and equals as soon as they completed their

sixteen years . . . Harilal . . . was naturally influenced by the

Western veneer that my life at one time did have. His commercial

undertakings were totally independent of me. Could I have

influenced him he would have been associated with me in my

several public activities and earning at the same time a decent

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livelihood. But he chose, as he had every right to do, a different

and independent path. He was and still is ambitious. He wants

to become rich, and that too, easily. Possibly he has a grievance

against me that when it was open to me to do so, I did not equip

him and my other children for careers that lead to wealth and

fame that wealth brings ... I do not know Harilal’s affairs. He

meets me occasionally, but I never pry into his affairs. I do not

know how his affairs stand at present, except that they are in a

bad way . . . There is much in Harilafs life that I dislike. He

knows that. But I love him in spite of his faults. The bosom of a

father will take him in as soon as he seeks entrance . . . Let the

client’s example be a warning against people being guided by big

names in their transactions. Men may be good, not necessarily

their children . . . Caveat emptor.

Harilal naturally caused his mother endless tortures. Kasturbai

brought up his four children with a grandmother’s tenderness. In

the 1930s, she could not control her grief, and wrote Harilal an

emotional letter; one of his adventures had got into the newspapers.

My dear son Harilal, I have read that recently in Madras

policemen found you misbehaving in a state of drunkenness at

midnight in an open street and took you into custody. Next day

you were produced before a bench of Magistrates and they fined

you one rupee. They must have been very good people to treat

you so leniently.

Even the Magistrates showed regard for your father in thus

giving you only nominal punishment. But I have been feeling

very miserable ever since I heard about this incident. I do not

know whether you were alone that night or were accompanied by

some of your friends, but in any case you acted very improperly.

I do not know what to say to you. I have been pleading with

you all these long years to hold yourself in check. But yo\i have

been going from bad to worse. Now you are making my very

existence impossible. Think of the misery you are causing your

aged parents in the evening of their lives.

Your father says nothing to anyone but I know how the shocks

you are giving him are breaking his heart. You are committing

a great sin in thus repeatedly hurting our feelings. Though born

as our son you are indeed behaving like an enemy.

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I am told that in your recent wanderings you have been criti¬

cizing and ridiculing your great father. This does not behoove

such an intelligent boy as you. You little realize that you only

disgrace yourself by speaking evil of him. He has nothing but

love in his heart for you. You know that he attaches the greatest

importance to purity of conduct. But you have never paid any

heed to advice. Yet he has offered to keep you with him, to feed

and clothe you and even to nurse you. . . .

I am a frail old woman unable to stand the anguish you are

causing. . . .

You have left no place for me anywhere. For sheer shame, I am

unable to move about among my friends or strangers. Your

father always pardons you, but God will not tolerate your

conduct. . . .

Every morning I rise with a shudder to think what fresh news of

disgrace the newspapers will bring. I sometimes wonder where

you are, where you sleep, what you eat. Perhaps you take for¬

bidden food ... I often feel like meeting you. But I do not know

where to find you. You are my eldest son and nearly fifty years

old. I am even afraid of approaching you, lest you humiliate me.

I do not know why you have changed your ancestral religion;

that is your affair. But I hear that you go about asking innocent

and ignorant people to follow your example . . . People are liable

to be led away by the fact that you are your father’s son. You are

not fit to preach religion.

Your daughters and son-in-law also bear with increasing diffi¬

culty the burden of sorrow your conduct has imposed upon them.

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Gandhi blamed Harilal’s misdeeds on himself. T was a slave of

my passions when Harilal was conceived’; T led a carnal and

luxurious life during Harilal’s childhood,’ he would say. But the

cause of Harilal’s fall could not have been the natural impulses

which led to his birth and to that of his brothers. Somewhere deep

in Gandhi’s psyche there was apparently a protest against having

children.

Yet Gandhi loved children and was never as happy as when he

played with them. He took time off to play with the youngsters

and babies in the ashram. Once, during the week I spent with

Gandhi at Sevagram in 1942, he led me to a hut used by a patient

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of his and then to a neighbouring hut which was empty but for a

red wooden cradle. The mother lifted the baby out of the cradle

as Gandhi approached. He patted the baby’s cheeks and said,

‘She is not my patient, she is my relaxation.’ The baby reacted

gleefully and he smacked and pinched it playfully.

There is a delightful photograph showing Gandhi rubbing noses

with a babe in arms. He would amuse the children of the ashram

by making funny faces at them and directing funny remarks to them.

Horace Alexander, of the British Society of Friends, who spent

years in India and much time with Gandhi, records his first view

of the Mahatma. He arrived at Sabarmati one afternoon in

March 1928. ‘After a rest,’ Alexander writes, ‘I went to evening

prayers. When all were assembled, he came walking quickly and

sat down in the centre and the chanting began. When the prayers

were over, each member of the ashram gave his or her report on

the amount of spinning done. This lasted for fifteen or twenty

minutes and was rather tedious. I noticed that the children ran

playfully around the Mahatma while this went on and he thrust

out his hand as if to catch them as they ran past. Some years later,

one of these children, now a grown-up man, told me how difficult

he had found it, as he grew up, to realize that the kind old man,

so simple and friendly, of his childhood days, was the same as the

Mahatma. . . .’

Gandhi believed in the goodness of children. ‘Children are

innocent, loving and benevolent by nature,’ he wrote in a letter

to the boys and girls of the ashram. ‘Evil comes in only when they

become older.’

Life at Sabarmati Ashram and, after 1932, at Sevagram in

central India, was serene, simple, joyous and unconstrained.

Nobody stood in awe of Gandhi. Until he was too old, he sat in

the scullery every morning with the ashramites peeling potatoes;

he did his share of other chores as well. Petty frictions and rival-'

ries were not absent even in this community of ascetics. There

was jealousy for the favour of the Mahatma. He usually succeeded

in being above that battle too, but bulletins of its progress came

to his attention. In fact, few details of the life and work of the

inmates remained hidden from his shrewd ken. He soothed,

smoothed and arbitrated impartially.

Gandhi met and expected everybody in the ashram to meet

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certain rigid requirements: absolute personal and civic cleanli¬

ness, undeviating punctuality and physical labour plus one hour

or at least thirty minutes a day of spinning. He denounced the

‘divorce between intelligence and labour’. Manual work was for

him a means of identification with working India, with the work¬

ing world. His compulsion to economize, though instinctive, also

stemmed from his conscious concern for the hundreds of millions

who valued a button, a nail and a fraction of a penny.

Gandhi once wrote out a telegram to G. V. Mavalankar, his

lawyer, who later became Speaker of the Constituent Assembly.

But on learning that there was an extra charge per word because

it was a holiday he posted the telegram.

Gandhi was famous for his postcards. Whenever the size and

nature of the communication permitted he put it on a postcard

instead of into a letter. He frequently wrote letters on the reverse

side of mimeographed announcements. Any odd piece of scrap

paper became an ashram-made envelope. His secretaries’ notes

and his own memoranda were always written on the backs of

letters received from outside. For a brief note he once wrote

to New York he had obviously taken a larger bit of stationery than

necessary and carefully torn off the excess.

Miss Slade, daughter of Sir Edmund Slade, a British admiral,

who joined Gandhi’s ashram in 1925 and lived there for many

years until she founded one of her own on the banks of the sacred

Ganges, tells how Gandhi lost the little pencil stump he had been

cherishing. The staff hunted for the lost treasure but in vain.

Somebody brought him a new pencil. No, he insisted that they

continue the search for the stump until they recovered it. ‘Bapu

. . . received it with a beaming smile.’

Gandhi’s insistence on economy, cleanliness, punctuality and

spinning grew greater, if anything, as he grew older. With all his

strictness about the personal conduct of his co-workers, however,

he was completely tolerant towards their thinking. Some of his

most intimate political collaborators and some who stayed long

in the ashram, did not, to his knowledge, believe in non-violence,

or in Qod, or in loving the British or the Moslems. Mrdulla

Sarabhai, for instance, said to him, T am not a Gandhian,’ but he

laughed and may have smacked her face affectionately. Nobody

had to toe a Gandhian ‘party line’. There was none.

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Gandhi accepted people as they were. Aware of his own defects,

how could he expect perfection in others? He believed in the

educational and curative value of time and good deeds.

Gandhi took from a person, a book, a religion and a situation

that which was congenial to him and discarded the rest. He

refused to see the bad in people. He often changed human beings

by regarding them not as what they were but as though they

were what they wished to be, and as though the good in them

was all of them.

His friends knew he forgave them, therefore they frankly con¬

fessed. If they hid things from him it was because he would blame

himself for their shortcomings. He encouraged familiarity; it

never bred contempt. It fostered love. He enjoyed banter even

if the point pierced him. A few weeks before Gandhi was arrested

in March 1922, Rajagopalachari, already in jail, wrote the

Mahatma a letter. He said he was ‘completely shut out from all

politics, news and newspapers. What an ideal condition which I

know you are envying ... It took me till now to get rid of the

boils. I am now quite free from the trouble. It must horrify you

to learn that I willingly underwent five injections of vaccine for

these boils. . . [Gandhi called vaccine ‘filthy 5 .] Your eyes would

flow with delight if you saw me here in my solitary cell spinning,

spinning not as a task imposed by a tyrant faddist, but with

pleasure 5 . The ‘tyrant faddist 5 printed the letter as the first item

in Young India of February 9th, 1922.

Sycophancy repelled Gandhi. He respected and befriended his

fiercest antagonists. Though pleased to make a convert, he was

hot flattered by loud partisans. He encouraged dissent; he helped

dissenters. Opponents found comfort in the knowledge that he

could reverse himself on even the most important political issue

in order to give the alternative policy a fair trial.

Such democratic liberalism made it possible for many members

of his political family, some of whom had joined reluctantly in the

1921-22 non-c6-operation campaign, to lay plans for co-operation

when Gandhi was sentenced on March 18th, 1922, to six years 5

imprisonment. He had prohibited nothing when he entered

prison. From his cell his only injunction was ‘peace, non-violence,

suffering 5 . Congress, therefore, was free to flounder and meander

in confusion.

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