# CHAPTER IX

THE TRANSFORMATION BEGINS

T h e Gandhi who worsted the South African government in

prolonged combat had first conquered himself and trans¬

formed his living habits and inner essence. That altered his

relations with Kasturbai and their children.

A photograph of Mrs. Gandhi on her first arrival in South

Africa in 1897 — at twenty-eight — shows her a beautiful woman,

elegantly dressed in a rich, silk sari. The fine oval face with eyes

wide apart, well-formed nose, delicately curved lips and perfectly

shaped chin must have made her very attractive indeed. She was

not as tall as Gandhi. He was photographed on the same occasion

in a European suit, stiff white collar and stiff white shirt, a gay,

striped necktie and a round button in his lapel buttonhole. On

his head is a thin skull-cap. In a second exposure he is without

head-dress. His full lips begin to reflect the will-power tempered

by powerful emotional self-control which they later expressed so

eloquently. But on the whole he looks the average Indian, Euro¬

peanized by constant imitation of the white world.

Harilal and Manilal, their two sons who came with them to

South Africa, were dressed in knee-length coats and long, Western

trousers. They wore shoes and stockings; they had not worn them

in India. Neither had Kasturbai. All three disliked them and

complained to the head of the family that their feet felt cramped

and the stockings stank. But Gandhi used his authority to compel

obedience. He also inflicted the Western torture of knives and

forks at meals; finger-eating had been so much more comfortable

and tasty.

Gandhi earned five to six thousand pounds a year from his

legal work — a very big income in those days in South Africa.

At one time, in Durban, he rented an English villa at the

beach a few doors from the Attorney-General’s home, and always

his life resembled that of the professional man who had made

good.

Before going to study law in London, Gandhi had yearned to be

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a doctor, and in effect he always was. He offered free medical

advice to most of his legal clients. One of them, Lutavasinh, was

asthmatic. Gandhi induced him to fast and give up smoking.

Later, Gandhi put him on a diet of rice, milk and marmalade for

a month. ‘At the end of the month,’ Gandhi boasted years later,

‘he was free from asthma.’

An Indian business man’s son became ill suddenly; the doctor

advised an operation. Gandhi was summoned. To calm the

father, Gandhi agreed to be present at the operation. The child

died under the knife; Gandhi never shook off the impression.

Gandhi was also Kasturbai’s midwife. He had studied a

popular work on childbirth, which constituted a full course in

obstetrics and infant care, and, when labour came too swiftly for

professional help to be fetched, Gandhi himself delivered his

fourth son, Devadas, May 22rd, 1900. ‘I was not nervous,’ he said.

For two months after the birth of Devadas and also for a while

after the birth of Ramdas, his third son, in South Africa in 1897,

Gandhi employed a nurse; she helped Kasturbai in the household.

But caring for infants ‘I did myself’, Gandhi writes.

Gandhi was constantly interfering in household matters; that

incensed Kasturbai. He considered himself her teacher, which

annoyed her. He imposed new, rigid rules of behaviour. The

‘blind, infatuated’ love he gave Kasturbai was a diminishing

recompense for these tribulations. But ‘A Hindu wife,’ Gandhi

declared, ‘regards implicit obedience to her husband as the highest

religion. A Hindu husband regards himself as the lord and master

of his wife who must ever dance attendance upon him.’ Gandhi,

in this period, was a very Hindu husband. He thought himself

‘a cruelly kind’ spouse. At times, Kasturbai would have failed

to notice the kindness.

Frequently, Gandhi’s friends and his law clerks and assistants,

whom he treated like sons, stayed with him. Among these non¬

paying boarders was Sheik Mehtab, his athletic, meat-eating

boyhood friend. Gandhi had brought him along on his second trip

from India. Mehtab had hardly settled in the Gandhi household

when he began secretly to introduce prostitutes into his room.

Gandhi was informed but he refused to believe it until on one

occasion he caught Mehtab in the act. Mehtab had to leave the

house. Later Mehtab married and reformed and wrote mediocre

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inspirational verse for the Gandhian passive resisters; his wife

went to prison as a passive resister.

There was no running water in the Gandhi home.; each room

had a chamber pot. Gandhi would not employ an untouchable

‘sweeper’ who in India does all ‘unclean’ tasks. He and Kasturbai

carried out the pots. She had no choice; he insisted. But one clerk

had been an untouchable himself and had become a Christian in

order to escape the ugly disabilities which Hindus inflict on their

‘outcasts’. To the orthodox Kasturbai, however, he remained an

untouchable and she balked at cleaning his pot. In fact she hated

the whole business and did not see why she, or her husband for

that matter, should perform such tasks. Gandhi compelled her to

obey; he considered it part of her ‘education’. But she cried and

her eyes were red with anger and tears. He protested; not only

must she do this work but she had to do it cheerfully and when he

saw her weep, he shouted, ‘I will not have this nonsense in my house.’

‘Keep your house to yourself and let me go,’ she screamed.

Gandhi grabbed her by the hand, dragged her to the gate,

opened it and was about to push her out.

‘Have you no shame?’ she exclaimed through copious tears.

‘Where am I to go? I have no parents or relatives here. For

Heaven’s sake, behave yourself and shut the gate. Let us not be

found making scenes like this.’

This brought Gandhi to his senses. He possessed a temper and

temperament, and his subsequent Mahatma-calm was the product

of training.

In 1901 Gandhi decided to return to India. On the eve of his

departure — with his family — the Indian community outdid

itself in concrete demonstrations of gratitude. He was presented

with numerous gold and silver objects and diamond ornaments.

For Kasturbai there was a very valuable gold necklace.

Gandhi had received gifts when he left for India in 1896. They

were not like these; they were small, personal tokens of apprecia¬

tion which he had accepted easily in that spirit. Since then,

moreover, his view of personal possessions had been gradually

changing. He was beginning to see danger in wealth and property.

He had been pleading with people to conquer their infatuation

for jewellery. Yet now he himself owned more than anybody

whom he had tried to convert.

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After the presentation party he went home and spent a sleepless

night. The gifts might be construed as payment for services which

he had rendered with no thought of material gain. He wanted to

give them up. But he saw the advantage of retention. Torn

between the yearning for financial security and the desire for the

freedom derived from owning nothing, he paced up and down for

hours arguing with himself. He was also aware that he faced a

family crisis if he decided to return the gifts. Kasturbai would

protest; he would be making her unhappy. But by morning his

mind was made up: the gifts must go.

He had won his own battle. Could he convince Kasturbai?

First, in order to make the renunciation a fact beyond family

dispute, he drafted a letter which elaborated a plan of using the

gifts to create a community fund. Then he proceeded to recruit

Harilal and Manilal, his first and second born. They were readily

persuaded. They had no interest in jewels and no objection to his

emerging new philosophy of austerity. Besides, Papa was a

compelling debater.

‘Let’s return them,’ they agreed.

‘Then you will plead with your mother, won’t you?’ Gandhi

hinted.

‘Certainly,’ the young boys said with alacrity. ‘Just leave it to

us. She does not need ornaments. She would want them for us,

and if we don’t want them why should she not part with them?’

But the boys failed to move Kasturbai. Gandhi came to their

aid.

‘It’s all very well for you,’ Kasturbai started calmly. ‘You don’t

care for jewels. You don’t wear them. And it’s easy enough for

you to influence the boys. They’ll always dance to your tune.

As for me, I have already obeyed your order not to wear trinkets.

After all the talking you’ve done about other people not wearing

jewels it would not do for me to wear them. But what about my

daughters-in-law?’ she said with bitterness and growing deter¬

mination. ‘They will be sure to want them.’

‘Well,’ Gandhi put in mildly, ‘the children aren’t married yet.

We’ve always said they must not marry young. When they are

grown up they can take care of themselves. And surely we will

not chose brides for our sons who are fond of jewellery.’

‘Young things like pretty things,’ argued Kasturbai.

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Gandhi tried to soothe. ‘Well/ he said, ‘if they do, if after all we

have to provide them with ornaments, I shall be hem You will

ask me then.’

That infuriated Kasturbai. ‘Ask you! I know you by this time.

You took my jewellery away from me. Imagine you offering to

get jewels for your daughters-in-law! You, who are trying to

make monks of my boys.

‘No,’ she shouted, ‘the ornaments will not be returned.’

The Hindu wife was defiant. ‘Besides,’ she exclaimed, ‘the

necklace is mine. You have no right to return that.’ This was a

retreat. She had given up hope of their keeping all the jewels.

At least, the necklace.

Eager to mollify her, Gandhi nevertheless was hard. ‘Was the

necklace given to you for your service or for my service?’ he asked

rhetorically.

Kasturbai burst into tears. ‘It’s the same thing,’ she sobbed.

‘Service rendered by you is as though rendered by me. I have

toiled and moiled for you day and night. Is that no service? You

forced all and sundry guests upon me, making me weep bitter

tears and I slaved for them.’

Gandhi knew this was a just reproach. But he did not admit it

at the moment. He was determined to return the jewels and

create the community fund. He was ‘definitely of the opinion that

a public worker should accept no costly gifts’. He was beginning

to believe that he should own nothing costly, whether given or

earned. Against this powerful impulse which would soon reach

full flower and alter his entire mode of life, Kasturbai had no

argument. Hers was the instinctive, million-year-old female

desire for adornment and the fear, equally primitive, of material

want. But a plea for acquisitiveness could not stand against

Gandhi’s penchant for renunciation, nor could Kasturbai induce

him to prefer self-enrichment to community service. In the end,

he simply asserted his male authority and announced that the

1901 gifts and those of 1896, would be surrendered to trustees.

So it was, and the fund, augmented from other sources, served

South African Indians for decades thereafter.

Shortly after this episode, Gandhi, having returned to India

and rented a home and chambers in Bombay, received a call at

his office from an American insurance agent. The agent had a

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‘pleasant countenance’ and ‘a sweet tongue’. He discussed

Gandhi’s future ‘as though we were old friends’. In America, the

agent said, ‘a person like you would always carry insurance; life

is uncertain’. Moreover, ‘It’s a religious duty to be insured.’

This impressed Gandhi; he had believed that faith in God made

an insurance policy superfluous. ‘And what about your family?’

the agent continued. Gandhi knew that his surrender of the

fortune in jewels had intensified Kasturbai’s insecurity. What

would happen to her and the boys if he died; would it be right

again to burden his generous brother who had already spent so

much money on them? So Gandhi took out an insurance policy

for ten thousand rupees or, roughly, a thousand pounds in values

of that time. The glib American agent subverted the future

Mahatma. The future Mahatma had not yet solved his psycho¬

logical problems.

Hardly had the family found itself in Bombay than Manilal,

aged ten, went down with a severe case of typhoid complicated,

before long, by pneumonia. At night, the boy had a very high

temperature.

A Parsi doctor was called. He said there was no effective medi¬

cine. Everything depended on proper diet and good nursing. He

recommended chicken broth and eggs.

‘But we are absolute vegetarians,’ Gandhi told the doctor.

‘Your son’s life is in danger,’ the doctor cautioned. ‘We could

give him milk diluted with water but that will not provide enough

nourishment.’ The Parsi physician said many of his Hindu

patients were vegetarians but in serious illnesses they obeyed his

instructions.

Gandhi replied, ‘Even for life itself we may not do certain things.

Rightly or wrongly it is part of my religious conviction that man

may not eat eggs and meat. It is in crises such as this that a per¬

son’s faith is truly tested.’ To be a vegetarian in normal circum¬

stances and take meat when the body is under stress would mock

vegetarianism. Gandhi accordingly told the doctor he would

persist. ‘I propose, in addition,’ Gandhi declared, ‘to try some

hydropathic remedies which I happen to know.’ He had been

reading pamphlets on water cure by a Dr. Kuhne of Leipzig.

Gandhi informed Manilal about this conversation. The boy

was too weak to do more than assent. The father now assumed

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complete charge of the patient. He gave Manilal several three-

minute hot hip baths a day and starved him on diluted orange

juice for three days.

But the temperature remained at 104. Manilal was delirious.

Gandhi worried. He worried about what people would say, what

his elder brother Laxmidas, now the head of the family, would

say. And Kasturbai was anxious and angry. Should he try

another physician, or perhaps consult an expert in ancient

Indian aryuvedic medicine?

On the other hand, he said to himself, The thread of life is in

God’s hand; and God must be pleased by my adherence to

vegetarianism and natural cures’.

The boy’s condition became extremely critical. Gandhi decided

to give him a wet pack. He dipped a bedsheet in water, wrung it

out, wrapped it around Manilal’s body, covered him with two

blankets, and put a wet towel to the head.

Manilal’s body was hot and dry. Gandhi was frantic. The boy

was not perspiring. Kasturbai fretted. Gandhi put her in charge,

telling her strictly not to alter anything; he himself felt he had to

leave the house to lessen the tension within him. He walked the

streets and prayed, calling, ‘God, God, God, God, please, God.’

Excited, exhausted, he returned home.

‘It is you Bapu,’ Manilal said to his father.

‘Yes, darling,’ Gandhi replied.

T am burning, take me out.’

‘Just a few more minutes, son. You are perspiring. You will

soon be well.’

‘No, Bapu, I cannot stand it any longer. I am burning up.’

‘Another minute. It will relieve you.’

Gandhi opened the sheet and wiped the body dry. Then they

both fell asleep in the same bed. Next morning the fever was

down. Gradually, it disappeared. Gandhi kept the boy on

diluted milk and fruit juices for forty days until he was com¬

pletely recovered.

Was it hydropathy? Or diet? It happens that Gandhi did the

right thing from the medical point of view. Orange juice and

milk were at least as good as, perhaps better than, eggs and

chicken. But Gandhi ascribed Manilal’s delivery to ‘God’s grace’.

‘God saved my honour,’ he said.

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Gandhi had settled down in Bombay, but in 1902 he was again

recalled to South Africa. He now realized that he would be there

for a long time and sent for his wife and three boys; Harilal,

the eldest, remained in India. Gandhi resumed his lucrative law

practice in Johannesburg.

Gandhi insisted that his clients tell him the whole truth; he

dropped many cases when he discovered that he had been

deceived. The lawyer’s duty, he held, was not to prove the guilty

innocent but to help the court to arrive at the truth.

If a person, wishing to retain him, made a confession of wrong¬

doing, Gandhi would say, ‘Why don’t you plead guilt/ and take

the penalty?’ He thought there was too much litigation for com¬

munity health and individual morality. ‘A true lawyer,’ he de¬

clared, ‘is one who places truth and service in the first place and

the emoluments of the profession in the next place only.’ But

the true lawyer, he found, was a rarity. Lawyers often lied,

money talked, and witnesses consciously perjured themselves.

Even as a lawyer his primary impulse was to change men. He

respected no precedent, tradition, enactment, or habit that ob¬

structed a change he aspired to introduce. He changed his own

habits with the greatest alacrity.

Gandhi suffered from occasional rheumatic inflammation, head¬

aches and constipation. Though a vegetarian he was a heavy

eater. He concluded that he overate. Having heard of the forma¬

tion in England (Manchester) of a No-Breakfast Association, he

dispensed with the morning meal and the headaches and other

physical ailments disappeared. Thereafter he took no more

laxatives or medicines. Instead, if necessary he applied a poultice

of clean earth moistened with cold water to his abdomen; this

worked alimentary miracles. Simultaneously, he adopted a diet

based on sun-baked fruits and nuts. Grapes and almonds, accord¬

ing to his researches, were adequate nourishment for the tissues

and nerves.

He walked to and from his law office. As long as the family

was in Johannesburg the children accompanied him — a distance

of five miles in all. In the office he became an expert typist.

Once a white barber refused to cut Gandhi’s hair. Without

blaming the barber (‘There was every chance of his losing his

custom if he should serve black men. We do not allow our barbers

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to serve our untouchable brethren’) Gandhi bought a pair of

clippers and thenceforth cut his own hair and that of the boys.

Gandhi wore stiff white collars, but the laundry was expensive

and, besides, it returned work so slowly that he had to have

several dozen collars. He took to washing and starching them

himself. The first time he did it he used too much starch and the

iron was not hot enough. In court, the starch began dropping off the

collar and Gandhi’s colleagues laughed. But ‘in the course of time

I became an expert washerman’. He saw ‘the beauty of self-help’.

In 1903 Gandhi joined a group of Christians and Theosophists

called the Seekers’ Club. They frequently read the Bhagavad Gita

together. Spurred by this activity Gandhi began studying the

Gita again. His morning toilet required thirty-five minutes,

‘fifteen minutes for the toothbrush’, an old Indian custom, and

twenty minutes for bathing. While cleaning his teeth, he memor¬

ized the Gita. Its outstanding lesson to him now was ‘non¬

possession’. Straightway he allowed his Bombay American

insurance policy to lapse. ‘God would take care’ of the family.

But ‘were not wife and children possessions?’

The discussions at the Seekers led him to introspection. He

concluded that his emotions were undisciplined and that he lacked

‘equability’. To be equable he would have to treat family, friend

and foe alike. This was Gita ‘detachment’.

One evening Gandhi went to an ‘At Home’ of the proprietress

of his favourite vegetarian restaurant. There he met a young man

named Henry S. L. Polak, born at Dover in 1882, who had be¬

come a vegetarian after reading Count Leo Tolstoy. Polak also

knew Adolf Just’s Return to Nature , a treatise on nature cures which

Gandhi cherished. They talked, found much in common and

became friends. Polak was assistant editor of the Transvaal Critic.

He had ‘a wonderful faculty’, Gandhi said, ‘of translating into

practice anything that appealed to his intellect. Some of the

changes he had made in his life were as prompt as they were

radical’. This description of what Gandhi liked in Polak is a

description of Gandhi.

Some months earlier, in 1903, Gandhi had helped to start a

weekly magazine called Indian Opinion. The paper was in diffi¬

culties, and to cope with them at first hand Gandhi took a trip

to Durban where the magazine was published. Polak saw him

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off at the station and gave him a book to read for the long

journey. It was John Ruskin’s Unto This Last.

Ruskin’s influence during his lifetime was very great, as art

critic, essayist and writer on ethics, sociology and economics.

His monumental Fors Clavigera, in eight volumes published between

1871 and 1874, preached the dignity of manual labour, urged the

simple life, and stressed the debilitating complexities of the modern

economic system.

Ruskin was sometimes contemptuous of the society in which he

lived. ‘How much’, he demanded in Sesame and Lilies , ‘do you

think we spend on libraries, public and private, as compared with

what we spend on our horses? . . . Or, to go lower still, how much

do you think the contents of the book-shelves of the United

Kingdom, private and public, would fetch, as compared with the

contents of its wine-cellars?’

The same iconoclastic spirit permeates Unto This Last: Four

Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy , first published serially

in the London Cornhill Magazine and in Harper’s, New York, in

i860 and later in book form. Of this work, forty years later,

Gandhi said that it was written with ‘blood and tears’.

‘Riches’, Ruskin declared, ‘are a power like that of electricity,

acting through inequalities or negations of itself. The force of the

guinea you have in your pocket depends wholly on the default of

a guinea in your neighbour’s pocket. If he did not want it, it

would be of no use to you.’ When he is poor and long out of work

the guinea is more valuable to you. Therefore, ‘what is really

desired, under the name of riches, is, essentially, power over men’.

Consequently, men should seek ‘not greater wealth, but simpler

pleasure; not higher fortune but deeper felicity; making the first

of possessions, self-possession; and honouring themselves in the

harmless pride and calm pursuits of peace’.

Remembering that ‘what one person has, another cannot have’,

the rich should abstain from luxuries until all, the poorest too,

shall have enough, ‘until the time come and the kingdom, when

Christ’s gift of bread and bequest of peace shall be unto this last

as unto thee. . . .’

To Gandhi it meant: only that economy is good which conduces

to the good of all. This Gandhi had known. The second lesson,

which he had ‘dimly realized’, was that ‘a lawyer’s work has the

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same value as the barber’s, inasmuch as all have the same right of

earning their livelihood for their work’. Gandhi derived this

interpretation from one sentence in Ruskin’s book: ‘A labourer

serves his country with his spade, just as a man in the middle rank

of life serves it with the sword, the pen, or the lancet.’ But Ruskin

did not say, as Gandhi did, that the work of all ‘has the same value’.

On the contrary, Ruskin stressed, more than anything else, ‘the

impossibility of Equality’ between men. He merely contended

that the underprivileged must find protection in the morality of

the fortunate. Ruskin hoped to alleviate the hardships of in¬

equality by an appeal to the conscience of the devout.

The third lesson of Unto This Last — ‘that the life of labour, that

is, the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the

life worth living’ — was completely new to Gandhi. But these are

Gandhi’s words; the teaching, though not alien to Ruskin, is

scarcely to be found in the four essays. Ruskin merely suggested,

in a footnote, that the rich would be healthier with ‘lighter dinner

and more work’ while the poor could do with more dinner and

lighter work.

Gandhi, who had never read Ruskin, started reading Unto This

Last the moment the train left Johannesburg and read all night.

‘That book’, he said in October 1946, ‘marked the turning point

in my life.’ He immediately decided ‘to change my life in accord¬

ance with the ideals of the book’. He would go to live on a farm

with his family and associates.

As Gandhi read his deepest convictions into the Gita , so he wove

his own notions into Ruskin. Those books appealed to him most

which were closest to his concept of life and, where they deviated,

he brought them closer by interpreting them. ‘It was a habit with

me’, Gandhi once wrote, ‘to forget what I did not like and to

carry out in practice whatever I liked.’

Ruskin, Gandhi observed in 1932, ‘was content to revolutionize

his mind’ but lacked the strength to change his life. Gandhi

suffered from no such deficiency. Bent on establishing a Walden

on the veldt, he acted quickly. He bought a farm near Phoenix,

a town fourteen miles from Durban. Situated on a hill, it con¬

sisted of a hundred acres with a well, some orange, mulberry and

mango trees and one dilapidated cottage. It cost a thousand

pounds. Several rich Indians helped with money. One Indian

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friend contributed quantities of corrugated iron for houses.

Gandhi would have preferred mud huts with thatched roofs, but

his colleagues vetoed that.

Without delay, the presses and offices of Indian Opinion were

transferred to the farm. Albert West, the British editor of the

magazine, whom Gandhi had met in a vegetarian restaurant,

gave instant agreement to this startling project. They fixed a

monthly allowance of three pounds for editor, errand boy and

compositor. That was in 1904. The magazine is still published

in the same place by Manilal Gandhi.

For a while, Gandhi’s law practice required his presence in

Johannesburg. He could not yet liberate himself for the new life

at Phoenix. He wrote much of the matter that went into Indian

Opinion and personally covered most of its deficits, which amounted

to many pounds a month. He did a great deal of legal work for

Indians who entrusted him not only with their litigations but also

with their savings. The Indian indentured labourers knew Gandhi

as their champion with the authorities and in the courts. He also

doctored them. Those who became free and accumulated wealth

often gave him their money to keep; they had no knowledge of

banking and little faith in the whites.

A proprietor was seeking funds to expand a vegetarian dining

room. Gandhi had a large sum belonging to Badri, a former serf.

‘Badri,’ said Gandhi, ‘may I use your money to help this restau¬

rant? It requires a thousand pounds.’

‘Brother,’ Badri replied, ‘give away the money if you like. I

know nothing in these matters. I know only you.’,

Gandhi lent the proprietor the money. In three months the

restaurant failed. Gandhi paid back the money out of his own pocket.

Henry Polak was assisting with the magazine, but Gandhi

needed him in his law business too, and so Polak, who had

settled on the Phoenix farm, came to live in Gandhi’s Johannes¬

burg home which always resembled an Indian joint family except

that in the Gandhi household not only blood relatives but friends,

co-workers, employees and political associates resided under one

roof. Gandhi paid the expenses.

Polak wanted to get married; he had postponed it for financial

reasons. But having made him a member of the joint Gandhi

family, Gandhi urged him to marry. ‘You are now mine,’

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Gandhi said. ‘Your concern about yourself and your children is

my concern. It is I who am marrying you and I do not see any

objection to your marrying immediately.’ Polak brought his

bride from England. She was a Christian, Polak a Jew, but their

real religion, Gandhi said, ‘was the religion of ethics’. Ever shap¬

ing others’ lives, Gandhi also persuaded Albert West to marry.

West went to Scotland and returned with a wife, a mother-in-law

and a sister. They were embraced in the joint family. At this

stage of his life, Gandhi was interested in marrying off all his

bachelor friends.

The expanding Johannesburg household adopted the practice

of maximum manual self-service. Instead of buying bread, un¬

leavened wholemeal biscuits were baked at home after a recipe of

the remote but omnipresent Dr. Kuhne of Leipzig, author of The

New Science of Healing. For health and economy reasons, the flour

was ground in a handmill with a huge iron wheel. Gandhi, the

children and the Polaks took turns at this arduous labour. ‘Good

exercise for the boys,’ said their exacting father. The boys also

did the chamber-pot chores.

During 1904 and 1905, Gandhi, Kasturbai and their sons lived

now in Johannesburg, now at Phoenix Farm. In both places, the

problem of restraint and self-control preoccupied him. He began

to fast, like his mother, whenever an occasion presented itself.

On the other days, he ate two meagre meals of fruits and nuts.

But after a fast he enjoyed his food more and wanted to eat more.

Fasts therefore could lead to indulgence! Gandhi’s goal was the

‘disembodiment’ and ‘desirelessness’ which, in Hindu thought,

conduces to union with God. Mere abstention does not meet the

Gita ideal; craving too must be absent. If reduced food consump¬

tion stimulated the appetite the restraint was negatived.

His task, therefore, was to conquer the palate. As a minimum,

he dispensed with spices and seasoning. Now began his lifelong

search for a diet which, while sustaining animal man, lifted the

mind above the animal.

If he did not curb his passion for food, how could he curb

stronger passions: anger, vanity and sex? We live, Gandhi

argued, not in order to provide food, clothing and shelter for the

body. We provide food, clothing and shelter for the body in order

to live. Material things are only the means to a spiritual end.

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When they become the end, the sole end, as they usually are, life

loses content and discontent afflicts mankind. The soul, alas,

needs a temporary abode, but a clean mud hut will do as well as

a palace, much better in fact. The body must be kept alive, not

pampered. To achieve release for the spirit, the body must be

subjected to the discipline of the mind.

The denial of ordinary pleasures is masochism, a Westerner

might say. Yet the Christian ethic is ascetic, and sainthood in all

religions is related to self-denial.

The year 1906 marked a crisis in Gandhi’s struggle with his

passions. He had given up the house in Johannesburg, sent the

family to Phoenix Farm, and volunteered for medical work in the

Zulu ‘war’. The suppression of the tribesmen, with its insensate

cruelty of man to man, depressed him. The long treks to the

hamlets of the suffering Negroes afforded ample opportunity for

self-analysis; he must do more to make a better world. Also, he

had a premonition of further discriminatory measures against

Indians in South Africa. He must dedicate himself completely to

public service.

To Gandhi, selfless service did not mean the sacrifice of part of

one’s assets; it required the investment of all of one’s being. A

dedicated person could not belong to wife or children, for if he

did, then they and not the work would be the first consideration.

To lead others he had to be immune to all temptations and in

command of all his desires.

Gandhi accordingly resolved to give up sexual intercourse.

Twice before, he had tried to become continent. Kasturbai was

willing. They began to sleep in separate beds and he never retired

until he was physically exhausted. Both times he succumbed to

temptation.

This time, however, he took a vow.

On his return from the Zulu uprising, Gandhi went to the

farm and told Kasturbai of his pledge to forswear sex. She made

no protest. ‘She was never the temptress,’ Gandhi asserted; he

determined the character of their intimate relations.

Gandhi remained celibate from 1906, when he was thirty-seven,

until his death in 1948.

The Indian word for continence is ‘Brahmacharya’, and a

celibate man or woman is called a ‘Brahmachari’. Brahmacharya

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THE END AND THE BEGINNING

‘fully and properly understood’, Gandhi wrote in 1924, ‘means

search after Brahma\*, or God. ‘Brahmacharya’, he added,

‘signifies control of all the senses at all times and at all places in

thought, word and deed.’ It thus includes yet transcends sexual

restraint; it embraces restraint in diet, emotions and speech. It

rules out hate, anger, violence and untruth. It creates equability.

It is desirelessness.

‘Perfect Brahmacharis’, Gandhi wrote, ‘are perfectly sinless.

They are therefore near to God. They are like God.’ To that he

aspired. It was the ultimate in self-transformation.

It is difficult to plumb Gandhi’s motives; it was difficult even

for him to know them. Gandhi believed his celibacy was ‘a

response to the calls of public duty’. On the other hand, ‘My

main object was to escape having more children.’

But why avoid additional children? Phoenix Farm was one big

joint family into which Gandhi invited many adults and children.

Their care was a common responsibility and expense. More of his

own would not have increased the burden.

Kasturbai was anaemic. She was once near death from internal

haemorrhage. A gynaecological operation, performed without

chloroform because she was too emaciated, brought relief but no

cure.

Brahmacharya is encountered frequently in Indian lore and life.

But it is unusual for a married man to take the vow at the early

age at which Gandhi adopted it. Kasturbai’s health and Hin¬

duism are part of the explanation. ‘The sight of women’, he

admitted in the Harijan magazine of June 15th, 1947, ‘had ceased

to arouse any sexual urge in me in South Africa.’ That was a third

factor. Perhaps, too, he harked back to his behaviour while his

father was dying.

In retrospect, Gandhi naturally did not attribute the chastity

vow to his own physiology or to Kasturbai’s, nor to his psychology.

On the contrary, he identified effect with motive and the effect was

spiritual. The chaste life apparently reinforced his passion and de¬

termination to sacrifice for the common weal. Less carnal, he became

less self-centred. He seemed suddenly lifted above the material. A

new inner drive possessed him. Storms continued to rage within,

but now he could harness them for the generation of more power.

A new Gandhi faced the South African government.

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