

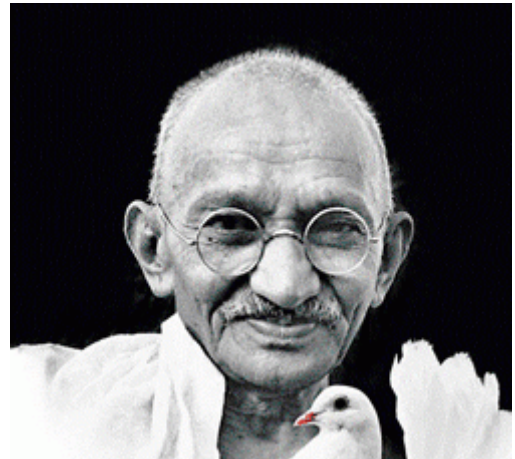
# Waiting for Gandhi

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## Waiting for Gandhi

On the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti, Shefali Tripathi Mehta recalls the values and principles, ideals and precepts that Gandhi stood for, propagated and preached, and rues the absence of a leader who could help us make sense of a world that's riddled with problems.



Decades ago, 'Gandhi Jayanti' every year took us kids to Kamala Park overlooking the Upper Lake in Bhopal to participate in a painting competition. We drew tricolours, charkhas, Gandhi glasses and Gandhi stick figures. The year I remember with disappointment was when Archana with me drew the typical Gandhi but made XXL ears — telling me importantly that he had BIG ears. I was the artist and I scoffed at her 'cartoon'. The prizes were announced at the Hindi Bhawan that evening and, sure enough, her lollipop Gandhi with elephant ears was displayed in the hall and won her a prize.

The Father of the Nation was someone we wrote essays about and whose life events we 'by hearted' to write in exams. Other than that, we remembered him only on his birth and death anniversaries. The two-minute ritual of silence that we observed on January 30 was invariably punctuated by stifled, schoolgirl giggles as we got to our feet during class when the siren went off at 11 am, the time of his martyrdom.

At home, things were different. My mother grew up in Gandhiji's Wardha Sevagram Ashram where her parents worked — her father as the Ashram administrator (who later edited 18 editions of the Government-commissioned Sampoorn Gandhi Vangmay) and her mother as the warden/principal of the Mahila Ashram.

Mother was nine when they moved into the ashram. Her parents and elder siblings spent years in jail during the freedom struggle. She lived her early years in close proximity with stalwarts of the freedom struggle and as a child growing up in the thick of political turmoil, imbibed the values of the stringent ashram life which included spinning and wearing only khadi.

Studies in the Mahila Ashram were geared towards preparing teachers for the villages. There was no grade or class system — just three broad categories. At 11, mother was being taught life sustaining skills along with History and Math that the students were expected

to pass on to the poor, illiterate women in the villages of India. Great stress was attached to swavalamban or self-help. Spinning was compulsory for everyone and no one was allowed to have more than three sets of clothes each.

### The ashram legacy

The most dreaded ashram legacy that we had to abide by at home was the threat of cleansing of the tongue with cow dung for using foul language. And foul, mind you, comprised all of today's language, including the near endearment, sala.

I was well into teenage when I learnt that perfectly normal people woke up late, lied at home and went to movies, stole small change to buy samosas at school and had parents and elder siblings do their homework.

Growing up, we never tired of mother's stories of Gandhiji and ashram life. When she first went to meet Bapu, she would tell us, Ba, (Kasturba) asked her if she could make something (cook). "Yes," said mother, "Chai". Ba laughed and warned her not to tell Gandhiji that!

The main ashram, Sevagram, was about four kilometres from the Mahila Ashram and often when Gandhiji was visiting, the inmates of Mahila Ashram went to Sevagram for the evening prayers. He encouraged them to clean the villages and involve themselves in community service from an early age.

Gandhiji lived simply and set an example for others to not waste anything. It was his vision of an equal society that made him question every excess. Mother recounts an incident when the inmates of the Mahila Ashram invited him and prepared a large map of India with food grains. The different states were filled with dals of different colours in the form of a big rangoli. Gandhiji appreciated the effort but regretted that so much food grain had been wasted. He was assured that it would be used for making a khichdi for the evening meal. He remembered to ask for it that evening. Later, in a letter to grandfather, he mentioned his distress:

Gauhati, January 11, 1946

BHAI DIKSHITJI,

I have your clear letter. It is good that you have written frankly. I am dictating this also at a Mahila Ashram. It is in Gauhati. A camp of the Kasturba Fund is being held here. On one side there is a village, and on the other, Gauhati city. It is utterly peaceful.

It gave me satisfaction to know that the cereals which were used for the camp would be cooked as kedgerree. It is quite true that I like garba and this I mentioned there. In one way I liked the scene, but from another point of view, I did not like it, and felt sorry. I could not then express myself in words as I was deeply moved. My heart was already in Bengal. I can never say that there was anything wrong in what you did. There was nothing wrong. The whole scene was one of love and it was performed with my consent.

Even so I had some talk with Shriman Narayan. But its purport was quite different. I do not remember whether I was able to convey it or not. But if I could not speak out then, I am telling you now. The Mahila Ashram is an institution of the poor. It is born of a noble sentiment.

It is filled with Jamnalalji's feelings and Vinobaji's tapascharya. It is regarded as a good means of rendering service to poor women. And its management is in the hands of Shantabehn. And yet, what a difference between what goes on in such an institution and the almost naked condition of the millions of poor women of India and Bengal. And I being a witness to all this. It wrung my heart then.

Even as I recall the scene, my heart weeps. Even if I could not convey my meaning, Shriman understood it and conveyed it. I dictate this early in the morning. If it calls for further explanation, or if you want to know more, ask me when I come there. You may share this letter with all.

Blessings from BAPU

In another instance, on the first death anniversary of Ba, her photo was decked with flowers and an elaborate floral rangoli was made before it. A large oil lamp remained lit in front of her picture. Gandhiji expressed his sadness, saying that the oil in the lamp could have been used to cook at least three meals by a poor family and the flowers too would have stayed longer on the bushes.

Now, mother gets invited to school functions to talk about Gandhiji. Kids touch her and ask in wonder if she has actually, really seen Mahatma Gandhi. She laughs and tells them of Gandhiji's simple and frugal living so they may think before wasting. But she never fails to remind them that Gandhiji wasn't such a grave old man. He laughed and joked all the time, especially when around children. He enjoyed teasing them. Once when the ashram inmates staged a play for him, he laughed out loud on seeing another Gandhi on the stage!

Gandhi, the superstar

When Richard Attenborough created his magnum opus and romanticised 'Gan-dai' for posterity, Gandhi became a Rockstar. Growing up, we watched the film twice a year when most TV channels played it on his birth and death anniversaries. Ben Kingsley and Gandhi became synonymous. For my generation, the one who smiled down at us from photographs in school and college walls, acquired a human persona. He faltered, he erred, but he admitted, repented and corrected himself.

But the world seemed out to get my idol. The cynicism, scepticism of the adult world was inescapable. Biographers, confidantes, random writers were outdoing themselves in laying out Gandhi's personal life, his oddities, threadbare. The shine of his perfect, blue-

skied pictures hanging in government offices began to dull for me. The clear-eyed, smooth-skinned Kingsley wasn't close to the scrawny, bald man with bad teeth his real pictures revealed.

The Munnabhai movies resurrected Gandhi in a more contemporary flavour for many. The rose-offering Gandhigiri caught on the imagination of a generation for a short while but petered out as fads do. Gandhi, anyway, would not have approved.

But it was Feroz Abbas Khan's Gandhi –My Father that shattered me. It was now time to ask mother the difficult questions. Maybe, he was a little harsh on his family, she said, but that's because, to him, all were equal. I wasn't happy with her reply. I was sure he had neglected the son, Harilal, just so no one would think him partial.

A firm believer that a person's first duty is to his family, then to the community, the nation, the world, I was ready to put my childhood idol through a full body scan. To fail as a parent is to fail your first duty, and to fail as a parent because you are preoccupied with 'greater' goals, I found unpardonable. My Gandhi picture — of a spindly Mahatma walking in a fast-forward mode in film documentaries, fell apart.

### Search for the Mahatma

Every once in a while, like a high-tide, people suddenly begin to rue the loss of an idol, a saviour, a mahatma who could have given direction to the country riddled with corruption, poverty, injustice, disparity, greed, religious fundamentalism, and a people seeped in anger, violence, consumerism and deceit.

In a country where men lie dying on roads while others walk past; where small, unsuspecting lives fall prey to careless traps laid out by adults; where women are owned and servants abused; where each one wields their power over those they can suppress; where hunger and disease kill those that can be saved; the custodians of law, mock it; and those that stand for their rights are brutally killed; innocents spend their lives in jail and predators gloat in power and wealth, stealing from those that barely earn to eat; but we are assured that the economy is strong, that development is unprecedented. Swank metros, ostentatious airports, a coffee for the price of a family's meal — a world in glass towers looks away as millions go hungry and struggle with ignorance and deprivation — the divide grows with time.

Is an idol relevant in our cynical times? Do people care? Would they listen to, follow someone, however infallible? Would the lady of the house stop kicking the little servant boy because of Gandhi's example of non-violence? Would a city driver not bludgeon another on road for grazing his car because Gandhi said an eye for an eye would make the whole world go blind?

Last year, on January 30, during a peace march in support of the passing of the Lokpal Bill, we swore in the name of Satyagrah. Yet, when during the walk, the siren went off, neither the organisers nor the marchers stopped to observe the two-minute silence. This

extremely passive form of non-violent, peacefulness of the thousands unsettled me. It was clear that idols are picked and dropped at convenience.

Today, the country rues the absence of an idol, a leader whose thoughts and words would spring from deeply ingrained values and personal integrity; who would have the courage to own up to his mistakes and whose power on his countrymen would arise out of their unfailing love and respect for him.

A Gandhi in our midst today, I am more than convinced, would help us make sense of our world where leaders shamelessly retract their own words to stay in power and blame modern technological aids for portraying them in bad light, where religious armies spew hatred at each other, little trusting girls are raped by friendly men, tax payers' money is hoarded in urban palaces and stolen to make handbag-carrying-auntie statues. The essential lesson and example in humanism, integrity, love, compassion for others and religious tolerance, only Gandhi could have shown us by his personal example. Being human would have meant more than a mere t-shirt slogan. Gandhi would be in, not just the topi.