

Can We Hear Manu (Gandhi) Speak?

Manu Gandhi, *The Diary of Manu Gandhi, 1943–1944*. Edited and translated by Tridip Suhrud, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019

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Abstract

In 1942, the recently bereaved Manu Gandhi arrived in Sevagram ashram, Wardha, to serve the aged Mahatma and his ailing wife Kasturba. In 1943, she was called to Poona, where the Mahatma and his associates were jailed. During that time, Manu began keeping a regular diary. Translated and published in 2019, the diary throws open the inner world of a lesser known Gandhi. This review article is a discursive reading of Manu's daily diary. It begins by locating women in general and Manu in particular in contemporary Gandhiana. The contents of the diary are discussed subsequently, the focus being primarily on Manu as a young woman. Put differently, the article explores Manu's feminine self (identity and agency) and its interface with larger questions of history such as nationalism and patriarchy. Finally, in an interrogative mode, it examines the possibility of retrieval of Manu's (a woman's) hitherto inaudible voice.

Keywords

Manu's diary, feminine agency, patriarchy, nation, Gandhi

Introduction: Gandhi, Women and Control

In 1946, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, the long-time political opponent of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, made an exasperating remark regarding the insatiable public curiosity about the 'most publicly accessible "public" man of the twentieth century': '[T]he number of books that people write on this old man takes

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my breath away' (Yusufji, 2017, pp. 73, 84 cited in Guha, 2018, p. 788). Seven decades later, the proliferation of Gandhiana continues unabated, notwithstanding Ambedkar's complaint (also see von Tunzelmann, 2018). There is no further proof required than the publication of the book under discussion in this review essay, which follows the voluminous biography of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi by the celebrity historian Ramachandra Guha (2018). Indeed, Gandhi belongs to that rare category of historical figures whose life and works have been so exhaustively documented, including by himself. One just needs to remember the hundred volumes of Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi covering over 50,000 pages that have been already been in the public domain, thanks to the monumental labours of the Publications Division of the Government of India. The really peculiar thing is that there is still so much curiosity about Gandhi's life; otherwise, Tridip Suhrud would not have undertaken the laborious task of translating Manu Gandhi's already published Gujarati diary into English, and also getting it published by a prestigious commercial publisher.

Undoubtedly, Gandhi was a complex man who consciously chose to bridge the divide between his private and public life. A self-avowed devout Hindu given to a deep-seated spiritual quest for truth and lofty religiosity, he was, for a man of his generation, unusually preoccupied with his own body—from his concerns with the bowel movement, to the discharge of semen, to water therapy, to fasting, to public experiments to test his vow of *brahmacharya* or chastity by sleeping naked with young women. It is worth remembering, howsoever undesirable it is, that Manu Gandhi's 'voice', through her diary, matters to the extent that her private life has been sanctified by the opportunity granted to her for the devoted *seva* (service to others) to Gandhi and, ultimately, for her being the 'partner' for the latter's sexual experiment in Noakhali.

Also, Gandhi was a control freak. His lifelong efforts had been directed towards controlling himself and those around him—wife, sons, female associates, political allies and opponents—through various means, including personal charm, argumentative force, moral prowess, ethical conduct, public persuasion and mass appeal. Interestingly, women constituted an important group to Gandhi, whom he sought to instruct and control in manifold ways. Readers of Gandhiana know of Gandhi's relationship with Rabindranath Tagore's niece, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, a cultivated writer and singer who was to be his 'spiritual wife' in 1919–1920. Apart from the fact that both were married to other people and often spoke of a haunting desire, Gandhi, noticeably, would sign his letters to her as 'Law Giver', which, as Guha observes, was 'a self-regarding appellation that reveals his desire to have Sarala conform to his ways' (2018, p. 854; also see Gandhi, 2007); readers may equally be aware of Gandhi's problematic relationship with his rather more well-known political associate Mira Behn (Madeleine Slade), about which the psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar (1990, 2004) has so ably written.

Manu, the subject, but only apparently, of the present diary, is different from women like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Mira Behn and Sushila Nayyar, given her unique vulnerability which no account of the ideals of the patriarchal Hindu joint family (and Manu talks about them) can hide. Undoubtedly, Manu Gandhi's diary calls for an even more sensitive engagement for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, Manu was just a teenager (and Gandhi was 77 years old) when Gandhi began his *brahmacharya* experiments sometime in 1946. At least, Sarala was 47 years of age, a mature woman exercising her own free will. Gandhi's decision to 'test' his vow of chastity by sharing the same bed with the teenage Manu, even if she happened to be his grand-niece, brings to the fore serious questions of women's agency and patriarchy. Manu was vulnerable on many counts. She had lost her mother at an early age. She has been 'gifted' by her father to Gandhi to be with him as a caregiver. Moreover, Manu spent her time in a setting where her great-uncle's charisma permeated even the flora and fauna of the ashram. Little wonder, she wrote a diary that could never be hers, and hers alone. The issue is not if her diary is a compromised archival source for the writers of Gandhiana, because Gandhi read the diary, as Manu wrote it frequently,

appending his comments in the margins. The moot issue is whether it reveals something of Manu Gandhi or if it is simply another feeble amplification of Gandhi's much chronicled personal life, albeit through the prism of an insecure girl carrying the disproportionate burden of rendering care to an eccentric old man who also happened to be an extraordinarily popular public figure.

Manu's Entry into Gandhi's Circle of Care

In 1927, a girl child was born to Kasumba and Jaisukhlal Amritlal Gandhi. Mridula, or Manu (behn/bahen), as she was popularly known, was the youngest of four daughters of the Gujarati Gandhi couple. Except that Manu lost her mother, Kasumba, very little is known about her life until she turned 15 years old; even the two books written by her, *Bapu: My Mother* (1955) and *The Lonely Pilgrim: Gandhiji's Noakhali Pilgrimage* (1964), tell very little about her childhood.

In mid-1942, Manu left Gujarat to live in an ashram in Sevagram, a town in Wardha district of what is now the Indian state of Maharashtra. Little did Manu know then that the decision, made by her father Jaisukhlal and grand-uncle Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, would transform not only her personal life but her illustrious grand-uncle's as well. Manu's entry into Gandhi's 'circle of care' (Suhруд, 2019, p. xi) in Sevagram entailed not only training in Sanskrit and English but also offering *seva* to the ageing Gandhi and his wife Kasturba. After spending 2 months in Sevagram, in August 1942, Manu, along with Gandhi, Kasturba, Mahadev Desai, Pyarelal, Dr Sushila Nayyar, Sarojini Naidu and Mira Behn, was arrested. During this period of the Quit India Movement, Manu's *satyagraha* led to her incarceration in Wardha and Nagpur jails, while Gandhi and his entourage were moved to the detention centre at the Aga Khan Palace in Poona. There, Gandhi's long fasts and Kasturba's deteriorating health necessitated calling Manu to the palace in March 1943, where she lived until May 1944.

Between 1942 and 1944, Manu, as an adolescent girl, underwent remarkable transformation. Insisted upon by Gandhi, Manu began to keep a diary from 1943. Interestingly, Manu too, like Mahadev Desai, wrote in her diaries only when she happened to be in the company of Gandhi; the practice, predictably, ceased following the death of Gandhi in 1948. *The Diary of Manu Gandhi, 1943–1944* (2019), edited and translated from its original Gujarati by Tridip Suhруд, contains the first set of diaries written during the 1943–1944 period. This book starts with an exceptionally long introduction by Suhруд, followed by entries made by Manu from Sunday, 11 April 1943, until 23 May 1944.

The Diary: Women's Agency, History and Nation

The diary, additionally annotated, makes for fascinating reading. It draws readers, slowly and almost seductively, to the world of a girl coming of age during a historically significant time for both Asia and Europe. Numerous diary entries mention her concerns regarding the ongoing freedom movement, including, for example, the breakdown of correspondence between Gandhi and Jinnah in 1943, the arrival of Wavell as the new viceroy or, say, the incarceration of Gandhi, the deaths in India due to the Bengal famine and the futility of celebrating festivals; in the entry of 30 October 1943, she writes:

It is the New Year today. May god grant peace and happiness to all in the world and bestow health upon all ... that is the only prayer I have. The New Year is not new in fact. Let alone the world, over 2000 persons die every day in India, Bapuji is imprisoned, Diwali cannot be celebrated (Gandhi, 2019, p. 84).

At the same time, we have a ‘trivial’ entry which displays her anxiety about (over-)sleeping and daily prayer; she notes:

Bapuji told me that ‘you do not recite the Gitaji during prayers and are not awake, instead you should sleep, because you do this only to please me; but this is not correct. You don’t even sing the bhajans’. Therefore, I have decided that I shall wake up on my own and remain alert I wake up three-four times at night ...! I go back to sleep but remain alert. (Gandhi, 2019, p. 57)

This diary is not one we usually expect from a girl of Manu’s age. For Manu, journaling was much more than simple acts of expressing ‘secret’ thoughts or finding an invisible and trustworthy friend. Manu was introduced to journaling by Gandhi. For Gandhi, keeping a diary had a higher purpose: it was a duty or assignment that all *satyagrahis* were expected to undertake in their quest for truth. Gandhi, and by extension Manu, believed the diary was a ‘mode of self-examination and self-purification’ (Suhруд, 2019, p. xii). In other words, the diary, as she was also to learn, contributed to the pursuits of self-discipline and self-vigilance. The entry of 2 May 1943, for instance, clearly illustrates this:

Today Bapuji woke me up at 5. 5 to 5.30 Prayers. 5.30 to 6.30 Slept again. 6.30 to 7.30 Squeezed juice, drank milk, bathed, made tea, arranged the medicines, combed hair. 7.30 to 8 Read the Gita, and cleaned Ba’s room. 8 to 8.30 Went for a walk with Bapuji. 8.30 to 9.30 Oiled Ba’s hair and combed it, gave her a massage and made preparations for her bath. 9.30 to 10.30 Cooked. 10.30 to 11 Wrote English. 11 to 12.15 I warmed up vegetables, milk, etc. made preparations for meals, I ate, cleaned the utensils, finished other sundry work and went to sleep. 12.15 to 1 Slept. 1 to 2 Applied ghee to Ba’s and Bapuji’s feet. 2 to 2.30 Today, I did not study with Sushilabehn as she had some other work. I read Ramayana to myself. 3.30 to 4 Read newspapers. 4 to 4.30 Studied with Bapuji. 4.30 to 5.30 Spun, have not counted. 5.30 to 6.45 Prepared twig for brushing teeth and lamp and lights, made tea and after that went to bathe in the pool. Cleaned utensils after eating. 6.45 to 7.30 Played. (Gandhi, 2019, p. 30)

Be that as it may, Manu’s diary provides us with an eyewitness form of history and accounts of feminine (and sometimes feminist) thoughts and acts. Unlike an autobiography, the diary is usually considered a woman’s genre, whereas men are believed to be more into ‘serious’ journaling (see Raoul, 1989). As a form, the diary is relatively easy, open and free; not surprisingly, it permits flexibility of both style and content, discontinuity, incompleteness and inconsequentiality. While the diary in the Western tradition is generally only a space for young girls to confide, in the Eastern one it is additionally treated as an avenue of education and character-building. The two important characteristics of journaling—truthfulness and education—appealed to Gandhi (with his ‘feminized’ sensibility and experiments with truth), and later Manu, his devoted disciple. Admittedly, they were to choose this genre to aid themselves ‘attain self-realization and achieve *moksha*’ (Suhруд, 2019, p. x).

As a ‘feminist practice’, notes Cynthia Huff (1989) in another context, Manu’s diary records the gradual process of forming *her* voice; in an interrogative and bold tone, she, for instance, writes on 27 May 1943:

Kanubhai had told me that I should be very careful and also have forbearance. I tread so carefully so as to not be faulted by anyone. How could this be? If I am not at fault, why should anyone be angry with me? I am not at fault and even then why should Pyarelalji be angry with me? (Gandhi, 2019, p. 42)

Speaking directly to the reader, the diary offers a factual—and sometimes banal—account of her everyday life of confinement in the Aga Khan Palace. Though it is tempting to read Manu’s diary as a purely

feminist document, it is ‘mediated’ or ‘restrained’ by Gandhi—the educator, who also reads and corrects (spelling, grammar, etc.) Manu’s entries routinely. Moreover, it is widely accepted by scholars, including Suhrud, that the very significance of this diary is its connection to Gandhi. Instead of being valued independently, *The Diary of Manu Gandhi, 1943–1944* is considered for further insights into Gandhi’s already much assessed life. This is a failure in justice to Manu and her diary. Being mindful that this diary is not an unmoderated record, we still insist on treating the candid entries as an intimate dialogue between Manu and her private self. And, indeed, it is Manu who, we argue, stands at the centre of this exercise. Rather than view her through the lens of Gandhi, we are eager to see Manu in her own right.

Manu having lost her mother early, her diary talks about the anxieties of discovering her purpose and place in a new home with a set of foster parents—Gandhi and Kasturba. Manu’s relationship with the couple, which is not free from tension with Kasturba, is an important theme in the diary, and over time, she begins to see Gandhi, and not the ailing Kasturba, as a mother figure; Kasturba often puts her to tests on *seva*, which she passes too, and yet, as she notes on 23 May 1943: ‘Ba [is] displeased with me ... Does Ba feel distanced from me? Why does she not ask me to do things for her as she used to when I just came here?’ (Gandhi, 2019, p. 39). The diary notes her daily duties, including household chores like cooking, cleaning, tending to Gandhi and Kasturba and also spinning, weaving, reading (the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita), writing and, most importantly, praying. Though her obsessive principle is routine, she has her emotional moments too. There are moments of grave self-doubt and inadequacy, partly due to her own fatigue, as also the renewed resolve to fight her ailing health. For example, the entry of 10 September 1943 demonstrates her trauma—she weeps until her eyes hurt—over losing weight and being chided by Kasturba and Sushila Nayyar. But, having confided in Gandhi, she overcomes and learns a ‘new lesson’ of not taking ‘anyone’s words to heart’ (Gandhi, 2019, p. 63). Ultimately, what the diary tells us, in an unrefined and utterly honest form, is about both her hopes and fears, her yearning to be appreciated and loved, and simultaneously the worry of not belonging. Manu’s experiences show that it was not easy to find her place in an eminent man’s life and his celebrated household.

Manu centres herself on the lived rhythms of the household and weaves herself into the place, the relatives and others members of the household and, in turn, the turbulent era. At the time of Manu’s writing, India was in the critical years of its independence movement. Instead of magnifying great events and ideas like *satyagraha*, *brahmacharya*, *ahimsa* and *swaraj*, she looks at micro-images and practices. Manu’s entries demonstrate that her time is not organized around the grand narrative of the nation state. Instead, her diary reflects the inner sphere of a recently orphaned girl. For Manu, this historical period is woven together with micro-activities like washing of utensils, daily prayers, play and studies. Arguably, it is this feminine insight into the nature of ‘real events’ that invites the reader to not only reconsider the history of India’s independence but also reflect on the very nature of history.

This diary offers reportage of the way things really happened, for example, the actual experience of imprisonment. It braids raw human experience with structures of meaning of, for instance, Manu’s ‘real’ existence as a young woman. Though the diary is chronological in terms of day-to-day telling, it is a non-narrative representation of history. Without any beginning, middle and end, the history of this diary time is not imposed on us as a story. This humanly experienced time, marked simply by dates and sometimes very short entries, takes us to the subjective side of Manu as a woman–person. It allows approaching big historical events through a woman’s time rather than the other way around. Though the diary contains a large cast of characters, the subject of it is *she*, Manu.

Accordingly, the diary entries revolve around *her* struggles to cope with the loss of her mother, to live in a communal (ashram life) setting and perform manual labour, to receive spiritual and educational training, to serve everyone in the ashram to the best of her abilities, to remain healthy, to learn frugality and restraint and, obviously, to handle her immense fragility. While Manu does not always seem to be

deeply interested in all that she does—except for serving Gandhi—there is a sense of gratefulness for the opportunity she is provided with, in the first place, to work and serve. Despite occasional setbacks, the diary reveals her extraordinary inner resolve. She remains steadfast to principles of duty and service. Perhaps, the daily prayers, spinning and regular study of scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita (which is focused on memorization of verses) played a significant role in this. Indeed, it is evident that the young Manu is trying to not only question her life but also navigate it in a better way, with the act of journaling contributing enormously to her efforts.

Manu's stay at and journaling in the Aga Khan Palace, which unfortunately finds near to no mention in the voluminous works on that period of the freedom movement, throw up some very interesting questions regarding women's thoughts and experiences. For instance, we are curious to know whether the culture of silence in which girls are brought up triggers distinctive personal journeys for them. Does this revolutionary household also embody patriarchy, and if so, does Manu abide by these patriarchal norms? Are there sexual politics in this household, and is she aware of them? Are there any patriarchal norms that we see shifting in this household? How do the men around her, say, Gandhi's secretary Pyarelal, conduct themselves, given that gender and social norms are deep-rooted and tenacious? Are there any instances of her speaking up against the normative values and practices and asserting her identity? What are the options for a young girl like Manu when not she but the nation is the priority? Is she getting a political education or training for a public role?

Retrieving Manu's Voice?

The diary offers nothing definitive but only some clues on these questions. Now, that is probably because Manu is either too young and naïve or is caught up in a political moment, a well-structured reality, which is greater than anything purely individual and private. In fact, the larger-than-life national and familial situation that she is part of deters Manu from making critical inquiries about her skills to negotiate for herself, her sense of self (or personal victimhood) and setting a clear life trajectory. Nevertheless, it is commendable that we have access to part of her voice. It is difficult to fully amplify her voice, but even limited agency is a remarkable achievement for Manu and her readers. The introduction to the volume under scrutiny denies her agency and voice. Instead, Suhrud goes on and on speaking about Gandhi—*satyagraha*, death, *vrata*, *brahmacharya*, women, sexuality and the final *yagna* with Manu—saying incredibly little about Manu. Of the 148 footnotes to the introduction, only six refer to Manu's book *The Lonely Pilgrim*. It is undeniable that Manu owes her 'recognition' to Gandhi, and yet the fact that she writes her own diary, mediations notwithstanding, gives her a life of her own. To deny her that is a gross injustice, both historical and academic. Manu's diary is not as famous as the one written by the young Anne Frank in hiding during the war. It neither presents a well-made story nor attempts any resolution; however, as Hayden White says,

the world really [does not] present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see 'the end' in every beginning? [It presents] itself more in the forms that the annals and chronicle suggest, either as mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude? (White, 1987, p. 24)

Locating the diary within White's frame allows us to make sense of the otherwise straightforward entries and incoherencies as real and authentic (feminine) questions. Finally, there is something compelling

about the diary, and we recommend its wide circulation and reading. And, needless to say, we look forward to the publication of the remaining diaries soon.

Our eagerness to read Manu's next set of diaries is not because we are convinced of retrieving her voice and agency through its pages. We are equally conscious of the pitfalls of looking at women's diaries either as unmediated sites of resistance or embodiments of an 'authentic' feminist voice. Feminist historiography has progressed too far to allow us to adhere to old shibboleths of the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the *ghar* and *bahar*. We want to get to Manu's diaries to ask incessantly such questions as: Did Manu want to test her own vow of chastity by agreeing to be a partner in Gandhi's sexual experiments? Was Manu trying to discourage another potential admirer and lover through her public acknowledgement of being Gandhi's bed partner? Was Manu trying to dissipate any future romantic possibility? Or, was she too much in love with Gandhi to have a sense of her own private space, her own individuality? We are not interested in knowing if Gandhi really had Manu's consent. We are more interested in knowing about the ways such 'consent' gets manufactured through power differentials of all sorts—through structural asymmetries and through ideological hegemony. Viewed thus, both Gandhi and Manu may have been trying to shape those structures as much as they were trapped inside them. It does not matter anymore if both of them wanted to go through this experiment or if there was an unequivocal imposition from Gandhi on Manu. What still matters is the question of power: the power of men over women, the power of nationalism as an ideology, the power of patriarchy to culturally encode notions like love, affection, devotion, *seva* and care. And, in these grand battles of history, it is quite likely that Manu's voice, regrettably, may never truly be heard unless, of course, mediated through Gandhi.

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