

BAHUROOPE GANDHI

By ANU BANDYOPADHYAYA

Foreword by JAWAHARLAL NEHRU

To my mother who taught me to respect all work

FOREWORD

PRIME MINISTER'S HOUSE
NEW DELHI

This is a book for children. But I am sure that many grown-ups will read it with pleasure and profit.

Already Gandhiji has become a legend. Those who have not seen him, especially the children of today, must think of him as a very unusual person, a superman who performed great deeds. It is desirable, therefore, for the common aspects of his life to be placed before them, as is done by this book.

It is extraordinary how in many things he took interest and when he took interest, he did so thoroughly. It was not a superficial interest. It was perhaps his thoroughness in dealing with what are considered to be the small things of life which emphasized his humanism. That was the basis of his character.

I am glad that this book has been written telling us of how Gandhiji functioned in a variety of ways, quite apart from politics and the public scene. It will perhaps give us a greater insight into him.

Jawaharlal Nehru

New Delhi,
10th March, 1964.

Introduction

THE MANUSCRIPT Of this book has been lying with me since 1949. I read D. G. Tendulkar's manuscript of the Mahatma in 1948, just after I had left the work in Kasturba training camp of Bengal. I worked in a village. The villagers around me and the girl trainees, I noticed, knew very little about Gandhiji. They observed Gandhi Jayanti, daily spun and prayed. Some had taken part in national movements and courted jail, but they did not know what Gandhiji's real contribution was. Maybe, I was wrong, but that is what I felt.

I still feel the same about many persons I come in contact with everyday, some of whom are educated, and all of whom abhor manual labour. I myself do not believe in the dignity of labour but I know the drudgery of body labour. And that is why I everyday try to share some manual labour with servants, lest I develop the feeling that just by paying a few chips I can win a right to make others work for me.

I wanted to present Gandhiji as a willing sharer in many such labours, which others do to earn their livelihood, not for the love of the work. Some incidents are repeated purposely. I definitely do not want to add more persons to the band of blind worshippers of Gandhiji. But I would very much like the young of today to know that Gandhiji was not merely the Father of the Nation or the Architect of Freedom, and then, criticise him.

The idea of the book was mine. I wrote it for the teenagers. Almost all the material has been culled from D. G. Tendulkar's Mahatma. I cannot express how much indebted I am to him for this small publication. Mr. N. G. Jog was kind enough to go through the manuscript. Mr. M. Chalapathi Rau gave me the chance of getting twenty of these sketches published in a series in the National Herald.

I am indebted to Mr. R. K. Laxman for the illustrations he has done for my book.

I am extremely grateful to Jawaharlalji for writing a foreword to this book.

I shall be happy if one young reader out of a thousand practises any of the works done by Gandhiji.

Cobbler



AT THE AGE OF 63, Gandhi was imprisoned in the Yeravda prison with Vallabhbhai Patel. Vallabhbhai needed a pair of sandals but that year there was no good shoe-maker in the jail. Gandhi said: “If I can get some good leather, I can make a pair for you. Let me see if I remember that art which I had learnt long ago. I was a very good cobbler. A sample of my workmanship can be seen in the Khadi Pratisthan Museum at Sodepur. I sent that pair of sandals for ‘_’. He said he could not use them as footwear but only as an ornament for his head. I made a number of them on Tolstoy Farm.” In 1911, Gandhi wrote to his nephew: “I am mostly busy making sandals these days. I like the work and it is essential too. I have already made about 15 pairs. When you need new ones, please send me the measurements.”

He learnt this craft in South Africa from his devoted German friend Kallenbach. Gandhi taught others to make shoes and they excelled their teacher in shoe-making. Shoes made by them were sold outside the farm. At that time, Gandhi set a fashion in wearing sandal-shoes with trousers. In tropical countries, they were more comfortable than covered shoes and could as well be worn with socks in winter.

Sardar Patel, Jawaharlal and others once went to Sevagram for Gandhi’s advice. They found him busy instructing a batch of trainees: “The strips should be here, the stitches should be there like this and there should be cross pieces of leather on the sole where the pressure is the heaviest.” They were getting the defects corrected by Gandhi. One of the leaders complained: “But they are robbing us of our time. Gandhi retorted: “Don’t grudge the lesson they are having. If you feel like, you can also watch how a good sandal is made.”

Another day, Gandhi and some co-workers were seen witnessing the full process of flaying a dead bull by village tanners. They neatly ripped open the dead animal with a village knife without damaging the hide. Their skill impressed Gandhi. He was told that none, not even surgeons, could do that work better than a village tanner. To him every medical student who dissected and skinned the human bodies was a tanner. A doctor's job is respected whereas a sweeper's or a tanner's occupation is despised. They are untouchables to the Hindus.

Gandhi did not stop at learning shoe-making. He wanted to be a tanning expert. What else could he do? So many persons all over the world wear leather shoes and that leather is mostly procured by killing healthy animals - cows and bulls, sheep and goats. Gandhi was a believer in non-violence. A man who did not give beef-tea or eggs to his dying wife or sick son, was the last person to agree to slaughter animals for wearing shiny shoes. But he needed leather.

He decided to use the hide of only such animals that died a natural death. Shoes and sandals made from such leather became known as *ahimsak chappals*. It was easier to treat hides of slaughtered animals than the hides of carcasses and tanneries did not supply *ahimsak* leather; hence Gandhi had to learn the art of tanning.

He found out that raw hide worth nine crores of rupees was exported from India every year. After being treated scientifically, finished leather articles costing crores of rupees were imported in India from abroad. This did not only mean a loss of money but loss of an opportunity of using our skill and intelligence for tanning raw hides and of making good leather articles. Like spinners and weavers, hundreds of tanners and cobblers were deprived of their livelihood. Gandhi wondered since when tanning had become a degrading calling. It could not have been so in ancient times. But today, a million tanners do this work and are counted as untouchables from generation to generation. The higher classes despise them and they lead a life deprived of art, education, cleanliness and dignity. Tanners, sweepers and shoe-makers serve society and do useful work, yet observance of caste forces a part of the nation to live a miserable life. In other countries, a man does not become a poor illiterate untouchable, if he chooses the profession of a tanner or a shoe-maker.

For reviving this village industry, Gandhi made public appeals and also sought help from tanning chemists for revitalising the art of village tanning which was fast dying out. Reformed tanning, Gandhi thought, would stop carrion-eating. When a dead cow is brought to a tanner's house, the whole family gets jubilant. It means a day of feast on the flesh of the dead animal. Children dance round it and as the animal is flayed, they take hold of bones and pieces of flesh and throw them at one another. This scene was repulsive to Gandhi.

He told the Harijan tanners: "Will you not give up eating carrion? If you do not give it up, I may touch you but the orthodox people will shun your company. It is a filthy habit." They said: "If we are to dispose of dead cattle, flay their skin, then you cannot expect us to stop eating carrion." Gandhi argued: "Why not? You may find me one day carrying on a tannery but you won't find me using carrion. I can say from my experience that scavenging and tanning can be done in a perfectly healthy and clean manner."

A tannery section was opened by Gandhi at the ashrams in Sabarmati and Wardha. It started on a small scale but later had a pukka building for storing hides. Gandhi collected Rs.50,000 for the building where the ashram boys did tanning work helped by expert chamars. Leather goods made there were sold in the open market. The entire work was done with dead cattle hides.

Gandhi visited the National Tannery in Calcutta and with keen interest saw the process of manufacturing chrome leather. He marked how salted cow hides were limed to take off hair, how dyeing was done. He also kept in touch with the research work that was being done in Tagore's Santiniketan for improving the village tanning. Gandhi did not want to scrap the ancient method of village tanning, nor did he like to remove from villages tanning and such other industries to cities, as that would have meant sure ruin for villagers. They would lose the little opportunity they had of making skilled use of their hands and heads. He wanted to find a decent way of removing a dead animal from one part of the village to another. The village tanner lifts it, drags it and thus injures the skin and reduces the value of the hide. He does not know how to utilise the bones. He throws them to dogs and incurs a loss. Handles and buttons made from bones come to India from foreign lands. Powdered bones also serve as a good manure.

Gandhi went to the chamars' huts, mixed with them, and talked with them. They too put great trust in him and looked up to him as a friend determined to improve their lot. When he visited their colony, they complained of the lack of drinking water. They told him how they were not allowed to use the public well or to enter a temple, how people shunned their company and how they were compelled to live in the outskirts of a village or a city. Gandhi felt hurt and ashamed. He did not believe in doing charity to them. He wanted them to stand on their own legs. With Tagore, he prophesied that an evil day dawned upon India when body labour began to be looked down upon and a day would come when those who denied human rights to their brethren would have to answer for their unjust and unkind acts.

Gandhi felt the need of a band of dedicated workers who would see that the tanners got proper wages, real education and medical aid. They would conduct night schools; take the Harijan children out for picnics and sightseeing. He himself opened night schools in the chamar quarters and concentrated on doing Harijan work.

The chamars in return tried to respond to his appeal. Some of them promised to deal with only dead cattle hide, some to give up drinking and carrion-eating. Gandhi once went to a cobblers' meeting in a tattered pair of sandals. He was on tour and had no extra pair of sandals with him. The chamars noticed it and two of them made a pair of *ahimsak chappals* and presented them to him.

Gandhi himself once presented a pair of hand-made sandals to General Smuts who had jailed Gandhi in South Africa. On Gandhi's 70th birthday, General Smuts wrote: "In jail he prepared for me a pair of sandals. I have worn them for many a summer, though I feel that I am not worthy to stand in the shoes of so great a man."