



## MEETING THE MAHATMA

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**H**e was killed before I was born. I never saw him; and yet, on several occasions in my life, I met him. He was no blood relation of mine; and yet, I always felt his presence as if he were my grandfather – the old man with the bushy moustache – whose blood flows in my veins.

His influence on my life started even before I was born. My father, Thakurdas Bang, in his youth, was a lecturer in the college started by one of the Mahatma's associates. He lived in Wardha, a small town a few miles away from Gandhi's ashram in Sevagram where the Mahatma conducted his experiments on life, personal and community, and from where he conducted the national independence movement. On his call, a nationwide protest against the British rule arose – the Quit India movement of 1942, which my father joined and was then jailed for two years. When he was released, the Second World War was almost over, and it was becoming clear that India would soon be independent. My father was an economist and wanted to pursue his academic career, so he thought of going to the US. He got his passport made, obtained admission and fellowship in Ohio University. Going abroad for studies was a major life-changing event in those days. Father went to see Gandhi at Sevagram to take his blessings before leaving the country.

Gandhi was sitting in his hut in the ashram; seated on a thin bamboo mat on the mud floor, he

was writing. My father had been given two minutes to see him. He went near him, bowed in respect, pranama.

“Bapu,” said my father. Bapu literally meant father. That was how the nation addressed the Mahatma.

“Bapu, I have been released from jail, and I am leaving the country for further studying economics in the US.”

The Mahatma looked up. The brown face with the rimmed glasses and a white moustache. He uttered only one sentence.

“If you want to study economics, don't go to the US; go to the villages of India.” And he continued his writing.

My father quietly came out of the hut. He tore his travel and admission papers, and within a few months went to live in a village with a group of his students to live like a villager, work in the field and understand the economics of the farmer by living like him. His entire course of life was changed by that one sentence.

He continued to work for social and political reform movements such as Bhoodan – land donation to the landless – and Gramdan – the village commune movements. Today, after 55 years, he continues the work with complete absorption. The fuel, once filled, is never exhausting.

“What was his magic,” I once asked my father, “that your whole life was changed by his one sentence?”

My father told me another story. Once, Ram Manohar Lohia, a scholar socialist leader of India, in his young age asked the same question to the Mahatma.

“Bapu,” he said, “you are an old man. Your speeches are delivered in a monotonous, low pitch, often inaudible voice, while we young socialists speak in a scholarly fashion or breathe fire in our speeches. And yet, the people of India follow you, not us. What is your magic?”

“Son,” said Bapu, “I don’t exactly know. But the only reason I can think of is that I have never asked people to do anything I first did not practice in my life. And the people of India seem to recognize the difference.”

On another occasion, when he was asked to give a message to the people, he said, “What other message? My life is my message.”

This was an astonishingly tall assertion. He had the moral strength to make such a statement because there was hardly any gap between what he said and what he lived. There was no private hidden compartment. He uttered and lived the truth. Many scientists, scholars, philosophers also know and often speak the truth. His magic lay in living it. On the evening of January 30, 1948, he was assassinated. Albert Einstein said, “The generations to come will scarce believe that such a one, in flesh and blood, ever walked on this earth.” I was born as one of that future generation. But I never had any problem in believing that he really existed. I experienced him!

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I spent my childhood in his ashram at Sevagram – where, a few years ago, he had actually lived, walked and breathed. He was no longer there, but his shadows still lingered. His presence could be felt everywhere.

The school in the ashram in which I studied was one started by him. He dreamt of an education system, which would generate a new human being. He called it ‘Nayi Taleem’ – new education! Children should learn to use head, heart and hand – to become a whole person – that was the first principle. Children should learn by actually doing and living – the second principle. Every student should learn a socially useful productive activity and engage in bread labour – the third principle. The ethics and moral values were far more important to learn than merely a few pieces of

information – his fourth principle. Once he had said, “Nayi Taleem will be my greatest gift to India.”

My school was designed to teach based on these educational principles. Every day we physically worked for 2–3 hours – sometimes in the field, sometimes in the kitchen, or in the dairy. All the work was packed with experiential knowledge. Chop wood, carry water and learn.

When I was 12 years old, I was posted in the community kitchen. The Mahatma was an experimenter of diet and hence was fond of working in the kitchen. Moreover, it made men and women equal. So when Nehru, Patel, Prasad – eminent barristers and national leaders – came to discuss national politics with him, he invited them to join in cutting vegetables in the kitchen. They later on became the first prime minister, deputy prime minister and president of independent India. I was sent to work in the kitchen of the ashram.

We were required to plan a nutritious diet using locally available foods and vegetables within a restricted budget – closer to what a poor villager could afford – and yet the meals should appeal to the diners. That was a difficult order. We cooked the food during the day, served the dinner in the evening and read the books on dietetics and nutrition in the night to plan for the next day’s meals. Which legume contains how much protein? Which vegetables contain which vitamins in what quantity? I learnt more about nutrition in the kitchen than what I later on learnt in medical college.

All of us were given a small piece of land – to plan, sow, nurture, harvest and sell the crop. “What type is the soil? What manures are required? What chemicals do they contain?” I learnt chemistry, botany, horticulture and economics – all while cultivating that small piece of land. I planted brinjals, or egg plants, nurtured them with lot of compost manure and cows’ urine – rich in nitrogen. The brinjal plants usually grow two feet, my plants grew six feet tall. I was four feet. So while walking in my brinjal field, I felt I was walking in the forest. The size of brinjal fruits was large. One particular fruit weighed 1.75 kg. It was taken to the market – but nobody would buy it. “We don’t want to eat one brinjal for the whole week,” the customers said. My brinjal came back. We cooked it in our community kitchen – it was enough for a 20-person meal.

We learnt music by way of prayers. Literature and poetry classes were often held either under, or some times by climbing on, a tree. Social sciences and skills were learnt by visiting villages, walking with Gandhi's disciples asking for land donations – Bhoodan – for the landless poor. That was literally a mobile university! He was no more; but he was still educating me.

My brother and I both studied in that school. One day, while cycling by the side of a hill, we decided that we were old enough – I was 14 years – to decide about our lives. What should we become? What do the villagers of India need, we pondered. Food and medicine. Decided! My brother would learn agriculture to help farmers and I would learn medicine to treat sick villagers.

The Mahatma was no longer there. But could I say that? Who inspired us to make that decision?

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I entered the medical college, and from that day I started ignoring my own health. They don't teach you in medical college how to live a healthy life yourself. No exercise, imbalanced diet, severe pressure for time and performance. I was completely engrossed in intellectual learning. Gandhi gradually went in the background. I wanted to become a brilliant successful doctor!

Years passed. I passed my graduate medical examination with the first position in the University. I wanted to learn an even higher level of medicine. Must go to a better place. Soon I was studying at the prestigious Post Graduate Institute of Medicine in India. The technological miracles of modern medical science were intoxicating.

But something was hurting within. Why wasn't I happy? Why was this restlessness? "For whom are you learning this? After learning this high tech medicine, to practice it, the only option will be to go to the US." That was what most of the doctors coming out of the Post Graduate Institute did. Ninety per cent of them were in the US. "Do you want to be there? What about the Indian villagers?"

I couldn't sleep. Something was seriously wrong. The inner pain grew. "What should I do?" I soon appeared for an all-India examination for selection for higher studies at the Institute. By the time the results of the examination were announced, my decision was

made. I had stood first in the national competitive examination. The director of the Institute, a very eminent physician of national reputation himself, in a specially-organized function congratulated me and asked, "Which specialty do you want to select?"

"I am leaving the Institute," I said. "I am going to a tribal area to put myself in use!" The Mahatma had died 20 years ago. But could I say that? Wasn't he my inner voice?

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Fifteen more years passed. My wife, Rani, and I had founded a community health care and research organization in a remote tribal district, Gadchiroli, in Central India. We were studying health problems in 100 villages by epidemiologic studies, developing village-based solutions to solve these, training villagers to become self-sufficient in their health care. Our research was often published in *The Lancet*. We were credited to have put rural women's gynaecological problems on the global public health agenda, and for developing a village-based system of managing pneumonia in children. The work was going strong.

As a physician, I often saw alcoholic men. Hopeless cases. I could hardly help them. So I ignored the problem and concentrated on my work. One night in the winter we heard noisy brawl from the nearby. Abuses, shouts, wails. Some nomadic families had put up their tents in the ground near our house; wife beating was a regular feature. Next day morning, we saw a dazed bruised woman with her seven children trying to hide in her. Her husband, drunk as he was often, had beaten her and children mercilessly, burnt the tent and the beddings and left them. It was a night in December. The woman and her children were under the open sky without cover. The tent had turned into ashes.

Rani gave the woman blankets and clothes for children. But that was an inadequate solution, we knew. "What should I do? Alcoholism is not my professional problem. It is a social problem." I tried to convince myself. But the more I tried to put the problem aside, the more it bounced back. That deserted woman with her seven clinging children! The sight would come back. "But you are a doctor," I pleaded to myself. "There is no effective medicine for alcoholism. Your professional expertise is of no use here. Don't waste your time."

But that woman's eye? There was no escape.

"I shall give you a talisman." He had once said to a perplexed soul. "When in doubt as to what your next step should be, bring before your eyes the most miserable person you ever saw, and ask yourself, "Will the next step I contemplate be of any use to him? Will it lessen his misery?"

A particular scene from Richard Attenborough's movie *Gandhi* floated before my eyes. Gandhi sees a helpless, half-naked woman across the river. Takes off his long turban and the waves carry the cloth to her.

The 'talisman' solved my dilemma. We started talking to women in villages individually, in groups. Their priority number one was the drinking habit of their men. Hardly any money reached the family. The good husbands and fathers would become devils in the evening. There were women who cried in the memory of their husbands who had died because of alcoholism years ago; and there were women who cried as to why didn't their alcoholic husband die. Alcohol was the greatest curse of women in Gadchiroli.

What was the solution? Men were not in their senses. Government encouraged selling alcohol because that gave big revenue. I felt very inadequate. They didn't teach me anything about this disease in my medical training. So I decided to return to him. Found out his writings on alcohol. He had built up a whole array of evidence against alcohol, incorporated prohibition in his programme to reconstruct society, and organized picketing against the sale of alcohol.

Soon we were collecting the evidence in Gadchiroli. It turned out that the annual government plan of development for the district – a very poor and undeveloped one – was 140 million rupees, while the annual sale of alcohol was worth 200 million rupees. When we went from village to village with these facts, even a school child understood the arithmetic of poverty.

We also discovered that the licenses to sell alcohol given by the state government were 'illegal' because the central government had long ago made a policy of not selling alcohol in the tribal districts because the tribals succumb to alcohol very fast.

The third weapon was his technique of civil disobedience. Saying 'no' to the government when it is wrong. A social movement in Gadchiroli was built up over six years which mobilized villages to liberate

themselves from alcohol. 150 villages declared social prohibition. Not a drop of alcohol was allowed to enter in the village. 353 social organizations and people from 600 villages sent a petition to the government.

The government was unrelenting. So we took our next step. A district conference was organized on his birth anniversary – October 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ten thousand villagers attended it. Half of them were women with hope. That one deserted nomadic woman had multiplied thousands of times. The conference declared that from that day, people's rule of liberation from alcohol became operative in the district. Government's right to sell alcohol and addiction was taken away.

Picketing started. The youth and women were in the forefront. Our two sons, four and ten year old, enjoyed getting arrested with us. Once when they brought their classmates for participation in the protest, we sent them back for their parents' approval. Surprisingly most returned with parents' permission.

"If you are going to be arrested in the anti-alcohol movement, we don't mind," the parents said. The Mahatma had once said, "If I was made the ruler of India even for one day, I shall close down all alcohol shops in the country." His 'ghost' was actively inspiring us in Gadchiroli.

The government finally relented. Sale of alcohol in the district was stopped. All shops were closed, licenses cancelled.

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On April 18, 1995, I started my morning walk and experienced severe chest pain. In an instant I knew that it was an attack of coronary heart disease – at the age of 44!

My first reaction was of disbelief and dismay. "How could this happen to me? Of all the persons, to me? Why me?" It was a terrible agony – to face that I may die any moment. "O God! I haven't lived the life yet! What about Rani, and our two sons, Anand and Amrut? How ill my parents will feel? What about the SEARCH and about the movement against alcohol? What will happen to these? How can I permanently depart so soon? So abruptly?"

I was completely unprepared to face death. All these years I had taken life for granted. Real life was yet to begin. I always postponed it with the thought that I was only 30, then 35 or 40 or 44 years. I had

cared nothing for my own health. The risk of disease and death was far remote. I always thought, "I shall start taking care soon someday!"

Life was slipping away from my hands and I was lying helplessly in the bed.

While I was still on my hospital bed, a book arrived for me: Dean Ornish's book titled *Reversing Heart Disease*. As if I had a tryst with destiny, I had ordered this book three months earlier for my own reading as a medical person. It arrived when I needed it as a patient. This book really gave me hope and courage to pull through. It gave a concrete programme of personal health care, its theoretical explanations, and convincing scientific evidence to substantiate the claimed benefits. It consisted of rigorous control of fat intake, limiting it to less than 25 gm of oil per day, completely stopping intake of sugar and animal fat, increasing vegetables, fruits, beans, germinated whole grains and pulses in the diet, daily brisk walk for half hour in the forest, Yogasans and Pranayam for half hour, meditation for 15 minutes, and deep relaxation through Shavasana twice each day.

For me, this was a desperate attempt to survive. At the same time it was going back to my roots of Gandhi's ashram. The lifestyle proposed in Ornish's therapy was very similar to one practised in Gandhiji's ashram, but which I had abandoned for the last 25 years, especially after I entered medical college, where I had switched to an unhealthy lifestyle consisting of no exercise, diet rich of refined carbohydrates and fat, and building up anxieties and stress to become an achiever. I was experiencing the consequences of this lifestyle at the age of 44.

On waking up every day, I used to stand in the garden in the early morning, and feel a deep sense of gratitude for the gift of one more day. It was a gift, a grace. I had not earned it. As I stood there watching the trees and the sky, and feeling the breeze, I used to feel a deep sense of oneness.

I got this feeling, for the first time, on my coronary angioplasty table. My angiography had shown 95 per cent block in my left coronary artery. During the attempt to dilate the obstruction in my coronary artery, the cardiologist increased the pressure in the angioplasty balloon. One atmospheric pressure, two, three... the obstruction didn't open. As a last effort, he increased the pressure to six atmospheric pressure

– and suddenly the inner layer of the vessel gave way and there was a tear. Everybody in the room gasped. I could see on the screen what was happening in my left coronary artery. I knew what it meant. "This could be the end of my life. This could be my last heart beat. The end has come!" For a few moments I was intensely anxious and frightened. And then, suddenly from somewhere, two streams started flowing. One was from the *Ishavasyopanishad*, the prayer we used to sing in early mornings in the Sevagram Ashram.

*Oum, Poornamada, Poornamidam,  
Poornat Poornmudachyate,  
Poornasya poornamadaya,  
Poornamevavshishyate!*

(This universe is a whole, that power which made it is also a whole. It is infinite. There is neither growth nor destruction, it is eternal. It will always remain. Let peace be there).

The second stream was from modern physics. "The universe originated when the Big Bang released infinite energy, which solidified into elementary particles – electrons, protons, *etc.* Everything was composed of these particles or energy. My body, my existence was also one such combination. Even if I died, the atoms would remain – albeit in different combinations. I was born with the Big Bang and I would be here eternally in the form of these particles. I was indestructible. So what was death? Merely a recombination of the particles!" My fear literally melted. I was ready for dissolution.

During the next three hours of emergency repair of my coronary artery, my doctors were anxiously working but I was absolutely at peace. On the fifth day, I was discharged from the hospital – alive and intact!

This experience sparked an urge and inquiry which I have tried to pursue in last few years, along with my efforts to regain physical health. The fundamental question was, "Is there a God? What is my relationship with him?" Rational intellect had doubts about 'God'. I did not have much time to get the answer. I must know this while I was alive. Re-read Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography. A simple statement in Gandhi's autobiography suddenly revealed to me a new meaning. At one place he writes about his meeting with the famous writer, Romain Rolland. In





## VILLAGE FIRST

### In Search of Research: Sevagram to Shodhgram

In what lay Mahatma's magic? His one sentence was enough to change the course of my father's life. We founded SEARCH; an Institution and an innovative model for addressing health in rural population in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra on the philosophy of Gandhian values and his dreams of reaching the poorest of the poor. Practice what you preach, was the Mahatma's mantra. When he came to Wardha from Ahmedabad, Gandhi went to live in an ordinary village named Segaoon – which later was named as Sevagram. So when sitting in a hut on a bamboo mat Gandhi gave a call, "Go to India's villages," his words and deeds were unified which gave his words the power of mantra and millions followed. His strength lay in his actual living!

During this search we discovered that most of the research on diseases affecting our people had been done by foreigners. Malaria – a disease transmitted via mosquitoes is widely prevalent in India. But the basic research on this Indian disease was done by a British doctor – Ronald Ross. He researched in India and unravelled the mystery of malaria transmission to the world. Cholera is another epidemic Indian disease. Its cause, the *Vibrio cholerae* germ, was discovered by Robert Koch – a European, who did his research in India. A pattern seemed to emerge. Whereas foreign scientists had shown vision and courage to do research on Indian diseases, Indian doctor-scientists usually stayed away from their own villages.

This is how most medical research is conducted in India. Our villages are plagued with health problems, but most of the research institutions are located in the cities – where electricity, air-conditioned office and facilities abound. Only thing missing is the problem to be solved! We got the message: "We will go where the problems are." Years ago, the Mahatma had said the same thing – Go to villages of India. That was our tryst with destiny.

We decided to go, live and work in Gadchiroli – a semi-tribal and backward district in Maharashtra. We started our research and training there, even housing the computer centre in the warehouse. We placed a board with the word SEARCH on the warehouse. To find relevant solutions to rural health problems- this was our SEARCH.

Shodhgram (Search Village) is the name of the campus from where we conduct our work. It has been designed to represent Gandhi's ashram and a tribal village. Situated inside the forest among tribal villages it is here that we live with our 50 colleagues and their families. It is from here that we treat, train, conduct research and seek solutions to people's health issues with their active participation.

response to a question about God, Gandhi said, "God is not a person, it is a principle." I got my answer! The hesitation about accepting God in some form of deity or image was suddenly resolved. If God is a principle, what principle? At another place, Gandhi says, 'Truth is God'. If the principle of truth itself is God, then it is something which can be searched, experienced and realized. The truth is everywhere; hence 'God' is everywhere. This line of thought helped me overcome my intellectual reservation about 'God'. It also provided a harmonious meeting of spiritual and scientific inquiries. Both are seeking the truth. I probably had a faint glimmer of this truth on my angioplasty table.

*"A human being is part of a whole, called by us the 'Universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."*

– Albert Einstein

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When I was in the intensive care unit, my wife Rani asked me if something happened to me, did I have

any particular wish. I replied, after burning my body as is done in the Hindu religion, bury my ashes in the Sevagram Ashram, somewhere near Babu Kuti, his hut.

After my discharge from hospital, the first thing I did was to go to the Sevagram Ashram. It was the same place where I grew up. The same trees with whom I grew up were still there. Leaves were moving with the breeze. The trees were speaking with me, smiling at me. If I had died, my ashes would be buried under these trees. I would be still there in the branches, in the leaves.

I went into his hut. Sat down. Closed my eyes. The time passed. Now I could clearly see – he was still there, sitting on the floor, spinning his wheel. I asked him, "Bapu, what did I do wrong?"

He smiled at me and said, "You will be alright." I again asked him, "What should I do?"

"Surrender yourself completely to God," he replied, and continued spinning.

I quietly came out, without disturbing him.

Today, I often wonder about that meeting. What was it that I saw, I heard? Who spoke to me? How did he come back after so many years to speak to me? Then I realize, he had never gone. He was always with me, in my blood, in my bones. At the deepest level I exist as consciousness. My consciousness, your consciousness, Gandhi's consciousness and the Universal Consciousness – the God – are all one.

No wonder I keep on meeting him.

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Kasturba, Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in a prayer meeting while visiting epidemic-stricken villages in Gujarat, 1940.