

The Mahatma's Sons: Harilal and Manilal Gandhi (A psychodynamic perspective on the father-son relation)

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Abstract When a reference is made to identity development as a process, choices made and differential investment by the individual to various sub-groups that he/she is a part of (family, peers etc.) are important factors. Personal characteristics that distinguish individuals from others within the same group are significant correlates in the shaping up of identity. Drawing from this perspective, this paper seeks to explore the father-son relation (Gandhi and his two elder sons, Harilal and Manilal), the domain of the personal experiential and life events from the prism of cinema, novel and biography. The attempt is to present a nuanced understanding without seeking to critically evaluate Gandhi's philosophy or the initiatives that mark the trajectory of his quest for harmony.

Key words: identity, Harilal, Gandhi, father-son relation

Introduction

The paper attempts to understand the relation of Mahatma Gandhi and two of his eldest sons, Harilal and Manilal, both in its “human and historical perspectives” (Parikh, 2001, p. ix). I seek to highlight that the analysis is not aimed at presenting them as dichotomous personalities or associating their actions with moral agendas. Rather, through this paper an attempt has been made to present a nuanced understanding and a more rounded perception of Gandhi as a father.

The intertwining of the public image with the personal in case of Gandhi and his sons, more so in the case of the former, is a significant consideration in unraveling the same. “There is an inexorable trade-off between the public and personal lives and interests” (Parikh, 2001, p. ix). The intent is to shift the focus upon the “clash between certain convictions and values and family aspirations,” particularly in case of Gandhi and his eldest son, Harilal (Chopra, 2007, para. 7).

From the perspective of developmental psychology the analysis seeks to demonstrate how the network of familial bonds and circumstances are integral to the shaping of identity. It becomes

even more complex in the Indian cultural milieu which celebrates the collectivist ethic (Kakar, 1982). Thus the aim of the paper is to bring to the foreground the ramifications that the family has as a contributory factor in the process of the forging of a distinct sense of self. Secondly the development of identity has to be understood in a continuum perspective, as located in the evolutionary framework marking the transition from childhood to youth.

The insights are sourced from biographical accounts and snapshots, drawn from different mediums - films, novels, biographies, published letters etc. It includes representations from cinema and literature; primarily the movie, *Gandhi: My Father* (2007) and the novel *Mahatma vs. Gandhi* by Dinkar Joshi(2007). Keeping into perspective that they are fictional renderings and the text, however unconscious it may be, is coloured by the authorial voice, the second half of the section pertains to accounts from published letters and biographies.

Biographies in comparison to autobiographies, can be described as narratives where aspects of the 'self' are prioritised and underplayed in its myriad dimensions. Besides Gandhi's autobiography,



which is an incredibly valuable resource, three prominent biographies on Harilal Gandhi and Manilal Gandhi – *Gandhiji's Lost Jewel: Harilal Gandhi* by Nilam Parikh (2001), *Harilal Gandhi: A life* (2007) by Chandulal Dalal (Ed. and Trans. by Tridib Suhrud) and *Gandhi's Prisoner* (2004) by Uma Dhupelia Mesthrie have been chosen for the analysis. Twin factors influenced the choice of these works – the absence of substantive autobiographical accounts and the propensity of different biographical texts in etching out the image of these much-forgotten men.

Harilal and Manilal: A brief sketch

Harilal Mohandas Gandhi (1888 – 18 June 1948) was the eldest son of Gandhi and Kasturba. He was born in Rajkot and probably in the ancestral house of the Gandhi family. He had three younger brothers – Manilal, Ramdas and Devdas. Immediately after his birth Gandhi left for England. Harilal had a keen desire to go to England for higher studies and to become a barrister as his father had been but it was fated otherwise. Later, accounts of his arrests and public drunkenness became commonplace. He died from liver disease on 18 June 1948 in a municipal hospital in Mumbai.

Manilal Gandhi, the second son of Gandhi and Kasturba, was born on 28 October 1892. He spent close to five decades of a life (almost sixty-four years) in South Africa. Most of these years, in particular, were lived at Phoenix Settlement, on the communal farm that Gandhi had started in 1904. For thirty-six years he (1920-1956) was the editor of the newspaper *Indian Opinion* which his father had a crucial hand in establishing in 1903 (Dalal, 2007).

Analysis

Literature has the propensity to recreate the web of life by capturing its complexities, ambiguities and varied dimensions within specificities of peculiar socio-cultural and historical contexts. Characters woven into the fabric of prose works evolve and their veiled selves are unravelled to illustrate the kaleidoscope of fundamental human tendencies that lurk behind human behaviour. It strikes an inevitable chord with the concerns such as the mind and consciousness of individuals that

characterise the discipline of psychology. A similar case is that of cinema; where the congruence of reel life with real life is inevitable. Not disregarding the dreamy and quixotic resolutions to life-situations that are sometimes portrayed one cannot overlook the social relevance of cinema. This may be elaborated upon by highlighting the fact that cinema can and does function as a platform for raising issues of social relevance – giving voice and space to the marginalised.

In this context, the movie *Gandhi: My father*, a 2007 Indian film by Feroze Abbas Khan, is a succinct and sensitive portrayal of the angst and mental turmoil of Harilal. Though taking into purview the wider social-political conditions of the era, yet it is distanced from the larger-than-life image of Gandhi. In an interview the director of the movie, Feroze Abbas Khan (March, 2012), highlights that very little is known about Gandhi the Man and his family life. And in the autobiography too the son is conspicuous by its absence. An oft-quoted argument is that “Harilal Gandhi's entire life was lived in the shadow of his father and it was spent rebelling against everything his father believed in” (Manzoor, 2007, August, para. 1). The veracity of the statement is highlighted through several anecdotes.

Innumerable biographical narratives and interpretations are available on the life of Gandhi; in comparison, the sheer paucity of documented evidence about Harilal's life trajectory is visibly evident. The biographical accounts of Harilal, though scant and mostly woven together through popular instances, highlight a pertinent factor that Harilal's life was devoid of his father's presence during a significant span of his childhood. His childhood is marked with small intervals of time when his father came to Kathiawad, only to leave for Mumbai and thereafter South Africa for better prospects. “During those days...he (Gandhi) liked being with the children (a reference to all the children of the joint family) and found great pleasure in their company. Along with other children, Harilal also benefited from this” (Dalal, 2007/1977, p.2). But it is equally pertinent to note that a significant span of his childhood is spent bereft of his father's presence.



During his youth Harilal was one of the most endearing and committed supporter of the ideals upheld by his father. As a thirteen year old he readily assented to giving away the ornaments gifted for the cause and was an ardent admirer and sought to actively contribute to the mobilization of the masses against discrimination and exploitation. Named as *Chhote Gandhi* his contributions ranged from taking the responsibility of the *Indian Opinion* press to active participation in the Transvaal agitation as a *satyagrahi* – hawking without permit, choosing jail terms and intensive imprisonment as a protest etc.

The ideological commitment can be construed as a significant indicator of developing personal values and making choices, a significant phase of developing a distinct sense of self. However the 'processual' perspective to the development of identity brings to fore the idea that the sense of commitment might not be crystallised and fixed. Taking into purview this factor it may involve a further exploration. As highlighted earlier, the process is checkered with risks, uncertainties, introspection and conflicts and tends to reach consolidation after a considerable period of time. If one analyses the example of Harilal from this lens there are two important considerations: firstly it brings to fore quite vividly identity development as a process of assimilation and differentiation and the yearning for 'singularisation' visible through certain certain behaviour patterns (Adams, 1992).

Both father-son worked as a team to stand for the cause in South Africa. On being asked why he allowed Harilal to go to jail Gandhiji mentioned that “I think whatever my son does at my instance can be taken to have been done by me” ... “It will be a part of Harilal's education to go to gaol for the sake of the country” (Dalal, 2007/1977, p. 15). Neither was Harilal given the opportunity to go and study law nor was he allowed to go with his wife Gulab to India – due to financial exigencies and the demands of the movement. But there was a deep-seated yearning “to study, educate himself and work for a living” (Dalal, 2007/1977, p. 28). With

no one to confide his inner turmoil, the feeling of claustrophobia in South Africa must have compelled the decision to leave for India without informing.

What is potently reflected in the actions and the behaviour exhibited is assertion of freewill and individual choices in the face of absence of support from the significant others. The crisis of the situation is that the overwhelming desire to carve a niche for himself/ herself becomes the guiding factor. In light of the Eriksonian (1963) framework, there is a dissonance experienced in the inner world due to conflicting opinion and pressures.

In the two-and-a-half years in South Africa, before Harilal left in a huff because he didn't agree with his father's notions of education, Gandhi's refusal to send him to study abroad on a scholarship was a significant juncture, an incident that heightened the differences of opinion in the father-son. Devdas Gandhi in an article titled *My Brother* (Dalal, 2007/1977, Appendix 2) mentions this incident highlighting that with this “my brother's sense of injury was complete. He never returned to Bapu after that in any sense of the term” (Dalal, 2007/1977, Appendix 2, p.148). It proved to be a catalyst and propelled Harilal's hasty departure from Phoenix. It is pertinent to consider that the contingencies of the social milieu, both pressing and delimiting in South Africa and Gandhi's own ideas on education, influenced by the idealism of Ruskin and Tolstoy's views endorsing manual labour, had prevented him from allowing his sons to seek an education which he never supported. The possibility of being subjected to social exclusion and an education which was not imparted in the mother tongue of the children deterred him from sending them to school. Dalal's (2007/1977) biography mentions that he had decided to devote time to the children at Phoenix but as the social movement gained momentum in South Africa he could not find enough time and the question of education during the stay in Africa remained unresolved. Further the biography

While returning to India in 1901, the Indian community out of respect for Gandhi gave him a grand farewell and several gifts. Dalal (2007/1977) and Parikh (2001) in the biographies mention that while Kasturba wished to keep the ornaments for her daughter's-in-law, Gandhiji resented this. When Harilal was asked for his opinion, he agreed with his father.



(Dalal, 2007/1977) highlights that a conflict must have gnawed at Harilal's being of how could a life of service, character building and simplicity valued by Gandhi could be achieved by remaining unlettered. Also when his ideal – his father - had been motivated for the cause after attaining prestigious qualifications, why was he and his siblings being left behind! The idea of saying that he was in Bapu's class did not satisfy his answers.

During this span Gandhi's letters that are addressed to Harilal are marked by a constant strain of concern; however they reverberate with a persistent sense of complain and dissatisfaction too. The mild rebukes can be labeled as a marker of veiled concern for the child. But equally significant is the fact that Harilal, inspite of the joint family, was distanced from his elementary family and the letters were the only source of succour and the chord that connected him to his parents and his siblings in South Africa. More than the affection, what stands out in these early letters Gandhi wrote to his eldest son is his curious mix of friend and a heavy parental hand (Reddy, 2007, August, para. 6).

The conversation between the father-son, after Harilal was discovered at the Delagoa Bay, trying to leave for India and brought back to the Tolstoy farm, is poignant. It is visibly evident that there was a strong sense of urgency and desire to pave his own path or destiny and for that he wanted to study. The conversation revolves around Harilal's passionate outcry against his life being defined, delimited and shackled by the ideals of his father. Harilal states that "I had always strangled my desires for your satisfaction..." (Joshi, 2007) but the decision to send someone else on Mr. Mehta's scholarship, while he equally deserved the opportunity, was a gross injustice against him. It comes forth as a shock to Gandhi and he states that the futility of the English system of education had prevented him from sending Harilal. It is a significant juncture for both father and son. For Harilal it functions as a cathartic release, a vent to

his pent up emotions. For Gandhi, it comes to fore as a realization, a realization of the inner turmoil that his son was undergoing. Thereafter Harilal left for Ahmedabad to complete his education and to stay with his family.

Parikh (2001) offers an interesting explanation based on the idea of inter-generational conflict of the same and examines the differences in the relationship in a more humane light. She states that the absence of an alternate vision was the tragedy of Harilal's life and clashes of opinions happen with every generation. From the standpoint of the Identity Status Paradigm (1966) forwarded by James Marcia there is a state of moratorium which involves a state of self exploration in order to achieve an inner sameness of one's values, beliefs etc. Correlating this paradigm with family correlates Carol Markstrom (1992) in the essay, *A Consideration of Intervening Factors in Adolescent Identity Formation*, mentions that different identity statuses can be identifiably correlated, though not equivocally, to varied patterns of parenting and familial milieu. In case of Harilal it can be stated that this strong-willed desire to fulfill the needs and ambitions slowly degenerates as the circumstances become hostile and Harilal becomes a pitiable figure.

Harilal's semi-public letter (1915 (in Suhrud (trans. & ed.), 2007, Appendix 1)) to his father has been often cited as an instance of a provocative indictment of his father's methods and practices. However on the whole several passages from the letter illustrate that it is written from an emotionally mature vantage point. For instance the sense of disenchantment is not only directed at the father but to himself at certain junctures. There is an ebbing and flow of emotions throughout the text which are potently reflective of an oscillation between blaming and self-reflection.

A similar example comes to fore in Franz Kafka's, a twentieth century German writer, *Letter to His Father*. The letter, as in case of Harilal becomes a mode of expressing or writing the unwritable.

Namely the four identity statuses were that of foreclosure (commitment without exploration), diffusion (where neither commitment nor exploration is present), moratorium (ongoing self exploration in absence of commitment) and achiever (commitment after duly exploring different avenues).



Kafka's letter exemplifies the angst of the son for whom the father's physical and psychological strong presence becomes overwhelming for him. As critics describe, even his work functions as the very epitome of the immobility and impossibility of the strained, sterile relationship he had with his father (Fischer, 2011). There are apparent similarities in the psychological experiences expressed by Kafka and Harilal. However situational matrices vary and subtle variations in case of Harilal are several.

The yearning to define and extricate, or rather salvage, the 'I' from being delimited and circumscribed by the 'You' comes to fore in the following excerpts from Harilal's letter:

I separated from you...In so doing I followed the dictates of my conscience.

It was usually not able to distinguish the Phoenix institution from you and hence I left that too. (Dalal, 2007/1977, Appendix 1, p.137)

Another pertinent factor that is noticeable that the sense of dissatisfaction and disenchantment - whether it is the *Open Letter to His Father* or it is the scene in *Gandhi: My Father* (2007) where he offers an orange to his mother completely disregarding his father's presence at Katni station - is directed primarily at his father. The anguish and admonishing of the mother comes to fore in the letter—An Open Letter to Her Son by a Mother.

I do not understand what I should tell you. Now it has become hard for me to even live. How much pain are you inflicting...'

I long ardently to meet you: but I do not know your whereabouts.'

(Open Letter to Her Son by a Mother (Excerpts), in Parikh, 2001, Appendix 8, 176, 177)

The biographies highlight that Harilal was a man who never stopped caring about his family, even after his downfall. He cared so deeply that he preferred to entrust his children to Gandhi and Kasturba, and stayed away from them rather than embarrass them with his degradation. "The tragedy of Harilal's life was that after picking up the moral courage to rebel against his father he became one of

those individuals who failed at everything he undertook, and gradually got pulled into the vortex of failure until he believed it was his destiny to wander homeless forever" (Parikh in Reddy, 2007). He was rebelling against the Mahatma, who was setting ideals for an entire nation. He was running against the tide of revolution and on top of it, he lost the support a family provides. He went "looking for a father," explains Parikh, "and always found a Mahatma instead"(in Reddy, 2007, para. 7). From a psychological standpoint it can be interpreted that there is a persistent yearning and desire to carve out a niche for himself propelling the attempts, sometimes frantic and reckless. However it cannot be disregarded that "there was a mutual respect between them..." and it was 'It was never Gandhi versus Gandhi, but Gandhi and Gandhi'" (Reddy, 2007, para. 9).

While Gandhi was in South Africa, Manilal's childhood years like his elder brother Harilal, were spent in the joint family at Rajkot. Mesthrie (2004) in her biography of Manilal Gandhi highlights that Gandhi "missed out on the crucial developmental stages of both sons...He was a stranger to them. It was their mother who provided them with emotional warmth and security" (Mesthrie, 2004, p. 35). However their arrival in South Africa in the 1896 is an important juncture as they witnessed their father's committed involvement in resistance initiatives and his image as a public figure. This experience did have a sustained influence and a deep impression on the young minds. For instance Manilal along with his elder brother readily agreed to Gandhi's decision to return the gifts while they were returning from South Africa to Rajkot (1901).

Mesthrie (2004) explicitly highlights that the life trajectory of Manilal Gandhi would have been very different had he been left behind like his elder brother, Harilal, at Rajkot when once again the family moved to South Africa in 1904. It cannot be overlooked that the circumstantial matrices of socialization and enculturation were markedly varied in case of both brothers. Particularly in case of Manilal experiences such as an extended family which consisted of members from differing socio-economic and cultural origins, the merging of public and private lives, the exposure to different



languages, such as English and Gujarati, his father's insistence on value of physical labour, etc. would not have escaped his attention during the growing up years. Also Mesthrie's (2004) biography points out that what Manilal recalled of his own childhood were experiences that were actually "lessons in discipline" (p. 57) given by his father. Thus whether it was the day when he was asked to walk a distance of 32 km to fetch his reading glasses which he had forgotten or the 'talk' he had received from his father on the importance of setting limits after he had sore stomach from eating his favourite dish in excess. Another important instance about which Gandhi makes a detailed reference in his autobiography too is the period when Manilal was taken seriously ill at Girgaum. We get a glimpse of a caring, nurturing father. But on the other hand we witness how he embarked on his own course of treatment. "Gandhi nevertheless decided that no matter how ill the boy became, the family was bounded by religion to remain vegetarian" (Mesthrie, 2004).

As a teenager, the shift from the house in Natal to the Phoenix farm (1906) was a significant juncture for Manilal. Harilal's extended periods of absence from the farm and his disenchantment with the manner in which surveillance was being carried out contrasted with his brother's active and devoted participation in the establishment of this communal farm. Soon his fate is inextricably intertwined with the farm as he became the editor of the paper (1920), *Indian Opinion*, which was published at the farm. However the intervening period (1906-1920) was not devoid of dichotomies and ambivalences where Manilal questioned his lack of accomplishment. Mesthrie (2004) biography, interestingly titled *Gandhi's Prisoner*, provides a nuanced insight into Manilal's unflinching commitment and dedication to the ideals cherished by his father. However at the same time highlights that "Gandhi would lay down his beliefs so persuasively that, in the end, Manilal had no choice" (Mesthrie, 2004, p.24). There are several instances which illustrate that there was a dichotomy which irked him or gnawed at his being repeatedly, but the volley of emotions remained resolutely caged in.

He thought he would make a good doctor. He also wanted to learn and play the piano, and urged his father to buy him one, but Gandhi could not fulfill the promise.

What class must I tell people I am in? Should not one be learning a skill to earn a living? (Mesthrie, 2004, p.75)

Interesting to consider is the letter addressed to Manilal by Gandhi from Volkrust prison in the year, 1909. According to the terms of imprisonment he was allowed to write only one letter in a month (Fischer, 1951, p119) and Gandhi mentions that he decided to write the letter to Manilal as he was the nearest one to his thoughts. Fischer (1951) in his pioneering biography of Gandhi highlights that in this letter "Gandhi's warm and tender concern to mould Manilal into his own image probably sounded like a sermon interlarded with... chores. Gandhi's selfless injunctions were for his son's good, but the prospect of chastity, poverty and hard work under a strict taskmaster... offered few thrills to the young man on the threshold of life." (p. 93) Apart from the socio-political contingencies Fischer's (1951) analysis also veers towards a more psychological explanation which refers to Gandhi's marriage at thirteen and the absence of the span of boyhood in his own life.

Conclusion:

Gandhi was an epitome of self actualization as universal good had assumed more salience for him than his personal self. From the same it can be purported that there was a stupendously well established synchrony between the inner world and the outer realm. The beliefs and the matrix of value systems that he subscribed to were often fed in by the experiences he had. These are suitably named as 'experiments' in his autobiography – *My Experiments with Truth*. They are mentioned as seminal learning experiences that had contributed to his ideas in a significant manner. Whether it was the question of sending one of his sons on a scholarship to study in London or his decision to punish Manilal by banishing him from the *ashram* (1916) for giving money to Harilal from the ashram funds, Gandhi was unlikely to have favored his



own sons. As a father, he cannot be separated from the public persona and often the 'self' is overshadowed by the image of the Mahatma.

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