Reminiscences Of Gandhi

Boyhood Memories
- Ramkrishna Bajaj

My parents lived for a time in the Ashram at Sabarmati when I was about five years of age. The only memory I have of these days is that Bapuji walked very fast during his evening strolls, and that we youngsters had practically to run all the time to keep pace with him. It was a coveted privilege to become his ‘walking sticks’ and we used to long for it; but it was not an easy task because of his speed.

Next I remember of him is when he went to stay at Maganvadi, Wardha, in 1935. My father sent me to Maganvadi to stay with him. He took personal interest in me as he did in everybody else. Every one of us felt the warmth of his affection. In those days I used to collect postal stamps as a hobby. I had never spoken to him about it. But to my agreeable surprise he told me one day that he had preserved two stamps for me for the last eight or ten months! He asked his personal assistant to give them to me. The latter did not remember where they had been kept. Then Bapuji tried to remember it himself. After a few minutes he took out one of the many envelopes in his portfolio, and told me that the stamps must be in that envelope. Oh yes! they were there!

Maganvadi is situated in a garden. I was about eleven at the time I am speaking of. I was allotted the task of climbing up the trees every morning and collecting fruits like rose-apples, jujubes, etc. After collecting them, I took them to Bapuji, and he would ask me to distribute them equally among the inmates of the ashram.

At the time of the individual satyagraha in 1941, I was but 17. After the arrest of my father, my young enthusiasm took me to Bapuji to get permission to offer satyagraha. I had little hope of my request being granted, because I was underage, the requisite age being 18. It seems, however, that he did not want to discourage me. He therefore specially called me three or four times to Sevagram and had long talks with me. I hardly realized that he was testing my capacity to stand the rigours of prison life. It was only after he felt certain about it that he allowed me to court arrest. Indeed he went further, and wrote out the notice I was to send to the Deputy Commissioner, Wardha, of my intention to offer satyagraha. He also wrote out a fairly long statement which I had to make at my trial in the court. He was busy and tired. It was night-time, and the next day I was to offer satyagraha. He called me, read out the statement he had written for me, explained the meaning of it in detail, and asked me whether I understood it properly and agreed with it. He told me specifically that, if I did not agree with anything that was said in the statement, he would change it. He also insisted on my spending that night, along with my mother, at Sevagram.

The following letter, received by me in prison, would show how particular he was about even the smallest things in life (the original is in Hindustani, and in his own handwriting):

Sevagram, 23-3-1941.

Dear Ramkrishna,

I often read the letters which Mother gets from you. . . . . I am writing this letter, because today I was given to understand that I too can write to you. From your letter I see that you have asked for an underwear. I would advise you to do without it. It is not at all necessary in our climate. If, however, its use has become a habit with you, you can certainly have it. Does not our duty lie in deliberately reducing our expenditure to the minimum and to cultivate the highest kind of life? I wish you to try for an all-round development. Love.

Bapu
Apart from the lesson which he wished to teach me, there is another thing worth noting about the letter. He wrote it only when I informed my mother that I had got permission from the Superintendent, Nagpur Jail, to receive a letter from Bapuji. Even then he took care to see that the letter might not be delivered to me without the knowledge that it was from Gandhiji. Therefore, below the signature, he put into brackets "M. K. Gandhi"

He utilized the blank portions at the back of letters he received. There was a small and very ordinary portfolio in which he preserved those papers (pastis as we call them). The portfolio got dirty, and he asked one of the assistants to clean it. The cleaning was not properly done. Bapuji never put up with any slovenliness. He explained to the assistant at length like an expert how to do it—how to wash the cloth with soap, and then put the whole thing under some equally distributed pressures that the inner cardboard which though wet does not get dishevelled.

I was with him during his tours in Bengal, Assam and South India after his release from the Agakhan Palace prison. I often felt as if we, the younger members of his entourage had been sent by God to take his patience and forbearance. Our behaviour at times was bad enough to annoy him, but forgiving as he was—he would but gently remonstrate with us. Indeed he would spend hours in explaining the smallest things to us. We sometimes felt that it was unpardonable to take so much of his valuable time which could otherwise be utilized for more useful and important work. But what could have been a headache for others seemed to be a pastime with him.

During this tour we stayed for a time at the Khadi Pratisthan in Sodepur. It was about 4 O'clock one afternoon, and Bapuji was spinning. Khan Abdul Gafar Khan was sitting by his side. A batch of ten or twelve friends and relatives of mine came into have darshan and blessings of Bapuji. They all came in one by one; made an obeisance to Bapuji, and sat down in front of him. He said nothing at the moment, but called me after the prayer was over and told me that Khansaheb was also sitting by his side when my friends came to see him, that it was not right of them to bow to him alone, and that thereafter whenever such occasions arose I should take care to give a hint to the friends to give due respects to others also, and especially to Khansaheb when they were with him.

I met him for the last time in company with some friends, a few months before the faithful 30th of January, 1948, at Bhangi Colony, Delhi, in order to see his guidance on Students' problems. We explained to him our scheme about the formation of the National Union of Students. He said that the scheme was very good, but that we should not expect much support for it because people were interested more in exploiting the students politically; that, however, he said, should not deter us from doing the work. "You should keep one thing in mind," he added. Whether you get any support or not, you, must never lower the standard of your principles for the sake of accommodating others.

Bombay,
10-10-1948