

Reading an Archive Focussed on its Archivist – the case of Mohandas Gandhi

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Gandhi began writing and keeping a record of his life from a very young age. His autobiography begins with the citation in full of a letter dating back to 1884 when he was fifteen. Although this little confession note, as Gandhi calls it, is a reproduction of the original it was with a letter of confession that Gandhi sought to begin to tell his story. The presence of the note is interesting given that he invested a large amount of time in his life writing - not just letters but petitions, newspaper articles, books and diaries. For the last forty years of his life he systematically wrote every day - describing every detail of his life from major political decisions to his dietary needs and bowel movements. As a result he has left behind one of the most comprehensive and voluminous archives of any individual in modern history. This archive has been edited and published as the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. It begins, like his autobiography, with this letter of confession to his father.

The *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* has been one of the main sources used by scholars to study Gandhi and will be a key source for my own PhD project.¹ It therefore becomes important to try and understand something about the history of this particular archive. In addition to making some comments in this regard this short paper also tries to map out a basic periodisation of Gandhi's correspondence through his life. This basic analysis will lay some of the foundations of my larger project, a project that will include trying to understand why Gandhi kept all these records of his life and experiences, and also, how his record keeping shapes our understanding of various periods of his life.

It was in 1950 that the Government of India, under Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, decided to bring together all the writings of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. All of Gandhi's letters, newspaper articles, diary entries,

¹ This does not mean that I will not engage with other archival material and I am aware that there many other sources to be found and analyzed. At this stage of my research I am trying to understand this large body of work and how it was put together. Once this has been understood in some way then I will go on working with the various other sources.

petitions and political writings were to be included in a series of volumes. It was a part of a nationalist project aiming to preserve the legacy of Gandhi. The work was overseen by the Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.²

The first volume was edited by Bharatan Kumarappa who was considered to be a respected Gandhian scholar. He died after the first edition was compiled. He was succeeded by Jairam Daulatram, who left shortly after he was offered a governorship. It was then that Professor K. Swaminathan took over the project which took thirty years to complete. He was assisted by C.N. Patel (Deputy Chief Editor) and Bhawani Prasad Mishra who was in charge of translating the volumes into Hindi. Over the next thirty years they managed to compile ninety volumes of Gandhi's work. Each entry was entered in chronologically and annotated. In addition each of the ninety volumes had a long preface setting the material in context.³

As each volume was completed it was printed and released for sale. In 1965 the earlier volumes sold for \$2.50 and the newer volumes that were being released sold for \$ 6.00. The last of the volumes were finally completed and published in 1994. The publication of all the volumes was welcomed by Gandhian Scholars as well as people generally interested in Gandhian ideology and politics.

In 1998 the government of India commissioned a revised second edition of the *Collected Works*. It is unclear why this revised edition was undertaken as the first edition had been received very favourably. The second revised edition was published in 2004 and was also made available electronically. The second revised edition caused immediate controversy. Many Gandhi scholars wrote to various

² Myron Weiner, "Review: The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi by K. Swaminathan", in *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 80, No. 3 (Sep., 1965) pp. 472-474

³<http://www.gandhiserve.org>

newspapers claiming that the second edition was inaccurate and that large chunks of the first edition were excised from this new edition.⁴ One article by Guha that appears in *The Hindu* had this to say about the new edition:

The Government decided to issue a new "revised" set, guided by the following principle: that there would be a hundred volumes, each of 500 pages. The edifice painstakingly created by Swaminathan and his team was dismantled; and the entries now "remixed" according to the new specifications. In the process, the illuminating prefaces written to the original volumes have been dropped. Also missing are the maps and illustrations. The cross-references, so carefully prepared and so indispensable to scholars, have been rendered meaningless.⁵

Tridip Suhrud, from an association called the Friends of CWMG, established a list of the missing items from the volumes. He very quickly pointed to the fact that 97 items were missing from the first seven volumes and that the missing texts could very well get up to 500.⁶ In addition to missing items many errors also occurred within this new edition, names of people were changed and letters addressed to incorrect people etc.

In the face of this controversy the Minister for Information & Broadcasting, New Delhi, Jaipal Reddy convened an advisory board. This board took into consideration the various complaints raised by Gandhian scholars and agreed that there was a wide range of errors in the second edition. The committee also conceded that the second edition was not put together in consultation with any experts in the field:

⁴ <http://www.hindu.com/mag/2005/30/01>
<http://timesofindia.com/ahmedabad/2004/25/10>

⁵ <http://www.hindu.com/mag/2005/30/01>

⁶ See appendix 1

After going through the records and personal hearings, the Committee would like to express its anguish on the manner in which the revised edition was brought out without expert editorial supervision or consultation. This was in stark contrast to the painstaking research, meticulous editing and dedication of Editors and other staff members of the office of Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi.⁷

In addition, the committee made the following recommendations:

The sale of revised edition should be stopped. The required number of copies of exhausted volumes and those likely to go out of stock of the original edition should be printed as required to meet the demand for complete sets of the original edition.

A revised and corrected CD-ROM should be prepared, as soon as possible, based on the original CWMG. It should include the facsimile of the original edition.

The Publications Division should make available a concordance table to enable readers to establish link between original and revised editions of the Collected Works.⁸

These recommendations did not really affect the distribution of the second edition which was by this period already widely circulated. In fact the edition that is available to us electronically is this second edition and many of the difficulties pointed to by Reddy, Suhrud and many others become apparent when working with this revised edition. Most of the items appear without notes; this is problematic when one is trying to understand when a particular event took place. On the other hand however, the lack of editorial means that it operates far more as conventional government archives do, with no overt recommendations and interpretation of the documents.

⁷ *Report of Advisory Committee*, New Delhi, 5 June 2005 taken from <http://www.gandhiserve.org>

⁸ *Report of Advisory Committee*, New Delhi, 5 June 2005 taken from <http://www.gandhiserve.org>

The reason why the government produced a revised edition of the *Collected Works* is unclear. However there is widespread speculation about various political motives. Guha summarises the general debates surrounding the publication of the revised edition:

There could be a pecuniary motive at work; namely, kickbacks from the new contracts for typesetting and printing. Or the impulse could be ideological; the "editing" done with a view to excising entries embarrassing to the beliefs of those then in power. Or it could be personal vanity; the desire to illegitimately insert one's own, otherwise unknown name, as the "editor" of the works of Mahatma Gandhi.⁹

The public uproar over the changes in the editing of this archive brings to the fore the ways in which the method of compilation, including its politics and perhaps even the idiosyncratic views of individual editors, affect the way we use an archive. Both the first and second edition, like all archives, has been put together with a particular intention and is organised according to the compilers' subjectivities. For example even the name of the *Collected Works* already loads the items found within it with particular meaning. It is called the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* rather than the 'Collected Works of Mohandas Gandhi'. This fact already determines and imposes a set of moral and religious connotations to the writings within it as well as a particular narrative of Gandhi.

In addition, the debates over the validity of different versions of this archive allows for the understanding of the role of individuals and various structures of power in shaping the storing and use of archival material. Often a rigorous analysis of the nature of particular archives are not carried out but the public debate around the *Collected Works of Gandhi* means that one cannot ignore the questions about the nature of archival research. Another interesting point is the

⁹ <http://www.hindu.com/mag/2005/30/01>

public debate about this archive resonates strikingly with the very public way Gandhi lived his life deliberately putting up most aspects of his life for debate.

Although this second revised edition has caused such controversy it is still a very useful source of information containing ninety-eight volumes of entries. The first ten Volumes specifically deal with Gandhi's young life and his political career and personal development in South Africa. And Gandhi's extensive writing and record keeping make both editions a rich source for the historian.

Gandhi's archive demonstrates that his life can be usefully divided into four periods. Each of these periods differs from each other in terms of geography as well as changes that occur within Gandhi personally and politically.¹⁰ Through mapping the various influence and changes that occur within Gandhi and his politics one is able to observe the different types and content of Gandhi's writings.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper the letter that Gandhi wrote to his father in 1884 at the age of fifteen opens his autobiography and the *Collected Works*.

I wrote it on a slip of paper and handed it to him myself. In this note not only did I confess my guilt, but I asked adequate punishment for it, and closed with a request to him not to punish himself for my offence. I also pledged myself never to steal in future.

¹⁰ D.G. Mandelbaum, "The Study of Life History: Gandhi" in *Current Anthropology* Vol. 14, No. 3 June 1973

It is interesting to ask why Gandhi as a young man found it necessary to keep a record of his documents. In addition to this letter, which it seems had a profound effect on Gandhi as he began to think about the method of punishment his father might use against him, he also kept a speech he gave at school. It is unclear whether he only kept these two documents from his teenage years or if these were the only documents he later sought to make public in order to build up a particular narrative of his life. Certainly the letter fits very well into the narrative that he was trying to build up about his character in *Experiments with Truth*. In particular it was a good illustrative tool in order to explain his thoughts and analysis with regard to the matter of punishment for wrongful deeds. The reaction of his father, which he goes on to say was silence and tears, affected him in a terrible way causing him great pain. Reaction to wrongful action with silence and a demonstration of pain rather than retaliation became, of course, the basis for much of Gandhi's political activism.

But noting the value of the letter in creating a particular narrative does not answer the question as to why he decided to keep this letter at the age of fifteen. One can only speculate as to the reason. Did he keep it as a reminder of what he saw as his appalling behaviour, or did he think it would one day shed some light on to the type of person he would become? During this period of British imperialism keeping a record of one's life through diaries and letters was not uncommon, so Gandhi may well have been influenced by these widespread notions of record keeping and self reflection.¹¹ Whatever the reason the first two early documents of Gandhi's fit too well into the narrative that develops about his life to be purely random.

¹¹ See. V. Khumalo, *Ekukhanyeni letter writers: Notes towards a social history of letter writing in KwaZulu-Natal-South Africa, 1890-1990* <http://history.humsci.ukzn.ac.za/files/sempapers/Khumalo.pdf>

Once Gandhi leaves India for England, to begin what could be viewed as the second phase of his life, his archive mainly comes from his diary, letters home to his family and a few letters he wrote to various newspapers in England. Therefore the main content of the archive during this period is more personal in nature. He is usually writing home to enquire about the well-being of his family members. Due to letter writing being the main form of communication Gandhi, insists that his family write to him regularly so that he may not feel anxious:

As I am far from home we can meet only through letters. And if I do not get letters I feel very much worried. Therefore please drop a postcard every week without fail. I would not have been anxious if you did not have my address. But I am sorry that you have stopped writing after having written to me twice. I joined the Inner Temple on Tuesday last. I will write in detail after I hear from you next week. The cold here is now bitter but such bad weather generally does not last long. In spite of the cold I have no need of meat or liquor. This fills my heart with joy and thankfulness. I am now keeping very good health. Please give my respects to mother and sister-in-law.¹²

His diary is mainly a description of his time in England. The diary is incomplete and only contains twenty pages. The rest of his accounts of his activity while he was in England that are in the *Collected Works* come from letters he wrote to his family, to friends and acquaintances in England as well as through speeches and articles he wrote for a few societies. It seems from these documents that Gandhi became very involved in the Vegetarian Society, which promoted vegetarianism as a healthy physical and spiritual lifestyle. This movement promoting vegetarianism fitted into Gandhi's existing preoccupation with vegetarianism and its benefits. Previously to the encounter with the vegetarian society Gandhi claimed his vegetarianism was due to his upbringing and that he in fact believed that a vegetarian diet was less beneficial than a meat-eating diet. However after

¹² *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 1: 1884 – 30 November, 1896 pp. 2

coming across literature from the vegetarian society he became a vegetarian for reasons of principle:

It was there that I first bought some vegetarian literature among which was a copy of *A Plea for Vegetarianism* by H. S. Salt, after reading which I adopted vegetarianism from principle. Till then I considered flesh to be a superior diet from a scientific point of view. Moreover, it was there that I came to know the existence of the Vegetarian Society of Manchester. But I did not take any active interest in it. I did, now and then, read *The Vegetarian Messenger* and that was all. My knowledge of *The Vegetarian* dates from a year and a half. It was at the International Vegetarian Congress that I may be said to have known the L.V.S. That the Congress was sitting I knew by the kind courtesy of Mr. Josiah Oldfield, who heard of me from a friend, and was good enough to ask me to attend it. In conclusion, I am bound to say that, during my nearly three years' stay in England, I have left many things undone, and have done many things which perhaps I might better have left undone, yet I carry one great consolation with me that I shall go back without having taken meat or wine, and that I know from personal experience that there are so many vegetarians in England.

The Vegetarian, 20-6-1891¹³

Gandhi quickly becomes a popular figure within this movement promoting not only vegetarianism for health purposes but also for spiritual reasons. Gandhi always linked various dietary habits to religion. Even as early as this period Vedic forms of Hinduism were key in Gandhi's thinking of Hinduism. This link grew steadily and become one of the principles of his ideology.

The Hindus are again divided into four chief castes, viz., the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas, and the Sudras, of all these, in theory, only the Brahmins and the Vaisyas are pure vegetarians. But in practice almost all the Indians are vegetarians. Some are so voluntarily, and others compulsorily.¹⁴

¹³ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 1: 1884 – 30 November, 1896 pp. 49

¹⁴ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 1: 1884 – 30 November, 1896 pp. 19

During his stay in England Gandhi's letters were not political but are rather interested in questions of health and spirituality hence the majority of the documentation within the *Collected Works* reflects his work with the vegetarian society as well as with other animal welfare society. In terms of spirituality his discussions of Hinduism are evident in his letters home or in the various articles published for the Vegetarian Society. However it is interesting that Gandhi's interest in theosophy and Esoteric Christianity is absent from this early section of the archive and that it is only when one get to the South African section and reads the letters he writes back to England that one becomes aware that this also made up a large part of his interests while in England. Here is an extract of a letter he wrote to a Mrs. Lewis from Durban on the 4 August 1894:

I have settled in Durban for practice as an advocate. More of this you will know from Mr. Oldfield. During my stay here I intend to spread as much as possible information about theosophy. (To me there is little difference between Theosophy and Esoteric Christianity). I have therefore sent out letters to the President of the Vegetarian Society and Mrs. Besant.¹⁵

Gandhi leaves England on 12 June 1891¹⁶ he goes back to India for a brief period. He does not want to remain in India and takes a job in South Africa. He arrives in South Africa in May 1893.¹⁷ It is at this point that items within the *Collected Works* become far more political in nature. This could be considered Gandhi's third phase - the phase when he starts becoming involved in politics - and the type of writing he is engaging in reflects this. The majority of it consists of letters to government officials, letters to newspapers and articles in newspapers. This

¹⁵ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 1: 1884 – 30 November, 1896 pp. 176

¹⁶ L. Fischer (Ed) *The Essential Gandhi: An anthology of his Writings on his life, works and ideas* (New York: Vintage Books) 1983 pp. 26

¹⁷ L. Fischer (Ed) *The Essential Gandhi: An anthology of his Writings on his life, works and ideas* (New York: Vintage Books) 1983 pp. 31

does not mean that personal letters and writings on spirituality do not appear but rather that at this time his public writings are mainly political and while issues of spirituality and diet tend to appear only in his personal writing. However as he continues to develop his politics his notions of spirituality and politics become fused.

The next eight to nine volumes of the collected works are filled with material from Gandhi's period in South Africa. This period illustrates Gandhi as a prolific letter writer. He is continuously writing letters and petitions to the state. His political activism initially takes the form of petitioning the state through various letters. In addition to petitions Gandhi was often writing articles and letters to various newspapers.

During his time in South Africa, Gandhi grew into a political figure, This transition is clearly illustrated in the archive. Gandhi soon became aware that he was a figure of importance so it is not difficult to understand why, in this context, he kept such a meticulous record of his activities. He made two copies of every letter or petition sent out and as a result the entries at this point within the *Collected Works* deal mainly with petitions to the state and his role in the formation of the Natal Indian Congress.

During this period of his life Gandhi still believed in the British system of governance which he discusses in *My Experiments with Truth*:

Hardly ever have I know anybody to cherish such loyalty as I did to the British Constitution...The National Anthem used to be sung at every meeting that I attended in Natal. I then felt I must also join in the singing. Not that I was unaware of the defects in

British rule, but...I believed British rule was, on the whole, beneficial to the ruled.¹⁸

The continued faith in British imperialism during this period meant that the form Gandhi's political protest took fitted into the workings of the colonial state. Breckenridge, amongst others, has drawn attention to the fact that writing was a central mode of engagement with the colonial state:

The ferocity of the "power of writing" in South Africa in the Milner era must lead one to wonder whether it is, at least in its untempered form, a defining feature of modern discipline.¹⁹

In addition, most of the people that Gandhi was representing politically in South Africa were literate business men. At this time in his life Gandhi was not concerned with building a mass based politics and was more interested in securing a few benefits for merchant class Indians in South Africa. It therefore made sense for the realm of politicking around their interests to be constituted mainly through writing. The discipline of writing that was central to the functioning of the South African state made a large impact on Gandhi who had already began keeping a record of his life although intermittently. From his time in South Africa to the end of his life Gandhi kept meticulous records of his political and personal activities.

In addition to petition and letter writing Gandhi wrote several letters and articles in newspapers. The content of these newspaper interventions was not only political in nature but they also discussed issues of spirituality and diet but in a manner that separated them from political action. Gandhi saw the newspaper as

¹⁸ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The story of my Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press) 1993 pp.146

¹⁹ K. Breckenridge, *Lord Milner's Registry: The Origins of South African exceptionalism* (African Studies Seminar) pp. <http://history.humsci.ukzn.ac.za/files/sempapers/Breckenridge2004.pdf>

an effective means of circulating ideas and political activism and therefore encouraged the development of a newspaper dealing with issues affecting the South African Indian community. In 1904 Gandhi, along with a few other people, started the *Indian Opinion*. He observed that:

Through... this paper, we could very well disseminate the news of the week among the community. The English section kept those Indians informed about the movement who did know Gujarati, and for Englishmen in India, England and South Africa.²⁰

Although the *Collected Works* includes instances and extracts of Gandhi's articles in the *Indian Opinion* it does not include all the editions of the newspaper. It does however include various letters and discussions that Gandhi had in and about the newspaper with various people. Gandhi's initial reliance on letter writing and petitioning as a means of demanding a response from the state began to wane and as his political popularity in South Africa grew he began to think of various other forms of political activism. This could have been partly due to the lack of response of the state to his petitions. In addition he began to take notice of various suffragette campaigns in England and began to promote the idea that people need to be more committed to the struggle for particular rights

The women therefore go to the House of Commons and harass the Members. They have sent petitions, written letters, delivered speeches and tried many other means. Last Wednesday, they went to the House of Commons as soon as it opened and demanded the right to vote; they caused some damage also, for which they were prosecuted and sentenced to furnish a security of £5 each. On their refusing to do so, they were sentenced to imprisonment, and they are now in gaol. Most of the women have got three months. All of them come from respectable families and some are very well educated. One of these is the daughter of the late Mr. Cobden who was highly respected by the people. She is serving her term in gaol... Some persons regard these women as insane; the police use force against them; the magistrate looks upon them with a

²⁰ M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Navajivan Publishing House: Ahmedabad: 2003) pp. 220

stern eye. Cobden's brave daughter said, "I shall never obey any law in the making of which I have no hand; I will not accept the authority of the court executing those laws; if you send me to gaol, I will go there, but I shall on no account pay a fine. I will not furnish any security either." It is no wonder that a people which produces such daughters and mothers should hold the sceptre. Today the whole country is laughing at them, and they have only a few people on their side. But undaunted, these women work on steadfast in their cause. They are bound to succeed and gain the franchise, for the simple reason that deeds are better than words. Even those who laughed at them would be left wondering. If even women display such courage, will the Transvaal Indians fail in their duty and be afraid of gaol? Or would they rather consider the gaol a palace and readily go there? When that time comes, India's bonds will snap of themselves. We have sent petitions; made speeches; and we shall continue to do so. But we shall gain our object only if we have the kind of strength we have spoken of. People do not have much faith in articles and speeches. Anyone can do that, they call for no courage. Deeds after all better than words. All other things are unavailing, and no one is afraid of them. The only way therefore is to sacrifice oneself and take the plunge. We have much to do yet, no doubt of that.²¹

It is at this point in 1905 that Gandhi begins to understand the effectiveness of more popular and direct forms of protesting and begins to develop his ideology around Satyagraha. Two years later he launched the first passive resistance campaign.²² It was after this event that Gandhi's political organizing and protest shift from only petitioning and letter writing to largely being focused around passive resistance. The basis of this form of protest is a spiritual exercise and here one begins to see his two interests - politics and spirituality - coming together. In addition this form of popular protest also popularized Gandhi shifting him from a political figure operating only within the realm of state politics to a more popular figure operating in the broader realms of popular life.

The shift in his politics to popular forms of mass protest made Gandhi a popular figure not only in his last years in South Africa but also in India. This does not

²¹ The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 5: 6 November 1905 – 3 November, 1906 pp 431

²² M. Swan, "The 1913 Natal Strike" in *Journal of African Studies* Vol. 10 No. 2 (April, 1984)

mean that he impacted on the lives of all South Africans or all Indians, but rather that his political audience and followers grew. This is an early hypothesis but it seems to fit with his life trajectory that as his political ambitions changed so did his form of activism as well as his public. This was apparent when he first arrived in India. According to Amin, the train journey Gandhi took through India became the symbolism of him turning from an ordinary politician interested in negotiating with state power in terms of its own modes of operation to an extraordinary politician heavily influenced by spiritualism and interested in creating an alternative mode of political expression. It was this journey that Amin says built up the persona of Gandhi as a Mahatma increasing his popularity. One of the key moments in this train journey was when Gandhi made a public announcement that he was becoming a fakir. He claimed the reason for this drastic change was due to the undisciplined behaviour of his followers and well wishers. His very public disrobing became another important spectacle which not only boosted his political power but also his guru-like status.²³ It is in this fourth phase of his life, his return to India, that his archive once again changes and reflects the changes and shifts within Gandhi's life.

Although there is a large amount of political documents; letters, petitions, pamphlets, meeting minutes and articles - these mainly come from external sources. The majority of the writing that comes directly from Gandhi was made up of his journal entries. He started keeping a diary at a young age but while in South Africa he begins to rigorously write in his diary every day. In India this practice continued and he often shared what he wrote in his diary with people in order that his lifestyle may serve as an example for other people. He also used it a self-reflective tool, always trying to keep a note of his feelings, ideas and experiences.

²³ S. Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1922* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1995)

Your diary must contain every particular about your health. It must also contain the particulars of work done every hour, if the work could be so divided. You might also make it a mirror of your own mind, recording your thoughts and dreams, good and bad, and you must also make it a record of your acts, good and bad. This mirror of the self is helpful for a purification of one's self. One's bowels must move regularly in order to keep one in a fit condition. That is physical purification. Just as this physical purification is necessary for the health of the body, even so spiritual purification is necessary for the health of the soul. In fact the necessity for physical cleanliness is in inverse proportion to the necessity for spiritual cleanliness. That is to say, spiritual cleanliness means automatic physical cleanliness. Have we not heard that a yogi's body emits a fragrant smell? The 'fragrant' smell means here the absence of bad smell.²⁴

These diaries also became a space within which Gandhi could discuss his various views on sexuality, diet, discipline and exercise linking it to a particular form of spirituality. Even during his lifetime these entries were published in order to explain particular decisions that he made as well as various experiments he undertook. For example when his experiments with celibacy were discussed publicly and he was called to account for this he published extracts from his diary in order to explain his intentions.

The controversy around his celibacy practices broke when sometime between 1944 and 1948 Gandhi began sharing a bed with young women. Gandhi would sleep naked with these women. The young girls were his grandnieces Abba and Manu but he also at times slept with his personal physician Sushila Nayar.²⁵ According to Gandhi and the women it was an experiment in Brahmacharya.²⁶

²⁴ The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 5: 6 November 1905 – 3 November, 1906 pp 232

²⁵ Vinay Lal "Nakedness, Nonviolence and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments with Celibate Sexuality" in *Journal of History of Sexuality* Vol.9 no 1/2 (January- April, 2000) pp 106

Manu arrived in the town of Noakhali in East Bengal where Gandhi had moved to quell Hindu- Muslim violence in 1946.²⁷ Later her sister Manu arrived and Sushila Nayar was with him throughout this period being his closest advisor and companion. In addition to this party of four was Nirmal Kumar Bose. He was Gandhi's typist. It was during this time that Bose also kept a diary as Gandhi had encouraged all satyagrahis to do so. It is in this diary that he discusses the various reactions to Gandhi's experiments in Brahmacharya.

no trace of passion in him of which he was conscious, it was not unlikely that a residue might be left over, and that would make trouble for the girls who took part in the experiment. He had asked them [the girls] if, even unconsciously, he had been responsible for evoking the least shade of evil sentiment in their heart. This 'experiment', as he called it, had been objected to by distinguished co-workers like Narahari (Parekh) and Ishoreial (Mashruwala); and one of the grounds of their complaint had been based on the possible repercussions which the example of a responsible leader like him might have upon other people.²⁸

Gandhi's response to this opposition was to openly discuss his practices and he published his various practices and thoughts on Brahmacharya. In fact he went so far as to hold a meeting in the village of Amishapara to discuss people's objections to his practices. In addition he writes to several people including his son to discuss the controversy around his experiments with Brahmacharya.

Gandhi described this as his aspiration: "It was in the spirit of God's eunuch that he had approached what he considered was

²⁶ Brahmacharya apparently according to various Vedic scholars is not the same as celibacy. Practicing celibacy means an abstinence from sexual activity, but sexual desire may still be present. Brahmacharya is the elimination of desire.

²⁷ Vinay Lal "Nakedness, Nonviolence and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments with Celibate Sexuality" in *Journal of History of Sexuality* Vol.9 no 1/2 (January- April, 2000) pp 115

²⁸ Vinay Lal "Nakedness, Nonviolence and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments with Celibate Sexuality" in *Journal of History of Sexuality* Vol.9 no 1/2 (January- April, 2000) pp 117

his duty It was an integral part of the yajna²⁹ he was performing and he invited them to bless the effort. He knew that his action had excited criticism even among his friends. But a duty could not be shirked even for the sake of the most intimate friends." The same day, in a letter to his son Manilal, Gandhi described his ahimsa, or belief in nonviolence, as "being severely tested" and pleaded with him to remain indifferent to the public criticism of Gandhi's actions: "Do not let the fact of Manu sleeping with me perturb you. I believe that it is God who has prompted me to take that step. If, however, you cannot understand, do not get upset and bear with me."³⁰

Although Gandhi eventually stopped this experiment this aspect of his life has not been received with the controversy one would expect from such an experiment. Once again I think it is due to the way Gandhi presents the nature of the events. From the first moment of the controversy Gandhi takes it on and begins to discuss it in terms of spirituality but also self reflection. He claims that in order to be a perfect satyagrahi one needs to confront and grapple with all their conflicts no matter how difficult they were. This he claims was what he was doing with the experiments with Brahmacharya. In addition the writing down of his experience of his experiments, and his not hiding these particular actions, makes Gandhi believe that he has done anything wrong. In fact his belief in this is so strong that even scholars studying this period of his life take this claim at face value - that this experiment in Brahmacharya was another intense and honest challenge of his own spiritual battles. Hence to an extent his editorial on his own life events predefine the modes of analysis and engagement various academics have with Gandhi and his writings. This predefinition almost invariably fails to pose the question, let alone seek evidence with regard to Manu and Abba's views on the matter.

²⁹ The word Yajna means sacred ritual. It is interesting that Gandhi choose these words to discuss his experiments in Brahmacharya. He is predefining the terms of discussions as acts of spirituality.

³⁰ Vinay Lal, "Nakedness, Nonviolence and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments with Celibate Sexuality" in *Journal of History of Sexuality* Vol.9 no 1/2 (January- April, 2000) pp118-119

Gandhi lived almost every aspect of his life publicly. It was an extension of his beliefs that he discussed at length in *Experiments with Truth*.³¹ A basic principle is that nothing that one does should be shameful and hidden but, if one does act shamefully, then one should share it with others so that you and they may learn from it. In a sense his entire life became an experiment in questions of truth linked to particular version of spirituality.

There was little or nothing in his life that he wanted to keep private. He insisted on describing in detail, and frequently in writing, everything about himself from his peristalsis to his political dilemmas. He often presented himself in his writings as a case history from which he as well as others could learn.³²

The above analysis of the *Collected Works*, although basic, illustrates the various changes in Gandhi's record keeping. The different personal and political changes in Gandhi's life are reflected in the types of records Gandhi kept. I am still uncertain as to why Gandhi kept a record of notes from as early on in his life as fifteen, however as he grows politically his need for record keeping becomes apparent. In addition the various forms his political protest takes also influenced what sort of records had prominence in various points in his life. The petitions and letters that fill the first ten volumes of the *Collected Works* are illustrative of the form his political protest took in South Africa. Although he begins to think far more about the popular spectacle of public protest as he launches various passive resistance campaigns he also kept on engaging the state with petition and letters.

³¹ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 1: 1884 – 30 November, 1896 pp.

³² D.G. Mandelbaum, "The Study of Life History: Gandhi" in *Current Anthropology* Vol. 14, No. 3 June 1973 pp.182

It is in India however that his protest becomes far more spectacle based and his writings that appear in the *Collected Works* from this period deal far more with issues of spirituality and political ideology than his petitions and letters written in South Africa. At this point Gandhi still writes letters to the state but mainly as a means of communicating a political point. It is not because he assumes the state will deliver anything in response to the needs explained in the letter. He has been disavowed of this belief through his various petitions sent in South Africa with no major results. It is partly because of this reason that his form of political protest changes and this is evident in India where his central political form of campaigning is through sit-ins and marches.

Through mapping out the major phases in Gandhi's life this paper has tried to understand better the various impact writing and record keeping had on Gandhi, and how it changed according to political and personal changes in his life. Through developing this understanding I hope to be able to now begin to engage critically with the documents in the archive compiled by Gandhi the historian in order to better understand Gandhi the historical figure.

Appendix 1

List of Missing Items from the second revised edition of *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*

Serial Number	Vol. No (old)	Vol. No. (revised)	Sr. No As Per Old Vols.	Date	Description
1	97	10	2	1909	Letter to Chhaganlal Gandhi
2	97	26	addenda 3	March 17, 1922	Letter to Mazharul Haq
3	97	26	45	March 18, 1922	Letter to Prabhudas Gandhi
4	97	26	46	April 2, 1923	Letter to Kashi Gandhi
5	97	26	47	April 8, 1923	Letter to Narandas Gandhi
6	97	56	209	August, 28, 1932	Letter to Nirmala Gandhi
7	97	80	330	April 22, 1941	Letter to Prabhudas Gandhi
8	97	80	331	May 23, 1941	Letter to Prabhudas Gandhi
9	91	21	addenda 14	November 18, 1920	Letter to Narhari D. Parikh
10	91	21	addenda 15	November 18, 1920	Letter to Anasuyaben Sarabhai
11	91	22	addenda 16	February 26, 1921	Letter to Anasuyaben Sarabhai
12	91	27	addenda 21	April 8, 1924	Letter to Manilal Doctor
13	91	30	addenda 23	February 21, 1925	Letter to Rameshwardas Birla
14	91	32	addenda 25	August 14, 1925	Letter to G D Birla
15	91	36	addenda 29	After October 10, 1926	A Talk
16	91	37	addenda 30	1926	Letter to Haribhau Upadhyaya
17	91	38	addenda 31	January 24, 1927	Letter to Mridula Sarabhai
18	91	42	addenda 38	Before August 1, 1928	A Letter

19	91	6	50	on or after February 25, 1907	Letter to Chhaganlal Gandhi
20	91	6	51	February 10, 1907	Letter to Chhaganlal Gandhi
21	91	6	52	February 20, 1907	Letter to P.S. To Governor, Transvaal
22	91	6	53	March 1, 1907	Letter to Chhaganlal Gandhi
23	91	19	230	March 23, 1920	Telegram to Mathurdas Trikumji
24	91	23	269	Before June 30, 1921	Letter to Kunvarji Anandaji Kapadia
25	91	26	306	March 6, 1922	Letter to S. A. Brelvi
26	91	26	308	After March 21, 1922	Letter to Baba Lakshmandas
27	91	26	309	Before August 24, 1923	A Note
28	91	27	310	February 28, 1924	Message To Romain Rolland
29	91	27	311	March 4, 1924	Letter to C. Vijayaraghavachariar
30	91	27	312	March 12, 1924	Telegram to Jawaharlal Nehru
31	91	27	313	on or after March 13, 1924	Letter To Ramdas Gandhi
32	91	27	314	March 17, 1924	Letter To Ramdas Gandhi
33	91	27	315	March 24, 1924	Letter to Mahadev Desai
34	91	27	316	March 25, 1924	Letter To Radha Gandhi
35	91	38	554	January 23, 1927	Letter to Ramkrishna Chandiwala
36	91	38	555	January 24, 1927	Letter to Anasuyaben Sarabhai
37	91	38	556	January 31, 1927	Letter to Anasuyaben Sarabhai
38	91	38	557	February 3, 1927	Letter to Motiram Shaukiram Adwani
39	91	38	558	February 6, 1927	Letter To Motilal Roy
40	91	38	559	February 7,	Message to

				1927	International Congress Against Imperialism
41	91	40	614	After November 25, 1927	Letter to Anasuyaben Sarabhai
42	93	74	332	October 10, 1938	Letter to Mathurdas Trijumji
43	93	74	333	October 13, 1938	Letter to Pyarelal
44	93	74	374	January 21, 1939	Letter to Mathurdas Trijumji
45	95	26	43	March 5, 1922	Letter To the Editor, The Survey, New York
46	95	26	44	December 1922	A Letter (Presumably to Madan Mohan Malaviya)
47	95	27	45	March 31, 1924	A Silence Day Note
48	95	27	46	Before April 3, 1924	Letter to Anasuyaben Sarabhai
49	95	32	53	August 21, 1925	Letter To C. Ramalinga Reddy
50	95	32	54	on or before August 31, 1925	Letter to Haribhau Upadhyaya
51	95	32	55	After September 23, 1925	Fragment of a letter
52	95	35	63	May 12, 1926	Letter to Amy Jacques Garvey
53	95	38	70	Before January 10, 1927	Letter To Vasumati Pandit
54	95	38	71	January 10, 1927	Letter To Vasumati Pandit
55	95	38	72	After February 2, 1927	Letter To Vasumati Pandit
56	95	38	73	After February 2, 1927	Letter To Vasumati Pandit
57	95	43	90	December 18, 1928	Letter To Benarsidas Chaturvedi

58	95	45	94	March 23, 1929	Letter To Prabhavati
59	95	80	154	May 14, 1941	Letter to Venkataswami Naidu
60	95	84	163	August 27, 1944	Telegram to M. A. Jinnah
61	96	4	1	July 3, 1905	Letter To Millie Graham Polak
62	96	9	2	September 19, 1908	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
63	96	9	3	February 9, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
64	96	9	4	April 5, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
65	96	9	5	June 19, 1909	Draft Will and Testament
66	96	9	6	June 21, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
67	96	9	7	June 22, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
68	96	9	8	June 23, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
69	96	9	9	July 3, 1909	A Letter
70	96	9	10	July 3, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
71	96	9	11	July 7, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
72	96	9	12	July 17, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
73	96	9	13	July 21, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
74	96	9	14	July 30, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
75	96	10	15	August 7, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
76	96	10	16	August 12, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
77	96	10	17	August 20, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
78	96	10	18	August 28, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
79	96	10	19	August 30, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
80	96	10	20	September 10, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach

81	96	10	21	September 17, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
82	96	10	22	September 24, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
83	97	10	23	October 1, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
84	97	10	24	October 27, 1909	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
85	97	10	25	November 14, 1909	Letter To Millie Graham Polak
86	97	10	26	November 15, 1909	Letter To H S L Polak
87	97	22	286	January 22, 1921	Letter To H S L Polak
88	97	23	287	April 10, 1921	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
89	97	24	290	September 29, 1921	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
90	97	72	311	December 28, 1937	Telegram to Herman Kallenbach
91	97	74	319	January 20, 1939	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
92	97	75	320	February 5, 1939	Letter To H S L Polak
93	97	75	321	March 2, 1939	Telegram to Amrit Kaur
94	97	75	322	March 8, 1939	Letter to Herman Kallenbach
95	97	75	323	March/April 1939	Notes to Herman Kallenbach
96	97	75	324	March/ April 1939	Note to Herman Kallenbach
97	97	81	327	August 30, 1941	Letter To H S L Polak
