

Mahatma Gandhi - Our Father

Anecdotes told by
Kanu Gandhi
and
Abha Gandhi

Photographs by
Kanu Gandhi

Edited by
Peter R  he

Jacket – front – inside:



Mahatma Gandhi - the *Father of the Indian Nation*, and the *Apostle of Nonviolence*. He worked for India's independence from the British rule. And gave us the awesome power of nonviolence. A social reformer, he taught the world the eternal values of love and truth. His fight for human rights, protection of environment and religious tolerance was mankind's finest hour.

Kanu Gandhi, grand-nephew of Gandhi, and his wife Abha were with the Mahatma for the last twelve years of his life. They call him *Bapu* - father - and became part of Mahatma's personal staff. Kanu Gandhi was the only one allowed to take photographs of Gandhi in all his moods and moments. On January 30, 1948 Gandhi died in Abha's arms.

This book presents authentic anecdotes and rare photographs from two of Gandhi's closest associates.

Jacket - back - inside:

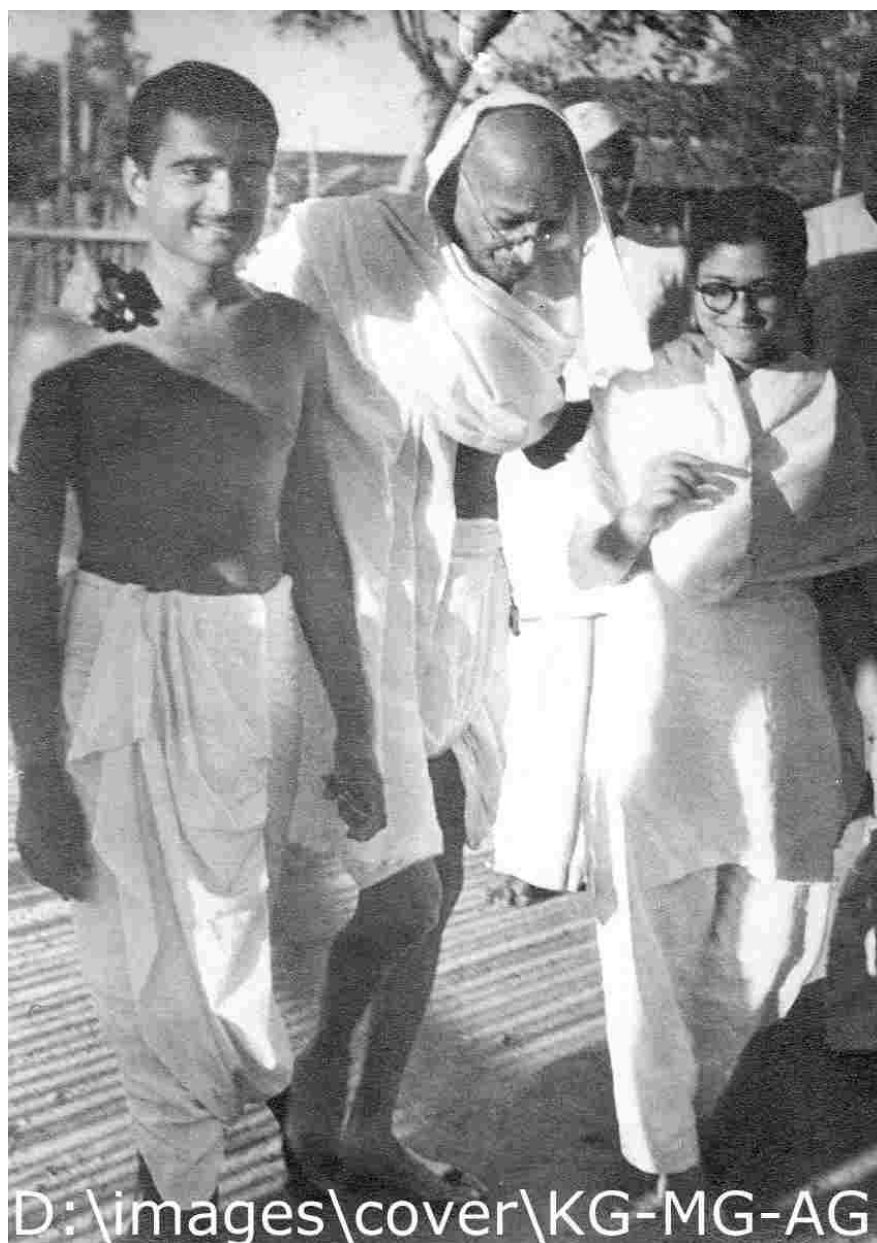


Peter R  he specialized in the collection and conservation of visual material related to Gandhi. He presented multimedia events on Gandhi in many countries and has contributed to several TV productions. R  he is the founder of the GandhiServe Foundation, Berlin and webmaster of the largest resource on Gandhi on the internet, GandhiServe's Mahatma Gandhi Research and Media Service – www.gandhiserve.org

Peter R  he is the author of the book *Gandhi – A Photo Biography*, Phaidon Press, 2001.



In the memory of
Abha, Kanu and the Mahatma,
who were like three bodies and one soul



Mahatma Gandhi with Abha (right) and Kanu Gandhi, 1945

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INTRODUCTION

The Father of the Indian nation, and the apostle of nonviolence. He worked for India's independence from the British rule. And gave us the awesome power of nonviolence. A social reformer, he taught the world the eternal values of love and truth. His fight for human rights, protection of environment and religious tolerance was mankind's finest hour.

Kanu Gandhi, grand-nephew of Gandhi, was with the Mahatma for the last twelve years of his life. When he was two years old, he and his parents moved to live at Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, where he received his education. This was the first centre set up by Mahatma Gandhi which was to be a living embodiment of village regeneration and his philosophies: non-violence, truthfulness and self sufficiency.

In 1932, Kanu Gandhi, aged 15, was jailed for participating in the Non-Cooperation Movement. Afterwards he planned to become a doctor but on his father's request joined Mahatma Gandhi's campaign for Indian independence from 1936. He became part of Mahatma's personal staff and they worked closely together until 1948. Kanu Gandhi was encouraged to take photographs of Mahatma Gandhi by Shivaji Bhavé (an associate of Mahatma Gandhi). Following this Ghanshyam Das Birla (an industrialist and associate of Mahatma Gandhi), gave Kanu one hundred rupees to buy his first camera and film. Mahatma Gandhi agreed to be photographed by Kanu Gandhi, on the condition that no flash would be used, he would not finance it and he would not pose. Kanu Gandhi covered his expenses by selling some images to the newspapers. As the independence movement gathered momentum, Kanu Gandhi provided images on a daily basis. 1944, at the age of 26, Kanu Gandhi married Abhaben Chatterjee, at Sevagram Ashram, as arranged by Mahatma and Kasturba Gandhi. She, too, dedicated her life to working daily with Mahatma Gandhi. Kanu and Abha Gandhi both attended to Mahatma Gandhi's personal care and working schedule from dawn till dusk. Abhaben became known as one of the two 'living walking sticks' Gandhi used to lean on in the later years of his life. They also used to sing his favourite hymns and Abhaben, who was Bengali, spent many hours teaching Mahatma Gandhi to read and write Bengali. Later on Abhaben used to say, "we were like three bodies but one soul". With his camera Kanu Gandhi was the only one allowed to take Gandhi's photograph at any time. He was thus able to capture Mahatma Gandhi in all his moods and moments.

As the former Indian High Commissioner to UK, Dr. L.M. Singhvi put it:

"Kanu Gandhi's photographs were the result of two kind of access. the first was privileged access to the subject, over several months and years, in different places and political environments.

The second was to his subject's inner being. This was, basically, an insight into the Mahatma's extraordinary alert sense of justice in its widest definition. Kanu was able to bring out his camera at situations which were both photographically and historically challenging.

Through a fugitive light and in one elusive second, Kanu captured many of Gandhi's personal and public moments. Kanu was extraordinarily gifted and had he lived in a different time or on another continent, he would have been regarded as an action photographer par excellence but then he could have had Gandhi for a subject!

It can truly be said that what Mahadev Desai and Pyarelal did to immortalise Gandhi through their memoirs and biographical writings, Kanu Gandhi did his through his camera. He can appropriately be described as not just a photographer but a photo-biographer of Gandhi."

When Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated on 30th January 1948, Kanu Gandhi was away taking photographs in what is now Bangladesh. Gandhi died in Abha's arms and she witnessed that his last words were "*He Ram*" (Oh God). Gandhi's death had an profound effect on Kanu and Abha's lives. Photography became less of a focus than the overwhelming need to convey the Gandhian

message of which they were living examples. They continued to travel around India promoting and teaching khadi (handwoven cloth), spinning and handicrafts.

Later on at the request of a friend, Kanu Gandhi went to Bihar to make photographic documentation of the famine. He also took photographs of India's foremost politicians and campaigners. In 1956 he and his wife went to Kasturba Dham near Rajkot in Gujarat. This was the place where Mahatma Gandhi's wife Kasturba had been kept under house arrest in 1939. After independence the government bought the property and entrusted Kanu Gandhi's father to look after it. Kanu Gandhi took over responsibilities on his father's behalf. He developed smallscale industries such as carpentry, hand made soap, paper making and cattle rearing. There is now also a thriving secondary school.

In 1985 I met Kanu Gandhi at his home in Rajkot (Gujarat/India). Proudly he showed me his precious photographs. In 1986 Kanu went on a pilgrimage in Madhya Pradesh where he suffered a heart attack and died on February 20th.

After Kanu Gandhi's death I paid a condolence visit to his family. During Kanu Gandhi's life nobody was allowed to enter his photo lab. Now, after his death, it needed to be cleared. When asked what she was going to do with the thousands of photographs of Gandhi laying around in shelves, cupboards and even on the floor, Abha said that she would throw them away as they were of no use for her, because she lived with Gandhi and therefore does not need photographs in order to remember those precious days with Bapu (father). I convinced her not to do so as for others these photographs would be valuable in order to get a realistic picture of the Mahatma. Then an arrangement was found to preserve the photographs and negatives which document Gandhi's later life in the most remarkable way. Abha Gandhi passed away in May 1995.

In this publication the majority of Kanu Gandhi's photographs are published for the first time outside India.

Peter Rühle

Berlin, 2 October 2006

Chapter 1

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

"Please excuse me, it is time for evening prayers. I must be there on time. Allow me to leave."

Bapu made this request during a Congress Working Committee meeting. At Bombay, Calcutta, Allahabad and other big cities, Congress Working Committee meetings used to be held at Bapu's residence. In such big cities evening prayers were held in public, and thousands of people would assemble. I was hesitating to remind Bapu of prayer time, but he excused himself as soon as he realized. About this I said to him, "If you stay a little longer and go for the prayer only after the discussion is over ..."

"You are right. Since I am called 'Mahatma', perhaps nobody would mind if I went late for prayers. But I mind. You see, everything should be done at its punctual time, and moreso prayers. The importance of the prayers that I understand, I want to explain to everybody. I can do so by setting an example myself and not by preaching it. It is up to them to follow. The Congress working committee members would understand now the value I have in my heart for the punctuality of prayers. If they do not understand in spite of this, what can I do? I reach the prayers in time and I have satisfaction from this. You should not forget that thousands of people attend the evening prayers. If I go late they will wait for me. Let's make a small calculation. Suppose there are six thousand attendees. If I am late by five minutes then in total how many minutes will be wasted? That should be thought about. In total thirty thousand minutes, that is, three hundred hours will be wasted.

"Alternately, I can talk thousands of times to explain the importance of prayers, but they will not understand. Whereas, if I go for prayers punctually every day, then they would try to understand the importance of prayers and that of punctuality. They will believe that Gandhi's prayers will start at the punctual time, therefore they should also be there in time. It is quoted in the *Gita* 'Yadyada charit shreshtha', that is, the masses follow the characters of the elders. Therefore, I should always remain conscious of this fact. Understood?"

Bapu had explained in detail. I said, "Now I understand well."

A similar incident occurred in 1946. In those days Bapu was staying in Mussoorie. The public evening prayer was routinely held. One day Bapu's car was held in traffic and therefore he reached the prayer house a little late. He stood outside until the rhymes of the *Gita* had been recited. As soon as the bhajan started he entered the prayer house. I had started the prayer in his absence. He asked to be pardoned for coming late and appreciated that the prayer had been started at the right time. This incident had a good effect on the public.

"I came late for prayers and I apologise," Bapu began. My friends here know that I have always requested punctuality. Today I was unexpectedly late. I appreciate that Kanu, who has always been with me since his childhood, began the prayers on time. I was unexpectedly held up in the crowd. I was helpless, therefore, I could not reach here in time."

How Can I Break the Rule?

Bapu used to say, "Prayers are my diet. I can stay without water and food but I can't live without prayers and without reciting 'Ram Ram'."

One day I asked Bapu, "People say that man's destiny is decided depending upon what he meditates for in the last moment of his life. Is that correct?"

"Absolutely correct," Bapu replied.

"Then Bapu, what is the need of doing two prayers a day? We can get good destiny by reciting God's name at the last moment of our lives," I asked.

"Theoretically correct, but it is not so easy. We should clearly understand that one who has not recited God's name in his whole life can never do so in the last moment. To be able to do so, we have to devote ourselves to God all through life."

The last words said by Bapu were "He Ram! He Ram!" We can imagine how devoted to God Bapu's life was.

My Ram is not the Ram of "Manas"

In 1941 a follower of Bapu, Satish Chandra Das Gupta, asked him, "Bapu, you are a devotee of Ram, in spite of the fact that Ram has killed Bali in his ill-planned duel between Bali and Sugriv, and that he ran behind 'kanchan mrag'. There are several such unpleasant events about Ram, but even so you follow his ideals. I don't understand why."

"My Ram is not the one who killed Bali or who ran behind 'Maya mrag'. My Ram is the one who declined the throne of Ayodhya and gladly accepted the punishment to fulfil the long-given promise. My Ram is the one who did not agree to the request of Bharat to return to the throne, the one who respected a washerman's statement and disowned Sita. There are many good characteristics. We should follow the good characteristics of Ram. We should understand that no man is ever perfect. We should appreciate the 'hansa', who could drink only milk from a mixture of water and milk. We should try to develop that ability in ourselves. Do you understand?", asked Bapu after explaining properly. "Yes, I do," Satish said contentedly.

How Would Kanu Sing Without a Dilruba? (string instrument with one string)

The Maharaja of Travancore (now Tiruvakoor) had decided to open all temples of his territory for the Harijans on the occasion of his birthday. In those days G.R. Ramachandran was the Minister of Travancore Harijan Sangh. The Maharaja told him, "I would be glad to have Gandhiji here on this occasion. I will consider myself fortunate if I could perform one of Gandhiji's favourite tasks in his presence. Would you kindly request him to come here on this occasion? He will be the guest of the state." Ramchandran conveyed this to Bapu and he accepted it. Soon after the Maharaja sent a letter of invitation.

Along with Bapu, we started the journey. Bapu had to make a one-day halt in Pune. Wherever Bapu would go, evening prayer used to be held in public. Bapu came to the prayer house in time and looked a little surprised when he saw me without my dilruba. He asked in a pitiful voice, "Kanu, where is your dilruba?"

"Bapu, I haven't brought it along", I replied. After the prayers, at his residence, he asked again, "Why didn't you bring a dilruba? It should always be with you, especially when we are going to inaugurate the opening of temples for Harijans. You have made a big mistake."

Mahadevbhai, standing nearby, said in my defence, "Bapu, it is not Kanu's fault. He wanted to carry a dilruba but I advised him not to do so because the luggage was heavy."

Bapu said, "In that case you should have told me. I would have left my bedding. I can sleep without a bed but I do not like that on the occasion of an opening of temples for Harijans, Kanu doesn't play the dilruba. In Wardha he sings prayer, bhajans and Ramayan with his dilruba. I like it very much. Dilruba must be played. Let's buy one here." Bapu requested Thakaraceybehn to arrange for it. We proceeded to Travancore with a new dilruba. Later Bapu said, "I would not have insisted on a dilruba if it was some other occasion, but to serve the Harijans is the task of my life. Therefore, prayers should be performed properly when temples are to be opened for Harijans."



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450 - Mahatma Gandhi, sitting in a train compartment, writing with his right hand and collecting donations for Harijan Fund with left hand, 1945



452 - Mahatma Gandhi, collecting donations for Harijan Fund with a basket in his h and at a train station on his way to Assam, January 1946



843- Mahatma Gandhi and harijan leader Thakkar Bapa in Madras, January 1946

Chapter 2

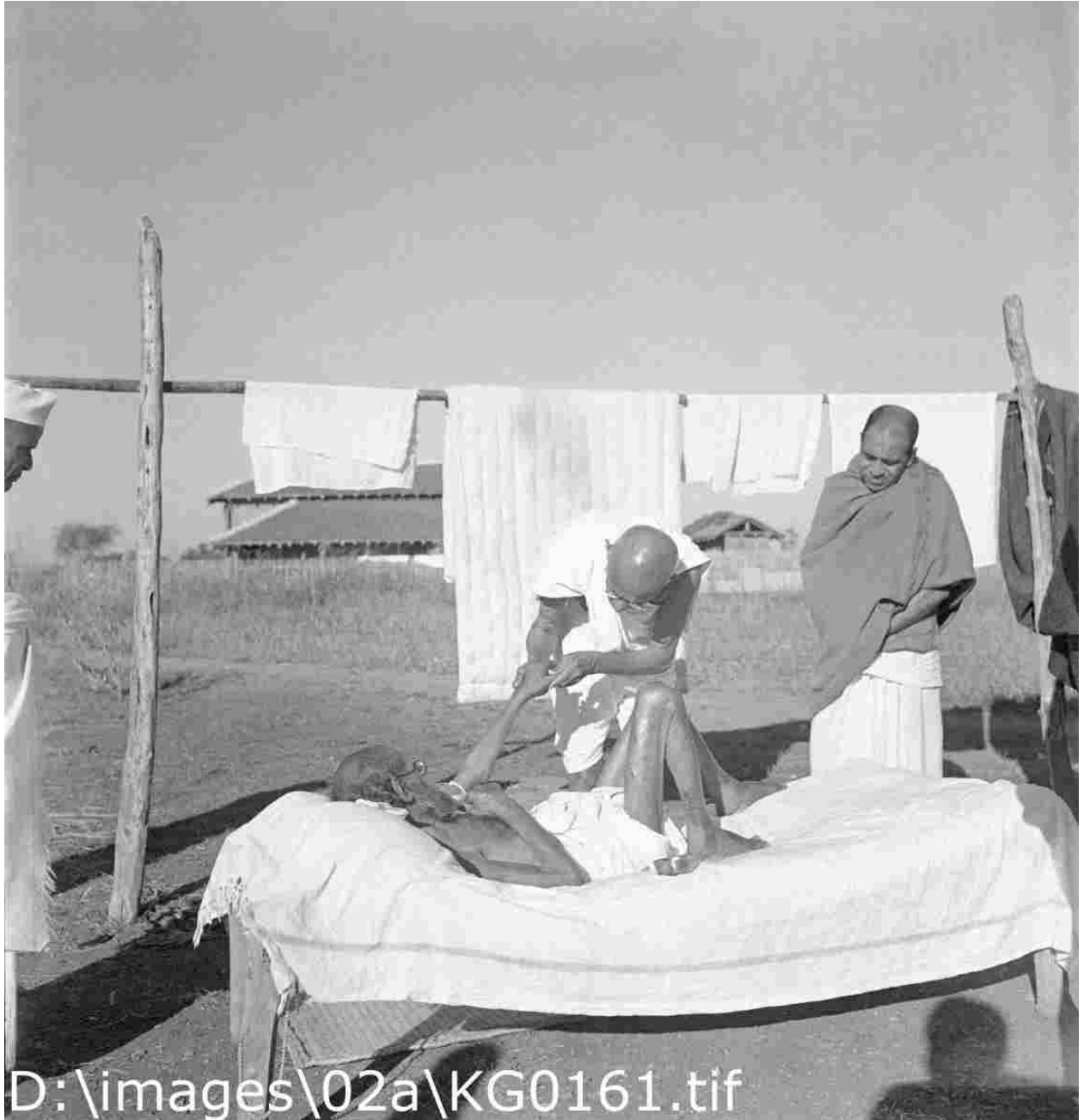
HUMAN SERVICE

The great pundit of Sanskrit, Parchure Shastri, was living in Sevagram Ashram. Suffering from leprosy, he was frustrated with life and wanted to starve to death.

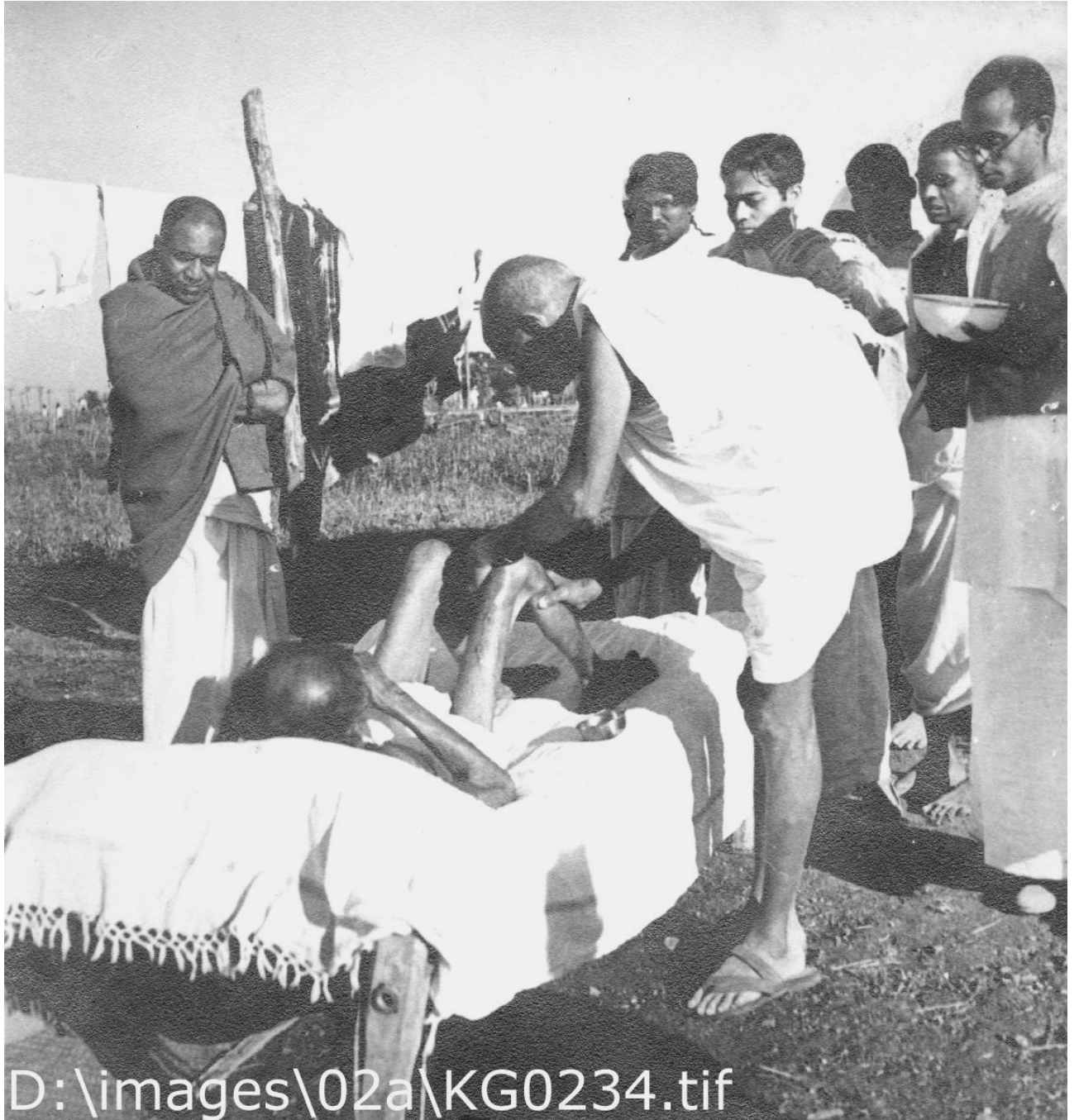
"You will not do that. I will not let you do it," Bapu said to Shastriji. About two hundred feet from his own hut, Bapu constructed a hut for Parchure Shastri. During his morning walks Bapu would stop at his hut and enquire after Shastriji's health. He also used to plan Shastriji's diet.

One day Shastriji said to Bapu, "I suffered from terrible body-ache last night and could not sleep well." Bapu listened to him carefully and thought about an appropriate treatment. Then he set up a bed for Shastriji nearby and arranged for mustard oil. Bapu asked Shastriji to lay down on the bed and started massaging his body. All of us were taken aback. Bapu was massaging him with so much concentration, love and affection, we were overwhelmed to observe it.

This became a routine. Shastriji was really relieved from pain. To show this pious scene to everybody I clicked some photographs, which are very popular today.



161 - Mahatma Gandhi attending to leper patient Sanskrit scholar Parchure Shastri at Sevagram Ashram, 1940; right: a visitor



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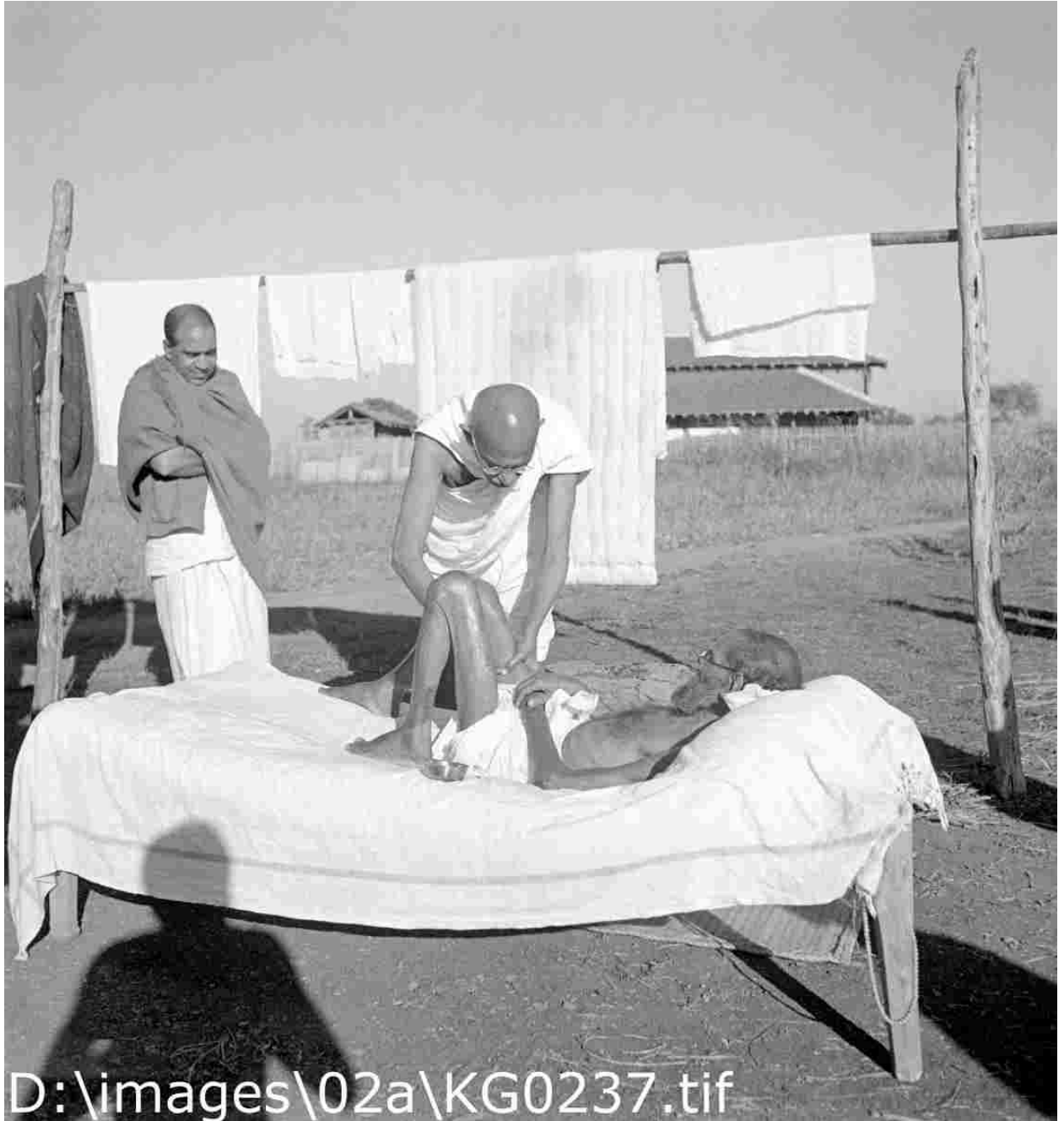
234- Mahatma Gandhi, giving his daily 15 min. massage to leper patient Sanskrit scholar Parchure Shastri at Sevagram Ashram, 1940; right: Shankaran (worker in Sushila Nayar's "Kasturba Gandhi Hospital" near Sevagram Ashram)



217- Leper patient Sanskrit scholar Parchure Shastri being examined at Sevagram Ashram, 1940



196- Mahatma Gandhi giving massage (15 min. daily) to leper patient Sanskrit scholar Parchure Shastri at Sevagram Ashram, 1940; right: Shankaran (worker in Sushila Nayar's *Kasturba Gandhi Hospital* near Sevagram Ashram)



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237- Mahatma Gandhi giving massage (15 min. daily) to leper patient Sanskrit scholar Parchure Shastri at Sevagram Ashram, 1940; back: a visitor

Wipe Out Superstitions

In 1930, at Sabarmati Ashram, many children fell ill with smallpox. Bapu used to do the treatment himself. The treatment was no food and a bath in potash-treated water. At that time I was also suffering from smallpox and Bapu suggested the same treatment for me. At this, my grandmother said to Bapu, "Water is forbidden for smallpox patients and you are recommending bath. 'Mata' might get annoyed at this." Bapu explained to her, "Devbhabhi, why do you get worried? 'Mata' would not get angry. You see, many children have had smallpox infection in our ashram and all of them have been treated in the same way. Until today 'Mata' has not got angry at them, then why should she get angry at Kanu. We must stop believing in all superstitions. If we ourselves don't initiate it, how can we ask others to follow? I beg you not to be worried."

Grandmother had great faith in Bapu and therefore she gladly agreed to his suggestions. I recovered fully in seven days and my grandmother was very happy. Bapu said to her, "Now Devbhabhi, isn't Kanu alright? See, 'Mata' didn't get annoyed with him."

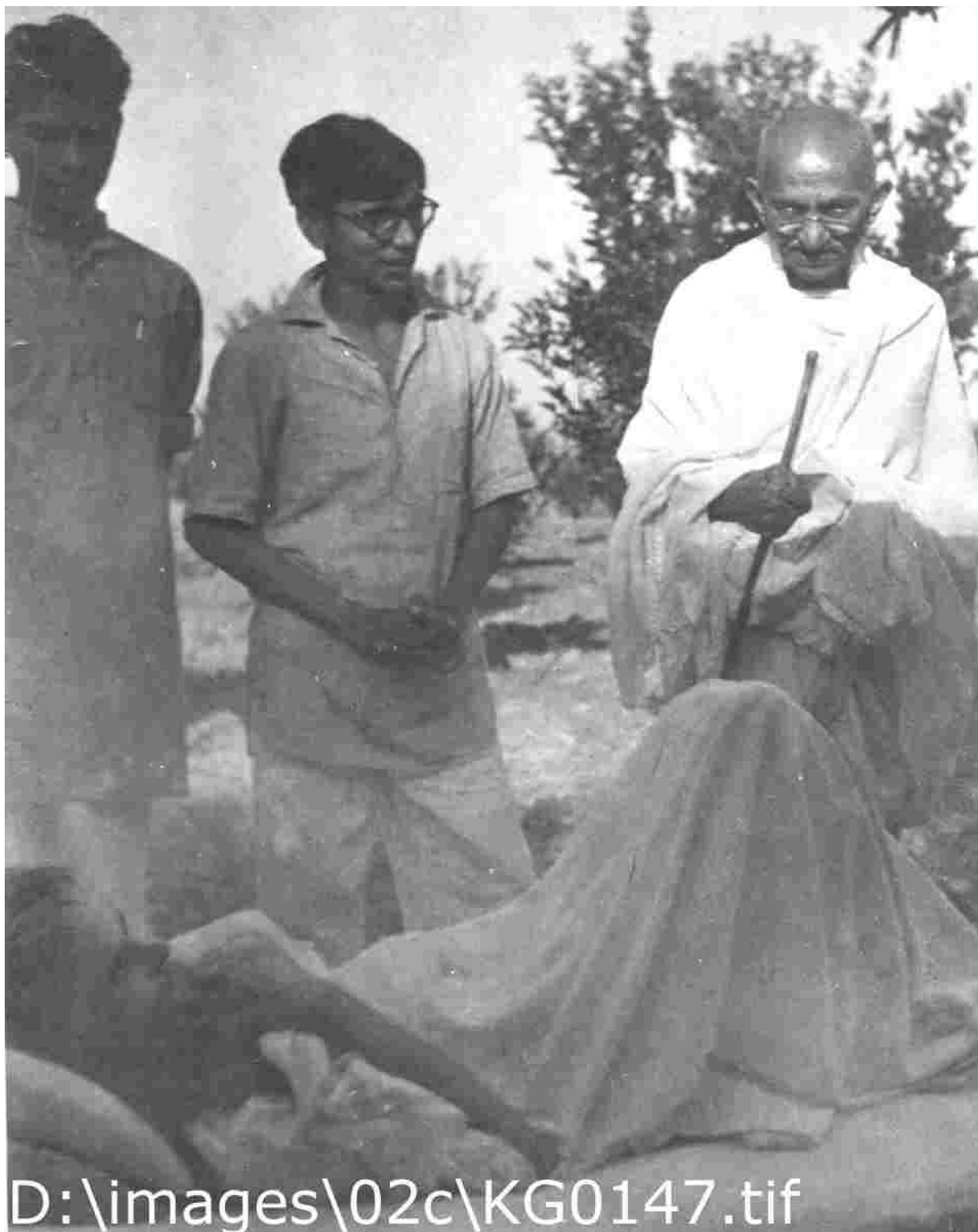
Human Service is Service to God

This is an incident from October 1936. Sri Shiv Prasad Gupta of Varanasi had constructed a grand temple of Bharat Mata. Bapu had agreed to inaugurate it on the auspicious occasion of Vijay Dashmi. Several days before, he felt he would not be able to go. He wrote in his letter, "I am very interested to fulfil the promise of inaugurating the Bharat Mata temple, but it seems unlikely. There are three patients of pneumonia and typhoid under my responsibility. How can I leave them? I am their doctor. As you know, I believe that human service is service to God, so my temple is here."

Guptaji replied immediately, "I understand your difficulty and I will pray to God. If it is due to my shortcomings and sins that we can't have you with us on this occasion, then please forgive me and come here. What else can I do?"

As if God had listened to Guptaji's prayer, all the patients recovered soon. Bapu wrote to Guptaji, "God has listened to you. Now I can reach there by the scheduled date and time."

Guptaji was overwhelmed. He wrote, "God listened to my prayer. Howsoever grateful I may be to Him would not be sufficient. I am also grateful to you."



147- Mahatma Gandhi and two other people talking to his sons son-in-law Kuvarji Parekh, who came to Sevagram Ashram for treatment of Tuberculosis, at Sevagram Ashram, 1941