

WRITING THE LIFE OF MANILAL MOHANDAS GANDHI

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Introduction

Manilal Gandhi was the second son of Mohandas (later Mahatma) and Kasturba Gandhi. Unlike his father who spent just over two decades in South Africa, Manilal spent close to five decades of a life (which spanned sixty-four years) in South Africa. Most of these years, in particular, were lived at Phoenix Settlement in the Inanda countryside on the communal farm that Gandhi had started in 1904. For thirty-six years of his life (1920-1956) Manilal was editor of the newspaper *Indian Opinion* which his father had had a crucial hand in establishing in 1903. This Gandhi, however, is relatively unknown in South Africa. To remedy that I wrote his biography, published in 2004.⁴¹³ Sufficient time has passed for me to reflect on the writing of the book, its objectives, the sources used, the reception of the book and especially its portrayal in the media in South Africa and in India. This reflection provides an opportunity for the historian to examine the practices of biographical writing but also to cast some understanding on what Judith Brown referred to as the “Gandhi phenomenon”⁴¹⁴ that hit India in the 1920s but which continues to manifest itself world-wide despite the fact that the Mahatma died almost six decades ago.

In my book I clearly spelt out the reasons why I was motivated to write about Manilal Gandhi.⁴¹⁵ I felt that while scholars both in India and

⁴¹³ See Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2004 and New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005).

⁴¹⁴ Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope?* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 167.

⁴¹⁵ Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi's Son Manilal*, 22-4.

South Africa had written about the history of Phoenix Settlement and *Indian Opinion* their interest was confined to the period up to 1914 after which Gandhi returned to India. I argued thus that the history of Phoenix and *Indian Opinion* after 1914 is equally worthy of study. Manilal was central to that story. He played an important role in keeping his father's heritage alive in South Africa. In 1917 when the Gandhi family had been in India for three years, Manilal was sent back to South Africa by his father to help with the newspaper. He took over the editorship of the paper from Albert West in 1920 and lived at Phoenix till his death in 1956. During this time he went to jail several times in protest against restrictive laws against Indians and Africans. Understanding the difficulties of publishing and editing a newspaper and running a farm on Gandhian ideals were thus important considerations.

I also confessed to significant personal motivations to tell this story. My mother, Sita, was Manilal's eldest daughter and she had felt that Manilal's contribution both to Phoenix and to South Africa's resistance struggle had to be documented and recognised. Yet I was also driven by my assessment as a historian that much life writing needed to be done about South Africa's lesser known heroes and heroines. The years since our birth as a democracy in 1994 has seen some attempts to remedy this and have been marked by a significant growth in biographical and autobiographical writing – black lives and their struggles have been celebrated and commemorated. The moment then seemed appropriate to bring Manilal's life to the fore.

While I wanted to rescue Manilal from anonymity, I also felt that through his life one might get to understand the father – Gandhi the family man – better. Many biographers have not been interested in Gandhi as a family man; his political role provides the main obsession.⁴¹⁶ A very recent biography of Gandhi (published after my book) by his grandson Rajmohan Gandhi aims more specifically and most admirably to rectify this by weaving the personal and the political but here too he is unable to sustain this through the book.⁴¹⁷ Gandhi's relationship with his elder son, Harilal, however, is well-known and biographers have not missed the opportunity to focus on this controversial relationship. The

⁴¹⁶ Brown's *Gandhi* is one example.

⁴¹⁷ Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas: a True Story of a Man, his People and an Empire* (New Delhi : Penguin, Viking, 2006).

much acclaimed play by Feroz Khan titled “Mahatma vs. Gandhi” served also to popularise the conflicts between father and an alcoholic son. Khan’s film *Gandhi My Father*, based predominantly on Chandulal Dalal’s biography of Harilal, has recently made its debut after being long in the making.⁴¹⁸ Aware of these initiatives to highlight Harilal’s life which could provide a not so favourable image of Gandhi as a father, I argued that Gandhi had three other sons and his relationship with them was much less controversial and thus provided an opportunity to develop a more rounded insight.

Although many years have passed since Louis Fischer first published his biography in 1951, it still retains its well-deserved reputation as among the best. Fischer tried to understand all the facets that made up the Mahatma and has a special chapter on Gandhi’s family. Fischer’s assessment of Gandhi as a father is quite harsh though not as harsh as what he wrote privately after meeting Devadas (Gandhi’s youngest son) and Manilal who both happened to be in New York in 1949. Writing to his wife Markoosha from the Hotel Duane on Madison Avenue, Fischer judged the two brothers and their father:

Last night at dinner I saw Manilal, age 56, and Devadas Gandhi, age 49, together for the first time. Manilal lives in South Africa but he was recently in India and met Devadas. Last night they met again in my presence ... They were not warm. Later Devadas said to me "I am glad he came here. He lives in South Africa. Here he had gotten some attention." On the street later I was walking between them. Manilal, who is leaving today, said, Now that I am leaving you could take my room. He lives in the not-too-fashionable Prince George on 28th Street. Devadas, after a moment said, No, I think I'll stay where I am. He's at The Waldorf. There's just formal friendship between them. The family was never warm, and Gandhi was a bad father, much worse than I. He actually wanted to punish them, although he loved everybody else.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁸ See Chandulal B. Dalal (translated and edited by Tridip Suhrud), *Harilal Gandhi: A Life* (Chennai: Orient Longman, 2007, original Gujarati book was published in 1977). The film maker and producer have marketed the film to ensure that Gandhi is not cast in a negative way and it shows sacrifices he made to serve the nation.

⁴¹⁹ New York Public Library, Manuscript Division, Louis Fischer Papers, “Correspondence Relating to Gandhi”, Fischer to Markoosha, 2 June 1949.

In his biography, Fischer made several judgements about his subject, such as: “(f)rom young manhood, he was sweet and kind towards everybody except his wife and sons.” He subjected his sons to very harsh tests and his appraisal of them could be severe. Their youth was one of lost opportunities for love and affection. To avoid nepotism “Gandhi leaned over backward to give his sons less than he gave other men's sons.”⁴²⁰ Building on this image, many others have been harsh in their assessment. An Indian journalist pronounced in 2003 that Gandhi “systematically destroyed his older sons, Harilal and Manilal, in the name of shaping their character ... As a father Gandhi was a flop.”⁴²¹

My book aimed to provide a more rounded perception of Gandhi as a father. Fischer, I hoped to show, was wrong in his judgement of Gandhi's family relationships. Gandhi, in my opinion, loved his sons. Further, Manilal's life, I argued, would make nonsense of the argument that he had been “destroyed.” Against these set objectives, I wish in this article to examine the extent to which my life of Manilal was able to rescue him from the margins and whether I was successful in contributing to a newer understanding of Gandhi as father. But first, this article reflects on the sources at my disposal to make Manilal's life understandable and penetrable.

Sources

Claude Markowitz has argued that by publishing his autobiography in 1927, Gandhi became his own biographer as he cast a narrative for the biographies that followed. Gandhi, he argues, “sought to take charge of all subsequent representations of his own life, and to impose an interpretation in terms of his spiritual quest which ought not to be seriously questioned afterwards.”⁴²² In my book I argued that, in one

⁴²⁰ Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Granada Publishing, 1982; original 1951), 261-68.

⁴²¹ T.J.S. George, “Who Succeeds, Who Fails? Naipaul Got It Wrong”, *Newindpress on Sunday*, 20 January 2003.

⁴²² Claude Markowitz, *The Un-Gandhian Gandhi: the Life and Afterlife of the Mahatma* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 50-5.

important sense, Gandhi is also “the maker of his son’s biography.”⁴²³ Gandhi wrote a fairly detailed account of his South African days in his autobiography and through these descriptions one is able to imagine and configure Manilal’s childhood. While many biographers devote but a slight chapter to their subject’s childhood my book has four significant chapters covering Manilal’s early years up to 1914, the time he was twenty-two years old. These years are significant in his father’s life for it was during this time that Gandhi developed most of the ideas that have come to be associated with his philosophy of life. His autobiography devotes no less than 67 chapters to the South African years.⁴²⁴ In my biography I was able to construct accounts of Manilal’s arrival in Natal in 1896 as a four year old; his very luxurious home in Beach Grove Villa in Durban; his early home education with Gandhi and then an English governess; the members of the household which included several of Gandhi’s clerks; the numerous visitors of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds to the house; the religious influences in the household; the scorn for traditional gender roles within the household; and the numerous conflicts between two very strong-willed parents – some of which were about Gandhi’s refusal to observe caste-based behaviour and retaining material gifts given to the family in 1901. Through Gandhi’s account we can see him marshalling the support of his sons against their mother on these matters. We read too, through Gandhi, that Kasturba thought that her husband was trying to turn her boys into religious ascetics and that they at this stage were “dancing to ... [Gandhi’s] tune.”⁴²⁵

Later, in 1904 when the family takes up home in Troyeville, one is again able to create a fairly comprehensive picture of the household. We learn from Gandhi that he always spoke to his children in Gujarati yet they learnt also to converse in English with the numerous guests he entertained. We learn of his attempts to educate his sons in the limited time he had available. These represent just some examples of the richness of Gandhi’s autobiography for the biographer trying to create the early life of his child. From these descriptions of life I was able to make several conclusions about Manilal and the influences on him. He was to adopt his

⁴²³ Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi’s Son Manilal*, 26.

⁴²⁴ See Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1932, reprint 1982).

⁴²⁵ Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi’s Son Manilal*, Chapter 1.

father's antipathy to caste discrimination; he learnt the value of physical labour; and he grew up confident in Indian culture but was able to interact with whites on an equal basis without feelings of inferiority. His educational needs were not met systematically but were dependent on his father's time and ability to make arrangements. From Gandhi we learn that his sons were eventually resentful of his early inability and then definite unwillingness to provide them with a formal education. From Gandhi we learn that he never ever hit his boys.⁴²⁶

While this source is incredibly valuable I would like to select a few examples to indicate its limits. Manilal, for example, features in an entire and very moving chapter when the family were together in Bombay in 1900. He was then ten years old and had typhoid and pneumonia. Gandhi decided not to give him chicken broth or eggs as recommended by the doctor but to follow hydrotherapy instead. This is an important episode in Gandhi's life: it was – as his chapter title indicates – his “faith on trial.”⁴²⁷ One could argue that this was also a significant episode in Manilal's life as he did not die. But would he have selected such an episode to talk about when recalling his childhood? We know next to nothing for example of his encounter with smallpox and how this was treated. Yet his face bore the marks of the disease and it also affected his eyesight. Gandhi the chronicler was absent when this disease took root and it does not feature in the autobiography.

While it is possible to discern Gandhi's role in his boys' lives it is almost impossible to glean what Kasturba meant to the boys as a mother. She was not literate and so has not left behind letters. We do not learn of what disciplinary methods she enforced, what traditional customs and religious beliefs she might have passed on to the boys or what conflicts she may have had with them. Yet with the father absent on so many occasions she was the constant in their lives. It is only through Gandhi that we are able to glimpse something of Kasturba but she remains elusive.

For Manilal's first fourteen years of life we are able to plot his residences from Gandhi's account: Rajkot, Durban, Rajkot again, Gिरगुam, Santa Cruz, and Troyeville. These various residences must have

⁴²⁶ Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi's Son Manilal*, Chapter 1; especially from page 53.

⁴²⁷ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 185-7.

impacted on his developing mind and character. We are dependent, then, for a record of these years on what his father wrote. One can infer what the influences on Manilal may have been but there are questions that cannot be answered by the autobiography. Oral histories, drawn from Manilal's children reveal interesting episodes of his life, however. Or, rather, about those episodes that he chose to tell them about. The stories he related about his youth are those of his father and the hard discipline he imposed on them. In Johannesburg, he once left his glasses at home and Gandhi insisted Manilal walk back to the house to fetch them. That day he walked 32 kilometres. He also loved food and one day his father taught him a lesson on the effects of overindulgence by allowing the boy to eat till he became ill.⁴²⁸ Here too it is possible to argue that Manilal chose to tell his children these stories because he wished to pass on lessons of how discipline was important. Yet even in a commemorative publication when his father was assassinated, Manilal wrote about some misdemeanours he committed in his youth and his father's attempts to discipline him. He writes with no bitterness. Instead, it reads as a matter of fact account.⁴²⁹

Oral histories and the written memoirs of his own children do provide an account of how Manilal's experience of his childhood influenced him.⁴³⁰ Manilal himself set no gender divisions of labour in his own household. Just as his father had delivered his youngest son, Devadas, so did Manilal deliver his eldest daughter. Manilal cooked and took care of the children and encouraged his partner to share his work life in full. He also employed some of Gandhi's methods of punishment, such as fasting or self-inflicted suffering, to influence behaviour.

Aside from this, what can one make of Manilal's youth outside of narratives of father and son? A crucial piece of evidence – a postcard – preserved by Manilal's daughter Sita points to an important hobby that Manilal developed while living in Johannesburg. He developed a passion for collecting postcards. Posted from Europe to “Master Manilal Gandhi”

⁴²⁸ Author's interviews with Ela Gandhi, 20 December 2001 and Arun Gandhi, 14 March 1990 and 8 April 2002. See Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi's Son Manilal*, 56-7.

⁴²⁹ See *Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Number* (International Printing Press, Phoenix, 1948), 16.

⁴³⁰ See Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, ed., *Sita: The Memoirs of Sita Gandhi* (Durban and Pretoria: Local History Museum and SA History Online, 2003), 15-27.

one postcard dated 6 December 1905 had a single sentence from the sender: "When are you going to send me some postcards?" This solitary postcard in the possession of one daughter belonged to a much larger collection of postcards from all over the world. It would become a lifelong hobby for Manilal, but of this neither he nor his father wrote.

The biographer is often faced with sources that are contradictory or not entirely revealing. Manilal, for instance, features in Gandhi's autobiography in a chapter titled "Fasting as Penance" but he is not named here. The autobiography was published in 1928-29 when Manilal was in his thirties and, while candid about his own misdoings, Gandhi chose quite soundly not to identify individuals in the episode discussed. Gandhi reveals how because of the "moral lapse" of two individuals at Phoenix Settlement he endured "a fiery ordeal." He felt responsible. He felt angry. He also felt "that the only way the guilty parties could be made to realize my distress and the depth of their own fall would be for me to do some penance." He thus undertook to fast for seven days and to thereafter eat only one meal a day for four-and-a-half months.⁴³¹ Gandhi then focuses on the effects of the fast and his ability to maintain it. This fast is significant in Gandhi's life for it represented a first attempt to use a fast to influence the behaviour of others. The Raj and the people in India would, on many occasions subsequently, feel the impact of Gandhi's political fasts. This fast is, however, also crucially significant in Manilal's life. I had to piece this together from a variety of sources.

Manilal himself wrote about an episode without providing any detail of what his crime was:

I had tried to deceive him. Father was at the time in Johannesburg and I was in Phoenix. There was an exchange of letters between us. He was pained at certain reports he had received about me. He wanted an admission from me but I persisted in denying until at last I received a letter from him which was signed "Blessings from your father in agony." I could no longer bear it. I wanted to confess but I had not the courage to approach him direct. I therefore enclosed the letter in a letter to Mr Kallenbach ... I asked father to forgive me in the letter. I received a telegram from him: "I forgive you. Ask God to forgive."⁴³²

⁴³¹ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 258-9.

This is an important account because it reveals Manilal's fear and the difficulties of owning up to an unnamed misdemeanour.

Manilal's son, Arun, provides one version of what happened at Phoenix, a version passed down to him by his mother many years after the event.

When he was yet a teenager [sic] Bhai [Manilal] was made to nurse a sick young woman living at Phoenix. This was also meant to be a lesson both in medical knowledge and the ability to curb one's carnal desires.

Bhai had to do everything for the woman, including sponge and change her clothes. The woman was not all that ill and to have a young man do such personal things moved her and she made suggestive passes. Bhai succumbed to these overtures and they were caught by someone while kissing.⁴³³

This account shows Manilal as a victim and it also reduces the seriousness of the misdemeanour. Yet the indications are that the relationship may have been more prolonged and more serious. This was a married woman. Other sources, however, also implicate her as the initiator. Louis Fischer, who would have chatted to Manilal about this in 1949 when he met the latter, writes a strangely worded sentence “a young Indian married woman successfully assaulted Manilal's continence.”⁴³⁴ Millie Graham Polak's writings provided a further dimension. She and Polak were living in Durban at the time while her husband Henry Polak was still editor of *Indian Opinion*. Using the pseudonym “Lila” for Jeki Mehta and “N” for Manilal, she writes of her conversation with Gandhi. According to Millie, Gandhi had told her, “Lila has been guilty of destroying her chastity. She has had a physical relationship with N....” In response to Millie's further questions Gandhi indicated that the affair had taken place for “some time ... some weeks at least.” Millie's mind raced

⁴³² *Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Number*, 16. Manilal wrongly places the incident as having taken place in 1912.

⁴³³ Private correspondence to author from Arun Gandhi, 29 February 1980.

⁴³⁴ Fischer, *Gandhi*, 263.

ahead. She asked Gandhi, “Is there to be a baby?” Gandhi replied, “No, thank God! At least that much is spared me.”⁴³⁵

There was one other significant effect of the fast – as a further penance Manilal decided he would not marry till he was released from the vow by his father. Here too there are differing accounts. Fischer’s account indicates that Gandhi said he would not permit Manilal to marry, while Arun Gandhi reflects that the vow was applicable till Manilal was thirty-six. Letters from Gandhi to Manilal, however, indicate that it was Manilal who took the vow voluntarily in 1913 as a self-imposed penance although within a decade he did want his father to release him from it.⁴³⁶ He subsequently married at the age of thirty-six.

This brings one to another crucially important source - Gandhi’s letters to Manilal. Far too numerous to count, they span a period of four decades. The earliest dates to 1907 when Gandhi lived in Johannesburg and his son lived at Phoenix. Over the subsequent decades, while Gandhi was in India and his son in South Africa, the father busy as he was with his political and public life in India took time to write to his son. From Gandhi came advice, direction, and education about life. Without these letters it would be hard to piece together important aspects of Manilal’s life. Yet Manilal also wrote letters to his father and this correspondence has not been preserved and only a handful of letters exist. The preservers of Gandhi’s legacy sought to recover all the letters Gandhi wrote by making appeals to people. His secretaries also kept copies of outbound letters. Hence the mammoth *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.⁴³⁷ This is a most important source on Manilal’s life, but it is also one of the most problematic sources, for the dialogue is one sided. For some reason little effort was made to keep the letters Gandhi received and so what is missing are Manilal’s letters which produced these responses from his father. Preserved in this way, Gandhi’s voice all but silences that of others.

⁴³⁵ Millie Graham Polak, *Mr. Gandhi: The Man* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1931), 143-45.

⁴³⁶ See, for instance, “To Manilal, 17 March 1922”, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (hereafter, *CWMG*) (New Delhi: Government of India), 23: 101-2. Also Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi’s Son Manilal*, 173-4.

⁴³⁷ The first volume was published in 1960 and over the decades many volumes, totalling a hundred, were issued. The publication dates of each volume are not given here.

From the *Collected Works* we can glean much and we can infer much about Manilal. We learn between 1907 and 1908 he was very concerned about his lack of formal education, for his father takes pains to explain his philosophy of education. Manilal was explicitly told he was not meant to follow a career path. Rather, public service and a life of poverty was what he should willingly seek. We know of some books he read since Gandhi sent these to his son and asked questions about them and explained the import of some of them. We know from Gandhi's letters to others at Phoenix that Manilal wanted a piano. We learn of Gandhi's pride in his son when the latter courts jail for the first time as a seventeen year old. We know what food Manilal ate since Gandhi advised about diet. The letters are firm but they are also marked by tenderness and considerable affection for his son. We also learn of discord between them when Gandhi forbade Manilal to take a day off while in Cape Town to go up Table Mountain. Through Gandhi's efforts to explain why he acted as he did, we also read Manilal's anger. We later learn of Manilal's wish to marry a Muslim woman and his father's pointed objection to this. We learn too of the wife Gandhi ultimately chose for his son and the advice he gave his son to treat his wife as an equal. In the 1930s we learn of Manilal's desire to leave Phoenix to live in Durban and his father's pointed objection to this. Gandhi gives political advice and advice about the running of *Indian Opinion* which was regularly plagued by financial troubles.⁴³⁸

Invaluable as this source is, the biographer longs for the letters that produced the responses. There are many answers that elude one. How did Manilal respond to his father when he advised him quite firmly not to marry Fatima (Timmy) Gool? Did he have answers to the questions that Gandhi raised about how two individuals could follow their respective religions in one household? How did he explain to his father his desire to move to Durban in the 1930s? What tone does he use in his replies?

The few letters that did survive are very revealing. The young man writes with neat carefully-formed letters; he is meticulous if somewhat unimaginative in his detail; his language is simple and matter-of-fact. He has a sound head on his shoulders and is deeply respectful to his father. His letter is addressed as follows "in my revered father's

⁴³⁸ These are all discussed in Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi's Son Manilal*, 73-4; 79-82; 85; 118-119; 173-7; 183-5; 233-5.

sublime service.” He ends with the words “*sashtang dandavat*” which suggests that he lies in full prostration before his father. And he signs himself “your obedient son.”⁴³⁹ We learn too of his willingness to return to Phoenix in 1916, for ashram life in India offered him limited opportunities: just the daily grind, “... turn the mill. Cook, spin, fill water or go to jail.” We also learn of his feelings of inadequacy in running the newspaper.⁴⁴⁰ Yet he is determined and has a clear vision of what he wants to do. These images can absolutely not be gleaned from his father’s letters to him.

Manilal’s editorship and political activity are much easier to chart. The pages of *Indian Opinion*, and in particular editorials he wrote over three decades together with political accounts that at that time appeared in other Durban newspapers such as *Indian Views*, provide ample opportunity for an analysis. The *Manilal Gandhi Memorial Number* produced by his family in 1956 gives tributes by many political friends and staff. This source had to be treated with some caution, however. Written soon after his death they could lead to hagiographical depictions, if used uncritically. Yet some, such as the recollections of staff member Alpha Ncgobo and journalist Jordan Ngubane, were invaluable. His American friend Homer Jack went to great lengths to chart out the key events and influences on Manilal’s life.⁴⁴¹ Yet I had to be careful not to allow these to overly influence my own construction of the life of Manilal, at the same time as ensuring that the gaps were also filled in. For Jack, the Jeki episode and Manilal’s desire to marry Timmy do not feature, quite understandably, in that detailed Obituary. Neither does a significant arrest and imprisonment in 1919 and 1921 which only the pages of *Indian Opinion* revealed.⁴⁴²

Manilal also wrote to many friends and acquaintances and these letters, preserved on three continents have survived, and run into the hundreds.⁴⁴³ To some he wrote only about politics; to others he wrote about the deeply personal. My approach in the biography was to focus on

⁴³⁹ Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya, Ahmedabad (GSS), Gandhi Papers, SN 7387, Manilal to Gandhi, 17 December 1920.

⁴⁴⁰ GSS, Gandhi Papers, SN 6851, Manilal to Gandhi, 31 August 1919.

⁴⁴¹ *Manilal Gandhi Memorial Number* (International Printing Press, Phoenix, 1956), 16; 20; 12-14.

⁴⁴² For this see Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi’s Son Manilal*, 145-46, 164-66.

the personal and not just the political. These personal letters provided a crucial glimpse into his personality. In the 1940s, for instance, he went through a bruising court case when he was sued by a political opponent, S.M. Nana, for defamation. He lost the case and was ordered by the courts to pay £1,468 plus costs. One could have imagined that this must have been a deeply shameful moment for him but a letter to a close friend indicates his strength and determination. He wrote:

We lost the case but we are not going to give a penny to Nana. I have heard that he is going to make me insolvent and send me to jail. Therefore the Hindus will settle the debt. Those who desire my goodwill cannot do such a thing. If I have to go to jail I will go and [if] I am made insolvent it will be no shame to me. I do not have anything now and I did not have anything before. What ever there is it belongs to Phoenix Settlement Trust.⁴⁴⁴

Before seeing this letter my inclination had been to assess this event as a moment of defeat and shame and not strength and defiance.

In the mid-1940s when Manilal faced a lonely period at Phoenix while his family were in India, we learn from letters to friends how he spent his time. He got the house painted and installed lights at the Press. There were accidents, too: for instance, the charger collapsed from the roof due to the carelessness of the electrician. Financial and other help came from one friend, Mr Babar Chavda. The latter spoilt his friend with crates of fruit from his Mowbray shop in Cape Town.⁴⁴⁵ All alone, Manilal experimented with a diet of fruit, though he later added boiled vegetables, but no spices, bread or butter. He described his intake for the day and its effects to another close friend Hanna Lazar:

Fruit and a few almonds and [N]escafe in the morning, the same with tomatoes lettuce carrots and sour milk in addition for lunch, boiled

⁴⁴³ See Babar Chavda (Private) Papers, Cape Town; the Homer Jack Papers and the John Nevin Sayre Papers, held by the Swarthmore College Peace Collection (SCPC), Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania ; and the Sarid-Kallenbach Collection, in Isa Sarid's personal collection in Haifa, Israel.

⁴⁴⁴ Chavda Papers, Manilal to Babarbai, 9 August 1943.

⁴⁴⁵ See Chavda Papers, Manilal to Babarbai, 24 December 1946 and 15, 16 January and 17 February 1947.

vegetables with a lot of soup in the evening. No butter, no cheese no bread no biscuits. Nothing else and I am feeling quite OK on it. It has a great effect not only on my physical but also on my mental condition.⁴⁴⁶

Five months into this diet he wrote again to Hanna:

You will be pleased to know that on the diet I am taking I have energy enough to walk from here to Durban - 15 miles. Last Sunday I walked the whole distance barefoot. I was surprised how my feet stood it when I have not been accustomed to walking barefoot even in the house.⁴⁴⁷

The personal letters also serve to contradict perceptions by Manilal's political contemporaries that Manilal was an unwilling participant in the 1946-8 passive resistance struggle.⁴⁴⁸ After a first imprisonment in 1946, it would be a full year before he was able to volunteer as a passive resister again. His letters to Hanna and Babarbai reveal a strong desire to participate in the campaign and frustration at his work at Phoenix. Sushila, his wife, had become such a useful partner that he wrote, "I cannot manage on my own." Manilal eagerly awaited her return but her stay in India was becoming indefinite – a brother got married, another died after an illness. Manilal felt the pressure on him greatly, a pressure born out of being Gandhi's son and a veteran resister. Surely, he thought, he needed to "set an example" to other resisters. Would not people say he was a "shirker" if he did not come forward? And so he worried. Many letters to Gandhi and Hanna deal with when Sushila might arrive.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁶ Sarid-Kallenbach Collection, Manilal to Hanna, 20 February 1947; also 5 December 1946.

⁴⁴⁷ Sarid-Kallenbach Collection, Manilal to Hanna, 15 May 1947.

⁴⁴⁸ Ahmed Kathrada once told me that Manilal only took part because his father ordered him to and that this was the perception in the Congress offices. A profile in the collection by Gail Gerhart and Tom Karis argues that he remained "aloof" from the campaign. See their *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1964* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1977), 4: 30.

⁴⁴⁹ Chavda Papers, Manilal to Babarbai, 24 December 1946 and 6 March 1947; Sarid-Kallenbach Collection, Manilal to Hanna, 21 November 1946, 27 January, 6 and 20 February, 28 March, and 10 April 1947; *CWMG*, 86, 1946-47, 333, "To Manilal", 10 January 1947; p.416, "To Sushila", 1 February 1947; *CWMG*, 87, 1947, p.276, "To Manilal", 13 April 1947.

In 1952, when he returned to Phoenix after participating in the Defiance Campaign, we have in a letter to Hanna a trifling personal detail of what awaited him at Phoenix. The realities of farm life hit him. There had been so much rain “that the road approaching our house was impassable. We had to leave the car on the road and walk home in ankle deep mud. And I had my new suit on and so that too was drenched. Our house was flooded with water ...”.⁴⁵⁰ This is not key to understanding his political activity but it does provide a sense of place and the reality of experience.

Visitors to Phoenix in the 1950s also provided glimpses into Manilal’s life in quite a vivid way. Robert St John, the American journalist, renders a physical description of Phoenix: “The buildings on the hilltop are surrounded by pineapple, papaya and banana trees, and there is a tennis-court close to the house.” St John also noted the placard outside Manilal’s home: “WELCOME TO THOSE WHO CROSS THE THRESHOLD OF THIS DOOR: A HEARTY WELCOME TO BOTH RICH AND POOR.” He also provides us with a description of Manilal:

His eyes, behind thin-rimmed spectacles are soft and kind, although sometimes they flash with impatience. His black hair has started to grey. He dresses in a conventional western manner, generally very unostentatiously, although this day he wore a beige sports shirt, beige slacks and open-work sandals. Most noticeable are his hands. The fingers are long and tapering. There is much about the aesthete about him. Often his voice seems to be coming from far off, almost as if from another world.⁴⁵¹

Jackie, the family’s newly acquired pet monkey, also received a mention. St John saw “Jackie running out of the house with the bottle of ink in his hand and everyone chasing him.” There were many stories about the antics of this monkey, for example that he would make off with Manilal’s important papers or even his glasses and retreat to the safety of the trees.⁴⁵²

⁴⁵⁰ Sarid-Kallenbach Collection, Manilal to Hanna, 15 February 1953.

⁴⁵¹ Robert St John, *Through Malan’s Africa* (London, Gollancx, 1954), 306-7.

⁴⁵² *Indian Opinion*, 12 April 1957 (“A Day with the Gandhis” by R. St John, published here some years after the visit); Dhupelia-Mesthrie, ed., *Sita*, 23.

Above all, visitors to Phoenix were amazed at Manilal's hospitality and the time he was prepared to devote to them. Homer Jack detailed his days at Phoenix in July 1952 in an unpublished travel journal.⁴⁵³ Manilal and eighteen year old Arun picked Jack up at the station. At Phoenix, he met the rest of the family – twelve year old Ela and twenty-three year old Sita. There were other guests, including a young Englishman and his Dutch wife and baby. Sushila, Manilal's wife was in India as her mother was critically ill but the house ran smoothly and meals appeared on time.

Manilal took Jack on a long stroll through the sugar cane fields of Inanda. Later in the day they all piled into his old Dodge and went for a meal at the Goodwill Lounge in Durban which was owned by Pompe Naidoo. Here people of all races could still sit together for a meal and this was Manilal's favourite restaurant. They then went to see a film, "The Day the Earth Stood Still", returning to the Goodwill Lounge for dessert. The next day, a Sunday, Jack met Hanna's daughter, Isa, who took everybody to a service of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. The next night, Manilal arranged for a large group of African leaders (Jack does not mention their names) to come to Phoenix for discussions and they talked late through the night. By the time Jack departed on the Wednesday he had enjoyed yet another meal at the Goodwill Lounge and had been to see his first Indian movie with the family.

During his stay at Phoenix, Reginald Reynolds observed that, by the time he rose in the morning, Manilal had been up for hours and had completed most of his work. He was a bad driver but took Reynolds around the countryside. They visited Manessa Moerane, the Principal at Ohlange Institute, whom Manilal knew very well. Jordan Ngubane and another African friend accompanied them to visit Chief Albert Luthuli at Groutville near Stanger.⁴⁵⁴ On several occasions, Reynolds, who had known Gandhi, was struck by how Gandhi's voice seemed to come through Manilal.

The different sources were significant in different ways in the writing of Manilal's biography, providing facts, interpretations, opinions,

⁴⁵³ SCPC, Swarthmore College, Homer Jack Papers, DG 63, Series V, Box 1, Travel journal, 2 July - 30 July 1952.

⁴⁵⁴ Reginald Reynolds, *Beware of Africans: A Pilgrimage from Cape to Cairo* (London, Jarrolds, 1955), 298-99.

colour and texture around which I constructed a narrative. Manilal's life is laid bare for readers as far as the sources allow one to uncover the past.

Gandhi's Shadow

Given the richness of sources, was it possible to remove Manilal from his father's shadow and restore him in full light? Was it possible for the junior Gandhi to come out of the margins to full centre? This biographer has to confess to an error of judgement. The title of the book, *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal*, ensured that Gandhi remained the focus in its reception. I had initially titled the book *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Manilal Gandhi*. After consulting with her marketing team, the publisher argued that this should be rephrased. Who would know, she argued, that Manilal was Gandhi's son unless it was clearly spelt out in the title? Who indeed was Manilal Gandhi and why would anyone want to buy or read the book? In the final throes of preparing a book, authors are often confronted with decisions and I allowed this change. In retrospect I should not have done so, for it further designated a marginal role for Manilal. He was but Gandhi's son.

In the book I also explained in some detail my motivation for using the words "Gandhi's Prisoner?" I knew it would be controversial to some, but for me it provided a way to ask key questions about Manilal's life.⁴⁵⁵ The title was inspired by a letter Gandhi wrote to Manilal in 1918, when the latter was twenty-six years old, saying "You are not my prisoner, but my friend. I shall give you my advice honestly; you may think over what I say and then act as it seems best to you."⁴⁵⁶ Yet, Gandhi would then proceed to lay down his beliefs so persuasively (note this choice of word) that, in the end, Manilal in reality had no choice. As I argued in the book, in important matters relating to his career and his marriage, he remained caged in.

For instance, in the matter of Manilal's desire to marry Timmy, Gandhi did say "You are a free man, so I cannot force you to do anything." Yet he spelt out his objections in full (the heightened

⁴⁵⁵ Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal*, 24-26.

⁴⁵⁶ See *CWMG*, 14, 1918, 178, "To Manilal", 31 January 1918.

communal tensions in India was one important factor) and indicated that should Manilal marry Timmy, Gandhi could not allow him to continue to edit *Indian Opinion*, neither could he return to India. The newspaper represented a measure of the independence Manilal had managed to carve out for himself. It represented an important mission in his life. Without it, and without Gandhi's support, he would be nothing. Manilal could not forget whose son he was, he did not have the courage to defy his father with penalties so severe and, being an obedient son, he bowed to his father's wishes.⁴⁵⁷

The title also derived from the perceptions of Manilal's children, especially Sita and Arun. The words Sita used in an account given to Fatima Meer to capture her father's relationship with *his* father were "captive" and "enslaved."⁴⁵⁸ I highlighted these words in the introduction but revisited and elaborated on them in Chapter Ten. Sita's use of the words "captive" and "enslaved" needs to be read in context. As a young teenager she had many questions and did not really know the grandfather who was the Mahatma. She reflected on these years: "At home, I observed my parent's total submission to this 'stranger' whose every word was law in our home. My father didn't make a single decision without referring to Bapu. My mother was no less enslaved."⁴⁵⁹

She recalls the influence that Gandhi, through his friend Kallenbach, had on the family in the 1930s. Kallenbach specifically destroyed a field of tobacco which Manilal had planted to earn some revenue on the grounds that Gandhi would not have approved. The manner in which he burnt the fields and exerted his authority led the young Sita to question their life at Phoenix: "What kind of grandfather was this, I thought, who ruled us with such an iron rod from thousands of miles away, through his agents. I wondered if I would like him at all?"

Thus Manilal decided to send her to India so that she could understand Gandhi more. She writes then of her meeting with her grandfather in 1944: "... (W)hen I saw him, and he drew me into his embrace, I was completely won over. I loved him instantly and all my

⁴⁵⁷ Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal*, 175-77.

⁴⁵⁸ See "A Granddaughter Reminisces" in *The South African Gandhi: An Abstract of the Speeches and Writings of M.K. Gandhi 1893-1914*, ed. Fatima Meer (Durban: Madiba Publishers, 1996), 1071-72

⁴⁵⁹ Meer, "A Granddaughter Reminisces", 1071-72.

doubts disappeared. ... It seemed so comforting to place myself in his complete care and I understood my parent's 'captive' state, and I joined their rank."⁴⁶⁰

This meeting with Gandhi is described in Manilal's biography where I argue that Sita was now able to realise and understand the source of her father's "devotion" to Gandhi.⁴⁶¹ "Captive" and "enslaved" did not have the kind of meaning that they would later take on when these words reached the media out of context as will be seen below. These words, and the title of the book, proved much more controversial than I could ever have anticipated.

I drew also on Arun's perception of his father's relationship with Gandhi. He argued that his father "was totally subservient to Bapu. It would seem as though he had no wish or desire of his own other than what Bapu had chalked out for him."⁴⁶² In an interview with me he also invoked an image of his father being trapped not only by Gandhi but also by Gandhi's friends, among them Hermann Kallenbach, Hannah Lazar (who was Kallenbach's niece), and Sonja Schlesin, Gandhi's former secretary. According to Arun:

He was not allowed to flourish. He had too many fathers and mothers. And if he wrote something in *Indian Opinion* Bapuji would criticise him and Kallenbach would criticise him and everybody would criticise him and nobody would appreciate what he was doing. So with all these – Miss Schlesin, Hannaben and Kallenbach and Bapuji and everybody sitting and judging him he felt oppressed by it.⁴⁶³

In both these perceptions, Manilal's submission and his inability to act without Gandhi's watchful eye emerge, and they conspired to lead me to my title.

A third reason for the book's title was that Manilal's life was lived on the margins while his father became the Mahatma. His life was linked to his father's: he was the editor of Gandhi's newspaper and the inheritor of the ideals that had inspired Gandhi to found Phoenix. While he tried to carve out his life in South Africa, his father had risen to great

⁴⁶⁰ Meer, "A Granddaughter Reminisces", 1071-72.

⁴⁶¹ Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi's Son Manilal*, 292-93.

⁴⁶² Letter to author from Arun Gandhi, 29 February 1980.

⁴⁶³ Author's interview with Arun Gandhi, 8 April 2002.

heights in India. For all but eight years of Manilal's life, Gandhi was alive, making waves at all times. And everybody watched Manilal and everybody compared. He was expected to be and to do a lot of things. When he did good things, these were taken for granted too. As a community leader once told me, "this is what we all expected of the son of the Mahatmaji."⁴⁶⁴ His life was inextricably linked to that of his father and in this sense, too, he was bound.

When Manilal died, practically every speech or dedication referred to him in relation to Gandhi. Dr Alfred B. Xuma, a former president of the African National Congress said: "(H)e could not be the Mahatma but he was the worthy son of the Mahatma."⁴⁶⁵ Alpha Ngcobo, a devoted press worker at Phoenix, observed that all the Africans around Phoenix called him "Nkosana" ("Son of a Great Man.")⁴⁶⁶ From India, Gandhi's former secretary, Pyarelal, sent a tribute to this "Worthy Son of a Great Father."⁴⁶⁷ Many such examples can be found. Some assessments of Manilal are not so favourable. Many years later, Henry Polak, who had known Manilal since he was a teenager, would privately remark "... he was all Manilal and no Gandhi."⁴⁶⁸ Pranshankar S. Joshi, a Transvaal activist and contemporary of Manilal, provides us with an understanding of the context in which Manilal was assessed:

To most sons of great world figures have fallen the hard lot of being misunderstood at times, undervalued and sharply criticized, at the hands of people automatically expecting heroics of them on the identical standards set by their fathers. Mr Manilal Gandhi, the second son of the greatest man of the age did not escape this ordeal.⁴⁶⁹

Behind the title of my book lay Gandhi's strong personality, Manilal's submission to his father, the tricky question of choices open to him, and finally, Gandhi's fame as the Mahatma and what it meant to live in that

⁴⁶⁴ A.D. Lazarus to author, 19 February 1980.

⁴⁶⁵ *Indian Opinion*, 4 May 1956.

⁴⁶⁶ *Manilal Gandhi Memorial Number* (Phoenix, International Printing Press, April 1956), 16.

⁴⁶⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 4 May 1956.

⁴⁶⁸ A.D. Lazarus to author, 19 February 1980.

⁴⁶⁹ *Manilal Gandhi Memorial Number*, 7.

shadow and measure up to that reputation. Yet, as I explained in the introduction to the book, I deliberately posed the title as a question, for though there were examples from his life which support such a judgement there were also many instances (which apparently his children did not see) in Manilal's life which display independence of thought and action. Being imprisoned, I argued, also carried negative connotations. It could mean a life that had not flourished at all. Yet Manilal's life was not negative. He absorbed and applied the finest ideas of Gandhism. One of the consequences of his upbringing is that he knew no fear when faced by injustice. The jails of the South African state and its police held no terror for him; neither did the prospect of death in defence of a just cause. My readers, too, must form their own conclusions about this life. The truth was not to be found in a choice of binaries. In my conclusion I specifically argued that it would be a mistake categorically to conceive of Manilal as a psychological prisoner of his father.⁴⁷⁰

The question in the title of *Gandhi's Prisoner?* is thus complex with no simple answer. I soon encountered the media and a penchant for controversy and sensationalism when the book was released. A book of 419 pages with detailed narrative, which had an avowed commitment not to judge but to understand, and which presented complex arguments, got reduced to simplicities and misrepresentations.

The first reports of the book based on interviews with me reflected, with some accuracy, the aims of the book. As Zoubair Ayoob wrote in the *Natal Mercury*:

A new book to be launched in Durban tonight, tries to correct the perception that passive resistance advocate Mahatma Gandhi was a harsh, autocratic father who had an unhappy relationship with his children.

Dhupelia-Mesthrie presents Gandhi as a man of contrasts. A man who offered his son a hug in troubled times, but denied him an education on the basis that the best education, serving the public, built character.⁴⁷¹

The Natal Witness reporter who attended the book launch wrote

⁴⁷⁰ Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi's Son Manilal*, 399.

⁴⁷¹ *Natal Mercury*, 8 September 2004, "A Study of 'Father Gandhi' "

The book tries to correct the perception that Gandhi was an autocratic father. ... She [the author] said that until now negative perceptions of Gandhi as a father have been based on his troubled relationship with his eldest son Harilal, who became an alcoholic.⁴⁷²

A few interviews were more detailed: Manilal's activities were noted and the title was probed, but some incorrect assumptions were also made. The *Daily News* asked the question "Was Manilal Gandhi his father's prisoner?" Reporter Keeran Sewsunkar not only got the spelling of my name wrong but he also wrongly suggested, after a telephonic interview with me, that the author's argument was that he was indeed.⁴⁷³ Another reporter – for the Agence France-Presse - argued that the book, covering the early period of the 1900s, dealt with Gandhi's "iron-fisted control over his family" despite being told by me that I do not use such words in the book. The article did, however, quote me as saying "Gandhi was a loving father but left his sons little choice You'll see a compassionate father."⁴⁷⁴ This report circulated worldwide. Variations in title and selectivity occurred. Some papers left the latter statement of Gandhi being a loving father out and instead ran with the title "Gandhi a dictatorial father, says new book."⁴⁷⁵ The Johannesburg-based *This Day* – which was all but in its dying stages and ceased publication later that year – had posters in the street saying "Gandhi a Control Freak."⁴⁷⁶ It is important to note that none of these reports were based on having read or even in some cases having actually seen the book. The syndicated dispersal of so-called news took over.

Newspapers also had field day with the words "captive" and "enslaved" which I had briefly alluded to in an interview with the *Sunday Times*.⁴⁷⁷ In India, a major daily asked the question: "Did the Mahatma

⁴⁷² *Natal Witness*, 9 September 2004, "Gandhi's Descendant Launches Book."

⁴⁷³ *Daily News*, 13 September 2004, "Was Manilal Gandhi his Father's Prisoner?"

⁴⁷⁴ This was produced locally in *This Day*, 22 September 2004. "Another View of Mahatma Gandhi."

⁴⁷⁵ *Argus*, 21 September 2004.

⁴⁷⁶ For my response to this see *This Day*, 22 September 2004, "Gandhi Misrepresented."

⁴⁷⁷ *Sunday Times*, 19 September 2004, "Manilal and the Mahatma", report by Marjorie Copeland.

'enslave' his son?"⁴⁷⁸ "[A] new book", the editor of the *Times of India* declared (without so much as having seen the book) "describes the Mahatma as 'dictator'."⁴⁷⁹ The consequence was that Gandhi supporters were reportedly enraged. Peter Foster of the London *Telegraph* carried the article "Outrage as Authors Tread on the Legend of Gandhi."⁴⁸⁰ The second author referred to Sudhir Karkar who had released his semi-fictional book on the relationship between an English devotee Mira (Madeleine Slade) and Gandhi.⁴⁸¹ Subsequent to these articles, I wrote to many newspapers in India to correct the distortions. Because newspaper reports had leant so drastically in one direction, my subsequent interviews and letters to the press highlighted those aspects in the book which showed Gandhi as a loving father. To its credit, *The Times of India* carried a corrective interview with me.⁴⁸²

While deeply distressing at the time, the news reports are nonetheless illustrative of "the Gandhi phenomenon." Matters are often lifted out in the media and made a subject of controversy and sensationalism. The controversy accompanying the release of the thoroughly scholarly biography of Gandhi by Rajmohan Gandhi is a case in point. In the book, the author devoted a few pages to an emotional attachment that Gandhi developed for a Bengali woman, Saraladevi Chaudhuri, in the 1920s when he was fifty and she forty-seven.⁴⁸³ *Outlook Magazine* published an excerpt from the book about this in a sensational way and soon papers in India billed it as a major new revelation, and as an affair of the Mahatma. The author's intention in dealing with the episode, which had been recounted elsewhere, was to show Gandhi as a "real person" and to show him "in his humanity." "His fame", Rajmohan Gandhi argued, "greatly eclipses our knowledge of him. I wanted to capture a real person at every stage of his life."⁴⁸⁴

Yet it is precisely because both books focussed on the human side of Gandhi – as a father and as a man who had deep emotional needs

⁴⁷⁸ *The Times of India*, 23 September 2004.

⁴⁷⁹ *The Times of India*, 2 October 2004, "Heroes and Worship".

⁴⁸⁰ *Telegraph*, 16 October 2004.

⁴⁸¹ Kakar's book is titled *Mira and the Mahatma* (New Delhi, Penguin, 2004).

⁴⁸² *The Times of India*, 12 November 2004, "Mahatma the Father."

⁴⁸³ Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 228-33.

⁴⁸⁴ *Outlook India*, 1 January 2007, Interview with Sheela Reddy.

– that they attracted controversy. They disturbed the iconic image of the Mahatma. Claude Markowitz has written with despair about the iconic creation of Gandhi in the post 1940s:

To create an icon implies classifying existing representations and rejecting some, so as to produce an image susceptible of worship ... the official image of the Mahatma which is proposed to worshipful crowds is that of a holy man, the upholder of a religion which is at the same time universal and rooted in the Indian context, a perfect and infallible leader who, through the sheer magic of his example, inspired the masses and threw the British out of India. ...

... the iconic image of Gandhi is of a man steeped in austerity, sexually renunciate, mediating in his ashram, whom the assassin's bullet providentially transformed into a martyr. He appears a heroic and tragic figure to be worshipped from afar ... inaccessible in his perfection.⁴⁸⁵

Kakar has argued with some justification that “[A]nything kind of human about Gandhi, even the hint that he might have entertained feelings if any kind which are not completely spiritual ... is offensive.”⁴⁸⁶

Newspaper reviewers for papers who actually received my book and that by Rajmohan Gandhi only after the controversy had erupted, soon found that they were far from sensational. “If Manilal was a prisoner”, one reviewer argued, “then he was one willingly.”⁴⁸⁷ The review in *Outlook Magazine* by respected journalist and author Mark Tully carried a subtitle “No judging of Gandhi here, just a balanced perspective on a father-son relationship.”⁴⁸⁸ After reading Rajmohan Gandhi’s *Mohandas*, a reporter for *The Hindu* admitted: “The 700-page biography, however, is starkly different from what the excerpt would lead you to expect.”⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁵ Markovits, *The UnGandhian Gandhi*, 163-64.

⁴⁸⁶ See “Novel Look at Gandhi’s Affections” by John Lancaster, *Washington Post*, 12 October 2004.

⁴⁸⁷ *The Sunday Express*, “In Gandhi’s Shadow”, by Atul Chaturvedi, 30 January 2005.

⁴⁸⁸ *Outlook India*, 17 January 2005, “Manilal s/o Mohandas” by Mark Tully.

⁴⁸⁹ *The Hindu*, 11 January 2007 (report by S. Bageshree).

Conclusion

This article draws attention to the sources available to me as a biographer and the way in which different sources contributed towards understanding various aspects of the life of Manilal Gandhi. Sources could be vague at times, and even contrary, and ways had to be found to construct a narrative. The biographer constructs a life – and it is worth invoking the words of Bram Fischer’s biographer, Stephen Clingman, who argued that “... when we write a life, the book is not the life.”⁴⁹⁰ This is an important perspective because representations of lives can be hugely contested. In the case of Manilal, this biographer cast his life within a framing question: to what extent was he a man free of his father’s all-pervading influence and fame?

A second aspect of this article draws attention to a media frenzy that accompanies any news about Gandhi, particularly those that focus on personal aspects of his life. This is the consequence of icon-making but it is also a consequence of the power of Gandhi. Six decades after his assassination he continues to draw strong feelings, and strong headlines, from around the globe: he is newsworthy.

And what of the subject of my book, Manilal? In the light of his biography’s reception, was I able to remove him from the margins? Reviews of the book in the Indian media focussed predominantly on Gandhi as father with little interest in Manilal’s own life apart from that connection. Few, however, could see the numerous examples of Gandhi’s love for his sons that I detailed in the book or that Manilal’s life was not a failure but, rather, that it drew on the best of Gandhi’s teaching.⁴⁹¹ Academic reviews in serious journals and magazines were far more comprehensive in their treatment of the life of Manilal Gandhi.⁴⁹² But, as one scholarly reviewer remarked, “the narrative loses its intensity when

⁴⁹⁰ Stephen Clingman, *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1998), 1.

⁴⁹¹ Mark Tully’s review marks an exception on both counts.

⁴⁹² See Goolam Vahed, “Gandhi Junior and the Struggle Against Apartheid”, *Journal of African History* 47, 2, 2006, 337-38; Surendra Bhana, “The Life of Manilal Gandhi”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31, 3, 2005, 678-9; Dennis Dalton, “From Whence Gandhi’s Power”, *The Book Review*, August 2005, 4-5; Anthony Copley, “A Biography of a Grandfather”, *Kleio*, 38, 1, 2006, 95-102. One could analyse these and other academic reviews as well but that would be quite a lengthy aside.

the focus shifts from the relations between father and son to the minutiae of printing and politics.”⁴⁹³ The narrative, one could argue, lost that intensity for an Indian reviewer because Gandhi moves to the margins as Manilal’s story as journalist and activist in South Africa takes centre stage. In the South African context of resistance and alternative histories, Manilal’s story has now been placed on record and scholars interested in such areas, as well as transnational connections, have found something to grapple with.⁴⁹⁴

The writing of this book provides a lesson in how academic arguments with their complexities are not so easily translated into the public sphere and, when Gandhi features in one of the lead roles it is even more difficult. To provide a picture that is layered with complexity all but befuddles those who seek a one-dimensional image that can be readily captured. It would seem that for all those who lived in Gandhi’s shadow and under his influence, there is not much of a role beyond that of devoted disciples.

⁴⁹³ *Times Literary Supplement*, “Father and Sons”, by Ramachandra Guha, 1 April 2005.

⁴⁹⁴ Paddy Kearney, in a local review, argued that the book did succeed in giving Manilal the recognition he deserved (see *Daily News*, 12 May 2005, “A View of Gandhi through his Son”).