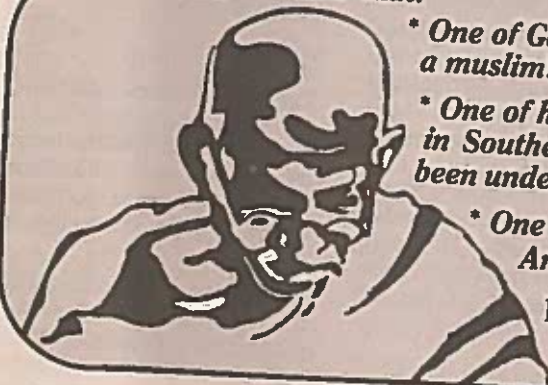


The lost children of the Father of the Nation

'Celebrity' meets the obscure descendents of the Mahatma

Did you know that:



* One of Gandhi's sons became a muslim?

* One of his grand-daughters is active in Southern African politics and has been under house arrest for 10 years?

* One of his great grandsons is an American citizen?

Read on:



By Vinati Tikku

They are Ordinary People. Cast not so much in the overblown, over-publicised image of Redford's average family as in the shapeless mould of obscurity. Unglamorous obscurity.

Frankly, I don't quite know what I expected when I went to the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi for the first time, in my search for the Mahatma's descendents. I only know that I was surprised at what I unearthed about the Gandhi family. Surprised at my own ignorance. Surprised at their forgiving it. Arun Gandhi took time off on a busy working day to fill in and up-date the sketchy family tree I had managed to piece together from the Mani Bhavan library. The others, Dr. K.H. Gandhi, Usha Gokani and Manuben Mashruwala pitched in with forgotten details and telephone numbers.

Slowly, as the Gandhi clan began to take shape, my sense of wonder grew. Here were the flesh and blood descendents of a great leader who had nothing to do with politics — not one of them holds a political office. Babu himself spurned offices, titles and money in his lifetime and his family is no different.

In a country where dynastic succession has become the rule rather than the exception, they are orphans — singularly bereft of a legacy. In a country where power is equated with importance, they are unimportant people. In a country where it takes extraordinary courage to spurn chances to pull strings and capitalise on connections, they are extraordinary people. And yet, they are ordinary people. As Babu wished them to be.



Manuben Mashruwala: Manuben is squatting on the steps leading up to her modest suburban home when I arrive. "Hamko kuchh jada malum nahin hai," she had said humbly over the phone. She repeats it — this time in Gujarati. In fact she can only speak Gujarati and some broken Hindi, which might have made the interview difficult to conduct under normal circumstances, but not with Manuben's spontaneous friendliness to help things along. She confesses right away that she's not educated and won't be able to help much. "We are simple people but we try and live the way Babu wanted us to. I spin my own cloth," she adds proudly. We enter a small all-purpose room in which two beds occupy pride of place. I perch on a high hospital bed, she settles down on the other and we begin a rambling conversation that takes her back to her early days with her grandfather and makes me wonder if she even realises that she is Gandhi's grand-daughter. The Gandhi's so naturally and spontaneously, he could be anybody's grand-father. Perhaps he was! On the wall above us a faded photograph of the Mahatma smiles an indulgent toothless smile.

The Sons

Harilal: The eldest son is acknowledged by the family as the most brilliant among the brothers. A strong-willed person himself, he clashed with his father over several fundamental issues. Harilal, it is believed, wanted to study, but Gandhi who had lost faith in formal education refused to send him to school. When Gandhi returned to India in 1915, he hoped his eldest son would take over the running of the ashram in South Africa, but Harilal, by now an embittered man, refused to oblige. Instead he returned to India where he lost his wife, **Gulab**, in the plague epidemic and wanted to re-marry. But Gandhi would not let him re-marry unless he married a widow, which led to further disagreements between the two. The estrangement between father and son was complete when Harilal embraced the Muslim faith and became an alcoholic. Gandhi publicly denounced Harilal and appealed to people not to help him with funds. He clarified however that the ashram doors were always open to his son in case he ever felt like reforming himself. But

there was no reconciliation. Harilal died an impoverished man at a T.B. hospital in Sewri, in 1949.

Manilal: He looked after the ashram started by his father in South Africa. He died in 1956.

Ramdas: Worked as General Manager, Tata Oil Mills, Nagpur. Died in 1969. His wife, **Nirmalaben**, still lives at the Sevagram ashram, Wardha.

Devdas: He was the editor of *The Hindustan Times*. He married C. Rajagopalachari's daughter, **Lakshmi**. He died in 1957.

The grandchildren

Harilal's Children

Rami: Harilal's eldest child married **Kunwarji Parekh**, an accountant with Zandu Pharmaceuticals.

Kantilal: A doctor, he was medical officer, Century Mills, Bombay for many years. He worked actively to improve health services for workers and is also connected with the Lok Sewa Trust. (See Interview)

Rasik: Harilal's third child. He died at 14.

Manu: She married **Surendra Mashruwala**, a cotton merchant who ran into losses. He is now

working as an accountant with **Kamlashankar P. Joshi and Co.** They live in Bombay (See Interview).

Manilal's Children

Sita: Manilal's eldest daughter, she married **Shashikant Dhupella** who runs a textile business in South Africa.

Arun: He helped his father Manilal with the production of the *Indian Opinion* weekly in South Africa. Later joined the *Times of India* as a reporter where he worked for 23 years. In 1980 he joined *Imprint* magazine as the editor.

Ela: She and her husband **Mevalal Ramgovind** are settled in South Africa and very active in the local politics. She is a professional social worker and very active in child welfare work. She has been under house arrest for 10 years and her husband has been under house arrest for 17 years.

Ramdas' Children

Sumitra: The eldest daughter of Ramdas Gandhi, she was in the Madhya Pradesh cadre of the Indian Administrative Service. She resigned and was later a member of the Rajya Sabha. She married

Gajanan Kulkarni, also a former government officer. They now live in Ahmedabad where Gajanan Kulkarni teaches at the Indian Institute of Management.

Usha: The second daughter of Ramdas Gandhi married textile magnate **Harish Gokani**. She is the President of the Maharashtra state council for child welfare and a trustee of the Kasturba Sevashram, Maroli. (See Interview)

Kanu: The only son of Ramdas Gandhi did his Masters from M.I.T. He is now working as an engineer in the U.S.A.

Devdas' Children

Tara: The eldest daughter of Devdas Gandhi. She married **Jyoti Bhattacharya** who works for the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). They live in Rome.

Rajmohan: Connected with the Moral Re-armament movement, freelance journalist. Writes a regular column in the Indian Express. Has written a biography of his maternal grandfather **C. Rajagopalachari**.

Ramu: He is an academician with Ph.D's from Delhi university and

Cambridge university. He is a professor of philosophy at the Delhi university. His wife **Indu** lectures at Miranda House.

Gopu: He is in the Tamil Nadu cadre of the Indian Administrative Service.

The great grandchildren and their children

Harilal's grandchildren

Anusuya: Rami's eldest daughter, she married **Mohan Parikh** who is involved in rural development work at Bardoli, Gujarat. Mohan Parikh who is interested in appropriate technology has designed a solar cooker. Their son **Rahul** is studying in Baroda, their daughter **Keki** is married to **Narendra Rathod**, an engineer in the States.

Prabodh: Rami's son is a doctor in Morvi, Gujarat. His daughter **Sonal** is married, his son **Parag** is still studying.

Neelam: She married **Yogendra Parikh**. They run a school at the Vedchi ashram in Bardoli district, Gujarat. Their son **Sunil** is doing his internship at a Baroda hospital.

Sudha: She married **Vrajlal Vajjariya**, a doctor in



Great grandsons Sanjay Gokani and Krishna Kulkarni

Rajkot. Their children **Parul** and **Manisha** are still young.

Shanti Kumar: Kantilal's elder son is a doctor in the United States. He is head of the cardiology department at the Kansas state hospital. He is an American citizen and married to **Susan**, an American. They have four daughters, **Anjali**, **Anita**, **Alka** and **Ann**.

Pradeep: Kantilal's other son is a chartered accountant, working in Ohio, U.S.A. He is married to **Mangala** and has one daughter, **Priya**.

Urmi: Manubhen's only child is a physiotherapist. She is married to **Bhupat Desai**, a professor at the

Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. They have two young children **Mrinal** and **Renu**.

Manilal's grandchildren

Satish: Sita's eldest child, he is a school teacher in South Africa.

Uma: She is a professor in English literature at the University of Westville, a non-white university in South Africa.

Kirti: She has just finished her B.A. (Hons) and is living with her parents in South Africa.

Tushar: He is Arun's elder child. He has just finished a course in printing technology.

Archana: Arun's daughter, she is married to **Harikishore Prasad** who is an electronics engineer with Xerox. They live in Rochester, U.S.A. with their two children **Paritosh** and **Anish**.

Kedar, Kush, Asha, Ashish and Arati: Ela's children are students in South Africa.

Ramdas' grandchildren

Ram, Krishna: Sumitra's children are twins. They are studying engineering in Delhi.

Sonali: Sumitra's daughter is studying in the United States.

Anand: Usha's elder son, he is a doctor in the Neurology department of the Jaslok hospital, Bombay.

Sanjay: Usha's younger son is doing his M.B.A. at the Lowell University, U.S.A.

Devdas' grandchildren

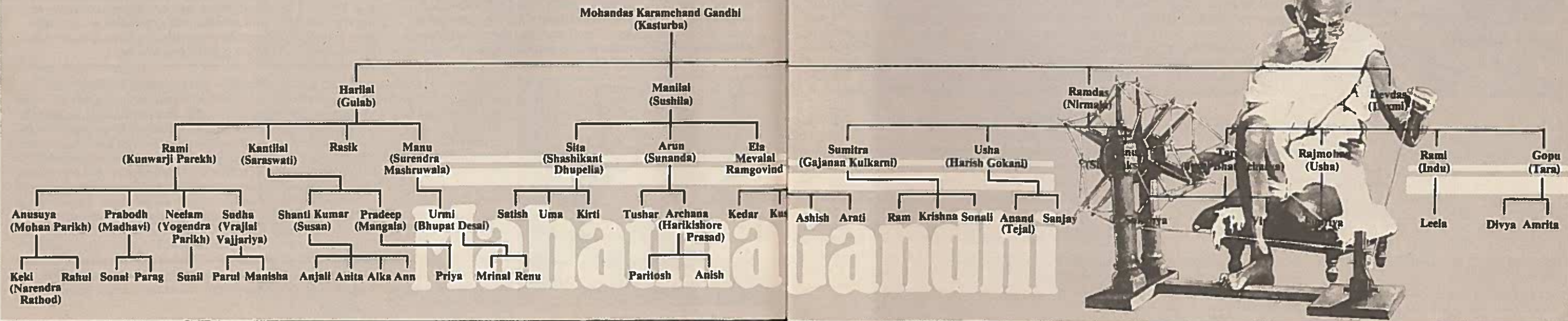
Sukanya, Vinay: Tara's children are with their parents in Rome. They are still studying.

Supriya: Rajmohan's daughter is a student.

Leela: Ramu's daughter is a student.

Divya, Amrita: Gopu's daughters are students.

The Gandhi Family Tree



Q: How much time did you spend with Gandhiji?

A: I was brought up by him. My mother died when I was very young and my father, as you know, was cut off from the family, so I was brought up by my grandparents at the Sabarmati ashram. In fact, when Kasturba died I was specially sent for. It was Shivaratri — I still remember. The last thing Bapu said to her was "Leave your attachments here and go in peace to God." My grandmother, you see, was very affectionate, very fond of

the family. At my wedding Kasturba was very angry that Bapu was not giving me anything. "What is this?" she'd ask, "No jewellery? No clothes? Shall we send away our grand-daughter just like that — empty handed?"

Q: Was your marriage arranged by Gandhiji?

A: Yes. He did the *kanyadaan*. It was a very simple affair. The guests were served only *dhaniya* and *gur*. When my in-laws later had a reception for 200 guests. Bapu even sent

them a letter saying "What was the need?" I didn't receive anything at my wedding nor did I want it. I only took one of Bapu's used shawls as a token of remembrance. My brother still teases my husband about having his feet washed by Bapu. "Paap lagega" he says!

Q: Do you think people still believe in Gandhiji's principles?

A: No, not at all. *Gandhiji ka kaun sunta hai?* They are only worried about videos and televisions.

Dr. Kantilal H. Gandhi: *Somewhere in the middle I began to feel as if I was at a Morarji Desai press conference. Dr. Kantilal Gandhi, Harilal's son and Mahatma Gandhi's eldest grandson is a dry, reticent individual who opens his mouth only to ask a cynical counter question or give a non-committal reply. "I will meet you only at the clinic. At home — I rest, I don't receive visitors," is his curt response to my request for an interview. The clinic turns out to be a modest two room affair that looks two rooms too much. There are no patients. Yet I can't help feeling that I'm keeping Dr. Gandhi from doing something important. In short he's the sort of man who can make you feel uncomfortable for no reason at all. Later, when I think about it, I realise it's because he is so lacking in the frills and frivolity associated with modern social contact — so utterly devoid of small talk and niceties, that he seems a misfit in this day and age. Yet, there's something reassuring about his bluntness. He looks at the copy of the magazine I had taken along and returns it to me at the end of the interview saying, "It's O.K. I've seen it. I don't want to keep it." Complimentary gifts don't figure in his scheme of things. And when one thinks about it, and this wonderfully honest anachronism of a man, why should they??*



Q: How does it feel to be Mahatma Gandhi's grandson?

A: It's embarrassing. Other people can do what they want — give bribes to get railway tickets — I can't. Even if I were to give a bribe, and the railway official realises who I am, he won't accept it.

Q: Does that mean you have often felt like bribing someone to get your work done?

A: I won't answer that.

Q: How do you feel about your father's quar-

rel with Gandhiji?

A: I feel sorry.

Q: You were 38 when Gandhiji died and his eldest grandson, you must have known him...

A: Nobody knew him. Do you know God? He was nearest to God. He became more and more difficult to understand as he became closer to God.

Q: They say Gandhiji was not much of a family person.

A: Of course he was a family person — only his family kept expanding. You are included in his family.

Q: Do you think Gandhiji's ideas are relevant today?

A: Yes.

Q: Are you satisfied with the way you've led your life?

A: I've made an honest effort to live upto my grandfather's ideals.



Usha Gokani: *Her large, beautifully furnished flat on the quiet, winding Altamont road is a pleasure to visit — as it must be, surely, to live in. Usha has just returned from a meeting of the Maharashtra State Child Welfare Council — a body she no doubt ably presides over, but there are other things on her mind at the moment. Like kadak masala chai and grilled vegetable sandwiches. "Won't you have some," she offers charmingly. In her bright red saree, matching lipstick and tika, to say nothing of the diamond mangalsutra, she is hardly cast in the Gandhian mould but she is not apologetic about it. Nor does she feel defensive about her opulent surroundings and the way she and her textile magnate husband, Harish, conduct their lives. And that, in the ultimate analysis, is the best thing about her.*

Q: Don't you feel guilty about living in such luxury?

A: We are not hypocrites. I know people are disappointed when they find Gandhiji's grand-daughter living like this, but as long as we are not harming anybody, why should I feel guilty? If Bapu were alive today perhaps we could have thrashed out these things with him.

Q: How do people react to you when they discover you are Gandhiji's grand-daughter?

A: I don't like to broadcast the fact but if someone finds out — well, they feel very hap-

py. Invariably they do *namaste* again as if they are greeting the great soul himself! Of course they also start judging me by my grandfather's standards once they realise who I am.

Q: How is it that your branch of the family is educated? There are many Gandhis in your generation who have not had any formal education.

A: My father took permission from Gandhiji for us to study. He said he'd go back to the ashram the day his youngest child graduated — and he did.

Q: What kind of social work are you involved with?

A: I am the President of the Maharashtra State Child Welfare Council and a trustee of the Kasturba Sewashram near Surat. The Sewashram runs ashram shalas for tribal children and gives vocational training to women. We also run one of the best mental hospitals in the country. I used to be on the advisory panel of the Central Board of Film Censors but I gave it up because I wasn't satisfied. One's wings are clipped by so many things



Arun Gandhi: *Until recently the editor of the literary 'Imprint', he turns out to be much younger and more nattily dressed than I had imagined. "I know most people are disappointed that I look as I do," he confesses good-humouredly and tells me of a Pune magazine reporter who took such serious objection to the Mahatma's grandson wearing T-Shirts and jeans that he wrote an angry article about it! It's not just his clothes, even his speech has a modern idiomatic flavour to it. Phrases like "We're a nutty family" and "Oh no, this makes me feel like a film hero" (this, while being photographed) tumble out casually — making him instantly approachable, instantly likeable and instantly human. Not a superhuman descendent of a superhuman forefather — just a nice guy. Or, wait a minute, make that very nice!*

Q: How did you opt for journalism as a career?

A: I was born at the Phoenix Ashram in South Africa and I've had no formal education at all. I used to help my father bring out the 'Indian Opinion' weekly in South Africa. In 1956 my father died and I came to India to perform the last rites. Here I met my wife Sunanda — it was quite romantic really, she was a nurse at the Harkisondas hospital where I was admitted for an emergency operation — and the South African government wouldn't allow me to take her back. So I decided to stay on in India and I joined the 'Times of India' as a reporter.

Q: Did you ever think of entering politics?

A: I don't believe in dynastic succession.

That is why I'm not in politics.

Q: What about ...er...your jeans? I mean as Gandhi's grandson ...

A: I feel more comfortable in western clothes. All my cousins, except Rajmohan, I think, wear western clothes. Besides, I don't believe in symbols. We must be faithful to Gandhi in terms of our actions.

Q: Are you happy about this resurgence of interest in Gandhi?

A: Yes. I believe Americans are enquiring at travel agencies about Gandhi tours to India. I wonder what they'll see here through — a string of dead museums? Gandhi was such a vibrant man — the dead museums don't represent him at all. I think it's more ap-

propriate to take them around to rural development projects inspired by Gandhian thought.

Q: Do you feel that your grandfather neglected his own family in his effort to be fair to others?

A: He didn't neglect us in the sense that he didn't care for us. It's just that he took a much broader view. I remember Kasturba making sweets for my uncle Ramdas and Bapu reprimanding her, "Do you do that for other people in the ashram?" But he was an amazing man. In 1946-47, I spent a whole year with him, and believe me, in the one hour that he spent with me each day, supervising my lessons, nothing, NOTHING, would distract him!

What the Gandhis think of 'Gandhi'



A still from the film

Usha Gokani: *By and large the message has been conveyed but since we've seen our grandfather, we are bound to feel a little dissatisfied. For instance, my grandfather believed in simplicity, but in the film, simplicity has been confused with untidiness. Ben Kingsley was very sloppily dressed for the most part. His dhoti seemed to have been tied anyhow — it was all bundled up. And the scenes in which he wears a Gujarati style kurta and turban were downright embarrassing! Bapuji was very particular about the way he dressed — all through his life. Even in the days when he only wore a dhoti, it had to be spotlessly clean and well-tied. But I must say that it was a good film and I liked two scenes very much — Kasturba's death and the scene in which Bapuji lets a piece of cloth float downstream to a poor woman. I've seen the film twice and plan to see it again.*

Manuben Mashruwala: *The film was very good. I cried.*

Arun Gandhi: *I don't mind confessing that since my father's death in 1956, I've not cried as much as I did on seeing Richard Attenborough's 'Gandhi'. I am not easily moved to tears and certainly not by a film, but 'Gandhi' is made with such intense feeling that I couldn't help myself. If one wants to punch holes in the script, or plot of Attenborough's 'Gandhi' one could find several instances to do so but to my mind all of it would be a wasteful exercise. For the compelling and overwhelming effect that he has achieved Attenborough can be pardoned for the liberties he has had to take.*

Dr. K.H. Gandhi: *It is a very ordinary film. I have seen him in reality, what is the fun in seeing a film? Bapuji always said his life was his message — what can you say about his life in three hours? But the good thing is that it has created interest in his life.*