

## *Sushila Gandhi (1907–1988): Guardian of Gandhian Traditions in South Africa*

When Mahatma Gandhi left South Africa in 1914 he left a very significant legacy to Indian South Africans, an ideology of resistance, *satyagraha*. He also left two tangible products of his stay in this country, a newspaper *Indian Opinion* (f. 1903) and a communal settlement of 100 acres situated nine kilometres out of central Durban, Phoenix (f. 1904), where the newspaper was published. While the history of the *satyagraha* campaign (1907 to 1913), the role of *Indian Opinion* in this struggle, and the founding of Phoenix Settlement have been fairly well recorded, few people (historians included) realize that there is a history of Phoenix and the newspaper after Gandhi's departure which is worth recording. Inextricably linked with this history are the names of Manilal and Sushila Gandhi. This article provides a brief glimpse

into the role of Sushila Gandhi who died in November 1988.

Albert West, a printer who was one of the first settlers at Phoenix, took over the task of editing *Indian Opinion* from H.S.L. Polak in the years after Gandhi's departure from South Africa. In 1916 Gandhi was informed that the production of the Gujarati sections of the paper was presenting some difficulty. He thus deputed his two sons, Manilal and Ramdas, to assist West. When Ramdas left South Africa after helping out for a short while, Manilal remained behind. Initially he assisted West by simply translating English copy into Gujarati, but in 1919 he took over the position of editor from West, a post which he retained until his death in 1956. Considering his lack of formal education this was no mean achievement.

Manilal Gandhi was no stranger to South Africa or Phoenix Settlement. He had first come to South Africa in 1897 at the age of four when his father had decided to remain in Natal to pursue a role in Indian politics. In 1901 the Gandhi family left for India only to return in 1904, living first in Johannesburg and later at Phoenix. Here Manilal was the subject of his father's educational experiments. His father had by now begun to question the validity of formal education and took it upon himself to educate his son. To Gandhi education meant not a 'knowledge of letters' but 'character building'. He guided his son's reading and insisted on manual labour on the farm. When Manilal wished to study medicine his father's advice to him was that 'learning to live a good life is in itself an education'. Going to prison in aid of a good political cause was considered to be far more educational than the acquisition of degrees and the pursuit of a career. His son enthusiastically courted arrest during the *satyagraha* campaign and served two terms of imprisonment in 1910 and 1913.

Essentially Gandhi's family became the victims of his 'Experiments with Truth' and the sons found their father to be a stern disciplinarian. While at Phoenix, Manilal committed a misdemeanour that slipped below his father's expectations that they should control their senses and desires. The outcome of this was that the son, quite remorseful, decided as an act of penance and to develop self-control, not to marry until he was 30 years old. In the 1920s he began to broach the subject of marriage, his period of penance having come to an end. Now too, his father was not encouraging. Gandhi had taken a vow of celibacy in 1906, which he was to maintain all his life. The idea was that he would be better able to devote himself to social service. He thus tried to warn his son of the pitfalls of marriage and lust:

Take it from me that there is no happiness in marriage . . . If, at this moment, I get enamoured of Ba [his wife] and indulge in sexual gratification, I would fall the very instant. My work would go to the dogs and I would lose in a twinkling all that power which would enable one to achieve swaraj [home rule] . . . I cannot imagine a thing as ugly as the intercourse of man and woman. That it leads to the birth of children is due to God's inscrutable way.

(*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 23, p. 102.)

Five years later, however, Gandhi informed Manilal (now 34 years old) that he had found a suitable wife for him and that the marriage could take place if both parties were agreeable.

The young girl whom Gandhi recommended to his son was Sushila Mashruwallah, who was 19 years old and slightly hard of hearing as a result of



Sushila Gandhi  
(*Photograph: Omar Badsha*)

an overdose of quinine while being treated for malaria as a child. She was a good artist, was educated up to the fourth form in school, and could speak Gujarati and Marathi and understood Hindi as well as a little English. Her family were among the first to throw their support behind Gandhi's civil disobedience movement in India and they boycotted British institutions and British products. A wealthy land-owning family, they surrendered their wealth to the resistance movement and wore clothes made out of cotton which they had themselves spun and woven in keeping with the home handicrafts movement inaugurated by Gandhi. The family was well known to Gandhi and he was very receptive to the idea of a marriage between his son and Sushila when the suggestion was made by a mutual friend of both families.

The marriage took place in March 1927 in the Mashruwallah's hometown, Akola, in the state of Maharashtra. The wedding was a simple one without the pomp and ceremony of traditional marriages. Sushila wore no jewellery and the only gifts they kept were a Gita given by Gandhi and a cotton garland which Gandhi had spun himself. Any money which might have been otherwise spent on the wedding was channelled into the funds of the nationalist movement. Sushila saw her husband for the first time on her wedding day. She did not find this unusual as it was common practice. Soon after the marriage the couple set sail for South Africa.

In an interview with her in 1980 I asked her what her first reactions were on coming to Phoenix. She had left behind a large family and while she was struck

by the unspoilt beauty of Phoenix, her main impression was the solitariness of her surroundings. There were only two other houses on the entire farm and she found herself a lone woman amongst the men who worked in the press. Her second reaction was to note with horror the existence of a giant coal stove in the kitchen which was quite unlike the six-inch-high stoves used in India.

Not only did she overcome the constant threat of loneliness and master the workings of the stove, she threw herself into the work of producing *Indian Opinion*. She recalled that quite by chance, on visiting the press building, she began to play with the types and found to her delight she could easily compose a few words. As part of her daily routine on the farm, thereafter, a few hours of work in the press became a compulsory delight. Not only did she aid in the task of composition, she soon took on the task of attending to the correspondence and the financial management of the press. She also sold books through *Indian Opinion* and processed these orders.

When most Gujarati women in Durban lived secluded and caste-bound lives, Sushila represented an exception. The Gandhis knew no caste distinctions and also had numerous acquaintances outside the small culturally conservative Gujarati community. Sushila began to add to her command of Indian languages by learning some Tamil through her daily contact with the Tamil workers in the press. In addition she tried to learn English so that in the 1980s she represented a most unusual Gujarati woman of her generation in terms of her command of the language. She also acquired some knowledge of Zulu.

In her marriage, which was based on equality, there was an extremely blurred sexual division of labour; this, she said, she owed to the teachings of Gandhi who constantly urged his son not to restrict his wife to domestic chores. Gandhi, in fact, had given his son considerable advice before the marriage. He wrote in 1927: 'You know my attitude towards women. Men have not been treating them well'. He instructed his son:

... I want a solemn assurance from you that ... you shall honour Sushila's freedom; that you shall treat her as your companion, never as your slave; that you shall take as much care of her person as of your own; that you shall not force her to surrender to your passion, but that you shall take your pleasure only with her consent ...

(*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 33, pp. 55–56.)

Asked what it was like to have had Gandhi for a father-in-law Sushila said she had not been in awe of him although she knew they shared him with the whole of India. She found that Gandhi had mellowed considerably in his later years and eased off on his stern discipline of those who lived with him. On the times that she met him during visits to India, she found him to be one of the easiest persons to talk to. She spoke with a grimace about the restricted type of food that Gandhi insisted all the inmates of his ashram should eat. This unspiced bland food she ate like 'medicine'.

The one thing that bothered her was that in keeping with Gandhi's ideals, she and her husband had little money that they could call their own. All money earned at Phoenix was channelled back into its running. Being a practical person and with three children to look after (Sita, Arun, Ela), she raised this question with Gandhi in the 1940s during a visit to India. His reply to her was that she should trust in God to provide for her and her family. When this reply failed to convince her, Gandhi finally agreed that she could

draw £5 from the press per month for her work there. Going against Gandhi's ideals was not easy. Although what she subsequently withdrew and put into a savings account she regarded as a paltry sum, she was full of remorse when news of Gandhi's assassination on 30 January 1948 reached her. Peace only came when she withdrew her savings and put this money back into the settlement.

Apart from gardening and helping in the press, Sushila had the important role of being hostess to the numerous guests who came to see the very first communal settlement established by Gandhi. In the very year that she was married the Indian government had begun its practice of appointing a representative to South Africa. All these representatives, V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, Kurma Reddi, Kunwar Maharaj Singh, Syed Raza Ali, Benegal Rama Rau, Shafa'at Ahmad Khan and R. Deshmukh visited Phoenix. Sushila joined the Durban Indian Child Welfare Society which was founded in 1927 under Sastri's guidance. She was also subsequently a member of the Durban Indian Women's Association, which was founded in 1933 by the Kunwarani Maharaj Singh. This was a non-sectional, non-communal organization aimed at bringing Christian, Hindu, and Muslim women together as well as to perform social and charitable work. She was also to play an important role in another women's organization — the Gujerati Mahila Mandal, where she served in an official capacity right into the 1970s.

It was unusual for women to participate in politics as the Natal Indian Congress, reflecting the norms of the community, was dominated by patriarchal attitudes. In 1939, Sushila and Mrs Albert Christopher did the unusual. They attended a political meeting in the Transvaal with their husbands. The meeting was concerned with offering passive resistance to the government's policy of segregation and both women then stood up and briefly addressed the gathering. While Sushila did not otherwise play an overt role in Indian politics, she played an important supportive role in the family. This was so in 1930 when Manilal spent one year in jail in India after participating in the *satyagraha* campaign against the salt tax law. In 1946, she took on greater responsibilities at Phoenix when Manilal took part in the passive resistance campaign led by Yusuf Dadoo and G.M. Naicker and served a term of imprisonment. In 1951 Manilal began an individual campaign to defy petty apartheid laws by entering places demarcated 'Whites Only'. On one such occasion in October 1951 Sushila and her daughter, Sita, accompanied Manilal and entered the 'Whites Only' Durban Municipal Library. In 1953 Manilal spent over a month in jail in Germiston after participating in the Defiance Campaign. In the 1970s Sushila's youngest daughter, Ela, who lived with her, was served with a banning order. Being a Gandhi meant taking a pride in such activities and Sushila bore her responsibilities unquestioningly. On a very individual basis, throughout her life, she very effectively conveyed to white South Africans she met, the injustices of apartheid.

Manilal and Sushila and their three children first lived in the small dwelling which Gandhi had erected in the 1900s. This home, Arun Gandhi recalls, was 'an unimpressive wood and iron structure eaten by white ants. There were gaping holes in the rusted tin sheets but it was home to all of us. The press was housed in a similarly dilapidated structure down the hill near the well.' The Gandhis took the decision to move the location of the press building up the hill. They also built a new home for themselves which they named 'Kasturba Bhavan' after Gandhi's wife, who died in 1944 while imprisoned by the British



‘Sarvodaya’: Gandhi’s home at Phoenix

(Photograph: Local History Museum)

in the palace of the Agha Khan. Gandhi’s original home was rebuilt, on the original plan, with new materials. This home was formally opened in 1950. Manilal and Sushila spent the rest of their lives preserving this home, which they named ‘Sarvodaya’ (the welfare or the rising of the people), as a memorial to Gandhi.

In 1951 Sushila started a small school for the children of the workers on the settlement. Initially five children attended her classes in the ‘Sarvodaya’ but numbers soon grew. The Gandhis then (out of donations received) built the Kasturba Gandhi School, which was officially opened in 1954 and catered for over 270 pupils. It was the one part of the settlement for which a state subsidy was received, albeit reluctantly.

The Gandhis were well aware in the 1950s that Phoenix, despite their work, had not fully lived up to the original ideas of its founder. It had been established by Gandhi after he had read John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* and was particularly struck by the tenet that ‘a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the craftsman, is the life worth living’. He attracted a handful of whites and Indians to take part in the experiment of communal living. According to the trust deed of the settlement of 1912, the settlers were ‘to order their lives so as to be able ultimately to earn their living by handicraft or agriculture carried on . . . so far as possible without machinery; . . . to promote purity of private life in individuals by living pure lives themselves; . . . to train themselves generally for the service of humanity’. The trust deed also provided for the establishment of a school and a health institution which would be guided by nature cure methods. The newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, was to be used to advance the above ideals.

After Gandhi’s departure from South Africa, the settlement began to founder. Few of the settlers remained. Apart from the production of *Indian*

*Opinion* and the establishment of the school, Manilal and Sushila regarded their duty in the 1950s as being to preserve the settlement because of its historic and — as they considered it — its holy significance. Their wish was that the settlement could one day 'be restored to its former greatness'. Sushila suffered a major setback in 1956 when her husband died. Being a strong woman she accepted the responsibility of being custodian of the settlement and the newspaper. Her son Arun left for a visit to India, where he subsequently married. The laws of South Africa prevented him from returning to South Africa with his Indian-born wife. Sushila wrote numerous letters to the government to secure their admission, citing the historic nature of the Phoenix Settlement, the importance of having her son to run it, and the continuance of the Gandhi name in South Africa. These appeals fell on deaf ears and Sushila carried with her the knowledge that she would be the last Gandhi to live on the settlement.

By 1962 the running of the paper proved difficult on two accounts: finance and finding a suitable editor. Sushila herself took on greater responsibility in producing the paper and was assisted by her daughter Sita. In addition, the editorial hands of Ranji Nowbath and Jordan Ngubane were employed. As the chief managing trustee, Sushila took the difficult decision to close down the paper as it was proving difficult to maintain editorial consistency and Gandhian ideals. Gandhi had often advised his son that sentimentalism should be put aside and that if it was not possible to run the paper on his principles, he would rather see it closed. The closure of the paper nonetheless meant that the heart of the settlement had been removed.

Gandhi's ideal had been that those who lived at Phoenix should also work there. Following the death of Manilal and the closure of the press, this ideal could not be maintained. Former press workers remained on the settlement but sought work outside it. In addition, a few other new families were allocated space to live on. This practice Sushila interpreted as being one of providing assistance to the poor. The children of these families attended the daily evening communal prayer which Sushila held in the 'Sarvodaya'. Seated on the wooden floors, these children learnt from Sushila the fundamentals of Gandhism. Among the most important ideas conveyed was a tolerance of all religions, and hymns from all the faiths were sung.

New developments took place to revitalize the settlement in the 1960s. The building that once housed the press was now used as a medical clinic. Doctors came voluntarily twice a week to attend to patients, who were mainly Africans from the surrounding areas. Sushila's solitary stay in the main house also came to an end as her daughter, Ela, and her husband, Mewa, moved in. The main catalyst for the revitalization of Phoenix was the Gandhi centenary celebrations. In preparation for this event, working committees were established to fulfil the decision taken to mark the centenary of Gandhi's birth by putting up two new buildings at Phoenix. One was to be a museum and library while the other would house the clinic. These two buildings were opened in 1969. Provision was also made for a Girl Guides centre. In addition to these developments, Phoenix also became an important political meeting ground in the next few years. As both Ela and her husband were politically active, they attracted to the settlement people of all races who were opposed to apartheid. Holiday camps were also held for children of all races and a new political consciousness was passed on to these young minds. Sushila spoke with pride about these camps in which she took an active part showing city-



The original press building put up by Gandhi. First from the right is Manilal Gandhi.  
Third from the right is Sushila Gandhi.

*(Photograph: Sita Dhupelia)*

born children how to work in the fields as well as giving them lectures on Gandhi.

As the settlement was revitalized so too did it quickly burn out. In the 1970s Ela and her husband moved to a new home in Verulam. Now in her late sixties, Sushila was unable to continue to live on her own at Phoenix. So she left the home which she had known since she had been 19 and went to live with her daughter. Power for running the settlement passed quickly from her hands to the working committees. The clinic continued to provide an important service but, without a resident manager, the settlement began to bear the signs of neglect. Visitors who now came to the settlement missed the presence of Sushila and the glimpses into the past which only she could offer so vividly. Squatters began to encroach on the settlement and shacks were put up. In August 1985 Phoenix did not escape the unrest which spread through Inanda and led to the loss of property and lives. Sushila's former home, the press building, and the school were set alight. The 'Sarvodaya' was dismantled so that only its foundations remained. The contents of the library and the other buildings were looted. The families who had lived on the settlement from early days also fled from the destruction. A settlement which had stood for peace, non-violence and harmony between the races died a violent death and was soon overrun by squatters who established their own law. For Sushila this meant that nothing of her or her husband's life's work remained. Three years later, at the age of eighty-two, she died.

While the Gandhi family has lost an important link with its past, it is with some pride that they recall the role of a remarkable woman. Their loss is shared by people of all races and faiths, by the former settlers at Phoenix, by those who also served the settlement in various ways, by the women's organizations she served, by politicians who recognized the symbolism of Phoenix and by the thousands of visitors from all over the world who came to visit Gandhi's ashram. All remember the tranquil but strong personality of a woman clad in the simplest hand-woven white cotton sari who served with distinction the role of custodian of Gandhian traditions in South Africa.

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