

UNDERSTANDING GANDHI'S 'LOVE' FOR HIS 'SPIRITUAL WIFE'

The publication of M.K. Gandhi's letters to Sarala Devi Chaudhurani throws fresh light on their charged and intense relationship

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If you run a cursory internet search for M.K. Gandhi's relationship with Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, you are likely to come across articles with headlines referring to a love affair between them, even salaciously pointing to the Mahatma's lust for her. The reality was far more complicated, as a newly published collection of letters between them shows.

Born in 1872, Sarala Devi was three years younger than Gandhi, and died in 1945. In all her 72 years, she knew the Mahatma closely for a little more than 12 months. In 1919-20, when India was pushed to a tipping point by the twin horrors of the Rowlatt Act and Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Gandhi came in contact with Sarala Devi and her husband Rambhadracharya, who was called "Panditji" by all and sundry. The couple was living in Lahore at the time, far from Sarala Devi's family home in Bengal. Soon after the three met, the couple entrusted Gandhi with the care of their 12-year-old son Dipak, who moved to Sabarmati ashram to live with the Mahatma.

The freedom movement, driven by a greater common good, brought people from disparate walks of life together. The meeting between the Chaudharys and Gandhi was one such occurrence. Sarala Devi came from perhaps the most illustrious Indian family of her time—the Tagores of Jorasanko in Bengal. She was the niece of Rabindranath Tagore, daughter of his elder sister Swarnakumari Devi, and was raised with modern feminist values. Growing up under a canopy of privilege, with attendants at her beck and call, Sarala Devi had no reason to learn any housework. She was allowed the special privilege of studying physics at a time when the discipline was not open to women students in Calcutta (now Kolkata). Her brothers sat next to her in class, the sole woman in a sea of male students.

Even though she had no need for a job, Sarala Devi took off to Mysore (now Mysuru) in 1892 to work for a while. Later, as an influential and highly educated woman married to a wealthy and powerful man,

she became involved in the struggle for independence—mostly through her work of empowering women. However, her politics was different from Gandhi's dictum of non-violence. This clash of opinions would turn into a major point of contention between them eventually.

To Gandhi, Sarala Devi appeared as a revelation. She had an electric effect on his senses, as historian Geraldine Forbes points out in her fine new book, *Lost Letters And Feminist History: The Political Friendship Of Mohandas K. Gandhi And Sarala Devi Chaudhurani*. A work of careful scholarship, the volume includes Gandhi's surviving correspondence with Sarala Devi, which throws new light on the nature and intensity of their relationship.

The bond between the two has intrigued historians for years. "Gandhi was besotted by her and she was also flattered by his attention," historian Ramachandra Guha told *Mint* in 2018, speaking about the final volume of his two-part biography of the Mahatma. Forbes acknowledges the attraction between the two but allows the letters to do most of the talking. It is through these letters—only a fraction of the many that are believed to have survived—that a measure of their attachment begins to emerge.

Gandhi's relationship with his disciple Madeleine Slade, christened Mirabehn by him and fictionalized by psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar in *Mira And The Mahatma*, raised hackles. As did historian Joseph Lelyveld's book, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi And His Struggle With India*, which insinuated that Gandhi's relationship with his friend Hermann Kallenbach was not platonic. Compared to such post-humorous brouhaha, Sarala Devi's presence in his life caused much uproar during Gandhi's lifetime itself. She was disliked by his close associates, especially C. Rajagopalachari. Many of them painted her, in Forbes' words, as "an ambitious vamp".

The scandalous taint on Sarala Devi was fortified by Gandhi scholar Martin Green, whose psychoanalytic misreadings of the relationship threw up some preposterous claims: such as Gandhi was willing to divorce Kasturba in order to be able to marry Sarala Devi. The surviving letters between them don't convey such a heady



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Gandhi with Manu Gandhi (left) and Abha Gandhi; and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani.

mood of teenage romance, though Gandhi's intensity of feeling for her is unmistakable.

The most obvious indication of the Mahatma's growing affection for Sarala Devi comes through in the sign-offs in his letters: "Yours sincerely" turns into "With love" in the span of a handful of exchanges, as does the address. From "My dear Sarala Devi", he quickly sheds the Devi, before switching to the superlative "dearest". If he describes her as his "spiritual wife" (in a letter to Kallenbach) and declares himself her "Law Giver", he also addresses her as "My dear sister" in one epistle, "Shakti" in another and "Mataji" in a third. The letters, too, are described as "love letters" and "loving letters". Once, he signs off, "With love that I cannot describe". Another time, in a confessional mood, he paints a vivid picture of desolation: "I had a disturbed night. You haunted me the whole of it."

The evidence before us does not allow



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for any definitive conclusions but Gandhi's desire to mould Sarala Devi into the goddess he wanted her to be is fairly evident. He rebukes her in almost every letter for not being able to keep pace with his epistolary demands. He wanted Sarala Devi to write to him daily, if possible in Hindi, as also to Kasturba and Dipak separately. On 13 May 1920, for instance, he mentions that he has sent Sarala Devi 25 letters in 16 days—the bar for mutual devotion was clearly set very high.

Gandhi also severely reprimands Sarala Devi for not doing gendered household work—the very same chores she had been given a reprieve from thanks to her privileged upbringing. A scathing indictment follows in a letter when Gandhi learns Sarala Devi had been enjoying her hair being groomed by a maid. When she champions the *khaddar* sari, made of coarse hand-spun textile, he is happy but also does not miss a chance to drop an arch remark. "It is nothing for monied women to buy a few yards of *khaddar* and even wear it occasionally."

In accordance with the experiments he conducted during his life, Gandhi did not want to keep his letters to Sarala Devi a private affair. He repeatedly urges her to

show them to her husband, seeks his permission whenever he wants her to come down to act as his "nurse" or "secretary", and does not hesitate to upbraid her for behaving like a child. Reading these letters leaves one with a sense of listening to only one side of a telephone conversation, with an importunate litany of praises and complaints being aired relentlessly.

Gandhi's role in galvanizing women to take part in the struggle for independence is a much noted fact of Indian history. It's true that he urged women to abjure foreign clothes and only wear *swadeshi* textiles, encouraged them to take up spinning on the *charkha* (spinning wheel). Yet, in the end, he did not manage to throw off the yoke of his gendered sensibility and the power he enjoyed as the patriarch of the nation. He acted as a tough taskmaster to Manu Gandhi, his orphaned grandniece who grew up under his care at Sevagram, but also pushed the limits of their relationship by making her a part of his unsavoury personal experiments. After spirited opposition from his associates and Manu's objection, Gandhi decided to stop sleeping naked with her at night in order to test his own will power.

With Sarala Devi, who was much older than Manu when she met Gandhi, there was not much scope for him to control her so egregiously. Still, it is evident from the letters that he did not take kindly to her criticisms—even as he rapturously called her a "goddess". He also did not want her to escape the cycle of daily domestic labour that women of his time were meant to shoulder. He liked to be her "Law Giver", not an equal in the fight for justice. All of this was of a piece with Gandhi's overall attitude towards women. In 1930, for instance, when he picked 78 people to join him in the Dandi March to protest against the British salt law, he did not include a single woman. He claimed to have been apprehensive that the British would accuse him and his followers of hiding behind women.

For all his progressive visions, Gandhi was not as much of a believer in the equality of genders as he could have been. His letters to Sarala Devi—charting the course and end of their relationship—show up this truth starkly.