

Gandhi, private and public

BOOK REVIEW

Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World, 1914-1948

By Ramachandra Guha. *Illustrated.* 1,083 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$40.

BY ALEX VON TUNZELMANN

"The number of books that people write on this old man takes my breath away," complained the politician B. R. Ambedkar of the proliferation of Gandhiana. That was in 1946. Ramachandra Guha must have smiled when he quoted that line in his new book, the second — and final — volume of his biography of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Few figures in history have been so extensively chronicled, including by himself (Gandhi's own published collected works run to 100 volumes and over 50,000 pages). The really surprising thing is that there is still so much to say.

"Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World, 1914-1948," encompassing both world wars and the struggle for Indian independence, is a portrait of a complex man whose remarkable tenacity remained constant, even when his beliefs changed. It is also extraordinarily intimate. Gandhi drew no distinction between his private and public life. He made his own body a symbol, mortifying it through fasting or marching for political and spiritual change. He even went public with his sexual life — and the negation of it through brahmacharya, or chastity.

It is difficult to write about a man who was a revered spiritual leader as

well as a keen political operator. Guha, the author of "India After Gandhi" and "Gandhi Before India" (the first volume of the biography that this book concludes), approaches Gandhi on his own terms while trying not to gloss over his flaws. Perhaps inevitably, with one who has been regarded almost as a saint, it is the flaws that will capture many readers' attention. A key theme that emerges is Gandhi's effort to control himself and those around him. This extended from his own family to his political allies and opponents.

The most compelling political relationship Guha reveals is the antagonism between Gandhi and the aforementioned B. R. Ambedkar, the preeminent politician of outcaste Hindus, then known as "untouchables" and now as dalits. Guha's book charts the two men's interactions over decades, along with Gandhi's own changing views on caste.

Even while he still saw some value in the caste system, Gandhi opposed untouchability. Guha is at pains to refute Arundhati Roy's dismissal of Gandhi as a reactionary on caste. He details Gandhi's exhaustive campaigns to allow untouchables into temples, and his many attempts to persuade other Hindus of his caste to accept them. Certainly, Gandhi did much brave and important work. Yet he still characterized untouchables as "helpless men and women" who required a savior — namely, him. As Guha says, Gandhi's rhetoric "sounded patronizing, robbing 'untouchables' of agency, of being able to articulate their own demands and grievances."

Gandhi fought Ambedkar over es-



Mohandas K. Gandhi in 1937.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

tablishing separate electorates for untouchables, arguing that these would "vivisect" Hinduism. "I want political power for my community," Ambedkar explained. "That is indispensable for our survival." Gandhi's reply, as quoted by Guha, was that "you are born an untouchable but I am an untouchable by adoption. And as a new convert I feel more for the welfare of the community than those who are already there." Gandhi cared passionately about untouchability: He repeatedly emphasized his willingness to die if that was what it took to end it. What he could not seem to do was let untouchables themselves take the lead.

Some of the most interesting parts of this book concern another group Gan-

dhi sought to instruct: women. Two sections in particular are likely to raise eyebrows. The first is Guha's account of Gandhi's relationship with the writer and singer Saraladevi Chaudhurani in 1919-20. Gandhi was, by then, celibate; both he and Sarala were married to other people. Yet their letters speak openly of desire — "You still continue to haunt me even in my sleep," he wrote to her — and he told friends, "I call her my spiritual wife." He signed his letters to her Law Giver, which, as Guha observes, was "a self-regarding appellation that reveals his desire to have Sarala conform to his ways." Gandhi's friends appear to have talked him out of making this "spiritual marriage" public. Eventually, he distanced himself, confessing that he did not have the "infinitely higher purity" in practice "that I possess in thought" to maintain a "marriage" that was perfectly spiritual.

The second section that will provoke controversy tackles an even more sensitive subject: Gandhi's notorious brahmacharya experiments, beginning in 1946. When Gandhi was involved with Sarala, he was 50 and she was 47, a mature woman exercising her own free will. Nearly three decades later, when he was 77, he made the decision to "test" his vow of chastity by sleeping in a bed with his teenage grandniece, Manu Gandhi.

Manu was vulnerable. She had lost her mother at a young age and had been taken in by Gandhi and his wife (who was deceased by the time the "experiments" started). Manu grew up in an ashram in which everyone was devoted to her great-uncle. She wrote a

diary mentioning the "experiments" that Guha quotes, though it is a compromised source: Gandhi read it as Manu wrote it, and his own writing appears in the margins.

Guha has found a letter written by Horace Alexander, a close friend of Gandhi's. Alexander said that Gandhi told him Manu wanted to test her own vow of chastity. Guha suggests that this puts a new light on the "experiments," and that Manu may have become involved partly to deter another man who was pursuing her romantically: "There may have been, as it were, two sides to the story. Both Gandhi and Manu may have wanted to go through this experiment, or ordeal. To be sure, there was a certain amount of imposition — from his side."

That caveat is important, for, as Guha allows, there was an enormous power differential between Gandhi and Manu. It is not clear that the letter from Alexander changes how we view the "experiments": He spoke only to Gandhi, not Manu. In the wake of #MeToo, we know that the powerful may delude themselves about the willingness of those they manipulate, and that their less powerful victims may go along with things they do not want because they are overwhelmed by the status of their abusers.

Lest anyone think this applies modern standards to a historical event, Guha provides extensive evidence of the horrified reaction of many of Gandhi's friends and followers at the time. Most were appalled that a young woman should be used as an instrument in an "experiment," and some of his political allies, like Vallabhbhai Patel,

feared that the matter would become a scandal. At least one, the stenographer R. P. Parasuram, left Gandhi's entourage when Gandhi refused to stop sharing a bed with Manu.

Guha does as much as any reasonable biographer could to explain the "experiments" with reference to Gandhi's 40-year obsession with celibacy. Ultimately, though, the reader is left feeling that Gandhi's own defenses of his behavior are riddled with self-justification, and Manu's voice may never truly be heard.

Gandhi posed a huge challenge to his world in his time, and still does. Guha's admiration for his subject is clear throughout this book. He tries to explain controversial aspects of Gandhi's life by contextualizing them within Gandhi's own thinking. Some of Gandhi's fiercer critics may feel this is soft-pedaling, but it does help build a fair, thorough and nuanced portrait of the man.

Gandhi spoke for himself more than most people in history, but even the most controlling people cannot control how history sees them. Guha lets Gandhi appear on his own terms, and allows him to reveal himself in all his contradictions.

There is much truth in a verse Guha quotes, written by Gandhi's secretary, Mahadev Desai:

*To live with the saints in heaven
Is a bliss and a glory
But to live with a saint on earth
Is a different story.*

Alex von Tunzelmann is the author of "Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire."