

NARHARIBHAI
[Narhari Dwarkadas Parikh]



NARHARIBHAI

[October 7, 1891 ~ July 15, 1957]

(An Unsung Hero of Gandhi Era)

Author of Gujarati Edition

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Translation

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Dedicated To
Revered Swami Anand

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Forward by Kaka Saheb [Dattatreya Kalelkar]

I have mentioned elsewhere that after joining Bapuji (Gandhiji), Vinoba Bhave left to complete a Sanskrit mission. Only after that did I join Gandhiji for good. While Vinoba was the first resident of the Gandhi Ashram, many still consider me his first associate.

Gandhiji had heard of me as a nationalist even while he was in South Africa. By the time he returned to India permanently, I had already joined Shantiniketan. During his visit there, he invited me to join him at his ashram. I accepted his invitation, though I first had to fulfill some personal responsibilities before fully dedicating myself to his mission.

As an educationist at heart, I naturally sought out students wherever I could. In the ashram, celibacy was considered essential to becoming a true ashramite (resident of the ashram). While I practiced celibacy, I chose not to take a formal vow.

Narharibhai [Parikh], Mahadevbhai [Desai], and Kishorlalbhai [Mashruwala] joined the ashram at their earliest opportunity. Along with our spouses, we settled in a row of modest apartments across from the ashram. My wife, Laxmi, and I formed a close bond with Narharibhai and Maniben, as well as Mahadevbhai and Durgaben. Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai, being longtime friends, had mutually decided to join Gandhiji's mission. Their shared commitment fostered a deep sense of camaraderie and unity within our growing ashram community.

Two of my former associates, Swami Anand and Jugatram Dave, joined the Gandhi ashram through my connection. Swami

Anand and I had previously worked together at *Kesari*, the Marathi daily of Lokmanya Tilak.

Several other nationalists also came in contact with Gandhiji through me. They are:

- Harihar Sharma Anna from the South,
- Mama Saheb Fadke from Ratnagiri,
- Jivatram Kriplani from Sindh,
- Gangadharrao Deshpande from Belgaum,
- Pundalik Katgade and Shankarrao Gulvadi from Karwar.

Although I knew Vinoba Bhave before he met Gandhiji, he joined the ashram independently.

My primary focus here is to write about Narharibhai. He and Mahadevbhai, along with their families—including their spouses and children, Mohan, Vanmala, and Narayan—were inseparable. Our own children, Satish and Bal, became close friends with these three. As a result, our three families developed a deep and lasting bond, sharing an intimacy that felt more like an extended family.

Narharibhai and Maniben seemed divinely destined to be husband and wife. Their fathers, who were close friends, had arranged their marriage when Narhari was just four-and-a-half years and Mani was a mere six months old.

After completing his Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws degrees, Narharibhai began practicing law in Ahmedabad. Around the same time, he started visiting the newly established Gandhi's Sabarmati ashram. This posed a unique challenge for Maniben, who had to navigate the contrasting aspects of Narharibhai's life. On the one hand, he enjoyed good food, fine clothes, and took pride in seeing her well-dressed. On the other hand, life at the

ashram demanded simplicity, austerity, and the practice of equality across all religions, races, and castes.

One can only imagine how difficult it must have been for Maniben and other women to reconcile these expectations with the deeply ingrained customs and traditions of their upbringing. Maniben faced an especially challenging task: she was assigned the responsibility of washing and caring for young girls from untouchable and lower-caste village families. This was no less than a social revolution and a significant departure from societal norms of the time.

From that point onward, I held the deepest respect for Maniben, recognizing her strength, adaptability, and courage in embracing these transformative practices.

Gandhiji took charge of the periodical *Navajivan* from Indulal Yagnik and began involving ashram women in its production. He would suggest topics for them to write about, carefully edit their articles, and guide them through the process. The early history of *Navajivan* is fascinating and well worth studying.

During this time, Gandhiji launched the movement for indigenous yarn production and the boycott of mass-produced foreign clothes. When he introduced *Khadi* (hand-spun and hand-woven cotton cloth), Maniben and her mother hand-spun yarn and presented the first *dhoti* (loincloth) to him. Gandhiji expressed his joy in *Navajivan*, a moment that must have brought immense pride and delight to Maniben.

Maniben's life in the ashram was full of responsibilities. At one point, when my wife was unwell, she took care of our son Mohan for about six months. This selfless support strengthened the bond between our families. In general, life in the ashram felt like being part of an extended family, where every shared experience added depth and fulfillment to our lives.

As Narharibhai, Mahadevbhai, and I became increasingly involved in Gandhian programs, we developed a deep sense of solidarity with those around us. I believe this sense of unity was a gift of divine grace. From observing Gandhiji's greatness, I came to understand a subtle yet profound distinction between closeness and detachment. His unique ability to remain profoundly engaged in countless tasks and missions while maintaining a spiritual detachment was nothing short of transcendental. This rare quality enabled him to embrace not just the nation but the world with his boundless spirituality. Truly, I have not known such a *Mahatma* (great soul) in history.

Narharibhai, too, was blessed with the ability to adapt to this ideal. He deeply understood Gandhiji's mission and programs, dedicating his life wholeheartedly to the cause. His unwavering commitment was a testament to his understanding of Gandhian principles and his own spiritual depth.

Like me, Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai were greatly influenced by the philosophy and spirituality of Swami Vivekananda and the great poet Rabindranath Tagore. All three of us shared a love for the Bengali language, and in our own ways, we translated Bengali literature and presented it to the Gujarati community.

In our younger days, we all enjoyed tea, though I eventually experienced a conflict regarding its consumption and switched to coffee. We often gathered with large containers of tea and coffee, engaging in deep discussions about literature and the social upliftment of our society. Even today, when I see someone with tea, I fondly remember these two friends and our cherished conversations.

To break free from the shackles of British imperialism and achieve India's independence, it was crucial to boycott the English education system and establish a national educational framework. Some states had already initiated this movement, and I was actively involved. Gandhiji was well aware of my efforts, including the training of colleagues for ashram schools. Narharibhai and Kishorlalbhai also made significant contributions to this cause. What few people know is that the success of the Gandhian education program was, in large part, due to the collective contributions of the three of us.

During this period, Gujarat Vidyapeeth and several other local social and educational institutions were founded. Among those who contributed the most to fostering national spirit through the philosophies of Tilak and Rabindranath Tagore, Narharibhai played a key role. While Mahatma Gandhi served as the chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapeeth and I was both the vice-chancellor and principal, the true credit for the development of the Vidyapeeth and other ashram schools belongs to Narharibhai.

I worked alongside Narharibhai, whose total commitment to the cause was unwavering. The students, in fact, often joked with a famous saying from England's history: "Queen Anne reigns, but

Sarah (the Queen’s friend) governs.” In our case, they said, “Kaka Saheb Kalelkar is the vice-chancellor, but Narharibhai runs the Vidyapeeth!” We both chuckled at this, but it was true in its own way. With our mutual understanding, Narharibhai led the Vidyapeeth with the highest standards.

Whenever any matter came before me, I would defer to Narharibhai’s judgment, considering his decision as my own. Our harmony was unique, a partnership built on trust, respect, and shared vision.

At this point, I will pause in discussing Narharibhai’s career and contributions. In closing, I must say that a person of Narharibhai’s character—marked by loyalty, pragmatism, and modesty—is rare in this world. Society would indeed be blessed to have a humble servant like him.

The sons of Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai—Mohan and Narayan—have carried on the Gandhian mission, and I am delighted to see their dedication. I also deeply admire Vanu (Vanmala), the author of this book, who is like a daughter to me. I am content knowing that she has so wonderfully captured the character of Narharibhai in her writing.

Affectionately,
Kaka Kalelkar

Gandhi Jayanti, 2 October 1975
Rajghat
New Delhi

Author's Preface

One day, Kaka Saheb visited us in Delhi and suggested, “You should write Narharibhai’s biography.” I responded, “If Narharibhai were a prominent personality, his biography would have already been written. He was a man of the people.” Kaka Saheb replied, “That’s not true. Narharibhai has written about Mahadevbhai, Kishorlalbhai, and Sardar Patel—these close associates of Gandhiji are in the same category, and his biography needs to be documented.” He insisted repeatedly, saying, “Write it, and I want to write the forward.”

Eventually, I wrote the biography and gave the manuscript to Kaka Saheb for review. He admired it, and I proceeded to send it to print. It wasn’t easy to narrate the life of my own father with complete impartiality. Though there may be a personal touch of reverence, I made every effort to remain true to the facts.

Narharibhai, our beloved family member, was a pleasant person who easily made friends with people of all ages. From elders like Dr. Sumant Mehta and Sharadaben to younger individuals like Parikshit Majmudar, Yusuf Meher Ali, and Dinkar Mehta, as well as his grandchildren, Narharibhai had a way of making everyone feel comfortable and close to him. Even strangers were drawn to him and quickly formed a bond.

Narharibhai did not simply follow the ideas and ideals of Gandhiji; he first understood the philosophy behind them and then integrated those ideals into his life and actions. As a result, he never experienced tension or discomfort in embracing the ashram life.

Gandhiji's life was full of experiments, and he often shared his unconventional and sometimes unorthodox ideas with his associates. Some blind followers would try to mimic Gandhiji's outward practices literally. At times, Gandhiji received comments like, "You've turned your ashram into a zoo!" My *Bhai*, however, never tried to show off or follow blindly. He observed Gandhiji, accepted the ideas that resonated with him, and frankly rejected those he found illogical. Gandhiji admired Narharibhai's honesty and opinions.

Narharibhai gave up the opportunity for top-class education and a lucrative law practice to embrace a minimalistic ashram life, perform menial labor, and even fast for the rights of the poorest. Who would call him sane by conventional standards?

Contentment was the key to Narharibhai's pleasing personality. He embraced selective simplicity, renounced wealth and comfort, and maintained equanimity toward his wife and children. This lifestyle came easily to him but was not easy for my mother, Maniben (*Moti*, our family name). Despite coming from a wealthy family, she willingly surrendered all her jewelry to Gandhiji and never wore a single ounce of gold for the rest of her life. After joining the ashram, she lived with just four sarees. At the time of her death, she had one saree on her, one that we used to dress her body after bathing, one that we used to cover her, and one that Ansuya kept in memory of her. Her exemplary simplicity was astonishing to all who knew her. When she gave up all her jewelry to Gandhiji, he asked, "Now, will you not ask Narhari for more?" She promised him she wouldn't, and she kept her word. After Narharibhai's passing, income tax officers investigated my

brother, Mohan, for a year, unable to comprehend how Narharibhai had no personal property or even a bank account.

Living a simple life, enduring jail detention, separating from loved ones, and embracing higher ideals came naturally to the generation between 1920 and 1945. The sacrifices of countless families, who dedicated their lives to the nationalist movement, gave strength to the spirit of nonviolence. This book is one such story of dedication and sacrifice.

Gandhiji saw no distinction between men and women. As the wise have said, “Consider a 16-year-old son as your friend.” From a young age, we were often separated from our parents. Narharibhai confided in us and assigned us responsibilities that usually come with age and experience. The ideal friendship our parents shared has remained a model for me throughout my life. Narharibhai embodied qualities of freedom, neatness, honesty, and frankness. It is my sincere hope that readers will recognize these qualities in this writing, and I would be pleased if I succeed in conveying this message.

Vanmala Desai
A/2 Gulmohar Park, New Delhi
24 February 1977

Note on English Translation

I was just over two years old when my grandfather, Narharibhai, passed away. Unfortunately, I have no personal memories of him. However, I have come to know him through the stories shared by my elders—most notably my father, Mohanbhai, and his sister, Vanmala Desai, the original Gujarati author of this book.

I feel privileged to have been connected with some of the stalwart, visionary, and dedicated associates of Mahatma Gandhi and Narharibhai. As the great-great-grandchild of Mahatma Gandhi through my mother's lineage, I was born and raised in one of his ashrams, immersing me in the values and spirit of that era. Later, working alongside my father in Bardoli for 12 years further deepened my understanding of that legacy. Even now, reflecting on those memories feels like stepping into another world—one shaped by profound ideals and an unwavering commitment to change.

I am deeply humbled and grateful to revered Kaka Saheb, whose encouragement led my Vanmala *foi* to write about Narharibhai, and to her for giving us the opportunity to study his character and contributions through her original Gujarati book.

My Nilam *masi* had once urged me to write a biography of my father, Mohanbhai—a wish I regret being unable to fulfill. She eventually took on the task herself. However, the aspiration to translate Narharibhai's biography into English remained with me for years. Encouraged by several elders and family members over time, I finally received the decisive nudge from the esteemed elder

Rajmohan Gandhi, whose suggestion I could not ignore. I am forever indebted to him for this blessing.

In translating the Gujarati text, I have aimed for a free yet faithful rendition—preserving the spirit and essence of the original rather than adhering to a strictly literal translation. Each reading of *Narharibhai* and the process of translating it into English transported me to a different era. It has been a profoundly moving and humbling journey.

I offer this translation with deep reverence to Narharibhai—an unsung hero of the Gandhi era.

Rahul Parikh
Cary, North Carolina, USA
March 7, 2025

Contents

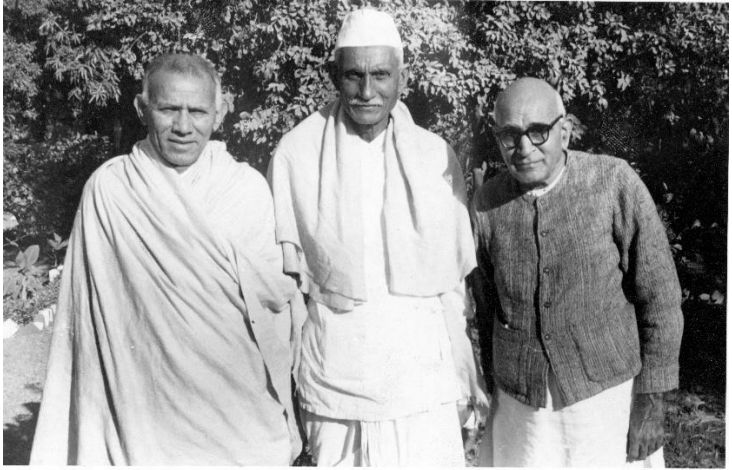
Forward by Kaka Saheb Kalelkar

Author's Preface

Note on English Translation

Introduction

1. Family Lineage and Childhood
2. Marriage and Education
3. First Meeting with Gandhi
4. Ashram calling — a transformation
5. Moving to South Gujarat for Village Uplift
6. Bardoli *Satyagraha*
7. Progress of Children—Mohan and Vanmala
8. Dharasana *Satyagraha*
9. Freedom Movement Intensified
10. Harijan Ashram
11. *Nai Talim* (Basic Education) and Gandhian Economics
12. Quit India Movement, Demise of Mahadevbhai
13. Assassination of Gandhiji
14. Deteriorating health, Moving to Bardoli & Writings
15. Gandhiji's Last Will
16. My Story—Maniben Parikh



Swami Anand-Ravishankar Vyas (Maharaj)-Narharibhai
[Three friends, devotees & close associates of Gandhi]



Narharibhai-Maniben with Family and Durgaben Desai

Introduction

This book chronicles the remarkable life of Narharibhai, an unsung hero of the Gandhian era. A pioneering thinker, he not only embraced but also amplified Gandhiji's timeless ideals. As a trusted intellectual associate, he remained deeply committed to Gandhian principles in both thought and action. A writer, independence activist, and social reformer from Gujarat, Narharibhai's legacy continues to inspire.

Born into a progressive and affluent Bania family, Narharibhai came from a distinguished lineage of legal professionals—his father, grandfather, and uncles were all highly regarded in the field of law. Following family tradition, he excelled academically, pursued a legal education, and embarked on a successful career as a barrister.

However, his life took a transformative turn in 1915 when Mohandas Gandhi—then known for his activism in South Africa but not yet revered as the Mahatma—returned to India for good. From their very first meeting, Narharibhai and his close friend, Mahadev Desai, were deeply inspired by Gandhiji's vision to liberate India from British rule and uplift the masses. Drawn to the ideals of service and sacrifice, Narharibhai became a regular visitor to the newly established Sabarmati Ashram, a community dedicated to purposeful living.

Ultimately, this young barrister—who had a thriving legal practice and promising future—made a life-altering decision. He renounced his career in law to dedicate himself entirely to India's struggle for freedom and the pursuit of social and economic reform alongside Gandhiji.

Narharibhai and his wife, Maniben—born into a wealthy merchant family—chose to renounce their high-society lifestyle in favor of a life rooted in simplicity and high moral values. In 1916, as a young couple in their twenties, they moved to Sabarmati Ashram, dedicating themselves to a lifelong mission of service and nation-building.

At the ashram, they joined Gandhiji's early associates, including Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, Kishorlal Mashruwala, and Mahadevbhai Desai. Together, they sought to harmonize worldly responsibilities with deep spiritual fulfillment, steadfastly adhering to Gandhiji's ideals, methods, and programs.

Narharibhai was widely recognized as a Gandhian economist. His most significant contribution was *Manav Artha Shastra*—a groundbreaking framework for people-centric economic development. This visionary work offered an alternative to conventional, profit-driven commerce, advocating for a morally guided economic order. It redefined progress by promoting shared prosperity through non-violent, non-exploitative means, ensuring that wealth and opportunity remained accessible to many rather than concentrated in the hands of a privileged few.

Narharibhai was a important figure in India's freedom movement, playing a key role in fostering national spirit through Gujarat Vidyapeeth and numerous other social and educational institutions. He actively campaigned against untouchability, alcoholism, and illiteracy while advocating for women's empowerment, sanitation, healthcare, and nationalist education.

He played a crucial role in three major Satyagrahas—Kheda, Bardoli, and Dharasana—demonstrating his deep commitment to

India's struggle for independence. As a true social reformer, he dedicated himself to uplifting the *Dalit* community, particularly its youth, by challenging traditional prejudices and promoting their integration into mainstream society.

Narharibhai's dedication to education, social reform, and rural development led him to contribute significantly to 30–35 institutions, including Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Harijan Ashram, the Basic Education Board of Bombay State, Rashtriya Shala (National School), Gram Sevak Vidyalaya (a training school for rural services), and Navajivan Trust. Additionally, following Mahadevbhai Desai's passing, he worked closely with Gandhiji as his secretary for a few years.

Narharibhai was also a prolific writer, with a body of work that included approximately 15 books covering a wide range of subjects, including biographies of his associates—Mahadev Desai, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and Kishorlal Mashruwala—along with topics on human economics, education, politics, contemporary social issues, and Gandhian philosophy. In addition to writing, he edited and compiled around 12 books. Furthermore, he co-translated, with Mahadev Desai, selected works of *Rabindranath Tagore* and translated several writings of *Leo Tolstoy*.

Narharibhai was one of the few deeply trusted, lifelong associates of Gandhiji who embodied the unity of thought, word, and deed. Walking steadfastly on the Gandhian path, he and his peers never ceased to grow inwardly, and the inner journey strengthened their manifest journey. It was a lifelong pursuit of extraordinary ideals. The Gandhian era was an epic of non-duality, self-purification, and social transformation—an unparalleled

revolutionary movement, rich in depth and complexity. For Narharibhai, Gandhiji was more than a leader; he was a revered father figure. His unwavering devotion and adoration for his guru were met with equal faith and affection from Gandhiji, forming a bond of profound mutual respect. Gandhiji appointed his two close and trusted associates, Mahadevbhai and Narharibhai as executors of his final will which he drafted in 1940.

In the final section, this book offers a captivating and intimate account of Maniben, the wife of Narharibhai, and her personal experiences—her reflections on a 30-year journey alongside Gandhiji and life in the ashram. It tells the story of a woman born into wealth, who married a well-to-do lawyer and initially lived a life of luxury as a traditional wife. However, at a pivotal moment, she renounced comfort and convenience, joined her husband in Gandhi's ashram, donated her jewelry, and embraced a minimalist life guided by high ideals.

With heartfelt yet straightforward language, she shares her firsthand experiences with Gandhiji, his close associates, and their families. She revered Gandhiji as both a saintly and fatherly figure, cooked for him, lived and worked closely with Kasturba. In return, Gandhiji regarded her as a vital member of his movement, entrusting her with critical tasks and responsibilities, keeping account of ashram community kitchen, managing school for tribal girls, picketing against alcohol shop. He valued her opinions on several issues and kept her informed even when he was out of the ashram or in prison.

These personal narratives offer a rare and deeply insightful glimpse into a transformative chapter of history.

Family Lineage and Childhood

Narharibhai was born into a progressive Khadayata caste family in the small town of Kathlal, located in the Kheda district of Gujarat. For generations, his family had been well-educated and highly respected in society. His grandfather, Motilal Mulji, achieved a remarkable milestone by receiving a charter from the East India Company in 1852, becoming a practicing lawyer in the town of Dhandhuka. Motilal earned the distinction of being the first lawyer from the entire Khadayata caste.

Motilal was known for his principles and self-discipline. He set a personal limit on wealth accumulation, and once he reached his target, he retired from his lucrative legal practice to settle in Ahmedabad. There, he dedicated the rest of his life to spiritual pursuits and devotion to the supreme being.

Even in moments of personal tragedy, such as the untimely death of his middle son, Dwarkadas (Narharibhai's father), Motilal remained composed. He accepted the loss with the words, "As God wished," and spent the entire night in prayer.

Motilal's own passing was equally serene and reflective of his spiritual devotion. On the day of his death, he woke early, visited the temple, and requested the priest for one final *darshan* of the deity's idol. Shortly after, he peacefully breathed his last in the temple courtyard, leaving behind a legacy of devotion, wisdom, and steadfast composure.

* * * * *

Narharibhai's father, Dwarkadas, was a practicing lawyer in the princely state of Vadodara before relocating to Ahmedabad due to health concerns. A seeker of truth and a staunch opponent

of injustice, Dwarkadas demonstrated courage and resilience throughout his life.

On one occasion, while traveling in a bullock cart from his hometown of Kathlal to Nadiad (approximately 18 miles away), he faced a group of robbers. He bravely resisted the attack but sustained severe wounds in the confrontation. Unlike the stereotypical image of the Bania community, Dwarkadas was skilled in horse riding and proficient with swords, which helped him defend himself.

Although his wounds healed over time, the lingering pain remained with him. Sadly, just three or four years after the incident, Dwarkadas passed away at the young age of 46. At the time, Narharibhai was only ten years old.

Following Dwarkadas's death, the responsibility of supporting the family fell on Keshavlal, his elder brother. Keshavlal was a successful lawyer practicing in Ahmedabad. Despite his demanding professional life, he was deeply involved in literature, social services, and promoting indigenous practices.

Keshavlal's pioneering spirit led him to establish Gujarat's first metal factory in Ahmedabad. As a member of the Ahmedabad Municipality, he played a key role in implementing the city's waterworks system, introducing running water lines despite strong public opposition. At the time, many residents believed that using running water would be a blasphemous act against their religion. Keshavlal's determination and vision ultimately prevailed, marking a significant milestone in Ahmedabad's civic infrastructure.

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Jethalal Motilal Parikh, the younger brother of Dwarkadas, broke societal norms by venturing abroad to pursue higher education. He studied law in England, becoming a barrister and earning the prestigious title of King's Counsel (K.C.), the first Indian to achieve this distinction. Jethalal practiced law at the Privy Council and spent the remainder of his life in England, maintaining a strong connection to his roots and deep respect for his homeland.

While in England, Jethalal met prominent Indian leaders such as Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. He also contributed significantly to the efforts of Parsi leaders Dadabhai Naoroji and Shahpurji, helping them appeal to British citizens about the cause of India. Jethalal played a key supporting role to these Parsi leaders in forming the India League in London, a pivotal organization for promoting India's interests and raising awareness about its struggle for freedom.

Narharibhai was born on October 7, 1891, into this spiritually rich, cultured, nationalist, and scholarly family. From an early age, he imbibed the values of his lineage, including a passion for the nation's cause. He held deep admiration for the nationalist leaders of his time and, even in his teenage years, made earnest efforts to attend speeches and gatherings led by prominent Gujarati leaders.

* * * * *

Narharibhai was a bright student, excelling academically while also showcasing his athleticism and love for childhood mischiefs. The family lived in a traditional housing cluster in the old city of Ahmedabad, where Narharibhai naturally took on the role of a leader among the neighborhood youngsters. Together,

they engaged in various games, pranks, and activities that brought life to their community.

From an early age, Narharibhai displayed a strong sense of justice and a rebellious streak against unfairness. While attending Gujarat College, he played a prominent role in student protests against the principal, Hurst, whose authoritarian demeanor caused widespread resentment. The slogan “Hurst is the worst” resonated not just in Ahmedabad but across Gujarat, cementing Narharibhai’s reputation as a leader among his peers.

Despite his academic brilliance, Narharibhai was far from a bookworm. He would efficiently complete his studies and assignments before rushing out to enjoy cricket, kite flying, and other games with his friends. In an era with limited resources, young boys displayed remarkable creativity, improvising equipment to play cricket. His love for cricket and kite flying continued well into adulthood, even after joining Gandhi’s *Satyagraha Ashram*. *Satyagraha* means truth-force or soul-force. He enjoyed playing games with Vidyapith students even though he was a registrar of the Vidyapith.

An especially unique event occurred in 1933, when several ashram residents, including Narharibhai, were detained in Visapur jail. In the makeshift barracks and tents on the village outskirts, Narharibhai maintained his routine of reading, writing, and spinning. He also formed a cricket team with the inmates, learning that the jail superintendent shared his love for the game. This coincidence led to the formation of two teams, with Narharibhai captaining one and the superintendent leading the other—a rare and amusing display of sportsmanship in such circumstances.

Narharibhai's childhood friend, Manubhai Mehta, lived nearby, and the two often played games after school hours. After intermediate school, Manubhai moved to Bombay (now Mumbai) to study at St. Xavier's College and resided in Gopaldas Tejpal Boarding. There, he befriended Mahadev Desai. Although Narharibhai was still at Gujarat College in Ahmedabad, he initiated correspondence with Mahadevbhai through their mutual connection with Manubhai.

In 1911, during King George V's visit to India, a grand amphitheater was set up at the Apollo Bunder in Bombay. Mahadevbhai secured an entry pass for Narharibhai, and the two met in person for the first time at this historic event. This meeting marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship, which would play a pivotal role in their shared journey.

Tragically, Narharibhai's father passed away about a year before he completed his BA (Bachelor of Arts) in 1911. Following the family tradition of law, upheld by two preceding generations, Narharibhai decided to pursue a career in law. He enrolled in the Bachelor of Law program in Bombay, as it was the only city in the region offering this qualification at the time.

Marriage and Education

In 1906, at a young age Narharibhai was married to Maniben, the daughter of his father's friend Lallubhai Shah. Their marriage, arranged according to the customs of the time, became a strong partnership that would endure through many trials and triumphs. When Narharibhai decided to move to Bombay (now Mumbai) to pursue his law studies, it was agreed that Maniben would accompany him to manage their household. Coincidentally, two of Narharibhai's close friends, also pursuing law studies, moved to Bombay with their spouses around the same time. The three friends decided to share living arrangements to make their stay economical and practical. They rented a house from a gentleman in Santacruz at a nominal rent. To ease the financial burden of his studies and household expenses, Narharibhai sought employment while pursuing his law degree. He secured a position at the Asian Insurance Company, earning a monthly salary of 75 rupees.

Mahadevbhai was staying in the town of Parel. On way home from law college, both friends often got together on local trains. During the last term of second LLB, all these four friends moved together to a newly built Parvati Mansion nearby. In the final term, Narharibhai quit the job to focus on the exams. Mahadevbhai did the same. Maniben was sent back to Ahmedabad. Incidentally their common friend, Manubhai Mehta and his wife were in the same Parvati mansion. So, these two friends used to dine at Mehta residence.

Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai came so close to one another during this period that their bond was more sacred than blood relation. This phase of life in Bombay not only marked the culmination of their legal education but also solidified friendships

that would prove invaluable in the years to come, as they ventured into the greater mission of social reform and nation-building. Both their spouses also lived like two sisters for life. Three of their children (Mohan, Vanmala & Narayan) also lived like brothers and a sister.

By the end of 1913, Narharibhai successfully completed his law degree—LLB and returned to Ahmedabad, where he commenced his law practice. Meanwhile, Mahadevbhai was still exploring career options. Narharibhai persistently encouraged Mahadevbhai to relocate to Ahmedabad. Meanwhile Mahadevbhai's father was transferred to Ahmedabad as a principal of Mahalakshmi Women's Training College. This fortunate turn of events brought Mahadevbhai to Ahmedabad. Once again, both families settled close by and built their friendship stronger.

Both Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai shared an immense admiration for Bengali language and literature, especially the works of the renowned poet Rabindranath Tagore. They undertook a dedicated self-study of Bengali, collecting original Bengali books and their available English translations. Their fondest aspiration was to translate Tagore's Bengali literature into Gujarati. The two friends successfully translated at least three of his celebrated works into Gujarati. Their lives soon took a significant turn as they became deeply committed to the ideals and mission of Mahatma Gandhi.

During his college years, Narharibhai exhibited refined tastes in attire, fragrances, and food. His wardrobe included stylish pants and jackets and did not repeat same dress without dry-clean. However, in an era when dry-cleaning services were uncommon

and costly, Maniben devised a creative solution—she neatly folded his clothes, placed them under mattresses to flatten and freshen them, and then returned them to the cabinet. They carried on with this lifestyle until a remarkable transformation after joining Gandhi ashram.

Drinking tea was considered a sign of aristocracy during those times. Upon entering college in 1906, Narharibhai, along with his close friend Amrutlal, started preparing tea in their own little “tea club.” Ambalal Sarabhai and a few others soon joined them, and the group began experimenting with various types of tea. Ambalalbai, from the affluent Sarabhai family, introduced a particularly high-quality variety called “Stein tea”. Also, he generously took on the financial responsibility of paying for the dorm rent and tea club expenses.

After discovering ‘Stein tea,’ Narharibhai introduced it at home as well. Maniben, his wife, came from a merchant family with traditional customs, and serving tea to several guests throughout the day was quite unusual for her. In those days, the daily consumption of tea at their home was as much as five to six pounds. However, after joining Gandhi ashram, Narharibhai made the decision to give up tea. Despite this, his fondness for tea never fully faded. He occasionally enjoyed tea during his time at the ashram, particularly when he and Mahadevbhai would get together, either at Sabarmati or Sevagram. Tragically, after the demise of his dearest friend Mahadevbhai in 1942, Narharibhai gave up tea completely and never drank it again.

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Narharibhai’s very first case came from a mill factory owned by Lalbhai Trikamlal, and he earned a solid reputation from

successfully handling it. Mulchand Asharam, a leading lawyer of Ahmedabad, was closely connected with Narharibhai's uncle, Keshavlal Motilal. Recognizing Narharibhai's potential after his first case, Mulchand ji began assigning smaller cases to him. Narharibhai meticulously studied each case, delving into every detail and preparing briefs with remarkable writing skill. This earned him further respect in the legal community. Over time, renowned lawyers like Harilal Desai and Ramanbhai Nilkanth began entrusting him with more cases. As a result, Narharibhai's legal practice flourished, and he became increasingly proficient in the court system.

First Meeting with Mohandas Gandhi

In 1915, Gandhiji and Kasturba returned to India for good and settled in Ahmedabad. They stayed at the *Shantisadan* bungalow, which belonged to Sheth Ambalal Sarabhai. Along with a few lawyer friends from the Gujarat Club, Narharibhai went to meet Gandhiji. Somalal Doshi introduced him as the nephew of Jethalal Parikh, who was based in England. Jethalal had assisted Gandhiji during his visit to London, where they met before Gandhiji's return to India. Gandhiji was pleased to meet Narharibhai and introduced him to Kasturba.

In April 1915, Gandhiji set up his ashram in a rented bungalow in Kochrab, a suburb of Ahmedabad. A few days later, Gandhiji drafted a manifesto outlining the objectives and regulations of the ashram. He invited friends in India to offer comments, critiques, and suggestions, including naming the ashram. Copies of the manifesto were circulated in Ahmedabad, including the Gujarat Club.

Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai read the manifesto and decided to send their response. Initially, they drafted their individual views, then consolidated them into a single letter, which they forwarded to Gandhiji. The letter included several critiques, such as concerns about potential disorder arising from the mandatory celibacy rule and the idea that practicing handicrafts might limit economic progress. They infused their academic wisdom into the letter and expressed a desire to meet Gandhiji in person rather than relying solely on written communication. However, after a few days without a response, they were disappointed and began to wonder if Gandhiji had deemed their letter insignificant.

Meanwhile, Gandhiji was scheduled to give a talk at Premabhai Hall in Ahmedabad. Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai attended the lecture and decided to follow Gandhiji afterward. Gandhiji, known for walking briskly, kept a fast pace, but eventually, the two friends caught up with him near Ellisbridge. They brought up their letter to him, and Gandhiji responded, “Yes, I remember that, and I had been planning to contact you for a meeting. If you have time, walk with me to my ashram, and we can discuss it.” Both friends were delighted and readily agreed to walk with him.

Gandhiji: “What do you two do?”

Response: “Practicing law”

Gandhiji: “Do you have the latest Indian Yearbook? I need to refer to some information”

Narharibhai: “I have one from the previous year but can get the latest one and send it to you.”

Gandhiji: “What kind of lawyer are you? When I used to shave like English people, I was using the latest razor.”

When they reached the ashram, Gandhiji retrieved their letter and began discussing it in detail. The conversation lasted for an hour and a half, and the two friends were so captivated by Gandhiji's articulate flow of words that they listened intently without interrupting. The discourse had a profound impact on both Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai. Afterward, they left the ashram around ten in the late evening, walking back in a light drizzle, lost in thought and reflecting on the depth of the conversation. By the time they reached Ellisbridge, Mahadevbhai broke the silence, saying, “Narhari, I feel like surrendering myself to the feet of this incredible person.” Narharibhai replied, “It would be our esteemed destiny if we could, but I cannot make any decision right

now.” They continued their walk in silence, eventually reaching their homes. This moment marked their first initiation, the first step in their journey to join Gandhiji and dedicate themselves to his noble ideals.

Narharibhai continued to visit Gandhiji on occasion, gradually learning valuable lessons about the unnecessary flattery of the British imperialists, the overemphasis on the English language, and the disregard for Gujarati. At that time, Gandhiji was still referred to as “Gandhi Saheb,” long before he became known as “Mahatma.”

Mahadevbhai eventually left Ahmedabad after being appointed as an inspector for the cooperative societies of Maharashtra. Meanwhile, Narharibhai increasingly visited the Gandhi ashram, much to the dismay of his family. They were unhappy with his growing interest in the ashram, as his law practice was flourishing, and he had responsibilities to care for the family and maintain their comfortable lifestyle. Feeling torn, Narharibhai decided he could not join the ashram until after his mother's passing, so as not to hurt her feelings.

Normally, Narharibhai would visit the ashram in the evenings after his visit to the Gujarat Club and attend the evening prayers. However, on one occasion, he went to the ashram in the morning and asked Gandhiji if he could be of any service, assuming he would be given a reading or translation assignment. Gandhiji, however, surprised him by responding, “Certainly, it's my time to hand-grind the grains. Do join me.” Narharibhai was shocked—he believed such tasks were meant for women, as he had always been served at home. Despite his discomfort, he couldn't deny Gandhiji and sat down to grind the grains. It was

awkward and painful work, and he developed warts on his palms from the task.

Maniben watched with confusion as Narharibhai's activities began to change. He started coming home late and spent most of his holidays at the ashram. The family members relied on her to bring him back to his senses, fearing that he might be heading down the path of becoming a monk. This added a great deal of burden on Maniben.

One day, she gathered the courage to confront Narharibhai. He explained everything to her in detail, describing his growing commitment to the ashram's ideals. To help her understand better, he took her along one day to the ashram. There, she observed with surprise that the men were engaged in various menial tasks—washing, cleaning, grinding grains. She couldn't quite grasp the ashram lifestyle but pondered that there must be a deeper philosophical purpose behind it, one that Narharibhai had clearly come to believe in.

Maniben met Kasturba and a few other women, who reassured her that Narharibhai was not on the path to becoming a monk. As a traditional housewife, she considered it her righteous duty to follow her husband. Maniben later narrated her experiences in detail in her chapter, which appears later in this book.

Ashram Calling—A Transformation

The imperial government had been transporting indentured Indian laborers to colonies like Africa and Fiji under a five-year mandatory labor agreement. This system was colloquially known as the '*Girmitya*' system. In 1912, Gopal Krishna Gokhale had appealed to the imperial legislature to end this practice, but the administration ignored his appeal. In 1916, when Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya reappealed, the government merely promised to address the issue at an appropriate time, but it did not allow a bill to be introduced in parliament.

Dissatisfied with this response, Gandhiji decided to take a stand. He announced that he would initiate a nationwide movement and, if necessary, exercise satyagraha (non-violent civil protest) to demand the immediate termination of the '*Girmitya*' system before 30th July 1917.

During the evening ashram prayers, Gandhiji spoke about his dialogues with the Viceroy and other leaders. Narharibhai, accompanied by elder Mohanlal Pandya, attended these prayer meetings. Both men pledged their willingness to go to jail as a result of the satyagraha protest. Narharibhai regularly wrote to his friend Mahadevbhai in Bombay, sharing the details of the ashram's proceedings. As a result of Gandhiji's firm stand, the Viceroy conceded and ended the '*Girmitya*' system before 30th July 1917.

In April 1917, Gandhiji was leading a protest against the exploitation of indigo farmers in Champaran, Bihar. He was issued a notice to leave the area, with the threat of prosecution if he did not comply. The night before, Gandhiji wrote letters to his associates, assigning different duties. In his letter to his nephew,

Maganlal Gandhi, he mentioned Narharibhai: “Consider Bhai Narhari as an ashram associate. He is a highly important part of my work in Ahmedabad.”

Narharibhai was overjoyed to read this letter from Maganlalbai. He had long desired to stay in Sabarmati ashram that summer and had already received permission from Gandhiji. Kaka Saheb (Dattatreya Balkrishna Kalelkar) and Professor Sakalchand Shah from Gujarat College were staying at the ashram at the time. Narharibhai joined the discussions on establishing a Rashtriya Shala (nationalist school) and contributed to the formation of its curriculum. On May 7th, 1917, the foundation for the school was laid. Narharibhai expressed his desire to join the school, and Maganlalbai assured him that he had Gandhiji's full support.

In that moment, Narharibhai resolved to join the ashram permanently, even before seeking permission from his family and relatives. He had doubts about how his decision would be received. His choice triggered significant turmoil within his family. Some relatives and colleagues were offended that they were not consulted, and some seniors encouraged him to reconsider. Only Dada Saheb (Ganesh Vasudev) Mavlankar was pleased with the decision and personally visited the ashram to congratulate Narharibhai.

Although both friends had been contemplating this decision for some time, Narharibhai was the first to turn this dream into reality. Mahadevbhai was overjoyed and made plans to visit his friend as soon as possible. At that time, Gandhiji was at the ashram and had written a pamphlet explaining his philosophy of satyagraha. He entrusted these two friends with the task of

translating it into English. Mahadevbhai's insight during their linguistic discussions on the pamphlet impressed Gandhiji.

During the Champaran district trial in 1917, Gandhiji invited Narharibhai and Maniben to join him in Champaran. Mahadevbhai and Durgaben also accompanied them. From that point until his death in 1942, Mahadevbhai remained unwaveringly dedicated to Gandhiji. The two couples spent several days with Gandhiji during this period. Subsequently, Gandhiji left for the Calcutta Congress session, with Mahadevbhai accompanying him, while Narharibhai and Maniben returned to Sabarmati ashram.

Back at the ashram, Narharibhai and Maniben focused their efforts on the *Rashtriya Shala* (nationalist school) alongside Kaka Saheb and Kishorlalbai (Mashruwala). The school was an innovative experiment in education, and the teachers involved brought their unique ideas for reforming the system. They engaged in regular discussions with Gandhiji to refine their approaches and ensure alignment with his vision.

Maniben took charge of a student dormitory, which was a completely new experience for her. Despite her initial unfamiliarity, her enthusiasm and dedication shone through as she embraced the role, continuously learning and finding ways to improve the living and learning environment for the students.

The teachers' residence was situated across the road from the ashram. It consisted of a very simple chawl, a series of small and modest rooms. Kaka Saheb, Kishorlalbai, Pandit Khare, Narharibhai, and Mahadevbhai lived there together, embracing a life of simplicity and high moral standards. Their evenings were often filled with music, art, literary discussions, and, notably, a

variety of humor. Gandhiji himself was known for blending humor with serious issues, a characteristic that left a lasting impression on those around him. The ashram's guiding principle, "simple living and high thinking," defined their daily lives, though to the neighboring community, the ashramites appeared as peculiar and eccentric individuals.

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Chhaganlal Joshi, one of the prominent Gandhian, shared his impressions of Narharibhai and life at the ashram:

"When I first visited the satyagraha ashram, I saw Narharibhai carrying two buckets of water from the Sabarmati River on his shoulders. My elder brother had introduced him as a well-educated scholar. I was pleasantly surprised to see that, despite holding a Bachelor's and LLB degree, Narharibhai engaged in physical labor and worked as a primary school teacher. This inspired me to adopt such a life."

"With the non-cooperation movement gaining momentum, I quit my postgraduate studies and joined the Gandhi ashram. There, I received abundant support and warmth from Narharibhai. He and Maniben lived in the ashram as a couple, and their daughter Vanmala was born shortly after I arrived. This dispelled my assumption that family life was incompatible with the ashram environment. From Narharibhai, I learned not only how to teach in the school but also how to maintain cleanliness, wash clothes, and embrace a minimalist lifestyle. He even washed Maniben's clothes, cleaned toilets, and did labor work in the ashram fields."

"I believed that tasks like cleaning and bathing children were the sole responsibility of mothers. It was enlightening to see

Narharibhai perform these chores with such grace, showing me that such work was not menial but noble and could be done with dignity and purpose.”

In April 1919, Gandhiji took charge of the weekly journal *Young India*, and in September of the same year, he assumed responsibility for the *Navajivan* newspaper. Swami Anand, a Gujarati monk with remarkable expertise in editing and printing periodicals, was well-known among scholars in Maharashtra for his skill in this field. Recognizing Swami Anand's capabilities, Gandhiji invited him to the ashram and entrusted him with the management of these two influential periodicals.

Swami Anand, in turn, invited a few trusted and capable colleagues to assist him. One of them was Jugatram Dave. Together, Swami Anand and Jugatrambhai worked tirelessly, dedicating long hours to printing *Navajivan* and *Young India* and ensuring their distribution across the country. Gandhiji's writings, often filled with fierce criticism of imperialism, resonated deeply with the nation, stirring people into action.

Over time, Jugatrambhai became increasingly drawn to the educational endeavors of Kaka Saheb, Kishorlalbhai, and Narharibhai. Their work in reforming education aligned more closely with his personal aspirations. Gradually, he transitioned out of his responsibilities with *Navajivan* and joined the *Rashtriya Shala* (nationalistic school) as a teacher, contributing to its growth and mission.

Moving to South Gujarat for Social Reform

The year 1920 witnessed widespread non-cooperative movements, including boycotting and burning foreign textiles. At the Congress session held in Nagpur, a grand strategy for non-cooperation was proclaimed. The plan included enrolling ten million members into the Congress, raising ten million rupees for the Tilak Freedom Fund, and introducing 100,000 spinning wheels to mobilize the masses and prepare them for a large-scale non-cooperative movement.

Following the non-cooperative movement of 1922, Gandhiji was sentenced to six years in prison. This event deeply affected the associates of the ashram. They questioned the sufficiency of staying in the ashram and running the school while not actively participating in the freedom struggle. Narharibhai, inspired by Gandhiji's vision of village uplift and reconstruction, resolved to dedicate himself to this cause. He decided to move to the small village of Sarbhon near Bardoli in the Surat District of Gujarat.

Narharibhai and Maniben began their new life under the shade of a large mango tree, as Sarbhon lacked proper housing. They constructed a small hut with metal sheets and set it up as their kitchen. Adjusting to this rural lifestyle was a challenging new experience. The villagers observed these educated city-dwellers with curiosity, as Narharibhai and Maniben dug toilet pits, plastered walls with mud, and assisted women in cooking.

Friends and colleagues from Ahmedabad frequently visited Narharibhai out of admiration and curiosity. With no prior intimation of these visits, Maniben often had to cook and serve meals on short notice. Meanwhile, their children, Vanmala and

Mohan, were still young and were raised in the simplicity of village life. Despite the hardships and limited resources, Maniben carried out her responsibilities with grace. Though she sometimes felt helpless when unable to provide adequately for her children, she never regretted the sacrifices made during those days.

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Sarbhon Ashram

After Narharibhai arrived in Sarbhon, several dedicated activists joined him in his mission to uplift the village and implement Gandhiji's vision of rural reconstruction. Chhaganlal Joshi, who had accompanied him from the Sabarmati ashram, became his first collaborator in this endeavor. Soon, more committed individuals were inspired to join the cause, including:

- Shankarlal Banker from Ahmedabad,
- Makanji Bhanabhai Desai from the village of Varad,
- Ishvarbhai Amin, a trainee at the Sabarmati ashram who held great admiration for Narharibhai,
- Uttamchand Shah, a recent graduate of Gujarat Vidyapeeth from Bharuch district,
- Dr. Tribhivandas Shah, also from Bharuch district, who provided medical services, and
- Chotubhai Desai, from a village near Sarbhon.

One notable addition to the team was Jugatram Dave, who had long yearned to serve in the villages. However, his work at *Navajivan* printing had kept him occupied, as Swami Anand was in jail at the time. When Swami Anand was released in 1923, Jugatram sought his permission and promptly joined Narharibhai in Sarbhon.

With Narharibhai and this team of Gandhians, Sarbhon ashram became a vibrant hub of reconstructive programs. The activists lived together like an extended family, sharing responsibilities and creating a sense of community.

The younger members—Uttamchandbhai, Chotubhai, and Ishvarbhai—assisted Maniben with cooking and daily chores. They even entertained her children, Vanmala and Mohan, often carrying them on their shoulders and playing with them. These three were like Maniben’s eldest sons and remained close to her throughout her life.

Maniben played a significant role in fostering relationships within the group. She arranged Ishvarbhai’s wedding, supported the young couple in their early days, and eventually helped them settle independently.

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Near the Sarbhon ashram lived a tribal community, considered lower cast farm laborers, also called *Halpati* (cultivators) in Gujarati. They were tillers of the farmland but were treated like slaves by the farmers who owned the real estate. These tribals labored on the fields during the day but remained intoxicated and often misbehaved in the evenings. Narharibhai decided to visit the community and teach them basic literacy. Young members of the community were amused by this offer and enjoyed studying the alphabet and then chanting *Bhajans* till late hours. They even carried alphabet books with them to the fields during the daytime. This annoyed and angered their landlords, who feared a revolt if the laborers became educated and aware of

their slavery. They forced the laborers not to attend literacy school.

These landlord farmers who used to visit the ashram and participated in games and evening prayers, were now angry with the ashram community. They stopped visiting and fiercely protested educating the laborers. They even stopped supplying milk and other goods to the ashram. Narharibhai and the team ignored the protest and continued their mission. The landlords started threatening the tribals, returned the teaching aids to the ashram and ultimately the evening school was abandoned.

Narharibhai met leaders of the village and tried to convince them that their treatment of the tribal community was not fair. But farmers did not concede since it was against their advantage. Narharibhai went on fast against this harmless literacy program. ashram colleagues were in turmoil. Maniben, who was still adjusting to this uncharted territory, the fast of Narharibhai was unbearable for her. Though she had vowed to follow him every step of the way, she was clueless about the outcome.

The entire village was in an uproar, struggling to comprehend why someone would undertake a fast over what they considered a trivial matter. Despite the growing tension, the landlords remained steadfast in their position, prioritizing their self-interest above all else.

Narharibhai's associates and friends from across Gujarat sent him letters expressing their concerns. Among them was Rajaji (C. Rajagopalachari), who sent a telegram urging, "A fast may not be justified against such an age-old tradition. Please give up your fast."

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel recognized that this delicate situation could not be resolved through mere letters or telegrams. On the seventh day of the fast, he personally traveled to Sarbhon to intervene. When confronted by Sardar, the landlords offered a weak excuse, claiming that while some may have complained, they had not actively opposed the literacy school.

Ashamed in the presence of Sardar Vallabhbhai, the landlords reluctantly gave a false promise to refrain from resisting the school. This marked the end of Narharibhai's fast. However, the damage had already been done. Disheartened by the opposition and conflict, the laborer caste never returned to the school.

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Narharibhai sent the following appeal to the villagers and others in Bardoli Taluk (a subdivision of a district):

“For the past few months, we have tried our utmost in providing social services in this area. However, a recent incident has provoked anger among neighboring farmers. While this may seem like a local matter, I consider it important to share the details with you.”

“Our efforts began with *Khadi*-related initiatives in the region. During this time, we discovered that many young people from the laborer caste were eager to achieve basic literacy. To support them, we started teaching the alphabet and foundational mathematics, with the goal of helping them overcome their current challenges. We strongly believe that the upliftment of the laborer community will bring benefits to the society as a whole.”

“Initially, we had a cordial relationship with the landlords of neighboring towns, and we did not expect them to oppose these efforts. Unfortunately, their hostility grew, and despite our best efforts, we were unable to gain their trust or address their concerns. We remain steadfast in our mission and hope to resolve these issues through dialogue and mutual understanding. Your support and cooperation are vital to this cause.”

Narharibhai wrote a personal letter to a couple of local leaders at length explaining Gandhi philosophy, their rural uplift endeavors in the Bardoli area, benefits of basic literacy and uplifting lower class. Ultimately their presence in the area made a lasting impact on the landlords and laboring class.

Gandhiji underwent appendicitis surgery and was resting in Sasun hospital at Pune. He sent Mahadevbhai to Sarbhon since he was concerned with the hostilities between Narharibhai and local landlords. Mahadevbhai circulated this statement:

“I came here on Saturday, the 16th of February 1924, and studied the situation carefully by speaking with the locals and my brother Narharibhai. I sensed the gravity of the conflict and felt it was imperative to seek guidance from Gandhiji directly. On Sunday, the very next day, I traveled to Pune and apprised Gandhiji of the developments in Sarbhon and the hostilities between Narharibhai and the local landlords. From his recovery bed, with shaky hands, he has sent this message:

“To people of Sarbhon and Bardoli area:

The Bardoli area holds a special place in my heart. It is here that I envisioned an ideal of collective self-reliance and harmony. Any discord, particularly involving my dear associate Narharibhai, pains me greatly. I am reminded of a promise that

your representatives made to me when I was visiting Bardoli. They were determined for non-violent, non-cooperative struggle and had vowed to treat equally the poor and lower cast community, not to exploit them but to support them as necessary and educate them. Moreover, I am reminding you that this is our moral fight, and our ultimate goal is welfare and upliftment of all including the lower cast communities. May God help you in fulfilling the vow we have taken.

Pune
Sunday

Your servant,
Mohandas Gandhi”

“I have nothing more to add after this appeal from Gandhiji. This is an internal matter. Bhai Narhari has earned your respect by staying here with you over the last eight months. You could not stomach him educating the laborers in their spare time. Narhari went on fast since you started mistreating the laborers. His intentions are pure, is trying to appeal to your conscious and to make amends. I pray that you realize the truth and support bhai Narhari in his efforts.

Swaraj Ashram, Sarbhon
19th February 1924

Your servant,
Mahadev Haribhai Desai”

Several associates and well-wishers, including Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, Kishorlalbhai Mashruwala, Darbar Gopaldas Desai, Mohanlal Pandya, and others, sent heartfelt and supportive messages to Narharibhai during this challenging time. These notes were not only a testament to their unwavering trust in Narharibhai’s mission but also a source of immense encouragement for him and his family.

Narharibhai had been in Sarbhon for about a year, but he and his colleagues struggled to earn the full trust of the local community. In this context, his decision to fast appeared premature, a sentiment shared by both Gandhiji and Narharibhai himself. To address the situation, Narharibhai wrote a detailed letter to Gandhiji, outlining the challenges faced by the tribal community and the measures he had taken to combat their exploitation.

A few days later, Narharibhai, accompanied by Maniben, traveled to Pune to meet Gandhiji. During their visit, they engaged in extensive discussions about strategies to effectively approach both landlords and the tribal community.

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Back in Sarbhon, Vanu and Mohan contracted smallpox. At the time, the smallpox vaccine was produced using antibodies extracted from cow or calf serum, a practice Gandhiji opposed due to his stance against violence toward animals. As a result, children in the ashram were not vaccinated against smallpox. The parents turned to alternative treatments, relying on neem leaves and natural antibiotics. After enduring rigorous and painful care, the children recovered within two weeks.

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From their experiences in the Sarbhon-Bardoli area, Narharibhai and his colleagues recognized that improving the education system in Surat District required a focused effort on the tribal community. Jugatrambhai explored the surrounding regions and devised a plan to establish a school for a marginalized

community, which he referred to as *Raniparaj*—a term later popularized by Gandhiji.

Bardoli was identified as an ideal location for the school. In 1925, Jugatrambhai, along with 10 students from the Sarbhon ashram, established the school in Bardoli. Uttamchand Shah and Chhaganlal Joshi from Sarbhon ashram also joined the initiative, contributing to its development.

Meanwhile, the Patidar ashram in Surat was managing a *Rashtriya Shala* (nationalist school), but its administration was in disarray. The school requested Narharibhai's assistance in reorganizing its operations. He traveled to Surat and successfully accomplished the task, bringing much-needed structure to the institution.

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Gujarati Dictionary—*Jodni Kosh*

At the time, there was no standardized practice for spelling Gujarati words. To address this, Gujarat Vidyapeeth decided to compile a comprehensive Gujarati dictionary. Narharibhai from Surat sent a detailed letter to Kaka Saheb, outlining a set of guidelines for the project. In response, Kaka Saheb wrote:

“I will pass on your guidelines to Chandulal Patel. For professional and traditional terms, we will need input from a broader community. Some scholars may not agree with our proposed spelling rules, but we must engage with them, present our reasoning, and strive to gain their consensus. It is crucial to prepare the dictionary with minimal controversy over the rules. Who else but you can take on this responsibility? I do wonder how you will find time for such a task. If Vidyapeeth could take over

the book committee's efforts and if *Navajivan* publishes the dictionary, we will achieve our goal.”

Narharibhai made significant progress on the Gujarati dictionary, but convincing some scholars about the spelling of certain words proved to be a major challenge. Moreover, with his other commitments, it was clear that this monumental task required collective effort. With contributions from his colleagues at Gujarat Vidyapeeth, the dictionary was eventually completed and published in 1928. Fortunately, the scholars and community agreed to adopt a unified spelling system for Gujarati.

On the first page of the dictionary, Gandhiji wrote: “From now onwards, no one has the right to spell Gujarati as they wish.”

Bardoli Satyagraha

In 1927, Gujarat faced an unprecedented flood, with 70 inches of rain falling in a short period. All the rivers overflowed, flooding nearby villages and destroying crops. The villages, mostly made up of mud-plastered houses, suffered widespread collapse. All essential services like railways and mail were disrupted. The scale of the tragedy was beyond anyone's imagination.

Sardar Patel took charge of the rescue mission, quickly identifying volunteers from the affected areas. After taking Maniben and the children to Sabarmati ashram for safety, Narharibhai reached Matar Taluk, the hardest-hit area, and set up a volunteer camp. Some regions could only be accessed by swimming, and Narharibhai's swimming skills proved invaluable in navigating the floodwaters.

While supplies poured in from various places, distributing essentials to those in need remained a colossal challenge. However, with Sardar Patel's leadership and the tireless efforts of the volunteer teams, the rescue mission was ultimately successful.

Gandhiji was unwell and was in Bangalore during the calamity in Gujarat. Concerned, he asked Sardar if he should come to Gujarat. However, Sardar assured him that this was a test of their capabilities. Gandhiji continued to console the people of Gujarat by writing in *Navajivan*.

The Imperial government had appointed Mr. Garret to lead the recovery committee. He came into close contact with the Gandhian workers and, contrary to the common belief among British officers, was impressed by their cooperative spirit and

exceptional service. He asked Sardar if the government could honor the volunteers with awards. Sardar, with a laugh, responded, “My colleagues and volunteers perform these services without any desire for personal gain or recognition. They would stay far away from your medals!”

Through their selfless efforts, Sardar and his colleagues earned the admiration and affection of the community. While Gujarat had faced calamities before, the scale and effectiveness of the rescue efforts this time were unparalleled and exemplary. This tragedy set a new standard of volunteerism for future disaster relief efforts.

Right after the devastating flooding in Gujarat, the stage was set for the Bardoli Satyagraha. The British government typically reviewed and adjusted land revenue rates for farmers every 30 years. Although they had been cautious about making changes due to Gandhiji’s influence, this time they imposed a 66% increase in the land revenue on Bardoli and the surrounding Taluks. The British assumed that the farmers would accept this hike without protest.

However, the farmers, instead of accepting the increase, approached Sardar Patel for guidance. This led to the birth of a large-scale revolt under his leadership, protesting the land revenue hike. The history of the Bardoli Satyagraha is well-known; ultimately, the government conceded, marking a victory for the farmers. It was through this struggle that Vallabhbhai was given the title “Sardar.”

A review committee was established to decide the new land revenue rates, and Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai were appointed to present the farmers' case. The government officials were

astonished by the documents and supporting evidence presented by these two lawyers. The income-expense reports prepared by Narharibhai, detailing the farmers' financial situation, were particularly convincing and were later referred to as the "Parikh Unit" by the British officers. The report submitted by the British officers to the government highlighted the cooperation of the local community and included high praise for the invaluable assistance provided by Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai.

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After completing the Bardoli mission, Narharibhai returned to Ahmedabad and assumed the role of the registrar at Gujarat Vidyapeeth, where Kaka Saheb Kalelkar served as Vice-Chancellor. Their friendship, which had started during their early days at Gandhi ashram, only grew stronger over time. Students at Vidyapeeth were drawn to Kaka Saheb's innovative and revolutionary educational ideas. Narharibhai, too, was immensely popular among students for his administrative expertise and his natural ability to connect with them through his humor and approachable attitude.

The Vidyapeeth thrived as a hub of energy and innovation, with dedicated teachers experimenting with novel educational methods and students who had abandoned conventional government education, driven by a passion to contribute to the country's progress.

Let us understand how the students felt about Narharibhai through a heartfelt tribute by former student Kapilrai Mehta, written after Narharibhai's passing:

“The dawn of March 11, 1930, was charged with an unusual excitement. Four teachers and 16 students from Vidyapeeth were ready and eager to join the historic march. March 12, the day Gandhiji chose to commence the Dandi March, stands as a golden day in the history of India’s freedom struggle. The atmosphere was electric, brimming with fervor and anticipation. Thousands of visitors flocked to the ashram, feeling blessed to attend Gandhiji’s prayer meetings.”

“I am overwhelmed with emotion as I recount those moments. Narharibhai’s wife, Maniben, blessed each marching student with motherly affection. Kaka Saheb, Narharibhai, and other teachers watched with pride and joy as we bowed to seek their blessings. I will never forget the sight of Narharibhai’s eyes welling up with emotions. He gave me a heartfelt hug. Even today, the memory of the affectionate blessings of that couple fills me with reverence.”

“We students felt so at home at Vidyapeeth that we never felt the absence of our own families. The warmth and affection of Kaka Saheb and Narharibhai made us feel like a close-knit family. Narharibhai lived in a modest housing near our dormitory. His simple yet dignified lifestyle was an inspiration to us. His life was like an open book; he shared personal experiences with us openly, guiding us with practical life lessons that were invaluable.”

“Despite being the registrar, Narharibhai did not employ servants for household chores. In 1929, when Maniben fell ill, he personally handled all the household responsibilities. He would come to the well to bathe, clean his children, and wash the family’s clothes. It was an eye-opening experience for us students. With his usual humor and honesty, he would say, ‘What’s

surprising about this? She washes my clothes every day; washing hers during her illness is my duty and perfectly normal.’

“We students would at least help him fetch water from the well. He was entirely unbothered by what anyone might think or say about him. His humility, honesty, and loyalty were unwavering. The ideals of the ashram life that he embodied were incredibly high. His strong familial bond and selflessness taught us invaluable life lessons.”

Narharibhai’s magnetic sense of humor drew everyone to him. He loved sharing amusing anecdotes and would laugh heartily with us, filling the ashram with joy. I vividly recall him recounting humorous incidents involving the diverse visitors who came to stay.

“Beyond his humor, Narharibhai was deeply committed to education. He eagerly imparted life lessons to students, encouraging them to expand their horizons. A well-read and knowledgeable man, he devoted himself to reading and writing late into the nights, often by the glow of a lantern. He would read aloud to his children at bedtime, nurturing their love for knowledge. His insatiable curiosity and wide-ranging interests were truly inspiring.”

“Gandhiji’s concept of economics was unconventional and vastly different from traditional practices. Narharibhai deeply understood Gandhi’s philosophy, earning him the reputation of a Gandhian economist. He authored the significant volume *Manav Artha Shastra* (economics for human welfare), published in 1945. The volume proposes a human-first economic model that integrates ethics, sustainability and inclusive growth. The foundation of this work was laid years earlier when he guided us

in Bardoli Taluk to conduct a survey of village economies. Through this exercise, Narharibhai transformed raw statistical data into meaningful insights, helping us comprehend the stark reality of poverty on a deeply personal level. We came to understand why the impoverished tribal communities often found it difficult to trust the white-collar elite. At the same time, Narharibhai taught us to appreciate the simple yet profound lives of villagers.”

“The survey required intense physical effort, but Narharibhai’s humor and fatherly approach made the experience rewarding. It was through his vision that we were introduced to the essence of village life and the tribal communities, giving us a new perspective on humanity and economics.”

“The memories of Narharibhai—selfless, courteous, and ever-humorous—will remain etched in my heart and in the hearts of many others. His guidance and affection continued to touch my life even 28 years after I graduated. I feel incredibly fortunate to have been his student and end this tribute with my deepest respect and humble obeisance to the revered Narharibhai.”

Progress of Children—Mohan and Vanmala

The children, Vanu (Vanmala) and Mohan, were reaching school age. During their time in Sarbhon, Vanu had already learned to read and write under the guidance of Jugatrambhai. She had even memorized a collection of his poems. Back at Sabarmati ashram, she began attending primary school at the Vidyapeeth.

Mohan, however, showed little interest in formal schooling. Instead, he was captivated by the practical world around him, often observing carpenters and blacksmiths at work. The family could not quite understand what drew him to these activities, but his fascination was undeniable. At home, Mohan's curiosity took a mechanical turn. He loved dismantling toys and gadgets to study their mechanisms.

On one occasion, Narharibhai gave him a non-functioning box clock. To Mohan, it was like discovering a hidden treasure. He eagerly took it apart, carefully studying all the wheels and springs inside. For an entire week, he remained engrossed in this project, his passion for understanding how things worked evident in every moment he spent with the clock.

Narharibhai discussed Mohan's situation with Kaka Saheb, who advised letting Mohan explore his interests and develop hands-on skills rather than forcing him into formal schooling. Taking this advice, Narharibhai provided Mohan with a set of basic carpentry tools. Mohan enthusiastically spent his days attending carpentry classes at the Vidyapeeth, trying his hands on different processes. He spent only a year in primary school before pursuing practical learning opportunities.

Mohan dedicated two years to improving mechanical skills at a technical school in Ahmedabad and also studied drawing under the guidance of the noted artist Ravishankar Raval. Later, he received training from Lakshmidas Asar in the ashram workshop, where he mastered the art of making spinning and weaving equipment. He also learned the process of producing handmade paper and eventually set up a production unit, *Kalamkhush*, in the ashram. Through these experiences, Mohan acquired a wide range of expertise in cottage industries, perfectly aligning with Gandhian philosophy.

In 1947, Mohan and Narayan Mahadev Desai joined Jugatrambhai at the Vedchhi ashram, where they began experimenting with basic education. After five years, Narayan became involved in Acharya Vinoba Bhave's *Bhoodan* movement, while Mohan moved to Bardoli to accompany Narharibhai, whose health was deteriorating.

In Bardoli, Mohan established a post-basic education school with a small group of students. Inspired by the *Bhoodan* movement, which had facilitated land donations to small-scale farmers, Mohan recognized a pressing need to improve agricultural hand tools. At the time, small farmers relied on outdated and inefficient tools. Determined to address this, Mohan began designing and developing improved and efficient tools tailored to their needs. To enhance his expertise, he traveled to Japan and studied advanced hand tool technology.

Mohan eventually established a workshop for producing a range of hand tools and later expanded to include bullock-driven equipment. This workshop evolved into a formal training-production institution named *Yantra Vidyalaya* (Agricultural

Tools Research Center). He also founded a printing school called *Suruchi* (High Taste) to train rural tribal youth in the modern skills of composing and printing. Both institutions became financially self-sufficient, embodying Gandhian ideals of self-reliance and community upliftment.

Vanmala (Vanu), on the other hand, pursued formal education up to matriculation and cultivated a deep interest in literature and poetry from a young age. She gained volunteer experience during the 1936 National Congress session and studied Gujarati literature under Nagindas Parekh and Urdu under Shri Qureshi at Sabarmati ashram. A staunch freedom fighter, she was jailed four times during 1941 and 1942.

Vanmala's literary contributions were significant. She translated the biography of Prophet Muhammad, authored *Amara Ba* (the story of Kasturba), and produced abridged editions of Dr. Rajendra Prasad's biography and *Satyagraha in South Africa*. She also translated Mirabeau's (Madeleine Slade) English biography into Gujarati. Later, Vanmala married Mahendra Valaji Desai, continuing her journey of literary and social contributions.

Dharasana Satyagraha

At the start of Dandi Salt March, Gandhiji assigned publishing *Navajivan* to Imam Saheb (Abdul Kadir Bavazeer) and Narharibhai. He wrote to Narharibhai en route to Dandi:

“Dear Narhari,

Do not insist Imam Saheb to come to *Navajivan* office. Have you thought of an alternative if his health deteriorates further and cannot attend to *Navajivan*? It seems that you will have to take over responsibilities. Take a decision as you think it fit since I am not up to date with ashram’s current situation.

Blessings from Bapu”

When Gandhiji decided to undertake the Dharasana satyagraha in 1930, Narharibhai sought his permission to participate. Gandhiji replied, “For now, a few of us must refrain from direct confrontation and sacrifice. Your assistance to Imam Saheb is more valuable at this moment. If needed, I will certainly call upon you.”

During Gandhiji’s imprisonment, Narharibhai continued contributing articles to *Navajivan*. True to his characteristic balance of criticism and appreciation, Gandhiji wrote to Narharibhai from jail, saying, “I observe that your incisive thoughts are at their best, dancing through your writings on the pages of *Navajivan*. My confinement in jail has so many advantages!”

When Gandhiji decided to lead the Dharasana satyagraha to challenge the British monopoly on salt, the strategy was to send successive teams of protesters as earlier groups were arrested. After Abbas Tayyabji and Sarojini Naidu were detained, Imam

Saheb and Narharibhai arrived to continue the protest. The scene was historic: Imam Saheb led the march, followed by three resolute young leaders—Manilal Gandhi, Narharibhai, and Pyarelal Nayyar—and a determined group of 1,500 *khadi*-clad volunteers. They were prepared to face violent police assaults with steadfast non-violence.

As the marchers approached, the police arrested Imam Saheb and unleashed a brutal baton charge on the volunteers. Under the scorching May heat, many fell into roadside trenches, their heads and faces covered with blood. Red Cross volunteers, doctors, and local women worked tirelessly to tend to the injured, but the sheer number of casualties overwhelmed them.

Manilal Gandhi was arrested after suffering severe blows. Narharibhai, undeterred, stepped forward with the other marchers. The police charged at him, mercilessly striking his back, hands, and head with batons. Despite the volunteers' efforts to shield him, Narharibhai's blood-soaked body collapsed into a trench. Dr. Bhaskar Patel rushed to him and found his deep wounds contaminated with dirty, salty water. Without the doctor's immediate first-aid, Narharibhai might not have survived.

The following day, the district magistrate visited Narharibhai and threatened to dismantle the satyagraha camp if the protest did not cease. Narharibhai firmly responded that they would not leave as long as volunteers continued to arrive willingly. He issued a public statement urging the protesters to persist and face the police brutality with unwavering non-violence.

On May 23rd, police officers raided the satyagraha camp, searching for documents, before arresting Narharibhai. Filled with pride, he saw his arrest as a culmination of his unyielding

leadership in the protest. The volunteers fell at his feet, but he embraced them warmly. Together, they sang Gandhiji's beloved Gujarati bhajan, "*Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye*" which describes the virtues of an ideal human being.

In court, Narharibhai made a powerful statement about the Dharasana satyagraha:

"It has been the common practice of the government to arrest leaders and harass our volunteers. With God's grace, all protesters maintained the spirit of non-violence. I do not see our inability to produce salt in Dharasana as a defeat. In the path of satyagraha, there is no victory or loss. Our sacrifice is our success. We hope that our collective sacrifice will touch the hearts of the police and the British administration. The sacrifices witnessed at Dharasana will inspire continued action elsewhere, and, in time, either the government's stance will change, or it will perish."

A journalist from *The New Freeman* who came to witness the Dharasana satyagraha reported:

"I have worked as a reporter in 22 countries over the past 18 years, covering all kinds of unrest, protests, and street fights. But I have never witnessed anything as heart-wrenching as Dharasana events. At times, the scenes were so painful to watch that I had to turn away. What struck me the most was the astonishing discipline of the protesting volunteers. They embodied the true non-violent spirit of Gandhi in a way I had never seen before."

Freedom Movement Intensified

Gandhiji intentionally excluded women from participating in the Dandi Salt March, as he was carefully considering a suitable course of action for their involvement. He eventually devised a plan for women to lead protests by picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops. Recognizing the immense patience, courage, and caution required for these tasks, Gandhiji entrusted women with this responsibility. He believed women were naturally equipped for such challenges, whereas men might grow restless or lose composure during long hours of picketing and verbal confrontations with shopkeepers and customers. When Gandhiji presented the idea to the women of the ashram, they willingly agreed to take part.

Near Sabarmati railway station was a small town called Ramnagar, home to railway workers. At the time, the railways predominantly employed Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Parsis, many of whom frequented a nearby liquor shop. They were the regular customers and often caused disturbances after drinking, becoming a nuisance to the local community. A well-known resident of Ramnagar approached Narharibhai with a request to send Maniben to picket the liquor shop. He assured Narharibhai that he would keep a watchful eye on Maniben, as no other woman dared to go to such a socially unsafe location. With Narharibhai away, participating in the Dharasana satyagraha, Maniben took up the task, leaving Vanmala and Mohan under the care of Durgaben.

The liquor shop owner was initially startled to see a respectable young ashram woman picketing in front of his establishment. A shrewd businessman, he tried to manipulate Maniben with flattery and sweet talk. Being inexperienced in such

situations, it took Maniben a couple of days to realize that customers were entering the shop through a back door to bypass her protest. In response, two or three young volunteers were assigned to support her during the day. At night, after completing her protest duties, she stayed with a nearby widow for safety.

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After about ten days, troubling news reached Maniben: protesters at Dharasana had been brutally beaten and arrested. Concerned, she asked the young volunteers to visit the Congress House for updates. They returned with an unverified rumor that Narharibhai had succumbed to police violence. This rumor stemmed from a passerby who had seen Narharibhai unconscious and mistakenly assumed he had died.

One could only guess the mental turmoil of Maniben. Yet, she remained steadfast to her picketing duty, embodying the true spirit of Gandhiji's *ahimsa*—an expression of infinite love and an infinite capacity of suffering. She sent an urgent plea to the ashram to confirm the condition of Narharibhai. She asked Vanmala to stay with her as a consolation. After 3~4 days Durgaben went to her with the update that Narharibhai had survived brutal baton lashes and was taken to Nasik jail. She described to her friend how she spent these few days in torment and then broke loose sobbing hard. She demonstrated a living embodiment of self-sacrifice.

After being relieved to hear of Narharibhai's condition, Maniben, along with Vanu and Mohan, traveled to Nasik jail to see him. The sight of Narharibhai shockingly moved them—all three broke down upon seeing him wrapped in bandages on his head, hands, and feet. Dressed in a scanty jail uniform and limping

with the support of a police officer, Narharibhai's frail condition was heart-wrenching.

The jailer, showing kindness, allowed them a daily half-hour visit for one week. It was their first time in Nasik, and they knew no one in the town, but they managed to find accommodation and visited Narharibhai each day.

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Finally, under the terms of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, Narharibhai and other imprisoned protesters were released. After approximately ten months of detention, Narharibhai returned to the Sabarmati ashram.

The Gandhi-Irwin Pact was a significant step toward initiating dialogue on India's independence with British diplomats. Unfortunately, the British diplomats failed to exhibit even the slightest goodwill that had inspired Gandhiji and Lord Irwin to pursue the pact. Despite Gandhiji's and other national leaders' relentless efforts, the agreement ultimately failed to produce meaningful results.

The 1931 Round Table Conference in London failed to achieve any significant results, leaving the political climate in India greatly disheartened. The British government tightened its grip, refusing to allow Gandhiji and other leaders to convene and strategize. Shortly after Gandhiji's return from London, he, Sardar Patel, and several other nationalist leaders were arrested. Public meetings and protests were strictly banned, often met with violent suppression. Congress offices, ashrams, and volunteer camps were shut down, effectively paralyzing the freedom movement.

Kaka Saheb, Narharibhai, and Prabhudas Gandhi—son of Gandhiji’s nephew Chhaganlal Gandhi—were imprisoned in Belgaum jail in Karnataka. They were held in cells alongside common criminals, treated as such, and forbidden from meeting each other. When Narharibhai protested the inhumane treatment of a fellow political prisoner, he faced severe punishment. He was confined to a pitch-dark cell without doors or windows for eight days. During this time, he was given only two meals per day, allowed a single bathroom break, and forced to wear coarse gunny sack clothing while performing laborious tasks.

Gandhiji was deeply distressed upon learning of the physical torture inflicted on Narharibhai. He wrote a formal plea to the inspector general of the jail, condemning the harsh treatment.

The cumulative toll of the brutal blows Narharibhai endured during the Dharasana protest, ten months of imprisonment in Nasik, and the physical torment in Belgaum jail severely affected his health. By the time of his release, Narharibhai had lost a significant amount of weight, and his skin had darkened so much from malnutrition and harsh conditions that he was nearly unrecognizable.

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Between 1930 and 1934, Narharibhai spent more days in prison than in the Sabarmati ashram. When Gandhiji departed the ashram to lead the Dandi March, the responsibility of managing the ashram fell to his nephew, Narandas Gandhi, while the children’s school was overseen by Premaben Kantik, a devoted follower of Gandhiji. With most of the men imprisoned, the ashram was primarily left to the care of women and children.

Upon one of Narharibhai's temporary releases from prison, he was painfully moved by the rigid discipline imposed on the women and the heavy-handed treatment of the children in the ashram. Concerned, he engaged in an extended correspondence with Gandhiji, who was also imprisoned at the time, discussing the ashram's conditions and the strict disciplinary practices. Though they had different opinions and approaches to addressing the situation, Narharibhai's reverence for Gandhiji and Gandhiji's trust and affection for Narharibhai was strong as ever.

In one of his letters, Gandhiji wrote: *"I enjoy receiving your letters and spending time responding. You are close to my heart, and you are one of my closest associates."*

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After his release from jail, Gandhiji continued his relentless pursuit of freedom. Transitioning from collective protests, he initiated the concept of individual satyagraha (non-violent and non-cooperative freedom fight). The movement garnered widespread support, with people joining wholeheartedly. Meanwhile, the British government intensified its efforts to suppress the freedom struggle, confiscating protestors' land and cattle, sealing Congress offices and ashrams. However, they refrained from acting against the Gandhi ashram.

In honor of the sacrifices of countless individuals, Gandhiji felt it was no longer justifiable to maintain the ashram. In 1933, he made the difficult decision to dismantle it.

Narharibhai, frequently imprisoned since 1930, found his family life further disrupted in 1933 when Vanmala and Mohan were separated from Maniben, who also had willingly accepted

imprisonment as an individual *Satyagrahi*. From his jail cell, Narharibhai began writing letters to Vanmala, who was now entering adolescence. These letters were filled with guidance, caution, and advice tailored to a young girl navigating this critical stage of life.

Later, Gandhiji and Mahadevbhai Desai contributed their own notes to these letters. The collection was eventually published in Gujarati by Navajivan Publishers as a book titled *Kanya ne Patro* (Letters to a Teenage Girl).

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After a brief release, Narharibhai was arrested again in 1933 and sent to Visapur jail. The jail officers and police, impressed by the wisdom and demeanor of the political prisoners, treated them with a level of respect and decency.

One unintended benefit of imprisonment was the opportunity for literary and intellectual pursuits. Less educated prisoners gained valuable knowledge from their more learned counterparts, while the scholars—often pressed for time outside—used their confinement to focus on study, writing, and intellectual discussions. Study circles were formed, fostering intensive reading and creative writing.

This unique environment led to the creation of a wide range of classic literature within the confines of the jail. Remarkably, the population at large gained access to this rich body of work, which might never have been produced if these scholars had not been imprisoned.

Harijan Ashram

The government began releasing political prisoners in 1934, and Maniben was freed after serving a four-month term. Narharibhai was also released from Visapur jail. With the Sabarmati ashram having been dismantled earlier, its former residents were left without a home. Having renounced their families long ago, they had nowhere else to turn.

The Congress House in Ahmedabad, a two-story building, became a temporary refuge. The ground floor functioned as the Congress office, while the upper floor served as living quarters. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel arranged for Narharibhai, Maniben, and a few other close associates to stay on the upper floor temporarily. However, this stay was far from restful for Narharibhai and Maniben. Activists from across Gujarat, freshly released from jail, frequently visited the Congress House seeking guidance. Upon learning that Narharibhai was staying upstairs, many made it a point to visit him. Meanwhile, Maniben kept herself busy hosting and feeding these visitors.

With nationalist institutions like the Gujarat Vidyapeeth sealed by the government, Narharibhai found himself with fewer responsibilities. At Sardar Patel's suggestion, he ran for the Regional Congress Committee election. To his surprise, he won with the largest majority. This would be his first and only venture into electoral politics.

Sardar Patel hoped that Narharibhai would dedicate his efforts to the Committee, but Narharibhai politely explained his stance. He expressed his passion for the freedom struggle but emphasized that his heart lay in education and constructive work, rather than political involvement. Understanding Narharibhai's

disposition, Sardar respected his wishes and never asked him to engage in political activities again.

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After his early release from Yerawada jail, Gandhiji deemed it imprudent to continue satyagraha. He announced that he would act as if he were still in prison and refrain from further civil disobedience. Instead, he redirected his focus toward eradicating untouchability, traveling across the country to promote social reform.

Before commencing this mission, Gandhiji visited Ahmedabad and was deeply concerned about the deteriorating state of the Sabarmati ashram. He decided to hand over the premises to the *Harijan Sevak Sangh*, an organization dedicated to eradicating untouchability. *Harijan* (children of God) was name coined by Gandhiji for the community of *Dalits* (untouchables). Thakkar Bapa (Amritlal Thakkar), the organization's president, and Parikshital Majumdar, its secretary, took charge of the ashram and settled there.

Meanwhile, Narharibhai contemplated his next steps, as the Congress House accommodation was only temporary. Jannalal Bajaj invited him to Wardha in Maharashtra to take charge of a nationalist school. Although Gandhiji agreed to the proposal, he suspected that Narharibhai would be reluctant to leave Gujarat. During this time, Narharibhai engaged in discussions with Kaka Saheb, Kishorlalbai, and Maganbhai Desai about reviving Gujarat Vidyapeeth. They concluded that the mission should expand by sending teachers to villages to work on social upliftment and community service.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, after consulting with the group, wrote to Gandhiji:

“With your permission, we have decided to appoint Narhari as the head of the newly formed *Harijan ashram*. All expenses for Narhari and the teachers will be covered by the financial resources of the Vidyapeeth, so as not to burden the Harijan Sevak Sangh. I have discussed this arrangement with Thakkar Bapa and firmly believe that no one else can lead the Harijan ashram as effectively as Narhari. He has the potential to make tremendous progress with this mission.”

“I am aware that Narhari is capable of many more significant contributions, but I feel this is the ideal task for him at the present time. His heart is fully committed to this cause, and I am confident he will carry out this responsibility faithfully.”

After approximately six months at the Congress House, Narharibhai assumed the administration of the Harijan ashram. Under his leadership, the ashram was better organized, and its activities expanded significantly. When the Bardoli ashram was ceased, the workshop for producing cotton carding and spinning equipment for *Khadi* production was relocated to the Harijan ashram. This shift provided productive employment opportunities for the Harijan families residing there.

To further expand the activities of the *Harijan Sevak Sangh*, Narharibhai helped establish a dormitory for *Dalit* boys in the town of Godhra and a dormitory for *Dalit* girls at Sabarmati. His residence was situated next to the girls' dormitory. Since no suitable rector could be found for the girls' dormitory, Maniben stepped in to take charge. A primary school was also founded to provide education for the girls and the children of the ashram.

Gandhiji, writing from Wardha, emphasized the importance of broadening the ashram's initiatives. He suggested, “We need to introduce cows and incorporate leatherwork for managing dead cattle as part of the ashram's interests. Learning and practicing such crafts are essential for the ashram's growth.”

Under Narharibhai's guidance, the *Harijan* ashram became a hub of activity. His lofty mission was not only to uplift underprivileged, who had faced generations of systemic repression and persecution, but also to empower and train younger generations in various skills and crafts. Narharibhai and his colleagues faced unimaginable issues as they worked tirelessly to uplift this community. Deep-rooted societal prejudices and resistance to change made their mission extraordinarily difficult. This was a monumental task that required immense patience, dedication, and perseverance. Narharibhai continued dialogue with Gandhiji about pros and cons of relocating and educating *Dalit* girls.

***Nai Talim* (Basic Education) and Gandhian Economics**

The first council of the Indian Congress was formed in 1937. Gandhiji invited educationists from across the country to Wardha, where he introduced his concept of *Nai Talim*—a system of vocational basic education designed to meet the fundamental needs of children. He emphasized that incorporating vocational activities into schools was the only way to achieve mass education for India’s population. Gandhiji also highlighted the shortcomings of the existing education system, which, he argued, left students ill-equipped for practical life due to a lack of hands-on skills.

Although there was initial resistance, the educationists eventually recognized the value of vocational basic education. With the formation of the Congress government, Bal Gangadhar Khare, then Chief Minister of Bombay State, was deeply impressed by Gandhiji’s ideology. He decided to implement the *Nai Talim* system on an experimental basis and appointed Narharibhai as president of the newly formed *Basic Education Board*. Narharibhai was dedicated to making this initiative a model for other schools to follow.

The *Nai Talim* system was introduced in Gujarat in the village of Thamna, located in Anand district, under the guidance of Babalbhai Mehta. It was also implemented in a dozen primary schools in the Surat district, guided by Jugatrambhai Dave.

Narharibhai played a pivotal role in developing nationalized educational institutions and implementing Gandhiji’s philosophy of basic education. Reflecting on his contributions, Kaka Saheb remarked, “*Many of us Gandhians were educationists, but Narharibhai had a key role in translating Gandhiji’s philosophy*

of education into practice. His contributions to nationalized education will never be forgotten.”

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The 13th Gujarati Sahitya Parishad (Literary Assembly) was held in Karachi, where Narharibhai was appointed to preside over the sessions on economics and social sciences. Economics was one of Narharibhai’s favorite subjects, and he had extensively studied economic practices in India through the lens of Gandhian philosophy. Below is an excerpt from his talk at the assembly:

“I am deeply interested in the interplay between economics and social sciences. In current times, economics has taken center stage, influencing and shaping other pillars of society—law, politics, and ethics—based on the economic conditions of the community.”

“The social class system, family structures, marriage customs, and other traditions are intrinsically tied to the economic conditions of a society. In India, the class system has long been rooted in financial conditions and inherited skills. However, it is important to remember that the accumulation of wealth is not the ultimate goal of human existence. We must strive to design an economic system that nourishes and supports the broader social and ethical dimensions of life.”

Some argue that economic philosophy is independent of morality or religious principles. However, in reality, religion and morality are essential for sustaining society and ensuring the well-being of less privileged individuals. Therefore, the principles of economics cannot be separated from those of religion and morality.

It is widely believed that the purpose of commerce is to increase wealth and fulfill self-interests, while pity and social service fall under the realm of morality. Gandhiji countered this notion, stating: *“It is ignorance and blasphemy to believe that wealth and religion (in the sense of righteous duty) are not correlated. One who acquires wealth through moral means gains both—wealth and the welfare of others. A society or individual that disregards morality and religious principles in economic pursuits risks losing its moral character.”*

“In general, one cannot think of morality or religion with an empty stomach. Therefore, economic activities should be aimed at feeding the community at large not just an upper class.”

“Economic affairs and institutions should aim to maximize the welfare of humanity by:

- Ensuring that the production processes minimize human labor and societal burden,
- Promoting the distribution of wealth in ways that reduce inequality and foster societal progress, and
- Utilizing wealth to maximize happiness and well-being for the greatest number of people.”

“Gandhiji, in his writings, elaborates on his ideals regarding economics and commerce while addressing the pitfalls of contemporary practices in India and their solutions. He emphasizes: the contrast between large-scale corporations and village-scale cottage industries, the challenges posed by the mechanization of industries, issues of poverty and unemployment in India, discrimination in business practices, importance of providing minimum wages to workers, inequality between greedy

factory owners and the laboring class, and the disparity between landlords and tillers.”

“The measure of humanity lies in what one takes from society and what one gives back. While considering minimum remuneration, it is equally important to establish a maximum limit. Exploitation by business owners and the elite class remains evident. In this context, remuneration for government executives, lawyers, doctors, scientists, and higher education professionals must also be evaluated to ensure equitable distribution of resources.”

Narharibhai then went on describing the negative impacts of the British invasion, including their strategies that led to the deterioration of the social fabric. He highlighted the struggles of societies facing the erosion of indigenous village and cottage industries in the face of large-scale industries, the plight of artisans and craftsmen, the challenges in agriculture and animal husbandry, and the loss of individual and production rights.

Narharibhai’s insightful perspective reflected his deep understanding of the interconnectedness of economics with societal well-being and his commitment to Gandhian principles of balanced and ethical economic development. His talk impressed scholars of all walks of life at the Literary Assembly.

Narharibhai had studied and internalized Gandhian economic principles rooted in *Sarvodaya* (universal uplift) and satyagraha (truth-force or soul-force). As a result of his extensive research, he authored three volumes in Gujarati — ‘*Manav Artha Shastra*’ (economic principles based on human welfare), ‘*Yantra Ni Maryada*’ (limitations of a machine) and ‘*Samyavad ane Sarvodaya*’ (egalitarianism and universal uplift). The core

principles of these works remain relevant today. Notably, the first volume was adopted as a textbook in several Gandhian educational institutes.

The Seventh Assembly of Libraries was held in Vadodara State in November 1939, with Narharibhai presiding over the event. In his address, he emphasized the state of libraries at the time, the need for collecting valuable resource materials, and the crucial role libraries play in mass education, serving individuals of all ages—from children to older adults. He also stressed that the true value of a library lies not in merely housing books within an ornate building but in the effective utilization of its resources to foster learning and community development.

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Communal Riots in Ahmedabad

When the British government declared war against Germany and falsely claimed that Hindustan supported Britain, Gandhiji launched another satyagraha in protest. Several volunteers engaged in peaceful individual demonstrations, leading to the arrest of many leaders.

In 1941, a minor incident escalated into communal riots in Ahmedabad, leaving the city in shock and fear. The situation was so dire that people hesitated even to come out and cremate the bodies of their loved ones, leaving dead bodies abandoned on the streets.

During this crisis, Ravishankar *Maharaj* (Vyas), a saintly associate of Gandhiji, undertook the solemn mission of collecting and cremating the unclaimed bodies. He summoned Mohan, Narharibhai's 18-year-old son, to assist him. For days, Mohan

selflessly worked alongside *Maharaj*, gathering and cremating decaying bodies. On one occasion, they assembled and cremated a heap of about 40 bodies.

That evening, despite washing his hands dozens of times, Mohan found himself unable to eat with his own hands. Yet, through this harrowing experience, he gained invaluable lessons in courage, selflessness, and the spirit of service, demonstrating the essence of true voluntarism in extreme circumstances.

The riots subsided within a few days but fear still gripped the people of Ahmedabad. Shops remained closed, and production had come to a standstill, leaving the city in a state of eerie silence.

Concerned about this paralyzing fear, Gandhiji and his associates convened to find a solution. Together, they established the *Shanti Sevak Sangh* (Peace Volunteers' Assembly), dedicated to restoring peace and rebuilding mutual trust among different religious communities through non-violent means.

Mahadevbhai was appointed as the president, with Narharibhai serving as vice president. The volunteers of the *Shanti Sevak Sangh* tirelessly reached out to the community, offering protection and reassurance, urging shopkeepers and business owners to reopen their establishments and revive daily life. Among these dedicated volunteers was Vanmala, who played an active role in the mission of restoring peace and normalcy.

Quit India Movement, Demise of Mahadevbhai

Both Narharibhai and Maniben were keeping high blood pressure. Gandhiji, out of his affection invited them to Sevagram where he was staying. He wished to treat them and make them normal. They went to Sevagram, but their blood pressure could not be controlled. Maniben looked at Gandhiji as her father-in-law and kept strict discipline having him around. That did not give her mental ease and could not control her blood pressure. Even with his strong willpower and restrained routine, even Gandhiji was unable to control his blood pressure. Narharibhai and Maniben kept suffering with high blood pressure all their life. Mohan also inherited this ailment from the parents.

In 1942, Gandhiji launched the Quit India Movement, a bold and aggressive call for British withdrawal from India. During a fiery speech in Bombay, he urged the nation to act decisively. Narharibhai and his associates believed that this firm stance would pressure the British government into negotiation. However, the response was quite the opposite—Gandhiji and other leaders, including Narharibhai were swiftly arrested.

A few days later, Narharibhai learned that Gandhiji had been taken to Aga Khan Palace in Pune. Soon after, shocking news arrived—Mahadevbhai had passed away in the palace. The authorities provided no details, merely issuing a one-line announcement. The flames of Mahadevbhai's funeral pyre were visible from Lady Thackersey's house on a hill, but his family and associates were left in the dark, forced to rely on speculation.

After several agonizing days, Durgaben finally received a telegram confirming Mahadevbhai's passing. One can only

imagine the grief and turmoil experienced by Durgaben, their son Narayan, and close friends like Narharibhai and Maniben.

When communication was eventually permitted, Narharibhai wrote a heartfelt letter to Gandhiji. In it, he poured out his sorrow and despair, expressing his concern for Gandhiji and Kasturba's health. He mourned the loss of his dear friend of decades, recounting the life journey they had shared—a bond forged in service, sacrifice, and unwavering dedication to India's freedom.

During the Quit India Movement, Gandhiji took an unconventional stance, declaring:

“I will not allow the government to play its usual cat-and-mouse game. I will continue guiding the nation when I am free. But if I am arrested, I will go on a fast, and people are free to choose their own course of action. While I do not approve of violence, I will not object if people take that path—everyone has the right to fight for freedom.”

This statement led to widespread confusion and unrest, as people began interpreting Gandhiji's words in their own way. The result was an outburst of violence and destruction, as some believed that Gandhiji had indirectly sanctioned aggressive action.

In this turbulent time, young revolutionaries turned to Narharibhai, a close associate of Gandhiji known for his socialist-leaning principles, seeking his guidance on the Mahatma's true intent. Understanding the gravity of the situation, Narharibhai consulted Swami Anand after his release from prison and took a firm stand against the rising violence.

To clarify Gandhiji's message and steer the movement back toward its non-violent roots, Narharibhai published a pamphlet

titled ‘Five Letters’, in which he denounced violent acts and elaborated on the true spirit of the freedom struggle. However, as soon as the British authorities became aware of this publication, Narharibhai was arrested and sentenced to two years in prison.

Later, Swami Anand reflecting on this episode, wrote: “Kishorlalbhair, I, and other associates were struggling to interpret Gandhiji’s stand, but amidst all the uncertainty, Narharibhai remained composed and unswerving. He guided the community onto the right path, ensuring that the movement did not stray from its foundational principles.”

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Manav Artha Shastra (Economics for Human Welfare)

Kishorlalbhair and Narharibhai spent a significant period together in Nasik Jail in 1930. During their time there, they engaged in deep discussions on the economic issues facing the country. They also conversed with several other activists in the jail, exchanging ideas and perspectives. Many students would visit Narharibhai to seek insights into the problems of villages and the economics of Khadi. These discussions highlighted the fundamental principles of economics and their contemporary applications.

Recognizing the urgent need for a comprehensive book on economics, Kishorlalbhair and his associates encouraged Narharibhai to take on the task. However, writing such a volume posed a significant challenge, requiring dedicated time and extensive study of existing literature.

In 1932, Narharibhai was imprisoned in Belgaum Jail in Karnataka, where he had the opportunity to meet Yusuf Meher

Ali, a freedom fighter and socialist leader. The two engaged in daily discussions on economic theories whenever political prisoners were permitted to gather. Meher Ali also urged Narharibhai to write a detailed work on the subject.

Encouraged by his friends, Narharibhai finally resolved to take up the challenge. His prolonged imprisonment in 1942 provided him with the time needed to complete the monumental task. The result was a 600-page volume titled *Manav Artha Shastra*—Economics for Human Welfare—a groundbreaking work and perhaps the first original, extensive economic treatise in Gujarati. It was a valuable framework for designing economies that serve people rather than just profits.

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Gandhiji was released in 1945 due to health concerns. Eventually, other political prisoners were also freed one by one. After his release, Gandhiji spent some time in Juhu, Bombay, before moving to Panchgani and Mahabaleshwar for recovery.

During this period, there was a pressing question of who would take over Mahadevbhai's work. While Pyarelal and his sister, Sushila Nayyar, assisted Gandhiji with secretarial tasks, he needed someone to manage his correspondence and writings in Gujarati. Given Narharibhai's long-standing association and deep trust with Gandhiji, he was asked to take on this responsibility. Narharibhai then traveled to Mahabaleshwar and assisted Gandhiji for a time.

Later, Gandhiji entrusted Narharibhai with the responsibility of overseeing the Khadi Educational Institute in Sevagram. However, due to high blood pressure and other health issues,

Narharibhai had to return to Sabarmati for medical treatment under expert care.

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Wedding of Children

In 1946, Mohan married Ansuya, the daughter of Ramiben, who was the daughter of Gandhiji's eldest son, Harilal. The wedding ceremony was conducted by Ravishankar Maharaj. However, Gandhiji, who had taken a vow to attend weddings only if either the bride or groom was a Harijan, did not attend but sent his heartfelt blessings.

Later, in 1949, Vanmala married Mahendra Desai, son of the Gandhian scholar Valji Desai. The wedding took place at Sardar Bungalow in Bardoli ashram in a simple yet meaningful ceremony. Due to health reasons, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel could not attend, but he sent his blessings, expressing great joy that the wedding was being held at his home.

This was the first Gandhian wedding at Bardoli ashram, drawing great curiosity from the town. The local post office experienced an unprecedented surge in mail and telegrams—receiving more in two days than they usually did in an entire year. In a gesture of surprise and goodwill, even the postmaster sent a small wedding gift. A few hundred people gathered to witness the brief but deeply symbolic ceremony, embracing the simplicity and values of the Gandhian way.

Assassination of Gandhiji

From 1947 onwards, Narharibhai's health began to deteriorate. He suffered a paralytic attack and underwent treatment from expert doctors, along with massage therapy.

Upon hearing the news, Gandhiji immediately sent a telegram:

“I am addressing this to you directly, assuming that you will be in a condition to read it. I am deeply pained by your paralytic condition. You will come out of it, assuming there is no other underlying reason. You must take a complete rest at a suitable place. I would have nursed you if I were with you. God is our Savior, and I pray that He will certainly protect you. I hope Mani is not too worried; Vanmala is the stronger one.”

It took nearly three months before Narharibhai regained enough strength to write to Gandhiji in his own handwriting. Despite the turmoil in Delhi and his ongoing fast, Gandhiji responded in the early hours of the morning:

“I am delighted to read your letter, especially in your own handwriting. This is a great sign of your recovery. I still cannot understand why you suffered a paralytic attack. Your life has always been simple, disciplined, and pure. These very qualities have helped you recover so quickly. But do not rush; take ample rest, and it may even help cure your asthma. I will stop here, as I have a very busy day ahead.”

Profoundly touched, Narharibhai promptly replied:

“Even during your fasting period, you took the time to write to me, I am overwhelmed by your affection. You have always showered me with kindness, but this time, it has poured upon me and left me speechless. I strive to live up to the virtues you ascribe to me, though I must confess, I am not free from flaws. My palate

still craves flavors, and I have not entirely overcome my anger. But with your blessings, I will continue to strive for higher virtues.”

“I have decided to stay in one place and dedicate myself to the writings I have committed to. God has spared you from both your fast and a bomb attack, perhaps to heal humanity from hatred and violence. His mercy is limitless.”

Gandhiji, in his unwavering care, replied at 4:25 a.m. on January 28, 1948. The letter reached Narharibhai on January 30, the very day Gandhiji left this ephemeral world. In his final message to Narharibhai, Gandhiji wrote:

“I am very glad to read your letter in such clear handwriting. I understand your emotions, but they do not change my opinion about you. One who does good work never meets a bad end, either in this world or the next (*Bhagavad Gita*, 6:40). Your swift recovery is proof of your inner strength and virtue. Do not let haste take away these qualities. You have much to write, and that work will keep you engaged—but never at the cost of your health. Swami [Anand] will find a peaceful place for you to rest and recover. Those who truly seek your wisdom will make the effort to find you, wherever you may be.”

Despite his usual composure, Narharibhai became extremely emotional during his illness. Swami Anand and his family had to prepare him before he met visitors. Yet, upon seeing Kaka Saheb, his elder brother, or close associates, he could not hold back his tears.

On the evening of January 30, a messenger rushed on a bicycle to Sabarmati ashram with the shocking news—Gandhiji had been shot in the chest at his prayer meeting. The entire

household and ashram members were devastated. They hesitated, unsure how to break the news to Narharibhai, who was still recovering. With great care, they gently informed him as he rested in bed. Without a word, Narharibhai broke down, weeping uncontrollably. His family administered his blood pressure medication and forced him to rest, but even in his sleep, he wept.

The ashram was soon flooded with reporters and mourners from the city. Many sought a message from Narharibhai, as he was one of Gandhiji's most senior associates. But he was too grief-stricken to speak.

Ten days later, Shanti Kumar Morarji, a noted industrialist and Gandhian associate, and Vithalbhai Jhaveri, a filmmaker and photographer devoted to Gandhiji, arrived in Ahmedabad with Gandhiji's ashes. It was the collective wish that Narharibhai, despite his fragile condition, perform the final rites. Summoning his inner strength, Narharibhai agreed to carry out this last duty for the great soul who had been like a father to him.

He went to the airport to receive the urn containing Gandhiji's ashes. The urn was placed at *Hriday Kunj*, Gandhiji's residence in Sabarmati ashram, where it remained for two days. The entire city of Ahmedabad came to pay its final respects. On the day of the last rites, nearly 200,000 to 300,000 people gathered at the banks of the Sabarmati River for the solemn ceremony.

Deteriorating Health, Moving to Bardoli

The emotional turmoil of the past two weeks took a significant toll on Narharibhai's health. His blood pressure spiked, but fortunately, he did not suffer another paralytic attack. Once he regained his strength, he began stepping away from his institutional responsibilities, resigning from 30 to 35 organizations, including the *Basic Education Board* and the Ahmedabad District School Board. Philosophically, he felt that while he remained alive in a physical sense, he had undergone an experience akin to *civic death*. This realization led him to withdraw from public commitments.

Following Gandhiji's suggestion, Narharibhai chose to settle in the coastal town of Tithal near Valsad in South Gujarat. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel arranged for the family to stay at a spacious bungalow belonging to his brother, Bhulabhai Desai. However, the large house, surrounded by vast orchards, felt isolating. The family, accustomed to an active social circle, struggled with loneliness in their new surroundings.

During this time, Narharibhai received an invitation from Dr. Dinsha Mehta to visit his Nature Cure Center in Pune. Eager to improve his health, he accepted the offer and underwent naturopathy treatment. The most significant benefit of the therapy was a weight loss of nearly 20 pounds, which in turn helped regulate his blood pressure.

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Freed from his institutional responsibilities, Narharibhai now had the opportunity to focus on compiling the *Diaries of Mahadevbhai*—a multi-volume collection of Gandhiji's letters,

speeches, conversations, and reflections. However, due to the paralysis affecting his right side, he was unable to write quickly. His daughter, Vanmala, took up the task of transcribing his work, finding deep satisfaction in contributing to such an important project.

After India's independence, Vallabhbhai Patel, as Deputy Prime Minister, was leading the nation, and many other leaders had taken up political roles. Meanwhile, Gandhian volunteers and workers engaged in rural uplift, *Sarvodaya*, and other social initiatives looked up to Narharibhai for guidance. They visited him frequently, seeking advice and inspiration.

As time passed, the road near the Sarvodaya ashram saw a significant increase in traffic, and the resulting dust aggravated Narharibhai's asthma. Concerned for his well-being, Vallabhbhai Patel offered him the use of his bungalow in Bardoli ashram. In his letter, Vallabhbhai wrote:

“I can no longer stay in that bungalow, but if you move in, I will feel as though I am living there in spirit. You will be relieved from Ahmedabad's unhealthy environment, find mental peace, and, most importantly, be able to guide Mohan and Narayan, who are stationed in Vedchhi.”

Narharibhai was delighted by this offer. He saw it as an opportunity to step away from the political and institutional atmosphere of Ahmedabad and to concentrate on Mahadevbhai's diaries. With these considerations in mind, he moved to Sardar's bungalow in Bardoli ashram by the end of 1948.

Before settling in Bardoli, he spent a couple of months in Vedchhi with Mohan. Upon returning to Bardoli ashram, he received excellent medical care from Dr. Manjuben Mashruwala,

the niece of Kishorlalbai. Manjuben, whom Narharibhai regarded as a daughter, ensured his well-being, and the ashram environment proved to be a peaceful and suitable home for both him and Maniben.

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In 1951, Narharibhai suffered a severe case of appendicitis and was rushed to Bombay, where he was admitted to Harkisandas Hospital. Doctors soon discovered that his appendix had ruptured—a condition with a low survival rate given the medical advancements of the time. Dr. Shantilal Mehta, a renowned surgeon in Bombay, performed a complex and critical three-hour operation.

Vishnu Mavalankar, son of independence activist and politician Ganesh Vasudev Mavalankar, was serving as a house surgeon at the hospital and provided exceptional care to Narharibhai. Typically, patients undergoing such surgeries were required to remain flat in bed for 21 days. However, to everyone's astonishment, the doctors encouraged Narharibhai to stand and take a few steps on the very same day. His recovery was nothing short of a miracle.

Upon learning about the surgery, Narharibhai's close friend and longtime associate, Kishorlal Mashruwala, traveled to Bombay despite his own fragile health. He remained by Narharibhai's side throughout his recovery. Sadly, in September 1952, Kishorlalbai passed away.

To offer their condolences, Narharibhai and Maniben traveled to Wardha to console Kishorlalbai's widow, Gomtiben. After spending some time in Bombay and Akola, Gomtiben

decided to move to Bardoli ashram, where she found comfort in being near her niece, Dr. Manjuben, and her old friend Maniben. Additionally, Bardoli ashram provided the ideal setting for preserving Kishorlalbhai's books and writings, ensuring that his intellectual legacy would endure.

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Literary Work

After India's independence, many Congress leaders assumed ministerial roles or other key positions within the party, while others continued engaging in social and educational initiatives. Although these leaders professed allegiance to Gandhiji's ideology, their actions often diverged in different directions. Despite Gandhiji's clearly defined principles and holistic approach to various issues, leaders interpreted his teachings in their own ways. For Gandhiji, moral, political, and social matters were inseparable—his philosophy embodied a seamless harmony of thought, speech, and action.

This ideological divergence posed a dilemma for Gandhiji's non-political social leaders and activists. Many of their former colleagues now acted in ways that contradicted Gandhian ideals, creating uncertainty about the path forward. Seeking clarity, several social workers turned to Narharibhai for guidance. He recognized that while the Congress government held political power, its leaders did not necessarily adhere to Gandhiji's principles.

In response, Narharibhai, in collaboration with Swami Anand, published a pamphlet outlining essential guidelines for social activists. The publication stirred controversy, as political

leaders and those involved in the nation's constructive programs held differing perspectives. Despite his frail health, Narharibhai remained resolute, taking an unwavering stand to uphold Gandhiji's vision.

From 1950 onwards, Narharibhai dedicated more time to writing and authored several books including:

Mahadevbhai Nu Purva Charitra (Mahadevbhai's Early Life): While editing Mahadevbhai's diaries, Narharibhai was inspired to portray his character and life journey. Mahadevbhai's life could be divided into two distinct phases of 25 years each—his early years from birth in 1892 until 1917, when he joined Gandhiji, and from 1917 until his passing in 1942. Narharibhai documented Mahadevbhai's early years in the form of a booklet.

Shreyarathi Ni Sadhana (Kishorlal Mashruwala's Biography): Kishorlalbai was opposed to the idea of a memorial or a biography after his death. In fact, he had humorously written about this, and his perspective was widely appreciated. However, his colleagues felt it was important to document his life, which was marked by integrity, innovative thinking, and relentless contributions to society. As a close lifelong friend, Narharibhai took on the responsibility of writing his biography, aptly titling it *Shreyarathi Ni Sadhana*—meaning the spiritual journey of a devotee.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (Volume 1 & 2):

Sardar Patel's daughter, Maniben, strongly desired that an authentic and comprehensive biography of her father be written. While smaller accounts existed, no one captured the full depth of his life and legacy. Though she had gathered extensive material, she was cautious about entrusting the task to any political figure.

Instead, she wished for Narharibhai, a close confidant of Sardar Patel, to undertake the work.

In a heartfelt letter to Narharibhai, Maniben expressed her request:

“It is not just because he is my father, but because you were his close and trusted colleague who witnessed all phases of his life and transformations. I want you to write his biography. He was the son of a simple farmer yet rose to extraordinary heights through relentless hard work. He never sought publicity or positions of power, yet, ironically, they kept coming to him, bringing him great prestige. His life story will serve as an invaluable learning experience for future leaders, and for this reason, I wish for you to write his comprehensive biography.”

Gandhiji nu Gita Shikshan (Gandhiji’s Gita Lessons):

For a year in 1926 Gandhiji took a break from public activities and stayed in Sabarmati ashram. He gave daily discourses on Bhagavad Gita after his early morning prayer meetings. Narharibhai wrote a book from the notes of these discourses taken by Mahadevbhai and Punjabhai Shah.

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Here is a concise list of Narharibhai’s literary contribution:

Narharibhai wrote three biographies of his associates—Mahadev Desai, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Kishorlal Mashruwala. *Manav Arthshastra* (1945) is his work on human economics. His writings on education, politics and Gandhian thought include *Samyavad ane Sarvodaya* (1934), *Wardha Kelvanino Prayog* (1939) and *Yantrani Maryada* (1940). *Atlu To Janjo* (1922), *Karandiyo* (1928) and *Kanyane Patro* (1937)

include his thoughts on education. *Kautumbik Arthashastra* (1926), *Bardolina Kheduto* (1927) and *Sarvoday Samajni Zankhi* discuss contemporary social issues.

He edited *Namdar Gokhlana Bhashano* (1918), *Govindgaman* (1923, with Ramnarayan V. Pathak), *Naval Granthavali* (1937), *Mahadevbhai ni Diary* Part 1–7 (1948–50), *Sardar Vallabhbhai na Bhashano* (1949), *Ambalal Sakarlal na Bhashano* (1949), *Gandhiji nu Geeta Shikshan* (1956).

He co-translated some works of Rabindranath Tagore with Mahadev Desai such as *Chitrangada* (1916), *Viday Abhishap* (1920), *Prachin Sahitya* (1922). He also translated some works of Leo Tolstoy; *Jate Majuri Karnarao ne* (1924) and *Tyare Karishu Shu?* (1925–26, with Rang Avadhoot).

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To spread his ideas to the masses and raise public awareness, Gandhiji published a weekly newspaper called *Indian Opinion* while in South Africa. After returning to India, he launched two weeklies, *Young India* and *Navajivan*. At the time, Indulal Yagnik was publishing a monthly Gujarati ‘*Navajivan Ane Satya*’ (Navajivan and Truth), which he offered to Gandhiji. Gandhiji accepted its editorship and renamed it to *Navajivan* and converted it to a weekly. *Young India* served as the English counterpart to *Navajivan*. Gandhiji encouraged his associates to contribute their perspectives on various subjects.

For the first issue of *Navajivan*, Gandhiji personally invited Maniben Parikh to write an article. Here is that article:

My Family

Two years ago, I did not truly understand the meaning of family. I believed that my family consisted only of my father's or my father-in-law's household. It was only later that I realized my family extended beyond them—to include everyone in the satyagraha ashram. Here, there is no distinction between a master and a servant; we all share a common bond.

When I accompanied my husband to Champaran to assist Bapuji (Gandhiji), I found myself deeply connected to the village people. Now, as we run a kitchen for the students, I begin my day early, preparing meals for them. I worry if any of them have a headache, not as an outsider, but as someone who truly cares. To me, they are not just students, and I am not merely their helper. When they address me as 'sister' with respect, I feel a deep sense of pride. Helping them throughout the day brings me joy, and I realize that my family is ever-expanding. I am still learning the true spirit of what it means to be part of a family.

Mani Narhari Parikh

[Navajivan, September 7, 1919]

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As the volume of Gandhi literature grew, Navajivan Institute expanded into a publicly registered publishing house. *Navajivan Trust* became a vital platform for associates and scholars, allowing them to publish their articles and books while also receiving remuneration for their work.

Under copyright law, a publisher holds the copyright for works created by its employees. In his will, Gandhiji entrusted the copyright of all his writings to *Navajivan Trust*. However, some

of his close associates—Swami Anand, Kishorlal Mashruwala, Kaka Saheb, Mahadevbhai, and Narharibhai—chose not to relinquish their copyrights to *Navajivan*.

Gandhiji's Will

I hereby declare that this is my final will, and any previous will that I may have drafted shall be considered null and void.

I do not regard myself as the owner of any personal property. However, for practical and legal purposes, I bequeath all my belongings—both tangible and intangible, including copyrights to all my published and unpublished books and articles to Navajivan Trust. This trust was officially registered by Mohanlal Maganlal Bhatt and me on November 26, 1929. At present, the trustees of Navajivan Trust are Vallabhbbhai Zhaverbhai Patel, Mahadev Haribhai Desai, and Narhari Dwarkadas Parikh.

As part of this arrangement, Navajivan Trust shall donate 25% of the profits earned from the sales and copyrights of my works to the Harijan Sevak Sangh, to support social welfare initiatives for the upliftment of the underprivileged.

For the execution of this will, I appoint Mahadev Haribhai Desai and Narhari Dwarkadas Parikh as my executors. In the event of the absence or demise of one, the other shall have full authority to execute my will.

Malikanda, February 20, 1940 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

Witness: Pyarelal Nayyar, February 20, 1940

Kishorlal G. Mashruwala, February 20, 1940

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During the Quit India Movement, many Congress leaders were imprisoned, leading to a chaotic situation. This turmoil gave rise to controversies regarding the interpretation of Gandhiji's views. Some individuals even began publishing articles using

excerpts from Gandhiji's writings out of context. With Mahadevbhai's recent passing, Narharibhai was the sole executor of Gandhiji's will. To prevent the unauthorized use of his writings, Narharibhai, with the assistance of Swami Anand—who was not in jail—issued a legal stay order through lawyers.

To further clarify the legality of his will, Gandhiji, after his release from Aga Khan Palace in 1944, drafted an addendum to ensure that no one could use his writings without the permission of *Navajivan Trust*.

As the sole executor of Gandhiji's will, Narharibhai, following the recommendation of Sardar Patel and Ganesh Vasudev Mavalankar, transferred the rights to the trustees of *Navajivan Trust*. In September 1950, the publishing house passed a resolution asserting its copyright over all its publications and decided to include a clause to that effect in its publications.

This decision sparked anger and uproar among Gandhiji's close associates—Kishorlal Mashruwala, Kaka Saheb, and Narharibhai. They strongly protested that *Navajivan Trust* had neither consulted them nor properly interpreted Gandhiji's will. They argued that the resolution was neither moral nor legal.

The dispute led to extensive correspondence between Narharibhai, Narayan Desai, and Kishorlalbhai on one side and the *Navajivan Trust* trustees on the other. Ultimately, the lawyers involved ruled that *Navajivan Trust* had no legal copyright over books authored by Gandhiji's associates. Narharibhai, with his fragile health, clarified that his intent was only to seek a legal interpretation of the copyright clause, not to take legal action against *Navajivan Trust*.

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Narharibhai had continued for the rest of his life in the spiritual presence of his guru. He felt a deep sense of relief the day he completed the final chapter of *Gandhiji's Gita Lessons*. That very night, he suffered a heart attack. Doctors in Bardoli treated him, but his health had already been fragile for a long time—worsened by high blood pressure, a previous paralytic attack, and now, a failing heart. Eventually, he was transferred to Bombay Hospital, where a specialist took over his care.

Between 1954 and 1957, Narharibhai endured two more heart attacks. His condition was deemed extremely delicate, and doctors predicted he had only a few months to live. On the morning of July 15, 1957, he suffered several ischemic strokes. By the afternoon, he took his final breath. His close associates, Ravishankar Maharaj and Jugatrambhai were by his side in the last moments. His family, ever devoted, provided him with the utmost care in his final days. Though they had prepared themselves for the inevitable, the pain of losing him was no less profound.

In Hindu philosophy, the last phase of a person's life is often regarded as a time of deep austerity—a final passage into peace. For Narharibhai, this journey had now come to an end.

Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai were an inseparable duo, united by their unwavering commitment to Gandhiji. While Mahadevbhai remained Gandhiji's constant companion, living as his shadow, Narharibhai devoted himself to serving nearly every institution Gandhiji established. He actively participated in numerous satyagraha movements and later played a crucial role in reconstructing the affected areas.

Narharibhai had an unparalleled grasp of Gandhian philosophy and principles. At times, even seasoned Gandhians wavered in interpreting Gandhiji's ideologies, but Narharibhai maintained a crystal-clear vision with unwavering equanimity. His guidance helped many stay true to the path of nonviolence and truth. As a dedicated messenger of the Gandhian mission, he upheld its values as well as efficiently administered its programs.

Beyond his commitment to Gandhiji, Narharibhai was also a trusted confidant of Sardar Patel. He stood by Sardar during the Kheda and Bardoli satyagraha, assisted in managing Gujarat Vidyapeeth, and played a pivotal role in Gujarat's famine and flood relief efforts. Sardar deeply valued Narharibhai's counsel in these endeavors, just as Narharibhai, in turn, sought Sardar's support when needed.

Kaka Saheb, Swami Anand, Kishorlalbai, Mahadevbhai, Narharibhai, Ravishankar Maharaj, and Jugatrambhai were not just colleagues but a close-knit fraternity—bound by a bond stronger than blood. Within a span of a few years, they had all joined Gandhiji, dedicating the rest of their lives to implementing his ideals and programs. Swami Anand mourned the loss of the younger ones in their group. In one of his books, he poured out his grief for Narharibhai in poetic language, expressing the deep anguish of losing a comrade so devoted to their shared cause.



Maniben Narhari Parikh
[March 3, 1895 ~ August 22, 1966]

Author's Note

My mother, Maniben, had only studied up to the fourth grade, yet she was fond of reading and writing. Narharibhai, with his characteristic humor, fondly called her a *pundit*. Their fathers had been close friends, and as was customary in those days, they had arranged their marriage long before they could understand its meaning—when Maniben was just six months old and Narharibhai was four and a half. Their union, however, turned out to be not only content and harmonious, but also ideal.

After Narharibhai's passing, Swami Anand often encouraged Maniben to write down her memories. She would reply with humility, "I don't know how to write that—it's your task." Eventually on Swami's persistence, she did put some of her recollections on paper—without punctuation or polish but filled with sincerity.

Maniben and Narharibhai were among the first few who joined Gandhiji in his Sabarmati Ashram in 1917. In fact, she may be the only ashramite woman to have personally documented her experiences and impressions of Gandhiji. What follows is a revealing and intimate glimpse into ashram life, the diverse personalities surrounding Gandhiji and the personal journey of a young woman with little formal education but a wealth of lived experience. I have made only minimal edits, preserving my mother Maniben's original voice and narrative as authentically as possible.

Vanmala Desai

My Story—Maniben Parikh

I was only twelve when I was married, but I was not formally sent off to live with my in-laws. Both my father's house and my in-laws' house were in Ahmedabad, not far from each other. Life continued as usual until, one day, circumstances changed.

At one point, my mother-in-law and the wife of Narharibhai's elder brother [Shankarlal Parikh] were both away from home. Around the same time, Narharibhai's aunt—his father's sister—fell ill. With no women left to manage the household and its duties, my younger brother-in-law came to fetch me. At just fourteen, I was called to my in-laws' home for the first time—not as a guest, but as the one responsible for running the house.

Their customs were different from those I had known, and I was unfamiliar with the household's routines. Yet, I had no choice but to step into the role. Until then, I had never spoken to my husband. Now, in this new home, I could not talk to him in the presence of others. Tradition dictated that I keep my face covered and maintain a respectable distance from the elders. The only person I could speak to freely was my younger brother-in-law.

I cooked and served meals for everyone, washed clothes, cleaned the house, polished lanterns, and before I knew it, it was time to cook dinner. After dinner, I cleaned the kitchen and prepared the family's beds. The weight of my responsibilities felt overwhelming, made even heavier by the silence—I had to complete all these tasks without speaking to anyone. I often broke down in tears but quickly gathered myself and returned to work.

Narharibhai's aunt had a fiery temper and offered no help. Instead, she scolded me for any mistake I made. By the end of

each day, I was utterly exhausted and deeply disheartened. The household received running water only in the middle of the night, so I had to stay up to fill all the containers. The relentless workload left me drained; I was simply not accustomed to such heavy household labor.

One day, a friend of my father-in-law came to visit, and I found myself in a dilemma about what to cook for him. The aunt, as usual, refused to give me a clear answer. Finally, my elder brother, Shankarlalbai suggested me to prepare sweet flatbread. I followed his advice, and to my relief, he praised my cooking. But the aunt did not like this.

A week later, when she recovered, I was sent back to my parents' home. The experience had left me so exhausted and dispirited that I refused to return to my in-laws. When my mother-in-law came back from her pilgrimage and learned how I had been treated, she immediately visited my mother. She reassured her that such a situation would never happen again. She then comforted me, promising that things would be different. And they were. My subsequent visits to my in-laws became easier, and in time, I grew to love that home.

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At the time, Narharibhai was practicing law in Ahmedabad. It was around then that Gandhiji returned from South Africa. When Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai learned about him, they began visiting him regularly going straight from court to meet him and returning home late in the evenings.

In our family, it was tradition for everyone to have dinner together, so my mother-in-law questioned Narharibhai about his

sudden change in routine. He explained, “*A man named Gandhi, who fought and won a battle against discrimination in South Africa, has returned. We go to meet him.*”

One day, he asked me to accompany him. However, tradition did not allow me to go out alone with him, so we took his elder brother and his wife along. Together, we visited the Gandhi Ashram, and Narharibhai gave us a tour. Everything about the place felt unfamiliar, almost otherworldly. I struggled to fully grasp this new way of living.

I had read in books that when Lord Rama was in exile, he visited ashrams where sages lived. As I stood in Kochrab Ashram, I couldn’t help but wonder—was this something similar?

During the summer break, Narharibhai decided to spend a month at the ashram. He told me, “*You can go stay with your parents, and I will be at Gandhi’s ashram.*” Since I had not visited my parents’ home in a long time, I welcomed the opportunity to spend a month with them.

While I was there, rumors began to reach me—some said Narharibhai was staying for a full year, while others whispered that he had joined Gandhiji permanently. I grew anxious, unable to understand what was happening. I returned to my in-laws’ home. He would visit home just once a week—and even then, he always brought guests with him.

One day, he arrived with Vinoba Bhave. “*Prepare a meal for him,*” he said. I was taken aback by the appearance of Vinoba. Dressed in nothing but a scanty loincloth with a simple covering on top, he was unlike anyone I had ever seen. I could not help but

wonder—what kind of friends had Narharibhai made? And what would I even cook for such a man?

Until then, I had only seen Narharibhai's friends in elegant English attire. This was a world I could never have imagined. I, too, had been raised with a taste for refinement. My father was well-to-do, and as the first daughter in the family, I had been given every luxury.

I felt uneasy and afraid of the changes I saw in Narharibhai. One day, unable to suppress my fears any longer, I insisted that he spend the night at home and explain his intentions. He sat with me, patiently detailing his thoughts, and reassured me. Then, he made a promise: *"If you are willing to give up luxuries and live a simple life, I would like both of us to join Gandhiji together."*

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Seizing the opportunity to be with Narharibhai, I packed two pairs of dresses, a bedroll, and a few essential kitchen utensils. We set off for the ashram in a horse cart.

Narharibhai's elder brother had always envisioned a different future for him. He had dreamed that Narharibhai would continue their three-generation-long family tradition of practicing law, earn wealth, and uphold a luxurious lifestyle for the family. This sudden departure from that path left him deeply disheartened—so much so that he refused to speak to us for an entire year.

Then, fate took an unexpected turn. The elder brother, Shankarlal fell seriously ill with typhoid. Narharibhai, despite their strained relationship, brought him to the ashram, placing him under the care of Gandhiji and his doctor. This act of kindness softened his heart, and his resentment began to fade.

Two months later, the elder brother also made a life-altering decision—he chose to part ways with their younger brother and instead follow Gandhiji’s path. He renounced his land and embraced a life of simplicity, dedicating himself to Gandhi’s programs. Eventually, he left Ahmedabad to live in the family home in a small town Kathlal. Narharibhai, staying true to his ideals, refused to take his share of the family property. When I asked, his elder brother willingly gave me a few items from the family house.

* * * * *

Our life and lifestyle underwent a complete transformation after moving to the ashram. The first hardship was waking up at four in the morning, a drastic change from our previous routine. We had to manage all household and community tasks ourselves, including grinding grains for daily use and assisting Ba [Kasturba]. Morning and evening prayers became an integral part of our day.

Once Gandhi cap was in high demand and Bapu—as we addressed Gandhiji—decided to make caps ourselves. Our task was to sew the caps from rough khadi cloth. The fabric was so thick and coarse that our fingers would bleed from the effort. Yet, having willingly chosen to follow my husband, I embraced this lifestyle without regret.

For Narharibhai, the transition was particularly difficult. He had a deep appreciation for tasty food and fine clothing, yet he sacrificed these comforts for a higher ideal. Seeing his silent suffering, I would quietly weep a few times a day, making peace with my emotions but never letting him notice my anguish.

Perhaps the hardest challenge for both of us was controlling the palate, yet we never regretted our decision. It was a life we had consciously and willingly chosen.

I was the first outsider woman to join the ashram. Kishorlalbhai and his wife, Gomtiben, arrived a month later and stayed with us.

About a month after that, Gandhiji received a barren piece of land near the Sabarmati River, with no buildings—just wild shrubs and bushes. Our first task was to clear the land, set up tents, and establish the ashram. This was especially challenging for us, as we were accustomed to city life.

Once the initial setup was complete, Gandhiji decided to construct permanent buildings. To support the effort, we all joined the construction crew—carrying bricks, fetching water, and performing manual labor to speed up the project.

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After some time, Babu was invited to Bihar to assist the indigo laborers in Champaran district, and he asked us to accompany him. Since I owned only two saris, our first task was to get warmer clothes to prepare for Bihar's cold climate. This journey was significant for me as it was my first long trip beyond Ahmedabad and Bombay.

With only the bare essentials, we set off for Bihar. For a day, Narharibhai and I stayed at the home of Rajendra Babu (Dr. Rajendra Prasad), and then we moved to a farm in Motihari to join Gandhiji-Kasturba, Mahadevbhai-Durgaben, Rajendra Babu, and a few other leaders. Rajendra Babu had arranged for servants to

handle household chores, but Durgaben and I took on the responsibility of cooking for the group.

One of our regular diners was Swami Satyadev, who insisted on having fresh, warm flatbread with his meals. If he arrived late, Durgaben and I had to wait before preparing the bread. When Gandhiji learned about this, he firmly told Swami, “Either come on time for lunch and dinner or make your own arrangements.” After that, Swamiji chose to arrange his meals elsewhere.

Every evening after supper, we would go for a walk with Bapu. If Durgaben and I were delayed in wrapping up the kitchen, he would wait for us outside the kitchen, refusing to leave without us. We felt shy, but his patience never wavered.

One evening, Kasturba lost the locking pin of her bangle, and Durgaben and I searched for it in vain. Seeing our struggle, Bapu remarked with a playful smile, “*I am still alive, the proof of her wifhood. Tell her to go out without bangles.*” But Ba wouldn’t agree. In the end, we fastened the bangle with a piece of straw, and only then did we leave for our walk.

Bapu was a fast walker, while Durgaben and I were much slower. Narharibhai and Mahadevbhai would scold us and urge us to walk faster so they could stay close to Bapu and listen to his conversation. However, Bapu insisted that we women join the evening walks. When we reached a particularly dense and dark stretch, he would slow down and stay close to us for safety.

Bapu also had a healthy appetite. His meals included forty chapatis, a cup each of dry lentils and rice before we cook, and vegetables—four items in total. If we ever served him more than forty chapatis, he would notice and remark on it, but we would

jokingly blame it on Kasturba. He was quite fond of food and always encouraged us to cook with fresh, local ingredients.

One day, Babu took us to visit an English family and introduced us. Later, he invited the Englishman to dinner at our place. We arranged the meal on the terrace of the building. Since we traditionally sat on the floor to eat, the Englishman, unable to fold his legs, struggled to sit. Babu teased him and playfully suggested he sit on the terrace's concrete railing instead.

Rajendra Babu [Prasad] was easygoing and ate whatever was prepared. He did not like the idea of women cooking every day. He said, "Our women do not cook or do household chores. You are doing far too much. I will bring a cook, so you do not have to cook." But we reassured him that we were used to cooking and did not see it as a burden.

In Bihar, the divide between the elite landlords and the poor farmers was stark. During our walks, poor local folks would step aside and get off the road when passing us, a sign of deep-rooted societal inequality.

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At the end of the indigo farmers' case, Babu took Narharibhai and me to run a school in the village of Madhubani. We stayed in a simple hut made of paddy straw and bamboo.

To introduce our mission, Babu gathered the villagers for a meeting and announced, "We are here to educate you. I am leaving Narhari and Mani, learn and make use of them as much you can." Then, turning to me, he said, "Go to the homes of the village, meet the women, earn their confidence, and try to help them in every way. Follow our vow of non-attachment and non-possessiveness."

Soon after, Bapu left, and we were on our own. I faced an immediate challenge—I did not know a word of Hindi, and the villagers spoke in a local dialect I could not understand at all. Every night, Narharibhai taught me a few Hindi words, but it was not enough to communicate effectively or run a school.

Realizing the language barrier, I took a practical approach. I gathered the village girls at the well, helped them bathe, wash their hair, clean their clothes, and then sent them home in the evening. The villagers were astonished—they had little awareness of hygiene, often remaining unclean for days.

Beyond hygiene, their diet was meager and lacked nutrition. The villagers were extremely poor, living in scanty huts and earning very little. Their wells were surrounded by filthy mud, worsening their health conditions. We took it upon ourselves to clean the wells and streets and spray disinfectants.

Our days were long and strenuous, filled with teaching, tending to the children, and working to improve sanitation. By nightfall, exhaustion would set in, and we would gather for a simple yet satisfying meal of roasted sweet potatoes, fresh milk, and seasonal fruits.

Despite the hardships, about forty girls attended the school. Every Sunday, I visited their homes and spoke with their parents. The village women would eagerly wait for me, treating me like a daughter of Gandhiji, even performing rituals to worship me. I struggled to convince them, saying, “I am here to talk to you, to help you improve your lives. If you try to worship me, I will stop coming.”

Since I could not speak their language fluently, most of our conversations happened through signs and gestures— a new yet deeply fulfilling way of connecting. It served our purpose and both sides departed happily.

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From Bihar, Babu traveled to Calcutta to attend the Congress session. He carefully considered who should accompany him and ultimately decided that Mahadevbhai would go with him, while Narharibhai would remain in Motihari to continue the social reform work. With a playful smile, Babu turned to me and said, “Aren’t you happy that I left Narhari with you?” His sense of humor never failed to surprise us.

One such moment was when Devdasbhai (Babu’s youngest son) and his wife, Lakshmi, came to visit. As Lakshmi bowed to Babu, he immediately noticed a tear in her sari. Without missing a beat, he quipped, “Lakshmi, Hindustan Times has been exposed through your sari!” We all burst into laughter—after all, Devdasbhai was the editor of Hindustan Times at the time.

Meanwhile, our efforts in Motihari were progressing well. However, the school at Sabarmati Ashram was in urgent need of Narharibhai, so we returned to Sabarmati. The ashram had recently acquired new land, but the Sabarmati River water was not potable, so our first major task was to dig a well. It took six months to complete. Until then, we fetched drinking and cooking water from a nearby well, while using the river water for other purposes.

Our first monsoon season at the ashram was an experience we would never forget. We lived in simple huts with dirt floors, and during heavy rains, water poured in through the thatched roof.

Narharibhai and I sat huddled on a single cot during such rainy nights, holding an umbrella over our heads—but nothing could fully keep us dry.

Bapu, staying on the porch of a building under construction, saw our struggle and invited us to join him. But by then, many others had already taken refuge there, leaving little space. Despite the hardships, I remained content in our humble hut—feeling as though I were living in a palace.

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As development progressed, a road was built through the land of the ashram, dividing it into two sections. Most residents stayed on the main side, closer to the river, where they had to strictly follow all ashram regulations, including celibacy. However, those who lived across the road had some leniency. Naturally, families like ours moved across the road to accommodate our way of life.

During this time, Bapu started a dormitory for 25–30 children of the ashram, and I was given the responsibility of managing it. My own children, Banu and Mohan, were not yet born, but I had my hands full caring for the ashram children.

Each day, I woke up at four in the morning and then woke up all the children so they could be ready for breakfast by six. Since milk was not delivered that early, Bapu instructed me to feed them tapioca porridge instead. After lunch and cleanup, we all sat together to clean wheat and rice grains. Even the teachers joined in, and it became a lively time filled with conversations and laughter.

Over time, our housing was upgraded from simple huts to brick-and-mortar row houses built for six families in the following

order: Narharibhai, Pandit Khare [Narayan Moreshwar Khare], Chhaganlal Gandhi [cousin of Gandhiji], Mahadevbhai, Kishorlalbhai, and Kaka Saheb.

One of the most unforgettable moments of those early days was Rabindranath Tagore's visit to the ashram. Morning and evening prayers were unusually crowded, as people from the city flocked to see him. Since we had previously lived in the city, our house was overflowing with guests.

I still vividly remember Tagore's towering presence, his elegant attire, and his majestic long beard. He delivered a speech in Hindi, his voice ringing like a bell, resonating with everyone present. Even today, that image of him remains etched in my memory.

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At the ashram, 200 to 250 residents dined together in a collective kitchen. We women were responsible for managing the pantry, cooking, and serving. Though the food was bland and prepared without spices, we still ended up cooking nearly forty varieties to accommodate the different preferences of the residents.

One of the most extreme examples of simplicity in the ashram was the control of the palate. All food was cooked without oil or spices, and we only used vegetables grown on ashram land. Once, we had a bumper crop of pumpkins. Unfortunately, boiled pumpkin—our only way of preparing it—caused gastric trouble for many of us. One day, while chatting with the other women, I made up a playful skit about our discomfort.

Kasturba overheard our conversation, and we all agreed—some oil and spices were absolutely necessary to make pumpkins digestible! Ba told the story to Bapu. After the evening prayer, he made an unexpected announcement:

“We have a new poet among us today.”

Then, he called me forward and asked me to narrate my skit. I felt incredibly embarrassed, but under Bapu’s orders, I had no choice but to perform. To my surprise, everyone found it amusing and had a good laugh.

The next day, Bapu made a new declaration that whoever is experiencing gastric trouble may now use some spices in their food. It was a small victory, but for us, it felt like a major one!

The dining process was highly disciplined. Diners were split into two batches, and we had just ten minutes to serve each group. A bell rang before each meal for prayer, and once seated, no one was allowed to talk or even make noise while cleaning their utensils.

The ashram routine was strictly regulated from four in the morning until nine at night, with every task running precisely on time, guided by bells. Any delays or errors in responsibilities were reported to Bapu. He closely observed latecomers in the morning and evening prayers, ensuring that discipline was maintained. After prayers, each of us had to report the number of yards of yarn we had spun that day.

By the end of the day, we were completely exhausted from the continuous routine. Yet, despite our fatigue, four or five families would gather in the evenings to chat and unwind before retiring to bed.

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About a year after we arrived at the ashram, my father passed away. Narharibhai and I immediately traveled to be with my mother and perform my father's final rites. Upon hearing the news, Bapu wrote me a letter, saying: "Your father's death was auspicious. We need not mourn such a soul. I wish to come and see you, but I must leave town."

I ended up staying with my mother for three months. During that time, she taught me how to spin yarn. We spun enough yarn to have it woven into cloth. With it, we gifted Bapu his first khadi dhoti made from our yarn. He was deeply moved and even wrote an article in Navajivan about the gift of khadi dhoti he received from my mother—a widow.

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For my first delivery, I went to stay with my mother. It was going to be the first childbirth in the ashram, so naturally, all the teachers were excited and took great interest in naming the baby. Since it was a girl, we collectively chose the name 'Vanmala', meaning 'daughter of the jungle', as the ashram itself felt like a jungle in those days.

When our son Mohan was born two years later, Mahadevbhai was in jail. He sent a suggestion:

"Our Bapu is Mohandas, and his dear child of the ashram should be named Mohanlal."

And so, we named both our children without ever checking horoscopes—a reflection of the simple, forward-thinking life we lived at the ashram.

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When we first moved to the ashram, I still wore jewelry—plenty of it.

During women’s daily prayers, Bapu often reminded us that we had taken a vow of simplicity and non-possession. He would say, “Jewelry should be forbidden. In fact, by keeping it, we are inviting thieves.” Hearing this again and again, one day, I gathered a set of my jewelry and gave it to Bapu.

He looked at me and asked, “You are giving these up now, but will you later ask Narhari for more?”

I replied firmly, “I am giving them up willingly and will not ask for more. Though... I do have another set for when I go out.”

Bapu smiled and said, “Ah, so you’ve tricked me by keeping one set!”

That remark stayed with me, and soon after, I gave up the remaining jewelry as well. From that day on, I never wore jewelry again. I was just twenty years old when this happened, but it was a decision that shaped my life forever.

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The school of the Patidar ashram in Surat was not well managed. So, Bapu asked Narharibhai to go to Surat and take charge of the school. During that time, second son of Bapu, Manilalbhai married to Kishorlal Mashruwala’s niece Sushila in town Akola. Ba-Bapu, newlyweds and few others came to Surat. Narharibhai received them at the railway station and brought them to Patidar ashram. I cooked simple meal, *laapsi* (a traditional sweet). I kept some fruits and milk for Bapu. Ba mentioned to

Bapu after the meal that I had served *laapsi* to others. Bapu congratulated me on how well I hosted all. I said, “since my brother is visiting first time after his wedding, I have to treat him with a sweet.”

Wedding of Bapu’s third son, Ramdas was arranged with Nirmala. Bapu did not allow this wedding ceremony at the ashram since both the bride and the groom were not from a lower cast. We arranged the ceremony at a bungalow away from the ashram. Bapu made some remarks when he noticed that I gifted a few items to Ramdas. I replied, “He is my brother, and as a sister it is my duty to fulfil the wedding tradition.” Bapu laughed and congratulated me.

I used to conduct sewing classes at the ashram. One English lady [Miss Madeleine Slade] came to the ashram. She was a devotee of Bapu, and he treated her like his daughter and named her Mirabahen. Bapu introduced her to us, the residents. She wanted to wear khadi clothes and came to my sewing class and asked me to make khadi dress for her. I was afraid, how would I know to sew English dress? I told her that since you came to the ashram, live like one of us and use dress like us. She agreed and then I made Indian style dress for her. She put on the dress and proudly went around telling everyone that she is now one of us. Later she cut her hair short and lived a simple life and helped Bapu in various ways. Bapu admired her that she was now Mirabahen in true sense. She maintained that simplistic lifestyle throughout her life. She maintained that attire even when she went to England with Bapu for the Round Table Conference.

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In July of 1933 Bapu decided to leave the Sabarmati ashram and vowed not to return until India gained independence. First, he met with all men of the ashram and then he met with us, the women. He addressed me, “Come close to me, you and I are the earliest resident of this ashram. Our association is seventeen years long. I will disassemble the ashram only on permission of you the women residents. Men had joined me with understanding of my mission, while you women came here following your husbands.” I replied, “I am okay if we quit the ashram. If we service after the struggle, I am willing to restart our lives in the fields with couple of belongings.” Rest of the women gave their consent. Some of us went to the jail and the rest went back to their native places.

We had a dilemma, where do our children go when we go to jail? Ansuyaben Sarabhai was managing a dormitory of *Dalit* girls. With her consent, Bapu arranged to put the children in this dormitory. About ten children and their parents got together under a tree. All eyes were wet, Mahadevbhai broke down in tears. I was alone since Narharibhai was already arrested. I arrange to store our belongings somewhere and bid farewell to Vanmala and Mohan with heavy heart.

My traditional mother came to visit me in the ashram when she heard the news. Bapu asked her, “Are you hear to take Mani with you?” She replied, “No, if my sophisticated son-in-law can harbor jail, why not Mani? Let her go to jail. I came to see you.” And then she donated about three pounds worth of silver ankle bracelets. Bapu asked, “Do you know how I am going to use these?” My mother responded, “I gave them to you; you may use them as you wish.” Then she turned to me and said, “He is a mahatma, people fail to recognize him.”

Narharibhai's Timeline:

- 1891 Oct 7 – birth at Ahmedabad
- 1906 – marriage to Mani Lallubhai Shah
- 1911 – Bachelor of Arts in History & Economics
- 1913 – LLB (Law degree)
- 1915 – meets Gandhiji first time
- 1917 May – decided to join Sabarmati Ashram
- 1920 – Registrar of Gujarat Vidyapeeth
- 1922 – moved to Sarbhon in South Gujarat
- 1924 – first fast against exploitation of tribals
- 1930 – Dharasana salt satyagraha
- 1930~1934 – frequent imprisonment
- 1937 – President of Basic Education Board (Bombay state)
- 1940 – Chairman of Navajivan Trust
- 1940 – Principal of *Gramsevak Vidyalyaya*
- 1950~55 – focused on literary work
- 1957 Jul 15 – death at Bardoli