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MY FATHER, Bapu's Trusted Dairy Expert

BY THOMAS TITUS,
With the Editors



Appachen lived, worked and marched with Gandhiji
but barely spoke about it

IT WAS EARLY 2005 when the phone rang one morning in my Bhopal home. The caller was Tushar Gandhi, great-grandson of the Mahatma. “I’d like you to do what your father did,” Tushar told me. “Join us on our march to Dandi.” Indeed, 2005 was the 75th anniversary of a momentous event.

My father Theverthundiyl Titus had died 25 years earlier, in 1980. Fifty years before that, in 1930, you might say the month of March lived up to its name: Gandhiji’s 25-day Salt March started on 12th March that year with about 80 men walking from his Sabarmati Ashram in suburban Ahmedabad to the coastal village of Dandi in Gujarat’s Navsari district. My father, who was known to all as “Titusji,” and who my six siblings and I called *Appachen*—meaning daddy in Malayalam—had been one among those 80 feisty ashram inmates who joined Gandhiji that day.

“I’ll be there,” I promised Tushar, who was organizing a commemorative march to Dandi, following the exact 385-km route that Gandhiji, Appachen and the others had taken. Reaching Dandi, Gandhiji had, along with his team and the crowds that had joined them along the way, broken the prevailing salt laws. The British rulers had had a monopoly on salt manu-

facture and trade. At Dandi, the freedom fighters, led by Gandhiji, boiled seawater and produced salt without paying the colonial taxes. Their “disobedience,” the police beatings and the marchers’ non-violent resistance were so widely reported that compatriots across the subcontinent were also encouraged to break the salt laws. And, inspired by something as basic as salt, millions of ordinary Indians plunged into the freedom struggle. The Salt March of 1930 also helped change the world’s attitude, and many people realized how much Indians deserved to be free.

After being roughed up at Dandi, the marchers, Appachen included, were transported to Pune and thrown in jail. But how did my father, a Christian from Kerala, get to be in the midst of all this?

Appachen had been a man of few words, who told us very little about his past. It was in 1978, just two years before he died, that he was invited by All India Radio Bhopal to speak about his days at Sabarmati. Appachen’s Hindi being far from broadcast quality, he narrated his experiences to me and I re-wrote his speech for him, transliterating the Hindi speech into English (“*Gandhiji ne mujh se kaha...*”) for Appachen to read easily on air. Appachen, meticulous as always, also left behind a

ILLUSTRATED BY VANDANA MEHTA

diary. All this, and years of picking up bits and pieces from what my parents said, helped me put together his story and realize how much Gandhiji had influenced him, and in turn, our large family.

TUSHAR GANDHI was waiting for me when I reached Sabarmati Ashram, where Appachen had spent five formative years of his working life. I felt the warmth of Appachen's presence. *He lived right here with Gandhiji!* In a flash I was flooded with memories.

Appachen grew up in a farming family in Kerala. After high school, he studied dairy science in Allahabad. While employed in a Gorakhpur, UP, dairy, he got a job offer from Sabarmati Ashram. Least interested in a new job but eager to meet Gandhiji, he decided to go for the interview. Naively, he informed his Anglo-Indian boss about it. "You want to ruin yourself by going after a mad man?" the boss fumed.

At Sabarmati, the vegetarianism and the austerity of the ashram didn't appeal to him although Gandhiji was charmingly persuasive. "On my way back to Gorakhpur," Appachen later wrote in his diary, "some inner voice told me to accept Gandhiji's offer."

When he returned in October 1929 to join as dairy manager, the Ashram was lit for Diwali and the garba dance fascinated him. But not the men's closely cropped hair and the lustreless

khadi clothing! Khadi had by then become a symbol of the freedom movement. British textiles, often made with cotton exported from India, were sold for such a high price that homespun khadi came to represent the boycott of all British imports. Ashram inmates—some 200 men and women—had to spin yarn daily on the *charkha* for an hour, do kitchen duty and wash their own clothes in the Sabarmati river. Gandhiji, seated on the floor at his spinning wheel, briefed Appachen about the abstinence expected of him, and how he should look upon the women of the ashram as his sisters.

"Am I expected to remain celibate throughout my life?" Appachen asked.

"No, not at all," Gandhiji replied. "Only so long as you remain in the precincts of this ashram."

Appachen gradually settled into a routine, waking hours before dawn to attend to his dairy duties. He began to enjoy spinning yarn and got used to the ashram's austere ways. Time and again Gandhiji had given those who couldn't follow the strict rules of purity of mind and body, or were unwilling to risk imprisonment, the option to leave. After one such occasion, Appachen wrote to Gandhiji, saying he "wasn't as pure as Bapu expected everyone to be..." Gandhiji assured Appachen that a daily effort to achieve perfection was all he wanted.

But boys will be boys and girls girls. Some youngsters there, Appachen

notes, were secretly romancing behind Bapu's back. Once, after a love letter was discovered, Gandhiji was so hurt that he declared: "It was only due to my own sins that such things happen among my own dear ones in the ashram." Appachen also writes about his own struggles with temptation, which he, overawed by Gandhiji's advice, managed to keep at bay with thoughts of God and a psalm.

Thus Appachen endeared himself to Bapu, so much so that when Gandhiji went to Kerala, he managed to find and visit Appachen's house. There he assured my grandpa that his son was safe and well.

Then, in early 1930, top leaders like Jawaharlal and Motilal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and Rajaji were visiting and privately consulting Gandhiji. Soon there were whispers of a "salt satyagraha."

When Gandhiji finally spoke about it to everyone, he insisted on strict discipline during the march—no evil thoughts, total peacefulness and no retaliation if any action is taken against them. It was not easy. Along the way, marchers should also see God in the poorest of the poor. On Bapu's advice that anybody who would find all this difficult may leave, some inmates even quit the ashram. While the men marched towards Dandi, women inmates were to take care of the ashram, Appachen's dairy job included.

Arrangements had been made for simple food along the way. The Lily

Biscuit Company in Calcutta had offered a consignment of biscuits, but Bapu politely said no—it would be "a luxury." The march started with a singing of one of Gandhiji's favourite hymns, "*Vaishnava jana to...*"



THE MARCHERS WERE OFTEN WEARY. WHEN APPACHEN'S FEET WERE BADLY SWOLLEN AT ONE POINT, BAPU HELPED.

Once they'd reach a resting place after walking about 20 km, they were to complete their daily quota of spinning. And no matter where they were, they'd assemble for prayers at 7:30pm. The marchers were often weary. Appachen's feet were badly swollen at one point. "Bapu saw it," he wrote, "and advised me to foment them in salt water and sleep with my feet resting on a higher level. The next day the swelling disappeared and I could continue the journey without a break." By the time the marchers reached Dandi, there was a multitude of followers.

RELEASED FROM JAIL following the Dandi arrests, Appachen returned to his dairy job at Sabarmati. In the summer of 1934, he went home to Kerala, this time for an arranged marriage to 17-

year-old Annamma. Reaching Sabar-mati after the few days in Kerala with her husband, Annamma imagined it would be their fun-filled, romantic honeymoon. But the couple had to live in separate quarters, and Annamma had to manage meals without meat or fish—tough for any Kerala Christian. She was also asked by Gandhiji to hand over her ornaments. She flatly refused. Her husband had to persuade her for days before she obliged.

Other ordeals soon followed. “Bahu, it is your duty today,” Bapu told Annamma lovingly. “Go and clean the latrine pots.” She was horrified. Once again Appachen had to explain things to her. I think all this strengthened my parents as a dedicated, industrious couple. However, the years with Bapu made Appachen a stubborn, disciplined man much like Bapu himself. And it looks like the very mentoring that changed him and brought him close to Gandhiji also resulted in their moving apart.

In 1934 Gandhiji was at Wardha, Maharashtra, planning to start another ashram with a new dairy. He telegrammed, asking Appachen to come over. He reached on a Tuesday—Mondays were *maun* days for Bapu, when he maintained silence and reflected. Gandhiji asked Appachen to check if the land in Wardha was fit for cattle breeding. “This barren place is not fit for any dairy,” he reported. But Bapu replied, “We have already made a beginning. And you’ll have to work

under Mirabehn here.”

Mirabehn was the name Gandhi had given Madeleine Slade, the daughter of a British aristocrat. She had come to India in 1925, became a close associate of Gandhiji and had, despite her background, joined the Independence movement, often pleading with the British for the cause.

“I cannot work under Mirabehn,” Appachen told Bapu. He simply didn’t want to be superseded by an English-woman.

“So you do not trust me?” Bapu asked Appachen, who left silently. He then travelled back to Kerala to be with his wife, already there and pregnant. Annamma soon delivered their first baby, a girl. She was to deliver six more children, all sons. I was the youngest, born in 1952 in Bhopal, where the family had settled.

MY APPACHEN, though, had full trust in Gandhiji. I should know. He was very religious, but as he grew old, he had always questioned the Christian belief that only they had a place in heaven. “I don’t want to go to a Christian heaven, if it has no room for Gandhiji,” he would say, hoping to meet the Mahatma again at least that way.

Our home in Bhopal, with nine of us, was often run like an ashram where all the children were expected to share the housework. Visitors, from Kerala and anywhere, often came to stay and look for jobs. To my parents,



PRASHANT SHARMA/IIT BOMBAY

Finally, recognition: Sculptor Chowki Srinivas works on his statue of a young Titusji, part of the Dandi Salt Satyagraha Memorial project, which will finish individual statues of 81 named Dandi marchers, including Gandhiji. The project involves 31 Indian and nine foreign sculptors working under the guidance of the Industrial Design Centre (IDC) at IIT Bombay. “The statues will finally be placed on a 15-acre area in Dandi next to Saifee Villa, where Gandhiji halted for the night after the march,” says Sethu Das, an IDC alumnus and consultant to the project. “A fitting tribute to those who marched bravely with Bapu, it’s a dream come true.”

it didn’t matter that there were more people to feed and care for. Providing for such a large family was not easy even after Appachen became a gazetted government official. Yet he donated most of the land he owned to the church to set up an ashram, which is still doing good work for the poor in Sehatganj village near Bhopal. We were all taught to lead simple lives, study hard and do well. I would also observe him treating the poor as equals, just as Gandhiji had wanted.

After my mother’s death in 1965, while I was away in a Mussoorie boarding school, Appachen managed much of the housework like cooking, cleaning and laundry himself. On several occasions, I requested him to give

up his khadi clothes since they were difficult to wash, starch and iron. But, in 1980, he died wearing a khadi shirt and khadi trousers. He was 75.

Appachen never used his links with Gandhiji for any personal gain or recognition. Proof enough when you consider that he got no freedom-fighter status or award, and there’s no street or square named after Thevert-hundiyil Titusji.

Appachen was happiest quietly working at the one thing that was his dharma—managing the dairy. **R**

Thomas Titus, 61, who lives in Bhopal, is a retired health services manager and freelance journalist. He and his wife Anita have a son and a daughter. Of his six siblings, three brothers survive today.