H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Meera Kosambi, ed. and trans. *Mahatma Gandhi and Prema Kantak: Exploring a Relationship, Exploring History.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013. 368 pp. $69.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-808293-4.

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Published on H-Asia (August, 2014)
Commissioned by Sumit Guha

Gandhi through the Eyes of a Disciple

Prema Kantak (1906-85) became Mohandas K. Gandhi's disciple early in her life. Everything she wrote and did was defined by her extraordinary admiration for him. In 1924, when she first saw him, she raced up the stage, donated one *anna* to his campaign, and touched his knees since his feet were tucked underneath him. That was the beginning of a remarkable journey that was to see this young Maharastrian become a resident of the Sabarmati ashram and a lifelong admirer of Gandhi. "Today I have had a vision of Brahman, the ultimate reality," she said when she joined Gandhi at the ashram (p. 56).

Meera Kosambi, one-time director of the Research Centre for Women's Studies at Women's University in Mumbai, translates, edits, and introduces us to an eclectic collection of Kantak's works, the most important of which are Gandhi's letters to Kantak. Kosambi published *Bapuke Patra* (Bapu's letters, 1961) in Hindi originally. An additional 74 out of a total of 248 are included in this volume in English. The letters reflect a lifelong bond forged with Gandhi. Her dedication to and questioning of Gandhian ideals are also reflected in the translated novels and nonfiction writings included in the volume.

Who was Prema Kantak? Born into a Gaud Saraswat Brahmin family, she lost her mother in her infancy, and was raised by her step-mother. She had a troubled relationship with her father who was, however, sufficiently open to provide her with education. She matriculated and earned a bachelor's degree at Bombay University in 1927, but, distracted by political activism, did not complete her master's degree. She joined the Congress Party and went to stay at the Sabarmati ashram in 1929 five years after she first met Gandhi. Kantak returned to Maharashtra after the ashram was disbanded in 1933. A year later, she helped to establish and supervise the Saswad ashram (1934-55) near Pune with the assistance of a close associate, Shankarrao Deo. There she engaged in village uplift projects and trained women volunteers for the Congress. In 1940, she went to jail four times, and during the Quit India movement she was jailed for eighteen months and released only in January 1944. She accepted appointment to the Kasturba Gandhi trust as a Maharashtra representative, but declined offers of high positions in the Congress. After 1951, she gave up membership of the Congress. In 1955-56, Kantak spent almost a year in an ashram near Hrishikesh, and then returned to Saswad.

The exchange of letters between Gandhi and Kantak defined the nineteen-year relationship between the two. Seventy-four of his letters are included in this volume, and in the absence of Kantak's own letters, her narration, prologue, and epilogue provide suitable contexts for them. They show how she deified Gandhi with a "reverence infused with mystic love" and was "possessive of him" (p. 19). As Kantak confided to her friends, "One can only be intoxicated on drinking one's fill of the flute of Mohan," equating Gandhi with Krishna (p. 70). In her dream, she revealed that she was a little girl "lying in his lap" as a "current of lovely, white milk" from his breast "fell straight" into her mouth. She "drank that sweet milk" with encouraging words from Gandhi, "drink, drink, drink" (p. 64). At the ashram, she reveled in her personal service to Gandhi. "As the days passed," she wrote, "I also got a chance to perform personal service for Respected Mahatmaji–making his bed, washing his feet when he returned home, messaging them with *ghee*, and other such things" (p. 69). She earned the privilege of having Gandhi's hand rest on her shoulder during his morning and evening walks. Once when Gandhi became ill after experimenting with diet, he "slumped against" her. She lifted him in both her arms and carried him to his bed. Gandhi allowed Kantak to tie a *rakhi* on his wrist, and she continued to send one annually even after she left the ashram. Kantak showed, however, fits of petty jealousy when she felt ignored by Gandhi.

Many of Gandhi's letters reflect an open and spon-

taneous discussion on serious personal issues. One such issue was celibacy. Intercourse disgusted her, but in line with Gandhi's thinking, it was acceptable for procreation. She was thirty-three years old when she wrote, "I may sleep with any man in the same bed during the whole night and get up in the morning as innocent as a child" (pp. 96-97). Kantak worried about her own celibacy in 1936 after hearing of Gandhi's ejaculations. Some happened while he was awake and others while he was asleep. One cannot totally control semen, he said, and lamented that he was an "incomplete *brahmachari*" (pp. 115-117).

Kantak was also a writer. How did she deal with important issues in her fictional and nonfictional works? Is there a "split authorial identity," as Kosambi suggests regarding Kantak's feminism (p. 1)? The two novels incorporated in the volume suggest this. *Kaam aani Kaamini* (Love and the beloved, 1937), tests the Gandhian notion of combining celibacy with social service in marriage. Mukund, a compassionate reformer, adopts celibacy and insists that his wife, Vrinda, do the same. The consequences are disastrous. As Vrinda laments, "It's like adorning a wife with special ornaments while starving her" (p. 172). Freed from spousal fidelity, she hooks up with a seducer who impregnates her. A son is born to her, and she finds work to raise the child on her own. As contrived as the plot is, it points to the kind of problematic hero this Gandhian ideal can produce.

In *Agniyaan* (A chariot of fire, 1942), she is more clear-headed about real-life situations. She speaks to us through Rohini and her two friends, Bhadra and Urmila. She raises a variety of people's lived experiences from 1928 to 1937. Regional and national politics intrude into the lives of all the characters. "We were being washed away in a great flood. We participated in meetings, processions, picketing" (p. 259). While remaining a Gandhi admirer, Kantak took positions different from Gandhi through Rohini, who "felt no unshakeable devotion [to him], only reverence and respect" (p. 272). Set against the backdrop of anti-Gandhian Maharastrian politics of the 1920s, we see Gandhism challenged by socialists and revolutionaries. One-time Gandhian Dada became disillusioned and joined the Hindu Mahasabha. Idealists do falter, as in the case of Bhavanand. Many Maharastrians come around to Gandhi's way of thinking, gradually joining the Congress. They adopted *swadeshi* (exclusive use of indigenous products) as a principle and organized homespun textile sales and *prabhat pheris* (early morning marches), attended Congress meetings, went to prison (the metaphorical temple of *swaraj* or self-rule) even as others rejected Gandhism. A great deal of play is given to educated and independent-minded women who engage in social and political movements. They are free in their personal relationships and choice of careers. We see a new kind of woman in this novel. While Gandhi valued them for their softening impact on male aggressiveness, Kantak gave them a more central role as doers in their own right. Family life went beyond simply a husband-wife-children setting. In this novel the relationships between men and women, between husbands and wives are drawn less idealistically and more realistically. The volume includes two nonfictional writings published in 1940 and 1945, respectively. These contain direct and indirect reference to the role of women. The first outlines Maharastrian developments from 1920 to 1936 in broad strokes; and the second addresses the generally sorry plight of Indian women. Freed from their shackles, they can contribute equally to India's welfare. Kantak's position on women was that as independent individuals they had important roles to play in society.

We get to know a lot about Kantak, but the absence of historiographical depth prevents us from knowing her fully. What was distinctive about her experience? In what way does Kantak's experience open a "new dimension" to understanding Gandhi (p. 3)? Such questions required Kosambi to place Kantak in the context of the experience of other women disciples. Gandhi loved the company of women, foreign and domestic; treated them as daughters, sister,s or mothers; and achieved degrees of closeness with them. As Sudhir Kakar explains, Gandhi needed "tender, feminine friendship within invisible limits" and "could not let [them] get away further than the distance he unconsciously held to be optimal for his own feelings of well-being" (p. 32). He kept close to them through copious letters. Some were intellectually his equal. Others included young girls like Manu and Abha Gandhi. Controversies surrounded Gandhi's experiments at the ashram. Manu Gandhi and Madeline Slade have written about their experiences; Sushila Nayar has authored many works on Gandhi; and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur has published Gandhi's letters to her. There are countless secondary works dealing with Gandhi's ashram activities, not many of which appear in Kosambi's list of references. This book would have benefited from a fuller discussion of Kantak's experience at the ashram within the context of the experience of other ashramites so that we can better understand what was unique and distinct about her disciplehood.

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Citation: Surendra Bhana. Review of Kosambi, Meera, ed. and trans., *Mahatma Gandhi and Prema Kantak: Exploring a Relationship, Exploring History*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. August, 2014.
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