CHAPTER - III

WOMEN IN THE LATER NOVELS
AND
THEIR CULTURAL AWARENESS

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With each new novel of Narayan, the reader finds that the dimensions of culture and its awareness go on expanding. In Waiting for the Mahatma, we find both traditional culture and the new culture — a casteless, non-violent and truth-based society which Mahatma Gandhi and his staunch supporters not only propagate but also practise.

Waiting for the Mahatma is a tale of the upsurge of Indian nationalism as witnessed through the eyes and hearts of the hero Sitaram and the heroine Bharati. It was first published in London by Methuen and Co. in 1955 and re-issued by William Heinemann in 1979. The first Indian edition was brought out by Indian Thought Publications, Mysore in 1964 and till now it has run into 12th Reprint.

The publisher's blurb says:

Sriram is twenty. As a mark of his coming of age, his grandmother allows him the Pass Book of his savings in the local bank, but Sriram is growing up in other ways, too. An enchanting and unpredictable girl (Bharati) leads him into the entourage of Mahatma Gandhi.

Bharati, the girl he worships, is witty, infuriating, capable, and condescending to the moonstruck Sriram. Her first loyalty, however, is to the Mahatma, a saint blessed with a disconcerting common sense, a man whose tragedy is that he is so much greater than his followers.
Belief in the birth star

Since he lost his parents, Sriram had been brought up by his grandmother with affectionate concern and tender care. One evening she asked him what star it would be the next day. She said that Sriram's age, his father could read the almanac and say what star was reigning over which particular day. Dragging Sriram by the hand, she took the brown paper-covered almanac from under a tile of their sloping roof. Then she clamoured for her spectacles till they were fetched. She forced Sriram to open the almanac and go through it to a particular page. It was full of bewildering symbols in intricate columns. She put her finger on a letter and asked what it was.

"Sa......" he read. "It means Sadhaya. That's your star". She drew her finger along the line and pointed at the morrow's date "Tomorrow is this date, which means it's your birth star. It's going to be your twentieth birthday. I am going to celebrate it. Would you like to invite any of your friends?

"No, never", said Sriram positively. (WM, 9)

Sugarcane for birthday celebration auspicious

Granny had secured a yard-long sugarcane for the celebration from somewhere, although it was not the season. She said:

No birthday is truly celebrated unless and until a sugarcane is seen in the house. It's auspicious. (WM, 10)

She strung mango leaves across the doorway and decorated the threshold with coloured rice powder.

She felt sorry at not being able to call in the neighbours, but her recluse grandson had forbidden her to invite anyone. Left to herself, she would
have engaged pipes and drums and procession, for this particular birthday was a thing she had been planning all along, this twentieth birthday when she would hand over the savings Pass Book to her grandson and relinquish the trust.

**The girl in white sari**

Granny asked for some jaggery and jasmine for her puja. As Sriram approached the Market Fountain, a pretty girl came up and stopped him. She shook a sealed collection box and asked for his contribution. Sriram had never been spoken to by any girl before. She was slender and young, with eyes that sparkled with happiness. He wanted to ask:

How old are you? What caste are you? where is your horoscope? Are you free to marry me? *(WM, 22)*

Sriram fumbled in his Jibba side-pocket for loose change and brought out an eight anna silver coin and dropped it into the slot. The girl smiled at him in return and went away, seeming to move with the lightest of steps like a dancer. Sriram had a wild hope that she would let him touch her hand, but she moved off.

"*A bird gliding on wings*"

The girl had disappeared into the market like a bird gliding on wings. Sriram realised he had not even asked her what the contribution was for. He wished he had thrust a ten-rupee note into her collection box, because that would have given her a better impression of him, and would have her possibly have made her stand and talk to him. He should have asked her where she lived. He ought to have emptied all his money into her money-box.
The girl has something to do with Mahatma Gandhi

Sriram told the jaggery merchant that he had seen a girl jingling a money-box. The jaggery merchant said:

"I too had to give some cash. We have to. We can't refuse".

"Who is she?" Sriram asked.

"She has something to do with Mahatma Gandhi and is collecting a fund. You know the Mahatma is coming." (WM, 24)

Sriram suddenly woke to the fact that Malgudi was about to have the honour of receiving Mahatma Gandhi.

Patriotism: genuine and fake

There was a sudden lull when Gandhiji arrived on the platform and took his seat. Some one whispered in to Sriram's ears that the man with Gandhiji was Mahadev Desai, and the man behind Gandhiji was Mr Natesh, Malgudi Municipal Chairman. Someone sneered at the mention of Mr Natesh's name:

"Some people conveniently adopt patriotism when Mahatmaji arrives".

"Otherwise how can they have a ride in the big procession and seat on the dais" (WM, 26)

Non-violent soldiers to cut chains that bind Mother India

Mahatma Gandhi stood on the dais, with his palms brought together in a salute. A mighty cry rang out, "Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai," Gandhiji clapped his hands rhythmically and said:"
I want you all to keep this up, this beating for a while. No good not enough. I like to see more vigour in your arms, more rhythm, more spirit. It must be like the drum-beats of the non-violent soldiers marching on to cut the chains that bind Mother India. I want to hear the great beat. I like to see all arms upraised and clapping. There is nothing to be ashamed of in it. I want to see unity in it. I want you all to do it with a single mind. (WM, 26-27)

At once, every man, woman, and child raised their arms and clapped over their heads.

**English: "the language of our rulers"**

A mighty choral chant to a simple tune, led by a girl at the microphone, then began:

Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram,
Patitha Pavan Seetha Ram.

It went on and on, and ceased when Mahatmaji began his speech. Natesh interpreted in Tamil what Gandhiji said in Hindi. At the outset, Mahatma Gandhi explained that he would speak only in Hindi as a matter of principle.

I will not address you in English. It's the language of our rulers. It has enslaved us. I very much wish I would speak to you in your own sweet language, Tamil; but, also I am too hard-pressed for time to master it now. (WM, 27)

**Soldiers of a non-violent army**

Mahatma Gandhi said:

I see before me a vast army. Everyone of you has certain good points and certain defects, and you must all strive to discipline yourselves before we can hope to attain freedom for our country. An army is always in training and keeps itself
in good shape by regular drill and discipline.

We, the citizens of this country, are all soldiers of a non-violent army, but even such an army has to practise a few things daily in order to keep itself in proper condition: we do not have to bask in the sun and cry "Left" or "Right". But we have a system of our own to follow: that's Ram Dhun, spinning on the charkha, and the practice of absolute Truth and Non-violence. (WM, 28)

"Turn the other cheek"

At the next evening's meeting, Sriram found himself beside the enclosure where the women assembled. Most of them were without ornaments, knowing Gandhiji's aversion to all show and luxury. Even then they were an attractive lot, in their saris of varied colours, and Sriram sat unashamedly staring at the gathering, for his favourite hobby at the moment was to speculate on what type of wife he would prefer.

Sriram recollected Gandhiji's suggestion on the previous day. The Mahatma had said this in answering a question that someone from the audience had put to him:

All women are your sisters and mothers. Never look at them with thoughts of lust. If you are troubled by such thoughts, this is the remedy: walk with your head down, looking at the ground during the day, and with your eyes up, looking at the stars at night. (WM, 29)

Presently, Mahatmaji ascended the platform. Shriram hostily took his eyes off the ladies and joined in the hand clapping with well-timed devotion and then in the singing of Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram. After that, Gandhiji spoke on non-violence, and explained how it could it be practise in daily life:
It is perfectly simple procedure, provided you have faith in it... Avoid all actions, big or small, and all thoughts, however obscure, which may cause pain to others... When someone has wronged you or has done something which appears to you to be evil, just pray for the destruction of that evil. Cultivate an extra affection for the person and you will find that you are able to bring about a change in him. Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ meant the same thing when he said "Turn the other cheek." *(WM, 30)*

**Untouchability and Caste**

When Mahatmaji spoke of untouchability and caste, Sriram reflected:

There must be a great deal in what he says.
We always think we are superior people. How Granny bullies that ragged scavenger who comes to our house every day to sweep the backyard.* *(WM, 50-51)*

Granny was so orthodox that she would not let the scavenger approach nearer than ten yards, and habitually adopted a bullying tone while addressing him. Sriram also took devilish pleasure in joining the baiting and finding fault with the scavenger's work, although he never paid the slightest attention to their comments. He simply went about his business, driving his broom vigorously and interrupting himself only to ask, "When will master give me an old shirt he promised so long ago?"

**Comments**

Untouchability is now regarded as a blot on Hindu culture. This practice not only degrades but also dehumanises the untouchable. In this passage, Narayan has shown that the scavenger is deprived of his human dignity, because Granny does not allow him to "approach nearer than ten yard". He is regarded, in terms of caste, as the lowest of the low. Both
Granny and Sriram take delight in bullying him, for no fault of his own. He has also become so abject and accustomed to centuries-old subhuman treatment that he never utters a single word of protest. His attitude towards the higher caste and his economic deprivation are indicated when he calls Sriram "master", and reminds him that Sriram had promised to give him an old shirt. The words "long ago" suggest that high-caste people do not bother to keep promises to the untouchables, because members of the scavenger community are inconsequential. Sriram is made aware of all these wrongs only when the Mahatma spoke of untouchability and caste, the two social evils which he wanted to eradicate from Hindu culture and society.

The Mahatma's hut in sweeper's colony

Sriram approached a wicket gate made of thorns and bamboo. He saw the girl, with whom he had fallen in love at first sight, going ahead to open the gate. He noted with satisfaction that she was not very tall, himself being of medium height. Gandhiji's said something to her and she was nodding and smiling.

The Mahatma entered his hut. This was one of the dozen huts belonging to the city sweepers who lived on the banks of the river. It was probably the worst area in the town. It was an exaggeration even to call them huts. They were just hovels, put together with rags, tin-sheets, and shreds of coconut matting, all crowded in anyhow, with scratchy fowls cackling about and children growing in the street dust. The municipal services were neither extended here nor missed, although the people living in the hovels were employed by the municipality for scavenging work in the town. They were paid ten rupees a month per head, and, since they worked in families of four or five, each family had a considerable income.
by Malgudi standards. They hardly ever lived in their huts, spending all their time around the municipal building or at the toddy shop run by the Government, which absorbed all their earnings.

These scavengers spent less than a tenth of their income on food or clothing, always depending upon mendicancy in their off hours for survival. Their possessions were few. If a cow or a calf died in the city, they were called in to carry off the carcass, and then the colony at the river's edge brightened us, for they held a feast on the flesh of the dead animal and made money out of its hide. Reformers looked on with wrath and horror, but did little else, since as an untonchable class they lived outside the town limits where nobody went, and they used only a part of the river on its downward course.

The cult of Khaddar

Mahatma Gandhi popularised the use of the charka for spinning cotton yarn which was utilised to make Khaddar. He did this to provide employment to families of millions of poor people to enable them to keep body and soul together. In one of the public meetings, Sri Ram noticed on the dais the girl who had jingled a money-box in his face a few days ago, at the market. She was clad in a sari of Khaddar, white home-spun, and he noticed how well it suited her. Before, he had felt that the wearing of Khaddar was a fad, that it was apparel fit only for cranks, but now he realised how lovely it could be. He paused for a moment to consider whether it was the wearer who was enriching the cloth or whether the material was good in itself. There she stood, like a vision beside the microphone, on the high dais, commanding the whole scene, a person who was worthy of standing before Mahatmaji's microphone. How confidently
she faced the crowd! Sriram decided that he would refuse to look at anyone who did not wear Khadi. He concluded that Khadi alone was going to save the nation from ruin and get the English out of India.

**Love: the basis of non-violence**

Sriram learnt another useful lesson. when the Mahatma appeared on the dais, an applause rang out and sriram joined it Gandhiji held up his hand to say:

> It is not enough for you to clap your hands and show your appreciation of me. I am not prepared to accept it all so easily. I want you really to make sure of a change in your hearts before you ever think of asking the British to leave the shores of India. It's all very well for you to take up the cry and create and uproar. But that's not enough. I want you to clear your hearts and minds and make certain that only love resides there and there is no residue of bitterness for past history. Only then can you say to the British, "Please leave this country to be managed or mismanaged by us, that's purely our own business, and come back any time you like as our friends and distinguished guests, not as our rulers", and you will find john bull packing his suit-case. But be sure you have in your heart love and not bitterness.

> If I have the slightest suspicion that your heart is not pure or that there is bitterness there, I'd rather have the British stay on. It's the lesser of the two evils. (WM, 32)

**The censored welcome address**

Natesh, as Chairman of Malgudi Municipality, had prepared an address welcoming Mahatma Gandhi: it was to be delivered by him outside the railway station. When Gandhiji arrived, he was ceremoniously
received. Natesh introduced to him, one by one, all the big-wigs of Malgudi and the local gentry. The crowd was constantly shouting: "Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai". When the Chairman read his address of welcome at the elaborately constructed archway, he could hardly be heard, much to his chagrin. He had spent the whole week composing the text of the address with the help of a local journalist, adding whatever would show off either his patriotism or the eminent position Malgudi occupied in the country's life.

The Collector had taken the trouble to go through the address, before it was sent for printing, in order to make sure that it contained no insult to the British Empire, that it did not hinder the war effort, and that it in no way betrayed military secrets. He had to censor it in several places. The Chairman had compared Malgudi to Switzerland. The Collector scored this out because he felt it might embarrass a neutral state. He also deleted a reference to the hosiery trade, since the Collector felt this was a blatant advertisement for the Chairman's goods, and in any case he did not want enemy planes to come looking for this institution thinking it was a camouflage for the manufacture of war material. He also cut all those passages which hinted at the work done by Gandhiji in the political field. The picture of Gandhiji as a social reformer was left intact and even enlarged. Anyone who read the address would conclude that political activities were the last thing that Mahatmaji was interested in.

"The programme as framed"

Cries of "Mahatmaji Ki Jai" and "Down with the Municipal Chairman" made the speech inaudible. The crowd was so noisy that Mahatmaji had to remonstrate once or twice. When he held up his hand,
the crowd subsided and waited to listen to him. He said quietly:

"This is sheer lack of order, which I cannot commend. Your Chairman is reading something and I am courtesy bound to know what he is saying. You must all keep quiet. Let him proceed."

"No", cried the crowd. "We want to hear Mahatma, and not the Municipal Chairman."

"Yes", replied Mahatma. "You will soon hear me, in about an hour on the banks of your Sarayu River. That is the programme as framed."

"By whom?"

"Never mind by whom. It has my approval. That is how it stands. On the sands of the Saryu in about an hour. Your Chairman has agreed to let me off without a reply to his very kind address. You will have to listen to what he has to say." (WM, 42)

The town celebrating the Mahatma's visit

Through archways and ringing cries of "Gandhiji Ki Jai", the Mahatma drove in the huge Bentley which the Chairman had left at his disposal. People sat on tree and house-tops all along the way and cheered Gandhiji as he passed. The police had cordoned off various side streets so the passage was clear. There were police everywhere. All shops had been closed and all schools, and the whole town was celebrating. School children felt delighted at the thought of Gandhiji, Office-goers were happy, and even banks were closed. They waited in the sun for hours, saw him pass in his Bentley, a white-clad figure, fair skinned and radiant, with his palms pressed together in a salute. Substitutions in the Chairman's palatial mansion. The Bentley entered Neel Bagh whose massive gates were of cast iron, patterned after the gates of Buckingham Palace. The thought that Gandhiji was actually within his gates sent a thrill of joy up and down the
Chairman's spine. Some years before, he would never have thought of forsaking his own air-conditioned suite and choosing to reside at the Circuit House, for anybody's sake. Natesh had now surrendered his whole house to Gandhiji.

The Chairman had substituted Khaddar hangings for the gaudy chintz that had adorned his doorways and windows. He had taken down pictures of hunting gentry, vague gods and kings. He had even removed the picture of George V’s wedding and substituted pictures of Maulana Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru Sarojini Naidu, Motilal Nehru, C. Rajagopalachari and Annie Besant. He had also managed to get a picture of Krishna discoursing to Arjuna on Bhagavad Gita, knowing well Gandhiji bias towards Bhagavad Gita. He had kept on the windowsill and a few other places a few specimens of charka. Natesh had also secured for himself a Khaddar jibba and a white Gandhi cap, for his wife a white Khaddar sari, and for his son a complete outfit in Khaddar.

The moment the car stoped in the decorated porch of the house, the chairman jumped down, held the door open, and helped Mahatmaji to alight.

"You are most welcome to this humble abode of mine, great sire," he said in confusion. Mahatmaji got down from the car and looked at the house.

"Is this your house?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, by the grace of God, I built it four years ago," the Chairman said. (WM, 45)

**The Mahatama's love for children**

The Chairman led Gandhiji up the verandah steps. He had placed a divan in the verandah covered with Khaddar printed cloth. He seated Gandhiji on it and asked the Mahatma's secretary in a whisper: " May I
give Mahatmaji a glassful of orange juice? The oranges are from my own estates in Mempi. A number of visitors and a miscellaneous crowd of people were passing in and out. It seemed to the Chairman that Mahatmaji’s presence had converted his house into a public place. People were squatting on the lawns and the Chairman saw helplessly that some were plucking flowers which had been tended by his municipal overseers.

The Chairman brought a large tray filled with oranges and placed it in front of Mahatmaji. On the edge of the crowd, Mahatmaji noticed a little boy and beckoned to him to come nearer. Gandhiji offered him a seat on the divan and gave him an orange. This acted as a signal, and presently the divan was swarming with children. When the tray was empty, Gandhiji asked for more oranges.

The Chairman brought a further supply in a basket. The children threw off their reserve, became clamorous, and soon the basket was empty. There were some flowers and garland which had been presented to the Mahatma on his arrival and all along the way by various associations. Gandhiji distributed them to all the little girls he saw in the gathering. The Chairman felt chagrined at the thought that the event was developing into a children’s party.

The Mahatma and the untouchable boy

Mahatmaji saw one child standing apart from the rest. The boy was a small dark fellow, with a protruding belly. He was wearing nothing over his body except a cast-off knitted vest, adult size, full of holes, which reached down to his ankles. His face was covered with mud and his feet were dirty. He had not dared to come up the steps, though attracted by oranges. Mahatmaji beckoned to the young fellow. One of his men went
and fetched him. The Chairman's blood boiled. Of course, people must like poor people and so on, but why bring in such a dirty boy, an untouchable, up the steps and make him so important?

Mahatmaji had the young urchin hoisted beside him on the divan. The boy nestled close to the Mahatma, who was smoothing out his matted hair with his fingers. He learnt that the boy's father swept the streets. "With a long broom or a short broom?" the Mahatma asked.

The explained, "He has both a long broom and a short broom".

The Mahatma turned to someone and explained: "It means that he is both a municipal sweeper and that he has scavenging work to do in private houses also. The long broom ought to be the municipal emblem."

"Where is your father at the moment?"

"He is working at the market. He will take me home when he has finished his work."

"And how have you managed to come here?"

"I was sitting on the road waiting for my father and I came along with the crowd. No one stopped me when I entered the gates."

"That's a very clever boy," Mahatmaji said.

"I'm very happy to see you."

Then Gandhiji asked: "Where do you live?"

"There at the end of the river."

"Will you let me come to your house?"

"Not now - because it's so far away."

"Don't bother about that. I've a motor-car here given to me by this very rich man. I can be there in a moment. I'll take you along in the motor-car too if you will show me your house."

"It is not a house like this," said the boy.

"But made of bamboo or something."
"Is that so?" said the Mahatma. "Then I'll like it all the more. I'll be very happy there." (WM, 48-50)

Gandhiji had a brief session with a delegation which had come to see him by appointment.

When it left, he dictated some notes, wrote something, and then, picking up his staff, told the chairman that they should go to the boy's house, because he had offered to take the child home and he must not disappoint him. He would also like to see the boy's father if he could be met anywhere on the way.

Mahatmaji gave his forefinger to the boy to clutch and allowed himself to be led down the verandah steps. The Chairman asked if the Mahatma would come in and had a look around his "humble home". The Mahatma replied he knew how it would be. It must be very grand. He told the Chairman to spare an old man like him the bother of walking through those vast spaces. He also invited the Chairman to come and stay with him in a hut.

The tidying up of the sweeper's colony

The authorities did everything to transform the scavengers' settlement. All the stench vanished. All the garbage and offal that lay about, and flesh and hide put out to sun-dry on the roofs, disappeared. All that night municipal and other employees kept working, with the aid of petrol lamps. This light was such a rarity that the children kept dancing all night around the lamps. Gandhiji noticed the hectic activity, but refrained from commenting on it out of a sense of charity. Only when it was all over, he said: "Now one can believe that the true cleansers of the city live here".
The men of the colony tied round their heads their whitest turbans and the women wore their best saris, dragged their children to the river and scrubbed them till they yelled, and decorated their coiffures with yellow chrysanthemum flowers. The men left off fighting, did their best to keep away from the drink shops, and even the few confirmed topers had their drinks on the sly, and suppressed their impulse to beat their wives or break their household pots. The whole place looked bright with lamps and green mango leaves tied across lamp-posts and tree branches.

**Performance of several things simultaneously**

Gandhiji occupied a hut which had a low entrance. He did not like to oust anyone from his hut. He chose one facing the river sand, after making certain that it had been vacant, the occupant of the hut having gone elsewhere. The Chairman brought in a low divan and covered the floor with a coarse rush mat for Gandhiji's visitors to sit on. Sriram lowered himself unobtrusively on the mat. Gandhiji sat on his divan, and dictated to one of his secretaries. They wrote voluminously. Mahatmaji performed a number of things simultaneously. He spoke to visitors. He dictated. He wrote. He prayed. He had his sparse dinner of nuts and milk, and presently he even laid himself down on the divan and went off to sleep. It was then that someone turned off the lamp, and people walked out of the hut.

**The oath of absolute truth**

When Sriram saw the girl was preparing to leave the hut, he thought he had better get up and go. She went past him, but suddenly
stopped and whispered:

"You will have to go now.... What is your name?

He answered, "Sriram ..... Don't you remember me?
I saw you when you came with a money-box in the market the other day ".

"...Anyway, I asked you what you are doing here now".

"Perhaps I'm one of the volunteers", Sriram said She asked, with a little irritation, "Are we going to stand here and talk the whole night?"

"Yes, unless you show me where we can go ".

"I know where I ought to go ", she said. " You see that hut there," she pointed to a small hut four doors off Gandhiji's.
"That's where all the women of this camp are quartered ... I have a right to ask you what you are doing here and report to our Chalak if I don't like you... None except absolute truth-speakers is allowed to come into Mahatma's Camp. People who come here must take an oath of absolute truth before toing into Mahatma's presence".

"What have I done that you should threaten and menace me?"

This softened her, and he noticed a little tenderness had crept into her tone. " Do you mind moving off and waiting there? We should not be taking like this near Mahatmaji's hut. I wiil go to my hut and then join you there. "(WM, 55-56)

Compassion for the motherless

The girl turned and disappeared: she had the lightning-like motion of a dancer. Sriram sat on a boulder on the edge of the river. He realised he had not yet asked her name. He remembered that he had felt hungry and thirsty long ago. "I wish they would give us all something to eat in Mahatmaji's camp". He remembered that the Mahatma ate only groundnuts and dates.
The moment the girl came back, Sriram said:
"What is your name?"
"Bharati", she answered. "Why?"
"You have the same style of talk as my grandmother".
She ignored the comparison and asked, "What about your mother?"
"I have never seen her. My grandmother has always been father and mother to me." (WM, 57)

Bharati became tender when she found that she was talking to someone without a mother. Noticing this, Sriram felt it was worthwhile being motherless and grandmother-tended. Bharati, sat on the same step, with her legs dancing in the river, leaving a gap of a couple of feet between them.

As regards Gandhiji, he was a Mahatma because, awake or asleep, he was fully aware of what was going on all around him. God alone could say what the Mahatma would do to someone who did not possess absolute purity of thought where girls were concerned. If one was to live in his camp, one had to follow the orders that emanated from the great soul. He struggled against evil thoughts and said, "Bharati." She looked startled at being called so familiarly, and he himself felt startled by the music of her name.

"What a nice name!" he remarked.
"I am glad you like it", she said. "The name was given by Bapuji himself".
"Oh, how grand!" he cried. (WM, 58)

Sevak Sangh

Bharati said her father died during the 1920 movement, just when she was born. When he learnt of it, Bapuji made himself her godfather and named her Bharati. Bharati is India, and Bharati means the daughter.
of India. After her mother died, she was practically adopted by the local Sevak Sangh and had known no other home since her adoption. Sriram said:

"I too wish I could be with you all and do something instead of wasting my life."
"What do you want to do?"
"The same as what you are doing. What are you doing?"
he asked.
"I do whatever I am asked to do by the Sevak Sangh. Sometimes they ask me to go and teach people spinning and tell them about Mahatmaji's ideas. Sometimes they send me to villages and poor quarters. I meet them and talk to them and do a few things. I attend to Mahatmaji needs."
"Please let me also do something along with you", he pleaded.
"But why? she asked."
He summoned all his courage and answered,
"Because I like you, and I like to be with you." (WM, 59)

The Mahatma's hut: the only place to meet Bharati

Bharati promised to take Sriram to the Mahatma. Sriram would have to face Bapuji if he wanted to work with the volunteers. Gandhiji was not going to examine Sriram like an Inspector of Schools. Sriram did not have to talk to him unless he had something to say. He might keep his mouth shut and Gandhiji would not mind. But he would have to speak the truth if he spoke at all. Sriram said:

"Bharati, tell me if I may meet you anywhere else. Otherwise let me go."
She replied with equal resolution: "If you wish to meet me, come to Bapuji, the only place where you may see me. Of course, if you don't want to see me any more, go away. "Where? How?" he asked.
"Come to the door of Bapu's hut and wait for me at three tomorrow morning. I'll take you to him." (WM, 61-62)

Saying this, she jumped to her feet and ran off to her hut.

**Granny's attitude toward Mahatma Gandhi**

Granny had slept fitfully. She had gone to Kanni's shop five times during the evening to inquire if anyone had seen Sriram, and sent a boy, who had come to make a purchase there, to look for Sriram everywhere. At last, the schoolmaster, who lived up the street, told her that he had seen Sriram in the Mahatma's camp.

Granny was alarmed. For her, the Mahatma was one who preached dangerously, who tried to bring untouchables into the temples, and who involved people in difficulties with the police.

She did not like the idea. She wailed:

"Oh, master, why did you allow him to stay on there? You should have brought him away. It is so late and he has not come home. As his old teacher, you should have weaned him away.hl

"Don't worry, madam, he is perfectly safe. How many of us could have the privilege of being so near the Mahatma? You must be happy that he is doing so well! Our country needs more young men like him."

Granny replied, "It is teachers like you who have ruined our boys and this country". (WM, 66)

**State of semi-enchantment**

When Sriram arrived, he was in a state of semi-enchantment. Bharati's presence and talk still echoed in his mind. He recollected the thrill
of her touch. He liked to think that, when he was not noticing, she had touched his arm and patted his shoulder. He thought how he would prefer the rest of his life, listening to her banter.

Sriram went to bed and slept for less than an hour. Bharati wanted him at three in the morning, and he needed an hour to reach the place. He got up before one, washed and bathed and put on special clothes, bent over Granny's bed to whisper, "I have to be going now. Bolt the door".

The great presence

Sriram stood at the entrance to Mahatmaji's hut. Bharati had asked him to be present at the portals of the Great Presence. Perhaps she had been fooling him. Even the scavengers, the earliest to rise in the town, were still asleep. The door of Mahatmaji's hut was half open. Light streamed out through the gap. He peeped in.

"Oh, there he is!" cried Bharati, with laughter in her voice. "You may open the door if you wish to come in".

"Come in, come in", said the Mahatma. "Why should you be standing there? You should have come straight in. Bharati has just been mentioning you." (WM, 66)

Gandhiji spoke while his hands were busy turning a spinning wheel, drawing out a fine thread. A man sitting in a corner, with a pad on his knee, was writing. Another person held a letter before Gandhiji which Gandhiji perused. He also found it possible to put in a word of welcome to Sriram. He said: "Sit down, young man. Come and sit as near me as you like". Sriram sat on the floor near Mahatmaji and watched with fascination the smooth turning of the spinning wheel.
The Mahatma said:

"Nowadays I generally get up an hour earlier in order to be able to do this. Spinning a certain length is my most important work. Even my prayer comes only after that. I'd very much like you to take a vow to wear cloth made out of your own hands each day".

"Yes, I will do so ", Sriram promised. (WM, 67)

**Belief in the omnipresence of God**

When the gong in the Taluk Office struck four, the Mahatma invited Sriram to go out with him for a walk. He seized his staff in one hand and with the other supported himself on the shoulder of Bharati and strode out of the hut.

He tucked his watch at his waist into a fold of his white dhoti. He pulled it out and said:

**Half an hour I have to walk. Come with me, Sriram. You can talk to me undisturbed.**

A few others joined them. Sriram felt he was walking through some unreal dream world. The Mahatma was in between him and Bharati. The Mahatma said:

God is everywhere; and, if you want to feel His presence, you will see Him in a place like this, with a beautiful river flowing, the sunrise with all its colours, and the air so fresh. Feeling a beautiful hour, or a beautiful scene, or a beautiful object is itself a form of prayer. (WM, 68)

Sriram listened in reverential silence. When Gandhiji spoke of beauty, it sounded unreal as applied to the sun and the air, but the word acquired a practical significance when he thought of it in terms of Bharati. The Mahatma asked him:
"What exactly do you want to do?"
Sriram said, "I like to be where Bharati is."
The Mahatma said, "Oh, is that so?" He patted Bharati's back and said: "What a fine friend you have: You must be pleased to have such a devoted friend." (WM, 70)

Citizen of a new world

Sriram's anxiety lest he should fall asleep when the Mahatma was up kept him awake the whole night. He shared the space on the floor with one of the men in the camp. It was a strange feeling to lie down in a hut, He felt he was becoming a citizen of an entirely new world. He missed the cosy room of his house. He missed the two pillows and the soft mattress and the carpet under it. He had to adopt an entirely new mode of life. He had to live, of his own choice, in a narrow hut, with thatch above, with a dingy, sooty smell hanging about everything. The floor had been swept with cow dung and covered with a thin layer of sand. He had to snuggle his head on the crook of his arm for a pillow.

Society of self-mortification and suffering

In society, in general, luxuries gave one a status, but in the Mahatma's camp it was the opposite. The more one showed an inclination for hardship and discomfort, the greater was one's chance of being admitted into the fold. Sriram had understood it the moment he stepped into the camp. Here the currency was suffering and self-mortification. Everyone seemed to excel his neighbour in managing in uncomfortable situations. Sriram caught the spirit, though it took him time to grasp the detail and get accustomed to it.
Freedom fighters: ready to be lathi-charged, jailed, even shot

There had been a meeting in the evening. The Mahatma retired at his usual hour of seven-thirty. It was a signal for the entire camp to retire. Bharati sought out Sriram and gave him a plateful of rice, butter-milk, and an orange. She told him she had found a place for him to sleep, with a volunteer named Gorpad.

Gorpad, welcoming Sriram, said:

"We are all persons who have to live like soldiers in a camp. We are indeed soldiers in our fight to eject the British from our land. We are all prepared to sacrifice our lives for the task. We sleep here on the bare floor, because the major part of our lives we shall have to spend in jail, here we won't be given such a comfortable bed unless we are A and B class prisoners. We are not important enough to be classified as A or B and you had better to get used to it all; and we are always prepared to be beaten by the Police, Lathi-charged, dragged to the jail, or even shot. My father died ten years ago facing a policeman's gun". (WM, 75)

Ethics of "ahimsa"

In the early hours of the morning, Sriram felt himself equipped to walk with the Mahatma without embarrassment. He told the Mahatma it was his greatest desire in life to take a vow to oust the British from India. The Mahatma asked Sriram how he proposed to do it. Sriram answered:

With your blessings, sir, I shall make myself good enough for the task. I shall be with you as long as possible. If you kindly guide me, you can make me a soldier fit to take up the fight to make the British leave our country. (WM, 77)

The Mahatma explained to Sriram how the freedom fight was to be fought:
Before you aspire to drive the British from this county, you must drive every vestige of violence from your system. Remember that it is not going to be a fight with sticks and knives or guns, but only with love. Until you are sure you have an overpowering love at heart for your enemy, don't think of driving him out. You must gradually forget the term "enemy". You must think of him as a friend who must leave you. You must train yourself to become a hundred per cent ahimsa soldier. You must become so sensitive that it is not possible for you to wear sandals made of the hide of slaughtered animals. You should prefer to go barefoot rather than wear the hide of an animal killed for your sake that is if you are unable to secure the skin of an animal that has died a natural death. (WM, 77-78)

Sriram's eyes were fixed on Mahatmaji's feet. The Mahatma read his thought and said:

Yes, there are sandals made of just such leather. In our tannery at Wardha, we specialise in it. No one our Ashram wears anything else. (WM, 78)

**The villages and the British war machine**

Sriram was told that he could accompany the Mahatma in his tour of famine-stricken villages. Some villages were hardly more than a cluster of huts. Sriram was informed that there were "seven hundred thousand other villages more or less like this in our country". They were out to survey the villages which had recently been affected by famine. It was a mission of mercy. Mahatmaji had set out to study the famine conditions at first hand, and to put courage and hope into the sufferers. It was a grim, melancholy undertaking. The Mahatama had his other engagements. A distant war being fought in Europe, and probably about to start in the Far East, had their repercussion here.
Gorpad looked oppressed with a sense of tragedy. He spoke less, retired early, mortified himself more and more. He said:

"See what the British have done to our country. This famine is their manoeuvring to keep us in enslavement. They are plundering the forests and fields to keep their war machinery going, and the actual sufferer is this child," pointing at any village child who might chance to come that way, showing its ribs, naked and pot-bellied.

"There is no food left in these villages", he cried passionately. "There is no one to look after them. Who cares for them? Everyone is engaged in this war. The profiteer has hoarded all the grain beyond the reach of these growers. The war machine buys it at any price. It's too big a competitor for these poor folk" (WM, 89)

**Comforting and advising the villagers**

Sriram's idea of a village was nowhere to be seen. Hungry, parched men and women with skin stretched over their bones, bars earth, dry ponds, and miserable tattered thatched roofing over crumbling mud walls, streets full of Pits and loose sand, unattractive dry fields— that was a village. Sriram could hardly believe he was within twenty miles of Malgudi and civilisation. Here pigs and dogs lounged in dry gutters. Everything in these parts had the appearance of a dry gutter.

Mahatma Gandhi toured the villages mostly on foot. He halted wherever he liked. He stationed himself at the lowliest hut in the village if it was available, on in a temple corridor, or in the open air. He walked silently for hours, holding his staff, and supporting his arm on one or the other of his disciples. He often stopped on the way to speak to a peasant cutting a tree or digging a field.

The Mahatma met the local village men and women, spoke to
them about God, comforted the ailing, and advised those who sought his guidance. He spoke to them about spinning, the war, Britain, and religion. He met them in their huts or spoke to them under the village banyan tree. He trudged his way to ploughed fields and climbed hard rocky places, through mud and slush, but always with the happiest look, and no place seemed too small for his attention.

**Self-development in a deserted temple**

After Mahatma Gandhi's departure from Malgudi, Sriram made a deserted shrine his home. The shrine was on a slope of the Mempi Hill, overlooking the valley. It was built thousands of years ago. The place was a ruin. A few sculptures showed along the wall. The masonry was crumbling here and there. There was an image of some god with four hands in an inner sanctum overgrown with weed. But it was the most comfortable ruins a man could possess. There were stately pillars in a central hall, with bricks showing. There were walls without a ceiling, but from which exotic creepers streamed down. One of the stubborn, undisturbed pieces of sculpture was a Bull-and-Peacock over the large portal, which had very large knobbed wooden doors that would not be moved at all on their immense hinges.

Sriram's possessions were a spinning wheel, a blanket on which to sleep, and a couple of vessels, some foodstuff, and a box of matches. He was going through a process of self-tempering. It was a rather hard task, for he often found that his thoughts were as undesirable as ever. He had thought that, by practising all the austerities that he had picked up in Gorpad's company, he could become suddenly different. Mahatmaji had blessed his idea of self-development. He had said:

> Spin and read Bhagavad Gita, and utter Ram Nam continuously, and then you will know what to do in life. (WM, 96)
The Khadi culture

Nearly twelve weeks after Mahatmaji had left, Sriram spun enough yarn for a dhoti and a short shirt. It was a result of continuous work over weeks. Bharati helped him to bundle off the yarn to a central depot at Madras and secure in exchange woven clothes. On the day he got his Khadi clothes, a simple dhoti and a jibba (cut and stitched in the spot by the village tailor), he took off the clothes he had been wearing (mill manufactured), heaped them in the middle of the street, poured half a bottle of kerosene over the lot, and applied a match. Some of the villagers looked on with interest.

Sriram explained to the gathering he would never again wear clothes spun by machinery. The dhoti and jibba were heavy, but he felt it was something to be proud of. He felt he had seen and reached a new plane of existence. He sat down and wrote to the Mahatma:

"Burnt my old clothes today. Spun 40 count. Bharati satisfied."
"Mahatmaji immediately wrote back to him: "Very pleased. Keep it up. God bless you "(WM, 99)

"Quit India"

In his resolution of August 1942, the Mahatma had said, "Britain must quit India". The phrase had the potency of a mantra or a magic formula. Throughout the length and breadth of the land, people cried "Quit India". The home Secretary grew uneasy at its sound. It became a prohibited phrase in polite society. After the Mahatma uttered the phrase, he was put in prison. But the phrase took life and flourished and ultimately produced enough power to send the British away.

On the following day, Sriram trudged up the mountain path carrying his little tin can, brush, and a rag in a satchel slung over his
shoulder. He stopped at the first village on the way, selected the most suitable wall, which happened to be the outer wall of a new house, on whose pyol the village children were learning the alphabet. Sriram dipped the brush in paint and fashioned carefully "Quit India" on the wall.

The teacher said:

Add, if possible, one "e" before "t". What we need in this country is not a "Quit" programme, but a "Quit India".(WM, 104)

**Cutting green unripe timber as war material**

Sriram went into a part of the jungle where elephants were hauling timber. Huge logs were being cut and herds of elephants picked them up on their trunks and rolled them and piled them on trucks waiting in the heart of the jungle. Sriram penetrated here with his own message. He watched them at work and remarked: "You are cutting down green unripe timber. You know where it is going?" The mahouts on the elephants paused in their tasks, and looked down at him with amusement.

Sriram explained:

They are going into the making of ships and rifles and bridges, and what not, all of which are to be used for the destruction of this world. They are going into a war which we are forced to fight because Britain chose to drag us into it. We shouldn't have to strip our forests for this task. It's going far away, to far off countries, and the money you are getting is a puffed up, illusory currency, which will lose its value soon. Don't supply these materials for the war. It will take centuries for us to grow all this timber again. Refuse to do this job. It's in your hands. Don't strengthen the hand that is oppressing you.(WM, 107)
The businessman's "impartiality": equal contribution to the Harijan Fund and the War Fund

Sriram told the timber-contractor that he must not send the timber out of the country for war purposes. All wars were against Mahatma's creed of Ahimsa. The contractor said he had given five thousand rupees to the Harijan Fund. He had a portrait of the Mahatma in his house. The Mahatma's was the first face he saw as soon as he got up from bed. The contractor had never missed a day's lecture when the Mahatma came to Malgudi. He bowed his head shyly when Sriram said that he must have attended an equal number of Loyalists' meetings. The contractor replied:

"After all, when the Collector comes and says,
"Do this or that", we have to obey him. We can not afford to displease Government officials"
"How much have you given to the War Fund?"
"Only five thousand. I'm very impartial. L When the Governor himself comes and appeals, how can we refuse? After all, we are businessmen" (WM, 108)

Boycott of British goods

Sriram's next destination was a village named Solur, which consisted of about fifty houses on a hill slope. He went to the only shop in the village. Bottles of aerated water in rainbow colours adorned the top shelf. Bunches of green bananas hung down by nails in front of the shop. There were also several little boxes and shallow tins filled with parched rice, fried gram, peppermints, sugar candy. The proprietor told Sriram that he had some nice biscuits.

"Are they English biscuits?" Sriram asked.
"The best English biscuits".
"How can you be sure?"

"I got them through a friend in the Army. They are supplied only to the army now. Purely English biscuits which you can not get for miles around. In these days, no one else can get them."

"Have you no sense of shame?" Sriram asked.....

"You should not sell English biscuits".

"All right, sir, hereafter I will be careful, after I dispose of the present stock".

"If you have any pride as an Indian, you will throw the entire stock in the gutter and won't let even a crow peck at it. Do you understand?" (WM, 116-117)

The shopman thought the gods had brought Sriram ("this man in Khadi") as a born trouble-maker.

**Satyagraha**

A women came to buy half an anna's worth of salt. Sriram requested her not to buy anything from that shop. When the women tried to get past him, he threw himself before her and said:

"You can walk over me if you like, but I will not allow you to buy anything in his shop. It's for people like you that Mahatama Gandhi had been fighting. Do you know that he will not rest till the Salt Tax repealed?"

"Why, sir?" She asked innocently.

"For every pinch of salt you consume, you have to pay a tax to the English Government. That's why you have to pay so much for salt....."

The shopman said, "What can we do? We sell salt at the price the Government has fixed."

"You might support those of us who are fighting the Government on these questions", said Sriram. "If you cannot do anything else. Do you remember Mahatma's march
to Dandi Beach in 1930? He walked three hundred miles across the country in order to boil the salt-water on the beach of Dandi and help anyone to boil salt-water and make own salt. (WM, 119-120)

**Superstition**

Then a little boy came running, clutching a six-pie coin in his hand. He wanted three pies of worth of good snuff for his grandfather and three pies worth of coconut barfi for himself. The shopman snatched the coin from his hand in the twinkling of an eye. Sriram touched the feet of the boy and importuned him not to buy anything from that shop. The people shouted angrily at the shopman, "Give the boy his money."

The shopman cried.

"How can I? This is a Friday, and would it not be inauspicious to give back a coin? I'll be ruined for the rest of my life. I am prepared to give him what he wants for the coins, even a little more if he wants; but no, I can't give back the cash. Have pity on me, friends. I am a man with seven children." (WM, 120-121)

**The British war propaganda**

There was a loyalists' meeting. Sriram shut his ears at the sound of harmonium. Then some one presented a scene from the Ramayana, with music and narration, The public enjoyed the show. Right in the midst of it all, the two officers occupying the iron chairs suddenly got up and delivered a speech in very bad Tamil. They explained the importance of the war, how Britain was winning, how it was India's duty to help, and how India should protect herself from enemies within and without.
were policemen in plain clothes and civil officers in tweed and bush coats, with sleek hair. Somebody was distributing toffees out of a tin to all the children in the assembly.

Underground workers to surrender themselves at the nearest police station

A letter from the Mahatma to Bharati read:

I am going to ask all workers if they are underground to come out. I want you to give yourself up at the nearest police station. Take your disciple too. God bless you both. (WM, 136)

The Mahatma had also given instruction as to how Bharati should occupy her time in jail:

This is an opportunity for to learn some new language. I wish you could read. Tulsi Das Ramayana without any assistance. You speak Hindi well, but your literary equipment will also have to be equally good. You may ask the jail superintendent to give you facilities if you are going to be classed as B to take your charka along. I would like to hear that you are spinning your quota in jail. Don't for a moment feel that you are wasting your time. Wherever you may be with a copy of Ramayana and Gita and a spinning wheel, there you are rightly occupied. Anyway, look after your health. Very mild exercise may be necessary. You may get it by walking around the compound if you are permitted.

If you would rather not be a B class but would like to be an ordinary class prisoner like others, you will have to ask for it. All that I am saying applies to your disciple too. (WM, 137-138)

Sriram followed Bharati sheepishly, hoping to meet again when they were out of jail, and adding:
"Will you marry me after we are out of this, will you promise, if Bapuji permits?"
"Yes, I promise", she said and hurried off. (WM, 141)

Reverence for Subhas Chandra Bose

Bharati surrendered to the police, but Sriram remained in the underground chamber of the abandoned temple. Another freedom-fighter, Jagdish installed a tiny battery-operated two-way radio set there. Their work was to listen to the news and message coming from Rangoon, Singapore and Germany, which purported to give hour-to-hour progress of the war in Europe and the Far East. Sriram wrote them down, Jagdish cyclostyled them, and both distributed them clandestinely as pamphlets among men at the military depot and the army training centre.

The radio said: "This is Tokyo calling. Here is Subhas Chandra Bose, your own leader at the mike, addressing you on a special occasion. A few second later, the message said, "This is Subhas Chandra Bose speaking."

Sriram sat up respectfully. "What good fortune that should hear his voice!" At the sound of it, Sriram felt reverence for this man who had abandoned his home, comfort, and security, and was going from country to country, seeking some means of liberating his Motherland. With what skill he had managed to slip away from his home in Calcutta in spite of police vigilance, disguising himself as Sadhu!

Subhas Chandra Bose's voice said:

Men of the Indian Army, be patriots. Help us free our dear Motherland. Many of your friends are here, having joined the Indianational Army which is poised for attack on your borders. We are ready. We shall soon be across, and then you can join the fight on our side. Till then don't aim your guns at us, but only at the heart of our enemy. (WM, 148-149)
Death

Culture includes not only the changing political impact on society but also death and funeral rites. In Waiting for the Mahatma, Narayan presents the cremation customs prevailing in the middle-class stratum of Malagudi society. Sriram received a hurriedly-written penciled note from Bharati requesting him to go and see his granny. A detenu had told her that granny was very ill. It was Sriram's duty to risk his life to see her before it was too late.

When Sriram ascended the steps of 14 Kabir Street, many people were not able to recognise him, among whom was Kanni, the shopman. Sriram almost involuntarily called for deserting his house betrayed him. Kanni mildly rebuked him for deserting his house and the old lady who his father, mother, cousin, everything:

Have you no heart? Thank God, you have come now anyway. But you are too late ... She died at ten o'clock last night. (WM, 172)

Sriram ran past him into the house. There, in the old familiar place, under the hall lamp, lay the old lady. A white sheet was drawn over her. A couple of women from the neighbouring houses were sitting beside her, keeping vigil. A women turned to Kanni and asked, "Is he the only relative to arrive or should we wait for some more?"

Kanni told Sriram that, ever since the police came asking for him in that house, his grand mother lost her original spirit. She was always feeling that Sriram had betrayed her. Sriram might know all about the Mahatma, But all she knew was what had told her, that Sriram had run after a girl. The old lady was much hurt. She hardly ever came out after that, and when the police came to take sriram's photograph, she was very much upset. She felt she could not hold up her head in public again.
She was always saying Sriram had betrayed her. People came and told her hair-raising tales about him. She was alarmed by his activities. The Market Road doctor attended her often. Even the previous evening he was there with his tube and needle and stayed till she passed away.

**Hurrying through the funeral**

Kanni advised Sriram not to keep the body too long, and let the lady have the satisfaction of having her pyre lit by her grandson as it might assuage her spirit. Sriram could not go with the funeral procession; but he would manage to come if Kanni would manage the other things. Kanni counselled him to do everything nicely and not to bother about expense.

**The cremation ground**

At about eight, Sriram was on the cremation ground beyond the Sarayu river. A couple of pyres, which had been lit on the previous day, were still smouldering. Bamboo and discarded pieces of shroud were scattered here and there. A funeral procession was crossing Nallappa’s Grove. The bier was decorated with flowers, and some men wearing white shirts and rings on their fingers were smouldering the corpse. Sriram thought:

> Must be devoted relatives. They are bearing the burden. But poor Granny has no one to carry her (WM, 177)

**The bier**

Granny’s pyre was also being built up, with dried cow-dung cakes, on a small platform. All the arrangements were supervised by Kanni’s shop assistant, who was haggling with fuel suppliers and ordering
the crematorium assistants about. Led by Kanni, who bore in his hand a pot of fire, a couple of neighbours, the manager of the Fund office, and two priests, Granny arrived on a bier made of bamboo, carried by four grim professional carriers. Kanni gave the pot of fire to Sriram saying that it was his duty to carry it. Sriram took charge.

Granny's face was uncovered and faced the sun. Sriram felt a pang of fresh sorrow at the sight. The bier was laid on the ground. The old family priest told Sriram to bathe in the river and come back soon with wet clothes on him. Granny was entitled to at least such consideration. Sriram realised that he was still in the garb of a wholesale rice merchant, and looked ridiculous.

Two silver coins

The old priest was greedy for ceremonial fees. He asked Sriram if he had two rupees in coins. Kanni said to the priest: "Why do you ask that? Haven't we agreed on a lump sum for everything?" the priest, who was squatting beside the body said:

Whoever said the lump sum included this? This can never go into that. This is a separate account. Our elders have decreed that the Dear Departed should have two silver coins on his or her chest from the hand of the nearest and dearest. It is said to smooth out the passage of the soul into further regions. I am only repeating what the shastras say. Our ancestors knew what was best for us. I am merely a mouthpiece. (WM, 179)

The Fund Manager asked, "What happens to the coins?" Kanni said, "They go the way of other coins - that is, into a priest's money-box." Quoting a Sanskrit verse, the priest said:
Yes they do. Do you expect the soul to carry the silver with it? You must view it all in the proper light. You must take only its philosophical meaning. We carry nothing from this earth. (WM, 179-180)

The priest suddenly looked across at the other part of the ground where the rich men were conducting their ceremonies.

See there. They are devoted and very correct. They are not omitting a single rite. (WM, 180)

**Modern life and the "shastras"**

The old priest looked up at Sriram and told him to go and bathe quickly. Sriram would find a barber there. He would have to shave off his moustache and the top of his head. Sriram said emphatically that he would shave neither his moustache nor his head. The priest said:

All right. It is my duty to suggest what the shastras say, and it is left to you to follow it or modify it in any manner. Of course, modern life makes it difficult to follow all the rules, and people have to adjust themselves. There are even people who perform their funerals with European hats on, nowadays. What can one do about them, "It is wisdom to accept what has come to pass", say the shastras, and we bow our heads to that injunction. (WM, 180)

**The wagging of the toe**

The old lady lay stretched out on the cow-dung fuel. The priest placed a small vessel in Sriram's hand and asked him to pour the milk in it over the lips of the dead. Sriram poured the milk, chanted some mantras, and finally dropped the fire on Granny's heart, which was actually below a layer of fuel. The fire smouldered and crackled.
The Fund Office Manager suddenly cried, "See there, See there." He was excited. The big toe on the left foot of the lady was seen to move. "Pull of the fire, Pull of the fire. Some one thrust his hand in and snatched off the burning piece. The old lady's sari was already burning at one end. Sriram flung a pail of water on it and put it out. Now with the fire out, they stood around and watched. The toe was wagging.

"She is not dead. Take her out", cried Sriram.
"I've never heard of such a thing. You can't do that", the priest cried.
"You want us to burn Granny alive, do you? Get out of our way, priest". (WM, 182) cried Sriram.

Sriram Kiched away the pile of fuel, lifted the body, and placed it down on the ground. He said he knew something was wrong. He sprinkled water on her face, forced some milk down her throat, and fanned her face. The priest stood aside with a doleful expression. Kanni seemed too stunned to speak. The shop assistant was running in circles announcing the glad tidings and collecting a crowd.

The Fund Office Manager cried, "I will fetch the doctor". Kanni cried, "Oh, what doctors these days! They don't even know whether some one is alive or dead". Under their nursing, the movement in the toe gradually spread. All the toes showed signs of revival, then her leg, then her arms. The old lady seemed to be coming back to life, inch by inch. Her eyes were still shut. Sriram murmured, "Granny", "Granny", open your eyes. I am here." At this moment, all politics were forgotten, all disputes and wars, Britain, even Bharati. Now her heart began to throb, her breathing returned, ever so faintly. Sriram let out a cry of tremendous relief.
Back from the other world

The doctor asked someone, to go and fetch his bag from the car. He took Granny's wrist in his hand, pulled out his watch, held his fingers under her nostrils, and smiled at Kanny, "Yes, she is not dead... Let us be happy that she is back from the other world." This was the first situation of its kind in his experience:

Well, freaks like this just happen. We can't say why or how. Last night she was practically dead. I don't know. This is enough to make one believe in the soul, karma, and all that. I read about a similar thing in a medical journal years ago but never thought it would come within my view. (WM, 183)

The doctor versus the priest

The doctor said: "It is not right to keep her here when she becomes fully conscious. She must be moved. Why not take her home? Take her in my car. The priest interrupted:

How can you suggest such a thing? No one who has been carried here can ever step in to the town bounds again. The whole town will be wiped out by fire or plague. It is very inauspicious. Do anything you like, but she can't come back into the town. (WM, 183-184)

As this point of view gathered a lot of support, Granny was kept at the Toll Office and nursed by the doctor. Her world hummed round her-kanni, The Fund Office Manager, Sriram, the old priest, and the two mournful women who had kept vigil. They nursed and fed the old lady as she lay on a bed in the old building. The doctor's little car drove up half
a dozen times a day to conduct the operations. A vast concourse began to arrive in order to witness the miracle.

**Revival of the old spirit**

A police inspector in plain clothes and two constables arrived on the third afternoon. Sriram, having fed his Granny and eaten a meal brought by the Fund Office Manager, was enjoying a siesta in the shade of a tree behind the toll-gate building. The Inspector said:

> Get up. You are under arrest. We have been looking for you for a long time. We know the special occasion which has brought you here, and we don't want to make any fuss, provided you make none. That is why we have stationed our jeep over there. I have some more men in it. You may come with us as soon as you are ready. Don't be too long. I am armed and will shoot if you try to escape. (WM, 185)

Sriram went to take a look at Granny. He found her sitting up and conversing with two people near her. The moment she saw Sriram, she cried:

> Oh, boy, when did you come back? They told me you were here, but with a moustache. Whatever made you grow one, my boy? Take it off, don't come before me with that, whatever else you may do." (WM, 185-186)

He said obediently, "Yes", Granny. He was so happy to find her old spirit revived. "Don't believe a word of anything you hear. People talk falsehoods, remember". Granny's face puckered in a happy smiled. "Vile-tongued folk", she cried.
**The curse**

Granny had a curse which she intended to hurl on some one:

> Whoever has been responsible for taking you away, whether it be man, woman, or whatever, may they perish and suffer in the worst hell! "(WM, 186-187)

After uttering her imprecation, she felt both relieved and happy.

**Stepping into the police jeep**

One of the policemen peeped into the doorway. Sriram walked over to the police officer and said, "Let us go". Kanni followed him to the jeep. Sriram said:

> Kanni, look after Granny till I am back. I don't know how long they will keep me. Try to see me and tell me how she is. I think the Collector will let you see us in jail. (WM, 187)

Kanni assured him not to be anxious. Granny was like a mother to them all, and they would take care of her.

**Benares and the old people**

Sriram was in detention at the Central Jail. He occupied a cell with a few others and slept on the hard cement floor. One day the Fund Office Manager came to see him. He told Sriram about Granny:

> When she revived at the cremation ground, some orthodox people said that she could not come back into the town because it was inauspicious and might blight the city. She respected their wishes and stayed in the toll-gate house for some days, and then said she would go to Benares. We helped her to take the train at Talapur.
She is with a number of others, who spend their last years there, old persons who are waiting to die. They cheerfully await their death, and look forward to the final fire and final ablution in the sacred Ganges.

She is quite well in Benares. There is a whole street of them, old people who have retired there to the banks of the great Ganges, awaiting their end. Some have been there for years. That's as it is enjoyed upon old people in the shastras. No one could wait for a happier end.

She has given instructions regarding the disposal of the rent of her house. She wants the amount to be sent to her. She wanted me to tell you about it, if you didn't want this money. It was her instruction that a tenant should be found for the house, and accordingly we found one willing to pay a rent of forty rupees, which they are crediting to the old lady's account in the bank.

A friend came from Benares today. She is keeping very well; bathes thrice in the Ganges, and prays in the temple, cooks her food, has good company. A sublime life. It is this friend who has brought the letter. (WM, 203-205)

Sriram told the Funds Office Manager to do anything Granny asks him to do. If she needed more money, the Manager should not hesitate to take it out of Sriram's funds.

"We shall be happy to meet you"

One day a newspaper was smuggled in through the good officers of a friendly warder. Sriram read out to the prisoners the impending political changes, the proposed division of India into Hindustan and Pakistan, Mahatamaji's firm refusal to accept the proposal, the Cabinet Mission, the endless amount of talking going on at Delhi, of death, disaster, and convulsive changes. The British were definitely quitting India.
Not long after, Sriram or Number Seven Six was told he was no longer a prisoner. A man handed him the bundle, his old close-collared coat, shirt, and dhoti in which he has been arrested at the cremation ground. He was also given a little money that had accumulated as his wages.

Sriram wrote to Bharati and, after ten days of anxious waiting, received a letter:

Happy to hear from you. Come to Delhi. Birla House at New Delhi, if you can. Our programme is unsettled. We are going to Bihar with Bapu, where there is trouble.

There is much to tell you. We shall be in Delhi on 14th January. After that come any time you like. We shall be happy to meet you.

BHARATI (WM, 233)

Weeks later, when Sriram got down from the train at New Delhi, carrying a roll of bedding and a trunk, Bharati's searching eye picked him out in the crowd. She looked darker and more tired, but her tresses were as black as ever. He could not get over the novelty of meeting her again. Bharati took him to a colony of huts somewhere in New Delhi. It was her present headquarters. She had taken him to her own hut. There was a spinning wheel in one corner, and her clothes hung on a rope tied across the doorway. She said:

You will have your "room" ready in about an hour. You may rest here till then. There is another block where you may wash yourself. Make yourself comfortable. (WM, 238)

Sriram said that he felt happy when she was with him, and miserable when she went away.
The Partition riots

Later on, Bharati explained:

More than anything else, the thing that pains Mahatmaji now is the suffering of women. So many of them have been ruined, so many of them have lost their honour, their home, their children, and the number of women who are missing cannot be counted. They have been abducted, carried away by ruffians, ravished of killed, or perhaps have even destroyed themselves.

On the 15th of August, when the whole country was jubilant and gathered here to take part in Independence Day festivities, do you know where Bapu was? In Calcutta where fresh riots had started. Bapu said his place was where people were suffering and not where they were celebrating. He said that, if a country cannot give security to women and children, it is not worth living in. He said it would be worth dying if that would make his philosophy better understood. He walked through villages barefoot on his mission. He followed him. Each day we walked five miles through floods and fields, silently. He walked with bowed head, all through those swamps of East Bengal. We stopped for a day or two in each village, and he spoke to those who had lost their homes, property, wives, and children...

I have seen what has happened both at Noakhali and Bihar, and then at Delhi.

How can one choose? Human beings have done impossible things to other human beings.

It is no use discussing whether this community committed greater horrors or the other one Bapuji forbade us to refer to anyone in terms of Muslims, Hindu, or but just as human beings. (WM, 243-244)

The refugee children

Bharati's special charges were children wherever she saw them. She gathered them and brought them to the hut colony in New Delhi. They did not know anything about all those children Sriram saw here. These
children had somehow escaped death. The were all gathered from various villages in Bengal and Bihar. Gandhiji's followers had gathered more children, but some were reclaimed in Calcutta itself. But nobody knows anything about the ones they had now. If their parents are alive, they would know where they are and come for them, otherwise Bharati and her colleagues would bring them up. Toys and clothes for them have been collected. It is useless to ask whether they are Muslim children or Hindu children, or who they are. They had been given the names of flowers and birds.

These children must grow up only as human beings.

**The assimilative nature of Indian culture**

Bharati told Sriram that they would go together at the Birla House the next day to see Gandhiji and ask his permission for their marriage. They were there the next afternoon. Sriram was amazed at the ease with which Bharati moved about the place. All kinds of people stopped to have a word with her.

She spoke English, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, and God knew what else. She spoke with great ease to men, women, young boys, and old men of all nationalities. She had a smile or a word for everyone.

**The Mahatama agrees to Sriram and Bharati's marriage**

The Mahatama said:

Tomorrow morning, the first thing I do will be that (the happy occasion). I will be your priest, if you don't mind. I've been a very neglectful father. I'll come and present the bride. Tomorrow, the very first thing. Other engagements after that. I already have here all the fruits and flowers ready.
and so after all you can't say I have been very neglectful.

You have already a home with thirty children. May you
be their father and mother! (WM, 253)

Premonition

The Mahatma went into an antechamber and came out after a minute. He suddenly stopped, turned round, and told Bharati he had a feeling that he might not attend her wedding the next morning, and that he seemed to have been too rash in promising to officiate as her priest.

I want to be there very much, but I don't know. If God wills it, I shall come. Otherwise, know my blessing is always on you both. Anyway, you are not to put off your marriage for any reason. (WM, 253)

The Mahatma patted her back, threw a smile at Sriram, and hurried down the passage.

The Martyrdom of the Mahatma

The Mahatma walked, leaning on the shoulder of his granddaughter. As they stepped on the lawn, Bharati said to Sriram, "Let us attend the prayer today. There is a place for two of us."

They stepped aside. As Mahatmaji approached the dais, the entire assembly got up. At this moment, a man pushed himself. The man went forward.

"I am sorry to be late today", murmured the Mahatma. The man stood before the Mahatma and brought his palms together in a reverential salute. Mahatma Gandhi returned it. The man took a revolver out of his pocket. As the Mahatma was about to step on the dais, the man took aim and fired.
Two more shots rang out. The Mahatma fell on the dais. He was dead in a few seconds.

**Summing Up**

In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Narayan presents women and their cultural awareness in two different backgrounds - one represented by Sriram's Granny and her old family priest who are orthodox and indifferent to the socio-political change taking place all over the country; and the other represented by Bharati who is devoted and loyal to Mahatma Gandhi and who follows the Mahatma wherever he goes. Tradition and modernisation coexist in Indian culture, sometime as separate and opposed to each other, but often in an amalgamated form in unequal proportions. The leadership of the Mahatma enlivens the doctrine of non-violence, truth-speaking, love, eradication of untouchability, oneness of the votaries of all religions as human beings, and his successful struggle for the liberation of India from British rule. All these elements have their impact on Indian life and culture.

In this chapter we have shown how Narayan has brought out both orthodoxy and changeability in *Waiting for the Mahatma* - and belief in birth stars the various superstitions determining what is auspicious and what inauspicious, the distinction between genuine and take patriotism, untouchability and caste, the cult of Khaddar, the Mahatma's love for children, the welfare activities of Sevak Sangh, the life-style of Gandhiji and his entourage, the exploitation of villagers and their fields and forests for the continuous functioning of the British war machinery, the underground activities of Gandhians after the Quit India resolution, a specimen of individual satyagraha or non-violent resistance, people's reverence for
Subhas Chandra Bose, Granny's supposed death and the consequent funeral rites, her Revival on the funeral pyre, her migration to Benares to wait for death like a pious Hindu lady, the aftermath of Partition riots, the martyrdom of the Mahatma at a prayer meeting, the assimilative nature of Indian culture.