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DISPUTED TREASURE

Gandhi's Last Letters

A satchel of papers, brittle and yellow with age, surfaces after 48 years, is almost auctioned for millions in London, then gifted to India by Saiva Siddhanta Church

Who would have guessed that while Hinduism Today's staff toiled to gather news of the Hindu world we would ourselves become the subject of one of the biggest stories to hit the Indian and UK media, broadcast daily for weeks? Yet, there we were in London on a frigid Friday afternoon, November 24, surrounded by highly-paid British solicitors and representatives of the UK's oldest auctioneer, Phillips, seated beside India's senior-most diplomat, His Excellency Dr. L.M. Singhvi, at a massive mahogany table at India House, facing three teams of news cameramen and dozens of reporters who were there to get the lowdown on the final dispensation of the hotly-disputed Last Papers of Mahatma Gandhi. Whoa! Let's start at the beginning.

First, a journalistic disclosure. The we in this story is Saiva Siddhanta Church (SSC), one of the US's leading Hindu institutions for over four decades, and the brother corporation of Himalayan Academy, publisher of Hinduism Today. They share the same stewards, the same monastic staff and the same headquarters in Hawaii, and were both founded by our

publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. We are deeply involved in the story that follows.

It all began on October 2, 1869, in Gujarat, India, with the birth of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a shy and unremarkable boy who recounted of his childhood: "The fact that I recollect nothing more of those days than having learnt, in company with other boys, to call our teacher all kinds of names, would strongly suggest that my intellect must have been sluggish, and my memory raw." That bookish boy, who feared ghosts and all social interaction, would change the world, free India, inspire spiritually-motivated social change among millions and become, in the end, Father of India and patron saint of nonviolence and compassion. Sluggish, indeed!

Fast-forwarding a few frames: the boy married at thirteen, graduated high school (barely), entered college (failing every class and dropping out), went to London at 18 to study law for three years, became a barrister, returned the next day to Bharat, failed in law, took a clerical job at a Muslim firm in South Africa, returned 21 years later to India, campaigned for the harijans, started an ashram and press, joined the struggle for Independence, spearheaded his nation's successful noncooperation movement, fasted nearly to death to bring peace, brokered with others the departure of Britain and was assassinated on January 30, 1948.

At Gandhi's side that afternoon when a Hindu fanatic's three gun shots brought him down was his 27-year-old secretary, Mr. Venkataraman Kalyanam. Hours later the dutiful amanuensis returned to his office to take charge of bundles of papers and

notebooks remaining under his care.

The 450 documents, all hand-scribed in English, had their source, curiously, in silence. Gandhi had taken a vow of mauna, not speaking even a word, on Mondays. All communications and correspondence were, on those days, written down. Without his vow, these papers would not exist today. The stockpile was stashed in a trunk for decades. In the '80s Mr. Kalyanam exhibited and published a few, gave some as presents and corresponded, more than once, with the National Archive of India, inviting them to Madras to take charge of his aging trove. They never came, and they never mentioned Gandhi's will to him. Kalyanam told Hinduism Today, "They didn't even have the courtesy to acknowledge my offer." The NAI says it did write him in 1990 and 1991, but the letters never arrived. So he started corresponding with Sotheby's, the London auctioneers, who expressed mild interest, asking for samples.

Before that happened, Mr. Kalyanam came to know of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, first through Mauritian attorney, Manon Mardemootoo, and later through Subramuniyaswami's publications, including Hinduism Today. Liking the swami's articulation of Sanatana Dharma and charmed by the white-granite temple being built on a Pacific island, Mr. Kalyanam decided to give his collection to the Iraivan Temple project.

On January 9, 1996, the two met for the first time. Subramuniyaswami was leading a pilgrimage to South India's temples and, following his 70th Jayanthi celebrations held at

Chidambaram, had halted in Chennai. Mr. Kalyanam came and made his gift, hopeful that it might "fetch as much as Rs.100,000 (US\$3,500) in London."

Mr. Easan Katir, a SSC member and UK investment manager, was appointed by Mr. Kalyanam as agent to sell the papers in London and give all proceeds to SSC. Katir must have intuited their value, for he decided to hand carry them on his flight. Back in London, Katir received instructions from Subramuniaswami to visit the Indian High Commissioner, whom the swami had met at the 1993 Chicago Parliament of Worlds' Religions. The two have high regard for each other. Subramuniaswami knew Dr. Singhvi would want to know about so weighty a matter, so in March he phoned the High Commissioner to share news of the find, then asked Katir to visit his home to amplify the details.

Though no one knew it at the time, Dr. Singhvi was shocked by the idea of the papers' being sold on the open market. This was his nation's treasure, not a commodity to be peddled. He vowed to himself in that moment to return the letters to India.

Meanwhile, the auctioneers changed from Sotheby's to Phillips, a 200-year-old company with impeccable credentials. Under the month-long scrutiny of Felix Pryor, Phillip's manuscripts consultant, the scribblings revealed their identity and worth. Pryor was the first to sense how the final six months of Gandhi's dramatic life were chronicled here. He deciphered the handwriting and put the works in chronological order and historical context. He told the press: "It is difficult to over-emphasize the importance of this archive. It is quite

extraordinary that something so central to the 20th century should pop up like this in its unadulterated form in the house of one of his disciples. It is the last act of an incredible drama and bears comparison in importance with the Churchill papers."

Phillips was thrilled. This was the kind of extraordinary item an auction house lives for. The date was set, November 14. They dubbed the collection "The Last Papers of Mahatma Gandhi," published a comprehensive 96-page catalog and invited the world to bring their checkbooks. But this was not for the faint of heart. The collection was initially valued at US\$290,000. Word spread and, as the press began to headline the story in India and the UK, the numbers climbed. A top appraiser was hired who put the value at US\$900,000. Phillips upped expectations to US\$1,600,000. Everyone was growing giddy.

Stop the auction: Everyone except Dr. Singhvi, who was working frantically (for 25 days straight, he later admitted) on all fronts to halt the sale. He first suggested nominal compensation for the papers, but the Church declined, firm in its ownership and unaware of any other claims. The High Commissioner then reached out across the world, informing Indian leaders of the pending sale. To them it was almost sacrilegious that the writings had ended up at Phillips and that money, more than they could afford, would determine their next owner (though historians say Gandhi himself used to charge Rs.5 for his autograph, which went toward Harijan relief). This was part of the country's soul and journey to freedom, Indians avowed, and must never be sold, definitely not to the West.

Aware that the clock was ticking, officials and citizens focused all efforts on the former owner. In Chennai, Mr. Kalyanam's life turned upside-down. The 75-year-old widower lives in a simple home on Rs.500 a month, does his own cooking, housekeeping and gardening, and walks everywhere, neither owning nor riding in a car. Starting in August his secluded life vanished. The press camped in his living room, moving in and out all day long through the door with its motto above, "Work is Worship." He was followed by unwanted security guards everywhere he went, and claims his phone was tapped. Officials flew in from Delhi to court him, the BBC interviewed him for hours on end, and he took calls from highly-placed Indian officials in the UK and South Africa. The pressure mounted. An old friend, Mr. N. Ram, editor of the prestigious national Frontline magazine (which ran a 16-page cover story on the saga, November 29) was enlisted by the government to change Kalyanam's mind. Mr. Ram spent days beseeching his friend to relent, calling upon his patriotic loyalties and warning of dire consequences in court.

Mr. Kalyanam bravely stood his ground as political, media and legal arm-twisting mounted. He was interrogated, sued and threatened with jail. Finding himself between the rock of his word to SSC and the hard places provided by ardent officials, he waffled for weeks. Finally, on November 7 the beleaguered fighter relented, signing papers asking the auction to be cancelled. Still, Phillips and SSC went forward, convinced that Mr. Kalyanam had title when he made his gift, and that the collection was no longer his to control or revoke. Even now, Mr. Kalyanam claims ownership, arguing the papers were meant to be discarded. He says Gandhi himself saw them in the office and asked why they had not been tossed out. In Indian law, lawyers tell, items thrown away become the property of those

who garner them. In fact, expert auction solicitors in the UK had told Subramuniaswami there was a solid case, advising, "We may lose the battle to stop the auction, but we will likely win the war for title."

Where there's a will: As part of the suit against Mr. Kalyanam, Gandhi's will, written in 1940 and giving over his writings and possessions to the Navajivan Trust, surfaced. The Trust, which derives its major income from copyrights it holds of the Mahatma's works, had kept the will in a cabinet in Ahmedabad, forgotten until October. It was faxed to Hawaii on November 7 from Chennai. As soon as Subramuniaswami saw the probated will, he concluded that Gandhi would have wanted his papers to remain in India. That fax changed everything. He gathered his 25 monks, telling them that while SSC owned the papers, title was being disputed, and Gandhi's intent was more important than legal rights. From this day, he said, they must "surrender our papers and work with Dr. Singhvi to return them to India." He instructed them to fax this decision to Dr. Singhvi, and told two monks to fly to London immediately.

Acharya Veylanswami, the Order's senior-most sannyasin, 54, and Sadhaka Thondunatha, a Sri Lankan monk, arrived in London November 10. Joined by Easan Katir, they met with all parties to the entanglement and, within a week, the auction was cancelled and a settlement reached. Not only did SSC renounce the proceeds of the auction it halted, it had to cover Phillip's expenses to the tune of US\$32,000. Sympathetic to SSC's plight, anonymous UK donors arranged for half the sum to be given, by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, for Phillip's catalog and special bookbinding costs.

On Friday, November 22, Dr. Singhvi called a press conference at India House, the London embassy. The yellowed, postcard-sized letters in the independence leader's sprawling handwriting had been inserted into oversized albums placed in three brown boxes on a massive mahogany table. Before whirring cameras, the settlement was signed, payments made to Phillips and the papers, a gift from SSC, turned over to His Excellency by Phillips. In the end, the Navajivan Trust bestowed the papers on the government of India.

A triumphant Dr. Singhvi spoke of his joy in being able to return Gandhi's handwritten works to India, "where they will form an important part of our national heritage. The legacy of Mahatma Gandhi should not become an article of commerce." Aware of the Hindu Church's sacrifice of the precious works, he gave thanks to all the parties for their high-minded efforts to base the settlement not on legal claims but "on reconciliation and moral principles, ideals that form the essence of the Mahatma's message to mankind."

Back in Hawaii, Subramuniaswami was gratified. "It's a win-win situation. Our temple must be built with funds that come from the heart, and not from conflict or confusion. With donors in 39 nations, the project will not be affected. Everyone involved, in my mind, is a hero, especially Dr. Singhvi and Mr. Kalyanam." He might also have mentioned that SSC benefited immensely from the global news coverage which spread awareness of its Hawaiian temple project to tens of millions.

The irony remains that none of this could have happened if the collection had not left India, for no one there wanted it until

Phillips and SSC brought it into the limelight. Only when its untrivial value in the West was established did India work for its return. The high regard for Mahatma Gandhi, held by those in the UK, both British and Indian, played a key role in the circuitous route the Last Papers of Gandhi took to reach their natural and now secure home in an Indian museum.