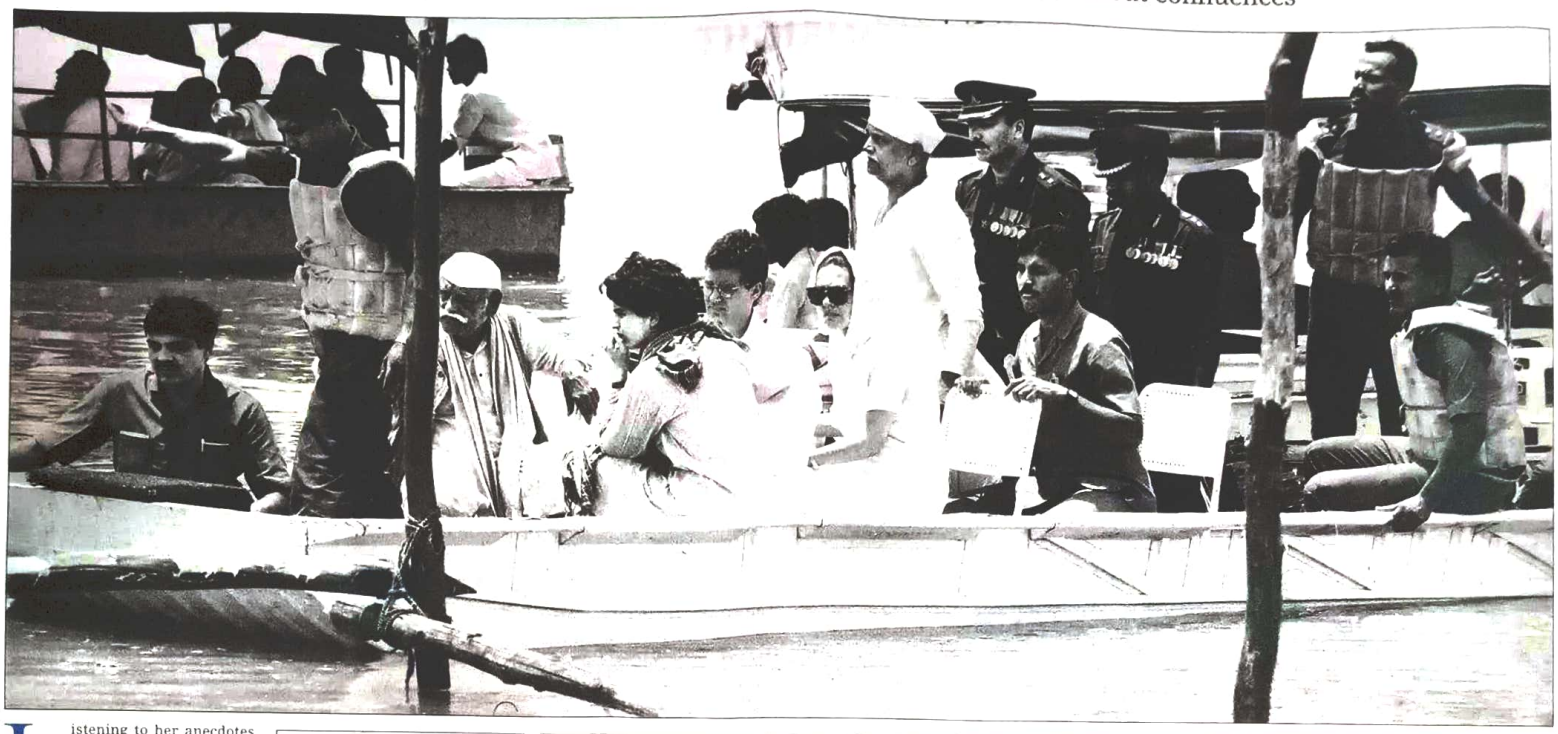
Ashes To Ashes

In this excerpt from her memoirs *Belonging*, **Sonia Gandhi** writes about confluences







GENTLY DOWN THE STREAM: (Clockwise from top) **In 1991, Sonia Gandhi, along with her children, was back in Allahabad with the ashes of Rajiv Gandhi; Sardar Patel, Mahatma Gandhi and Vijay Lakshmi Pandit at Anand Bhawan; Indira Gandhi at her childhood home.** Photos from ABP Archives and Wikimedia Commons

Listening to her anecdotes and reading about the recent history of India was always interesting, but it was during my few days' stay in Anand Bhawan in Allahabad in September 1970 that India's struggle for independence acquired for me a new dimension. The two mansions were the Nehru family ancestral homes, about which I had heard so much. The older house, the original Anand Bhawan, was later renamed Swaraj Bhawan — *"Anand" means joy, and "Swaraj" self-rule, one of the core demands of Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress...*

In 1970 my mother-in-law decided to donate Anand Bhawan, the second house built by Motilal in 1927, to the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, and to turn it into a museum. Rajiv, Sanjay, and I, along with Rahul, just a few months old, accompanied her to Allahabad...

Old storerooms that had been shut since 1947 were opened up. Lists were made and items of sentimental value set aside separately, to be packed and taken to Delhi. My mother-in-law, while supervising these activities, recounted stories of her youth, showing us each room and filling in with details a picture of its life.

She walked us to the old house and showed us the room where she was born, recounting her grandmother's disappointment on hearing the baby was a girl. She led us to her parents' apartment on the upper storey, up the wooden staircase that as a child she had been so scared to climb alone at night. We were shown the room in the basement where Congress workers clandestinely printed pamphlets, posters, and articles against the British. She led us to a small building that had been an infirmary where Congress Party activists injured by the police while demonstrating were secretly housed and treated. Her mother, Kamala, had been in charge of that incipient hospital, she proudly told us, which had grown after independence into the well-known charitable hospital for women that carries her name.

Then back to the newer house: She pointed out the upper-storey verandah where the Mahatma would sit and work. She took us to the large library on the ground floor where the Congress Working Committee, seated on the ground on a white khadi spread, held meetings to discuss strategies and prepare plans to defeat the colonial power: the Mahatma, her father and grandfather, Sardar Patel's imposing figure, tall and slender Acharya Kripalani, erudite and gentle Maulana Azad, Rajendra Prasad, who was to become free India's first president, and many stalwarts of the movement.

We admired the bindings of the old books, shelf after shelf, browsing through them, reading the inscriptions on some, a loving dedication, or just a name and a date — a handwritten note, a few lines marked lightly. In one old book I found two pressed edelweiss flowers. I missed a heartbeat and wondered, who was it that had treasured and preserved these blooms? Was it a message of love or just a keepsake? How many people had picked up or read those books, what notable men and women had flipped through those pages, spent hours debating strategies in that hallowed space!

...My mother-in-law led us upstairs to her father Jawaharlal Nehru's bedroom, simply furnished with his bed, his writing table, and shelves full of books and a number of photo frames. She explained to us who the various people were in the frames and those that hung on the walls. Behind his bed was a portrait of Kamala, his wife. On his writing table stood a photograph taken by himself of an ancient sculpture of the Buddha in Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, then Ceylon. It had been a favourite of his, my mother-in-law told us, one he always carried with him during his travels. His pens, pencils, and notebooks were still there, just as he had left them.

She led us to his dressing room lined with bookshelves, a wooden almirah, and two old steel ones. The keeper took out a big bundle of keys, and I was struck by the speed with which he immediately picked out the right one to open the steel almirah. We found an old wristwatch, a travel clock, diaries, manuscripts, old letters and postcards, photo albums, and notes in Nehru's handwriting.

Our attention was drawn to three containers of different shapes. My mother-in-law took them out gently and with emotion told us that they contained portions of the ashes of her grandfather, her mother, and her father. "The first two were preserved by my father," she said, "and the last one by me." I felt a shiver go down my spine. Ashes being preserved? I hadn't known of such a thing. Rajiv explained to me how, after a cremation, the bones are separated from the ashes, collected, and immersed in the river. Though not strictly in keeping with custom, a portion of them had been kept — perhaps out of a desire to hold on to the one who had passed away?

My mother-in-law felt they had been kept for too long and it was time to part with them. She told the three of us to go with the family priest to Triveni Sangam, the confluence of three rivers, the Yamuna, the Ganga, and the invisible Saraswati, and immerse the ashes...

As we approached the confluence, the boatman shut down the engine. The boat slowed down, and Rajiv pointed out the place where the muddy colour of the Ganga waters and the green of the Yamuna met and mingled. I felt rather nervous and inept, holding the small box with its precious content. At a signal from the priest, each of us scattered the ashes. A strange and somewhat eerie sensation got hold of me. My hair stood on end as I released them from their container. Captured by the breeze, they swirled in the air as they wafted down to the river. And I wondered at the destiny that had brought me there from a faraway land, from a different people, and from different circumstances to participate in this sacred and intimate ritual.

Later, as I read Nehru's lines in his will, that experience took on a deeper meaning: "The Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved by her people, round which are intertwined her racial memories, her hopes and fears, her songs of triumph, her victories and her defeats... The Ganga has been to me a symbol and a memory of the past of India, running into the present, and flowing on to the great ocean of the future."

Excerpted with permission from HarperCollins