

BRAHMACHARYA GANDHI & HIS WOMEN ASSOCIATES

SECTION I: *BRAHMACHARYA* IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

1. ODE TO *BRAHMACHARYA*

For Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the personal was not the political. At least, not in the same sense. Arguably, modern history's most extraordinary figure, a political leader who fired the imagination and stiffened the resolve of a poor, colonised society, Gandhiji's politics was, above all, about passion. But in his ideal of his personal life, and in how he wanted others to organise their lives, passion had no place.

What is remarkable about Mahatma is not so much the thesis—many, before and after him, have found virtue in abstinence—but his extraordinary efforts to obtain this ideal, efforts that, inevitably perhaps, produced contradictions, affected the lives of his closest associates and produced a vision, a passionless society, that looks curiously naive, and not a little discomfiting, when compared with his still-inspiring political programme.

This forces us to ask certain questions. Did the man, who led a movement that brought political freedom for so many, go wrong on the issue of personal freedom? Do we need to re-evaluate Mahatma in this light? After all, given the importance he attached to

restrictions on personal conduct, it would be illogical to ignore that aspect of Gandhiji's life and assess him on the basis of his politics only.

There isn't much in Indian historiography that deals with these issues. Whether this is because we tend to revere our icons or because, culturally, we are uncomfortable with public inquiry of personal details is not important. What is important is that our understanding of the greatest modern Indian will always remain incomplete if we donot read and understand what he himself said about the conflicts between mind and body.

Ironically, even though the Indian tendency is to shy away from this topic, Gandhiji was awe-inspiringly and fascinatingly frank about his struggles to banish passion.

Perfect *Brahmachari*

The Mahatma started practising *brahmacharya* in 1901. For him, *brahmacharya* was a wider concept than mere celibacy or continence. It constituted an entire philosophy and a moral imperative to be observed in thought, word and deed—a sure road to nirvana. Sexuality, in his world view, was to be banished to the nether regions for eternity. He took a vow of lifelong celibacy in 1906. From then till his death, his personal life was a mission and its goal was to become a perfect *brahmachari*. All through, he sought to explain his quest.

To his friend and benefactor GD Birla, Gandhiji had this to say: “Today I am a better *brahmachari* than I was in 1901. What my experiment has done is to make me firm in my *brahmacharya*. The experiment was designed to make myself a perfect *brahmachari* and if God so wills it will lead to perfection.”

Everyone should abjure passion, Gandhiji thought. His thesis of a passionless society was explained in a letter to his devoted follower Krishnachandra: “The idea is that a man, by becoming passionless, transforms himself into a woman, that is, he includes the woman into himself. The same is true of a passionless woman. If you visualise the state of passionlessness in your mind, you will understand what I say. It is a different story that we do not come across such men and women.”² The primary discordant note in this abstinence-dictated harmony is, of course, that not even Gandhiji claimed to have reached that state.

Parade of Women

Historians are surprised to see that the man who abhorred bodily temptations was surrounded by women who constituted his entire world at one level. They walked in and out of his life. From his days in South Africa to the end of his life, he maintained close relations with them.

Millie Graham Polak was the first. She was a lady in every sense of the term. Gandhiji established complete rapport with her soon after she arrived in South Africa. Her husband Henry was also one of his

closest friends. Sonja Schlesin was another woman from his South African days. She was the best secretary he ever had. She led from the front and was the only woman Gandhiji was afraid of. She was domineering, aggressive and opinionated but she delivered.

Two women entered his life after his return to India— Saraladevi Chowdharani and Madelene Slade from England. The former was a cultured and cultivated *bhadramahila* of Tagore lineage. She was Gandhiji's only true infatuation. In a rare confession recorded in his diary, he talked of "one exemption" to physical passion in his entire life. The tall Slade was a British Admiral's daughter whom Gandhiji re-christened Mirabehn. She was, as the irreverent modern expression would have it, obsessed with Gandhiji. Her whole life may be described as a pilgrimage in the cause of Mahatma. He teased her and played little games with her. In the end, she forsook him for Baba Prithvi Singh Azad, and later for Beethoven, her first true love.

There were three other western women who came in close contact with him but quickly left. The American Nilla Cram Cook was Mahatma's most vivacious woman associate. He was fond of calling her the 'fallen daughter'. She appeared and disappeared like a whirlwind. The German Jewish Margarete Spiegel was dull, boring and slow-witted but totally in awe of Gandhiji (and Tagore). Gandhiji was being gallant when he told her: "I shall love you in spite of your faults." The Danish missionary Esther Faering had an intense personal relationship with Gandhiji who treated her like his favourite daughter.

Gandhiji had high respect for PremabehnKantak, Prabhavati and Rajkumari AmritKaur. Prema was known as the field marshal of the Gandhian army and was a true defender of faith. She often debated on *brahmacharya* with Gandhiji. Prabhavati, wife of a distinguished socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan, practised *brahmacharya* even after marriage. She was the subject of discord between Gandhiji and JP. She was torn between two loyalties but ultimately preferred Gandhiji over her husband. RajkumariAmritKaur, the Kapurthala princess, had also established a remarkable degree of rapport with her mentor.

There were several minor characters who survived a long association with Gandhiji. The “crazy daughter”, BibiAmutussalaam of Patiala, was asked to bring peace to riot-torn Sind. She was commissioned by her mentor to go to the riot-ridden region to bring about normalcy. She was, however, given to frequent bouts of depression. Gandhiji’s ashram companion, LilavatiAsar, nicknamed “a limpet” by him, divided time between her studies and keeping her mentor company. Kanchan Shah, Mahatma’s role model for practising *brahmacharya*, was as defiant as her husband Munnalal was submissive.

The younger women associates of Mahatma included SushilaNayyar and Manubehn Gandhi. Sushila was his personal physician and in constant attendance. Sushila, her brother Pyarelal and Gandhiji constituted an “unstable triangle” with years of association dotted with prolonged periods of quarrels, recriminations and reconciliations as reflected in their correspondence. Manu Gandhi, the granddaughter

of Mahatma's brother, was the youngest and most lovable of his woman associates. She was ready for the hard grind of *tapasya* throughout Gandhiji's sojourn in Noakhali. She was his closest associate during his last few years.

Above all others was the towering figure of Kasturba Gandhi, the 'mother courage'. Popularly known as 'Ba', she was the stabilising factor throughout Gandhiji's life. She was overwhelmed by his personality in the initial years of their relationship but gradually came into her own. She exercised subtle control over him at critical moments in his life. While the other women were sisters and daughters, Ba was his *dharmic* wife who subsequently substituted his mother. The most difficult years of Mahatma's life were after her death in 1944.

Women in *Brahmacharya* Experiment

In the 1920s, Gandhiji had started resting his hands on the shoulders of young women during his morning and evening walks. He affectionately referred to Manu Gandhi and other girls as his "walking sticks." The next step on the same road was his elaborate daily massage, performed by young women.

The massage was followed by bath with the presence of a woman attendant almost essential. Sushila Nayyar was the usual fixture on such occasions. She would take her bath at the same time. On such occasions, Gandhiji would keep his eyes closed to save him embarrassment. Gandhiji gave a graphic description of the

bathing ritual after it gave rise to “bathing gossip” among the ashramites.

The next step on the road was the ritual of young women sleeping next to him, close to him or with him. What started as a mere sleeping arrangement became, over time, an exercise to obtain the nirvana state of perfect *brahmacharya*. Gandhiji was brutally truthful about his “experiment”. He shared information with his closest associates, knowing fully well that the world would come to know about it.

Munnalal G Shah received a full confession of his experiments. An amazingly frank missive that Munnalal received, said: “I don’t wish to exclude anybody. I have mentioned four. Perhaps they will say, ‘We were not objects of your experiment; we slept with you as with a mother.’ I would not contradict them. It is enough here to mention that such a thing has happened. I don’t consider Abha [Gandhi], Kanchan [Shah] and Vina [Patil] as part of the experiment. If we distinguish between sleeping together and the experiment, the difference between the two in my view is big one.”

He went on to add: “Abha slept with me for hardly three nights. Kanchan slept one night only. Vinas sleeping with me might be called an accident. All that can be said is that she slept close to me. If Abha had continued, her case would have been an altogether different one. Kanchan’s case was rather tragic. I didn’t understand her at all. What Abha and Kanchan told me was this; that she had no intention whatever of observing *brahmacharya*, but wished to enjoy the pleasure of sex. She, therefore, stayed very reluctantly and undressed only for fear of hurting me. If I remembered rightly, she was

not with me for even an hour. I then stopped both the women from sleeping with me, for I realised that Kanu [Gandhi] and you were upset. I myself advised them that they should tell you both and also Bhansali.

You will thus see that these three names cannot be included in the experiment. Lilavati [Asar], Amutussalaam, Rajkumari [AmritKaur] and Prabhavati are not here. I have deliberately included Pra[bhavati] in the experiment. May be I should not. She often used to sleep with me to keep me warm even before I was conscious that I was making an experiment. I used to draw her to me when she lay on the floor shivering for my sake. This is an old, old story... Kanchan's labouring under a misunderstanding pained me, but I was helpless."

The female partners in the Gandhian experiment were listless, disoriented and subservient. Gandhiji freely admitted to Krishnachandra on this score: "What I mean is that I have done naturally. Almost all of them would strip reluctantly. I have written—haven't I?—that they did so at my prompting. If I wish to be a *brahmachari* under all circumstances and want the women also to be such, this is the one way. Now leave this matter alone and watch what happens."

Hostile and swift reactions followed from many quarters. Kanu Gandhi was upset because his wife Abha and his sister-in-law Vina Patel were reluctant participants in the experiment. So was Munnalal Shah because he did not want to be dragged into a controversy. Obviously, Gandhiji had a premonition of the events that

followed. He sent two more letters to Munnalal on 6 and 7 March 1945. In the very first letter he asked him rhetorically: "What else may I give up? I cannot give up thinking. As far as possible I have postponed the practice of sleeping together. But it cannot be given up altogether."

His humility was tempered with aggressiveness, with one following the other in cycle. In his very next letter to Munnalal, he dared those who disagreed with him to leave him. Similarly, he told Krishnachandra on 7 May 1945 that he would not bend beyond a limit to placate his friends. This would be like sacrificing principles for purely temporary tactical advantages.

Gandhiji could very well appreciate sensual matters. As C Rajagopalachari observed: "It is now said that he was born so holy that he had a natural bent for *brahmacharya* but actually he was highly sexed... Everything he achieved was through extraordinary self-discipline and renunciation."

Joint Family Incorporated

Gandhiji had no daughter of his own. He had adopted a young harijan girl, Laxmi, as his daughter. She was, however, marginal to his existence and forgotten immediately after she was married off. The other women were far more important. They flattered him, laughed with him, cajoled him and endorsed every word he spoke. They were totally besotted by him.

They sought his attention all the time. He was definitely a father- figure to them. Possibly a few of them viewed him as a mystical lover. He was very informal and carried on voluminous correspondence with many of them. With a rare exception, all of them volunteered to live as spinsters and those who were married chose the path of physical *brahmacharya*, denying conjugal rights to their spouses.

Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose had watched Gandhiji from close quarters during his Noakhali days. He had a Freudian explanation to offer. The games young women played with Gandhiji were not so innocuous. They must have viewed him as an unstated 'object of love'.

Professor Bose addressed his mentor directly on the subject and in most unambiguous terms: "When women love men in normal life, a part of their psychological hunger is satisfied by the pleasure which they derive in the physical field. But when women pay their homage of love to you, there can be no such satisfaction, with the result that when they come close to you personally, their mind becomes slightly warped."⁷ In other words, he discovered a number of neurotic women surrounding Gandhiji. The common element that united them with him as well as divided them from the rest of the world was their neurosis. They shined in his reflected glory. No wonder, perhaps, they were forgotten soon after he died.

Charismatic Gandhi

Gandhiji, many thought, wasn't blessed with much physical appeal. But in the eyes of his female associates he exuded considerable charm. Perhaps his male companions failed to notice it.

When Millie Graham Polak met him for the first time, she thought Gandhiji's sensuous lips, probing eyes and his ramrod physical frame spoke of his unspoken sensuality. He laughed, joked and felt totally relaxed in the company of young females.

The renowned feminist Margaret Sanger interviewed Gandhiji in 1936 and she said: "He has an unusual light that shines in his face, that circles around his head and neck like a mist with white sails of a ship coming through. It lasted only a few seconds but it is there." It is interesting to note that his charisma was widely diffused. It rested not only in his eyes, but it was also ingrained in his ramrod body, his artful gait, his perpetual toothless smile and his gentle and meandering style of conversation.

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