

Gandhi on Women

Madhu Kishwar

This article reviews and analyses the role of Gandhi in drawing a large number of women into the mainstream of the freedom movement. Gandhi's ideas about women and their role in public life was a departure from those of the 19th century reformers. He saw women as a potential force in the struggle to build a new social order. He consciously attempted to articulate the connections between private and public life in order to bring women into the struggle. However, he failed to come to terms with the fact that oppression is not a moral condition but a social and historical experience relating to production relations. On the other hand even while insisting that a woman's real sphere of activity was the home, he was instrumental in creating conditions which could help women break the shackles of domesticity.

[The first two parts of the article which deal with Gandhi's views on the nature of women's oppression and the influence his ideas had in drawing women into the freedom movement were published last week. The third part, which reviews his personal relationships with women, appears below.]

III

GANDHI'S PERSONAL RELATIONS WITH WOMEN

GANDHI'S relationship with Gangabehn is typical of the way he raised simple, ordinary women to the status of fellow workers for a common cause. "Out of a plain, ignorant Gujarati woman" he made "a pioneer in a new era. Through her, a tiny craft, a miniature industry was . . . born."¹⁴³ He spotted her at a meeting, and was struck by her air of alertness and independence. This woman not only 'discovered' the spinning wheel for Gandhi but became the first organiser of the khadi movement in India. To her, as to other women such as Kamaladevi, Mirabehn, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Anasuyabehn, Gandhi was one who followed an ideal, expecting others to be equal to working with him for his ideal. "From each alike he received in response a deep, responding devotion, a devotion not only for his purposes, but to himself . . ."¹⁴⁴ It was mainly as a result of his influence that Sarojini Naidu and others like her were made to shed much of their elitism and to identify themselves with the mass of the country's women.

Even prominent Muslim leaders like the Ali brothers had to address meetings of Muslim women blindfolded but Gandhi had no problem having direct access to these women. He insisted on, and succeeded remarkably well, in talking to his 'Muslim sisters' unveiled. "Gandhi, they said, was pure enough to go anywhere and everywhere."¹⁴⁵

However, though his attempt was to create equality among men and women workers in the movement, most of the women who came in close contact with him ended up functioning primarily as his devotees. He tried to channelise this devotion into commitment to the cause that he stood for. As he wrote to Mira in one of his very touching letters: "You will truly serve me by joyously serving the cause."¹⁴⁶ He tried his best not to permit her to 'cling' to him personally: "All the time you were squandering your love on me personally, I felt guilty of misappropriation. And I exploded on the slightest pretext."¹⁴⁷ He wanted her to learn to identify herself with the cause alone. His work

alone should be dear to her. He sternly kept her apart because of her fierce attachment to him. As long as she persisted in her emotional dependence on him, he remained very uneasy about her presence in the Ashram, and kept ordering her to go and work in other villages, away from him. Mirabehn may have been an extreme case, and therefore have made Gandhi uneasy. However most of the women who came into close contact with him functioned primarily as his devotees.

A somewhat unusual relationship was the one with Sarladevi Chaudhrani. She was the wife of Pandit Rambhuj Dutt Chaudhuri, one of the nationalist leaders of Punjab. Gandhi first came into close contact with her some time in 1919. She was a very talented woman, a good singer and an active worker for the cause of Swadeshi. However, like many others, men and women, who came into close contact with Gandhi, she was not a mere political co-worker. He seems to have become deeply attached to her as a person and he took care of her son's education in his Ashram. In one of his very moving letters to her he explains that what he aspired to with her was a relationship of 'spiritual wife' which he described as follows: "It is a partnership between two persons of the opposite sex where the physical is wholly absent . . . It is possible only between two brahmacharis in thought, word and deed . . . It is a meeting between two kindred spirits . . . Are you spiritual wife to me of that description? Have we that exquisite purity, that perfect coincidence, that perfect meeting, that identity of ideals, that self-forgetfulness, that fixity of purpose, that trustfulness? For me I can answer plainly that it is only an aspiration . . ."

The emotional attachment caused some raised eyebrows among Gandhi's other colleagues and Sarladevi seems to have protested. Despite all the personal attachment and fondness Gandhi was clear that this relationship like many others had to fit into the mould of the ideal man-woman relationship that he propagated. Therefore, he would give due consideration to the objections raised by his colleagues however unwarranted: "They are jealous of their ideal which is my character. I and you . . . must give everything to retain or deserve their due affection

. . . They are my sheet-anchor as I am theirs."¹⁴⁸

Thus we see that Gandhi was willing to sacrifice everything which, in his view, might come in the way of the ideal man-woman relationship. For him, this meant a relationship of fellow workers who were untainted by sexual feeling. He felt that he must practice in his own life what he held up as an ideal for others.

Gandhi's autobiography and various other accounts of his life bring out clearly how he moved a long way from his early possessiveness and tyrannical disposition towards Kasturba to a healthy respect for her autonomy. In his autobiography he remarks that he learnt his 'first lesson in satyagraha' from his wife's capacity for silent but firm resistance to any attempt by him to impose on her. This reveals his gradual break away from the overbearing attitude of a traditional husband as he came to realise that he had no 'prescriptive rights' over her. For example, in response to questions as to what a Congressman should do if his wife refused to wear khadi or refused to fight untouchability, he answered that even for a good cause no man has the right to compel his wife: "Remember, your wife is not your property any more than you are hers" and, therefore, a wife ought never to be compelled even to do 'the right thing'.¹⁴⁹ In case the wife refused to allow harijans into the house, she could have 'a separate kitchen for herself and, if she likes, also a separate room'.¹⁵⁰ However, this kind of freedom was never granted to Kasturba. As a leader of his people, he felt he could not allow untouchability in his own house, even if it meant that his wife was denied the kind of autonomy that he advocated other men should grant their wives. In spite of Kasturba's deep-seated resistance on several important issues, he slowly steered her into becoming a kind of junior working partner instead of letting her remain outside his work in her private domestic world. She began by offering stiff resistance to his various experiments but slowly forced herself to co-operate actively on almost every one of those issues, somewhat in the tradition of Sita, who chose to follow her husband in whatever his dharma called him to do.

BAPU—THE MOTHER

Just as in his politics, Gandhi refused to fight with 'manly' weapons, so in his personal relations he gave full vent to what are generally disowned by men as 'womanly' qualities. This "father of the nation" is also remembered by those who came in personal contact with him as one who bestowed 'motherly' care and concern on them. Kaka Kalelkar narrates an incident which well illustrates this aspect of Gandhi's personality. A number of ex-residents of Phoenix Farm had returned to India with Gandhi and were staying at Shanti Niketan. Kaka Kalelkar was one of them. Early each morning, the group used to go to perform an hour of manual labour. One day, "when Bapu came, we sat up till late at night, talking with him. In the morning, after prayers, we went to perform our labour. When we came back, what did we see? Our breakfast, fruit and all, was carefully prepared and kept ready in plates for us. We had all gone to work. Who had performed this motherlike labour of love?" On discovering that it was Gandhi who had done this, Kaka Kalelkar says he felt very embarrassed, but Gandhi laughed and reassured him, saying that anyone who serves, deserves to be served.¹⁵¹

Gandhi took a deep personal interest not only in the political development of all those who came in close contact with him but also in the most intimate, private details of their life in the same way that a mother does. His correspondence with hundreds of people is full of this kind of concern. He remembered the personal situation and problems of each one, and showed particular concern for their health. Even in the midst of major political storms, he never forgot to recommend, in his letters, diet changes, long walks and various nature cure methods whenever he got to know about someone's ill-health. In his Ashram and also at different places he visited, he nursed hundreds of people, personally administering nature cures to them. Even when caught up in what he considered the most serious political crisis of his life—the Hindu-Muslim riots preceding partition—he found time to nurse sick people as he walked through the villages of Naakhali in East Bengal.

In *Young India* and *Harijan*, he regularly published articles on diet reform. In these columns he emphasised the urgency of changing to healthier food habits. He also presented for the readers' benefit his own tried-out recipes for cheap and nutritious meals that did not require elaborate preparation.

His interest in food sprang partly from a deep concern for the individuals around him, and partly from his involvement with the question of how even the poorest person in the country was to be well fed. From the time he took to public life, he always had a group of followers and their children living with him. He held himself responsible

for their well being and tended to their needs with typical motherly concern.

In his Ashrams, he incessantly carried on experiments in healthy and cheap diet. He experimented with ovens, cooking vessels, quantity of water to be used, steaming, boiling, baking, determining what ingredients are to be used or avoided in cooking, various ways of making bread, preparing various dishes from nutritious but neglected food items such as oil cakes and soyabeans, manufacturing jams and murabbas out of fruits and orange peels that might otherwise be wasted or thrown away. He also spent much thought and energy on making up suitable dishes for invalids and convalescents, and on devising nature cure remedies for them. The weight of every Ashramite used to be recorded regularly, and Gandhi carefully observed the effects on them of changes introduced in their diet. He spent a good deal of time devising suitable diet for Congress workers in villages. He wanted such diet to be "nourishing and yet within the means of an average villager and within the possibility of an eight hours minimum wage" which the Congress had in those days fixed at three annas per day.¹⁵²

Thus his experiments were conducted with a view to finding out the most wholesome food and the most sensible way of preparing it, keeping in mind the conditions of poverty in which a majority of people lived. Equally touching is his deep concern for eliminating the drudgery of women as far as possible. For instance, in reporting on his experiments with uncooked, raw foods, Gandhi tells his readers: "I publish the facts of this experiment because I attach the greatest importance to it. If it succeeds it enables serious men and women to make revolutionary changes in their mode of living. It frees women from a drudgery which brings no happiness but which brings disease in its train."¹⁵³

Similarly, when he argued in favour of eating unpolished rice, that is, rice which is hand pounded rather than polished in mills, Gandhi emphasised not just the nutritional advantages but also that "If rice can be pounded in the villages after the old fashion the wages will fill the pockets of the rice pounding sisters . . .",¹⁵⁴ since hand pounding of rice is traditionally considered a woman's occupation.

It is important to point out that Gandhi never recommended any diet reform which he had not tried on himself over a period of time. This area of Gandhi's activity reveals him at his scientific and rational best. It also throws light on his essential humanness which led him to try and approximate most closely to what has been defined as a 'womanly' ideal—that of being nurturant, life giving and healing. Towards the end of his life, he seems to have taken on the maternal role more consciously. In her aptly titled book "Bapu, My Mother", his grandniece Manu Gandhi recalls how Bapu often said

to her that though he had been a father to many, he was a mother to her. On another occasion, when replying to some workers of the Kasturba Memorial Trust who wanted the whole programme to be run by women, Gandhi endorsed their point of view, but said that he counted himself as a woman. He made such statements on several other occasions as well.

ATTITUDE TO SEXUALITY

For an overall understanding of Gandhi's views on women, it is important to take into account his views on sex and man-woman relationships. These views are rooted in his personal experiences in childhood and early youth. There are obsessive and repeated references to 'lust' in his autobiography. His vow of sexual abstinence, taken in South Africa and continued to the end of his life, his later experiments to test the extent of his freedom from sexual impulses, indicate that sexuality continued to occupy a crucial place in his thinking, and also to affect his views on women. What he calls his 'juvenile excess' in the early years of his married life seem to have left a permanent mark.¹⁵⁵ Any form of sexual contact with his wife came to embody a threat to higher loyalties. He could never, all his life, forgive himself for the fact that, while his father lay dying, he was indulging in sexual intimacy with his wife who was in an advanced stage of pregnancy.¹⁵⁶ The fact of the death of the child, a few days before it was supposed to be born, only confirmed for him the "latent mischief in the sexual nature of man."¹⁵⁷

The fact that he came to see in sexuality a fatal danger is perhaps also related to the vow of abstinence that he had to give his mother before he was allowed to go to England. As Gandhi himself admits, it was only 'the hand of God' that saved him from 'disaster' on many an occasion. In his autobiography he narrates how providence saved him from breaking his vow in spite of himself. The first occasion was when his friend Mehtab took him to a brothel. On another occasion, in Portsmouth, during a card session, some women made advances to which Gandhi nearly responded, but suddenly recalling his vow, he walked off. Being aware of how little resistance he had to the temptation, he was convinced that God had saved him! Likewise, at Zanzibar, the ship's captain took him to a brothel where Gandhi again experienced his lack of sufficient self-restraint and was assisted in keeping his vow only by the 'hand of God'. During his stay in Europe, despite 'grave temptations' he was able to keep his vow to his mother. His experiences, however, seem to have reinforced his growing mistrust of sexuality.

Gandhi viewed celibacy as an important component of living a higher form of life. He was aware that celibacy would not work for everyone so he recommended it only for

those few who wished to live more than an ordinary life. It was a precondition for those who wished to become Ashram inmates: "The conquest of lust is the highest endeavour of a man's or a woman's existence. And without overcoming lust, man cannot hope to rule over self; without rule over self, there can be no Swaraj . . . No worker who has not overcome lust, can hope to render any genuine service to the cause of the harijans, communal unity, khadi, cow protection or village reconstruction. Great causes like these cannot be served by intellectual equipment alone, they call for spiritual effort or soul force. Soul force comes only through God's grace and never descends upon a man who is a slave to lust."¹⁵⁸

Even between married couples, he felt that sexual restraint was vitally necessary. That is why he was firmly opposed to any form of birth control except abstinence. Margaret Sanger tried desperately to convince him of the urgent need for birth control methods as a necessary precondition for the liberation of women. He remained untouched, unmoved by her impassioned arguments based on her experience of the miserable condition of working-class women in England who suffered due to the lack of dissemination of scientific birth control methods. Gandhi insisted that 'self control or *Brahmacharya*' was the only healthy method. "Artificial methods are like putting a premium upon vice . . . [and] must result in imbecility and nervous prostration."¹⁵⁹ The sexual urge in man or woman was seen by him as 'animal passion' or 'bestial lust'. He saw it as "an insult to the fair sex to put up her case in support of birth control by artificial methods . . . [which] will still further degrade her".¹⁶⁰ For him, "the difference between a prostitute and a woman using contraceptives is only this—that the former sells her body to several men, while the latter sells it to one man".¹⁶¹ Gandhi condemned "the use of contraceptives in every conceivable circumstances" because he felt it was "not necessary for man or woman to satisfy the sexual instinct except when the act is meant for race reproduction".¹⁶² Any sexual contact between a husband and wife, except when they both wanted a child, was sinful, immoral and bestial. Gandhi insisted that there would be no birth control problem in India if the women could be taught to say 'No' to their husbands, when they 'approach them carnally'.¹⁶³ When Margaret Sanger cited cases of nervous and mental breakdowns as a result of the practice of self-control, Gandhi dismissed the evidence as 'based on examination of imbeciles'.¹⁶⁴ Free love was, for him, 'dog's love' which is what contraceptives would bring about. "If people want to multiply like rabbits, they will also have to die like rabbits. If we become licentious, there will undoubtedly be Nature's punishment descending upon us."¹⁶⁵

According to Gandhi, women, to preserve

their integrity and self-respect, should not allow even their husband to 'enjoy' any physical relation with them. He insisted that true love could flower between man and woman, as in his own case, only when the two voluntarily renounced all sexual or 'lustful' contact. It was only then that they could rise above 'the selfish purpose of begetting children and running a household'.¹⁶⁶ It is significant that from here he did not go on to attack the institution of marriage and the family as coming in the way of selfless humanity. His solution to the problem was that married people "can behave [even while continuing to stay married] as if they were not married . . . If the married couple can think of each other as brother and sister, they are freed for universal service." Their love becomes free from the impurity of lust and so grows stronger.¹⁶⁷ His blessing to a young couple upon their marriage was "May you have no children".¹⁶⁸

A Sati would, in Gandhi's view, regard marriage not as a means of satisfying the animal appetite but "as a means of realising the ideal of selfless and self-effacing service . . .".¹⁶⁹ Selflessness here equals sexlessness and anybody wanting to perform social service or have a glimpse of religious life must lead a celibate existence, whether married or unmarried.¹⁷⁰ In Gandhi's Ashram, even married couples had to vow to live a life of celibacy. In love and companionship between man and woman, there was no room for sexual satisfaction. That satisfaction was seen as a denial of true friendship. Gandhi tells us that he and his wife tasted the real bliss of married life when they renounced all sexual contact and that in the heyday of youth.¹⁷¹ Even though he liked to believe that this self-denial was born out of their great desire for service, we know, from his own account, that he took the decision unilaterally and Kasturba acquiesced in it, as she silently acquiesced in many other things which she did not really agree with.

Gandhi's experiments with changing key aspects of the usual power relationship between men and women always included a healthy respect and consideration for every human being, allowing them to obey the dictates of their own conscience. All this mutual respect and consideration was, however, circumscribed in a benevolent and enlightened patriarchal mould. Gandhi the patriarch was confident that he would never abuse the authority and trust vested in him. The relationship he envisaged did not, however, provide real equality to women. Though Kasturba remained publicly silent on these issues, even Gandhi's own version of his relationship with her, despite all the respect he claimed to have for her, bears this out. In everything, he decided and she acquiesced, whether it was Gandhi unilaterally giving up all sexual contact between them, or his opting for an Ashram life instead of a private householder's life, or his insisting on her

cleaning latrines along with him. Whether or not she really felt convinced of all these things, Gandhi seldom questioned his right to impose them on her, because he was convinced that he could confidently decide for her what she needed to do when actions to promote a 'higher cause' were involved. The framework within which he worked may have had inbuilt safeguards against vile abuse of power for purely selfish ends but in the way it functioned, it did not provide an alternative to the traditional power hierarchy that prevails in most families between men and women and between young and old.

Though sometimes bordering on crankiness and perverseness, Gandhi's obsession and experiment with sexual abstinence should not be dismissed as mere products of personal eccentricity. His 'self control' and brahmacharya were not mere claptrap of life denying asceticism with a moralistic facade. In the hands of a reactionary moralist, sexual abstinence invariably comes to represent a repressive and life denying ideology. But Gandhi tried literally to transcend his sexuality and to make it contribute to forging the powerful, modern political weapon of satyagraha. He experimented with these ideas as part of his social revolution and vision of a new man-woman relationship. Since there used to be many letters on sex problems written to him, he began to discuss them in a regular column in the *Harijan*. It is noteworthy that almost all his advocacy of sexual restraint was addressed to men. He saw male sexuality as almost synonymous with aggression towards and humiliation of women. In his view, women, by and large, were passive objects of male sexual urge.

His ideas on control of sexuality served to create a favourable social atmosphere for women to come out of their homes and participate in social and political struggles, to be able to live away from home without fear, shame or exploitation. His upholding celibacy as a higher ideal than marriage also made it possible for many women to live unmarried and yet be respected in society. Just as Mirabai had opted out of marriage by embracing a new religious trend which allowed such an option, so many women during the national movement were helped to exercise this option, because of the active encouragement given by Gandhi.

Gandhi tried to ensure that his model of an ideal relationship between men and women was practised not only in the Ashram but also in the national movement generally. His insistence on making the love of Ashramites a love of brothers and sisters served an important purpose in bringing about a 'freer' social interaction between the sexes. The kind of innovations he tried in Ashram life bear witness to this: My brahmacharya knew nothing of the orthodox laws governing its observance. I framed my own rules, as occasion necessitated. But I have never

believed that all contact with women was to be shunned for the due observance of brahmacharya. That restraint which demands the abstention from all contact, no matter how innocent, with the opposite sex, is a forced growth, having little or no vital value ... I sleep in the Ashram surrounded by women, for they feel safe with me in every respect. It should be remembered that there is no privacy in the Segaon Ashram."¹⁷² Sometimes, he even received visitors while bathing, and had his massage administered by young women. Besides keeping his own clothes to a minimum, he inveighed against the muffling up and false modesty imposed on women: "Chastity ... must be a very poor thing [if] it cannot stand the gaze of men." So he asked women to 'tear [down] the purdah',¹⁷³

Gandhi's conception of brahmacharya differed in one important respect from the conception that had come down through the mainstream tradition of sages and ascetics who practised and preached celibacy as a precondition to the achievement of self-realisation. In the ancient ascetic tradition, woman was consistently seen as the embodiment of temptation, the seductress who lured the sage away from his high pursuits. Therefore, a tapasvi who had taken the vow of brahmacharya was always warned to stay far away from women and to shun them like the plague. Many of them went to the ridiculous extent of vowing never to set eyes on women lest their tapasya be shattered. Gandhi took a far more rational view of the phenomenon of lust, and temptation, in that he blamed the lustful eye rather than the object viewed by that eye. His writings on sexuality are free of that misogynist taint which is so visible in much theology and mythology of the ascetic traditions, Christian, Hindu and Islamic. Gandhi, by and large, saw man as the perpetrator of lust and woman as its victim rather than as temptress or agent. His life at the Ashram, surrounded by women, was an acknowledgment that woman in herself is not an embodiment of evil sexuality but that such evil must be cleansed from the mind wherein it may exist.

In the Ashram, there was no segregation. Men and women slept, ate and worked together. Taking the cue from Gandhi, Ashramites of opposite sex nursed each other in illness without the usual restraints. This was indeed a radical experiment for evolving a new framework and a new concept of a working relationship between men and women. Uninhibited by each other's sex, the common bond between man and woman was to be their common ideal and their common work.

Moreover, under the prevalent social circumstances, brahmacharya had a very liberating potential for women. In the existing social structures, this was perhaps the only way women could free themselves from household drudgery and the burden of childcare to an extent sufficient for them to

become active participants in social change. Even married couples were asked to practise sexual abstinence and direct their energies to constructive work.

However, Gandhi recommended sexual abstinence even more strongly for men than for women. These experiments with brahmacharya as a way of life were part of a much larger effort for finding newer and healthier ways of relating with the opposite sex and moving out of the framework of power relations based on sex.

The experiments with abstinence are also part of an old Indian tradition wherein ascetics were believed to acquire extraordinary powers, even greater than those of the gods, by years of hard tapasya. Gandhi's sexual abstinence was part of a larger tapasya through which he attempted to discipline his life for devotion to a high cause. His rigorous austerity, various fasts and dietary experiments, vows of silence, living barebodied except for a loin-cloth, and travelling as far as possible in the manner of ordinary poor people, all were essential components of his rigorous tapasya. While most of this seemed to come relatively easily and naturally to Gandhi, he seems to have been bothered by sexual unrest till the very end of his life. Could it be that he saw himself as similar to the prominent rishis and munis who, after acquiring extraordinary powers through their tapasya, lost all their accumulated power because they failed to resist sexual lust? Gandhi not only deliberately surrounded himself with 'temptation', living in close proximity with a number of young women and staying in close physical contact with them. He also kept testing himself in more and more ultimate ways, especially towards the end of his life, when he was facing a serious moral and political crisis.

A very fundamental part of his philosophy and world-view was the idea of the responsibility of each human being for everyone else. He believed that the spiritual force of even one fully formed satyagrahi could set right the world's wrongs. At the end of his life it was clear that many things had gone terribly wrong. He and the India of his dreams had been pushed aside. Millions were being slaughtered in communal riots. The Congress party was assuming power as the inheritor of the British Raj, not as the regenerator of India. Day after day, he sought an explanation as to why his ideals and hopes had ended in such a shambles. He no longer spoke of living a hundred years but spoke of the sadness of continuing to live at all. To one who believed so firmly in the connection between personal purity and the force of truth and fearlessness, some explanation had to be forthcoming for the ruin that had ensued.

This constant preoccupied brooding led him to make one of his final major, practical experiments with truth. He thought that perhaps his own commitment was flawed and hypocritical, and that flaw was responsible

for the whole disaster. Considering the profound faith he had in the unity of theory and practice, could he in all sincerity be sure that his sexual lust was a thing of the past and that he saw women who were close to him only as sisters and daughters united in a common faith? He began to test himself, as always hiding nothing and increasing the stakes day by day. His final experiments were with Manu, his cousin's 19-year-old granddaughter. They slept together without any clothes, holding each other. In this way, Gandhi felt he could find out whether any remnants of his formerly active sexual urges remained in him to be revealed.

An important component of his views was also the belief that loss of semen leads to serious loss of physical and spiritual energy of men. Sexual responsiveness to women was to be banned as an evil temptation, not by shunning women but by acquiring total control over one's own sexuality. In this part of his attempt to transform himself, where Gandhi as a man is concerned with self-realisation and disciplining himself to attain what he believed to be a higher moral and spiritual force, his attention seems to lie with his own struggle with no apparent attention paid to how his actions might affect the woman who became participants in his experiments. Just as he seems to have shown no concern for Kasturba's opinion when he first decided to launch his sexual experiments with abstinence, so he seems to overlook the possible effects of his experiment on the 19-year old Manu.¹⁷⁴

Gandhi's revulsion against sex and sensuality often led him to practise a kind of inner violence on those under his charge. Certain autobiographical instances narrated by him highlight a streak of perverse self-righteous arbitrariness. For example, at Tolstoy Farm, as part of an experiment, he used to send young boys and girls 'to bathe in the same spot at the same time' after having fully introduced them to the necessity of 'self-restraint'. He tells us that his eye 'always followed the girls as a mother's eye would follow a daughter'. One day, he got to know that one of the boys had 'made fun of two girls'. He then forced the girls to 'cut off' their fine, long hair so that they would have some sign on their person to 'sterilise the sinner's eye'. He reports with satisfaction that he never heard of a joke again.¹⁷⁵ Later on, at Phoenix, a girl of 20 was made to chop off her hair because of having sinned with two boys. Much later, he had Mirabehn also shave off her hair to make her fit for Ashram life.

While it is true that Gandhi gave up sexual intimacy for a wider communal intimacy, and for disciplining himself as a servant of a higher cause, yet there is also some sign of a streak of vindictiveness towards woman as the temptress that can be detected in his views and actions. While some of his diatribes against promiscuous male sexuality have humane aspects, Gandhi made one most un-

characteristic and shocking statement which betrayed his violent revulsion against any sexual contact outside marriage. When criticising the work of orphanages, one of his points among several others, was that they admit 'foundlings', that is, infants who have been abandoned because they were born out of wedlock: "I am not yet convinced that providing for such admissions is ethically sound. I have a kind of feeling that such facilities lead to increase in indulgence. It can in no way be proved that keeping alive every creature that is born, no matter how, is a part of humanitarianism. It is indeed futile to make such an effort . . . Humanitarianism does not mean saving a definite number of lives . . . Unclean flour is infested with numberless lives. To preserve such flour is no humanitarianism. It lies rather in covering up the flour with earth or destroying it, though either way the vermin in the flour perish. Numberless vermin perish even in the process of keeping our bodies clean." Therefore he concludes that humanitarianism "will not encourage and shield laxity by accepting the burden of such admissions".¹⁷⁶ The fact that one as devoted to non-violence as was Gandhi, should see innocent children born out of marriage as vermin who deserved to be left to perish is another reflection of his moralistic self-righteousness and vindictive revulsion against what he saw as irresponsible sex for the sake of sensual enjoyment. Even if one makes allowance for the statment by acknowledging that it was made in 1917 when Gandhi was only beginning to evolve his philosophy of non-violence and love for every human being including an enemy, it is hard to comprehend the violence of thought underlying this sentiment considering that he never used similar language or expressed such sentiments against well known exploiters of society, and would not have condoned violence against them as he does against little babies who could not by any stretch of imagination be held responsible for being born of people who refused to take responsibility for them.

PRACTICE IN ADVANCE OF PRECEPT

While in many ways, Gandhi's views on women and their role in society are not very different from those of the 19th century reformers, in some other important ways he marks a crucial break from that tradition. The most crucial difference is that he does not see women as objects of reform, as helpless creatures deserving charitable concern. Instead, he sees them as active, self-conscious agents of social change. His concern is not limited to bringing about change in selected areas of social life such as education and marriage as a way of regenerating Indian society, as was that of most 19th century social reformers. He is primarily concerned with bringing about radical social reconstruction. The political movement for national liberation was a means, a weapon to achieve that end. And he saw women play-

ing a major role in the task of social reconstruction. He thought that in the process of reconstructing society, they would also free themselves from the specific forms of bondage that affected them as women.

Yet, while the new society that he envisions is a radical departure from the past, and is based on anarchist principles of local self-determination, the role that he envisages and advocates for women is based on the ideology of division of labour between the sexes which has been historically an important tool for the oppression and exploitation of women.

Gandhi saw the home as the main sphere of activity of most women, barring the exceptional woman who devotes herself to serving humanity as an extension of the domestic role of selfless service. Gandhi believes in the equal dignity of both men and women and in women's absolute freedom for self-realisation. But his notion of equality does not extend to equality in employment, or in economic and political power. He wanted, first and foremost, to change the moral condition of women's lives, and to do away with the vile abuses of power by men, but not so much to alter the basic relationship from which that power was derived. He attempted to extend the power of women as wives, mothers and sisters within the household rather than to have women acquire political power in their own right. Gandhi did not envisage a radical change in their social role even though he was in favour of removing all legal and juridical disabilities against them.

One of the most lasting contributions of Gandhi to the women's cause was that he gave it a moral legitimacy. He helped create a tradition and a social-political atmosphere in which even today, hardly anyone will publicly stand up and explicitly oppose women's fundamental rights or will deny them participation in politics. Such was the moral legitimacy that leaders like Gandhi created for the cause of women that women's entry into politics as 'equal' partners came without much overt resistance and opposition. The tradition was set for patronised entry of a handful of urban middle-class women into politics and for tailoring the movement in such a way that some women's issues could easily be accommodated within the parameters of male domination and supremacy without throwing a serious challenge to it.

Slowly, this legitimacy had degenerated into token representation of women, with a handful of urban, educated, middle-class women being the beneficiaries while the mass of women remain voiceless with no access whatsoever to political power at any level, especially no access to power at the village level.

Women's representation in parliament has never exceeded five per cent of total seats and has been on a decline, recently settling down to about three per cent. In most parts

of the country, women are not allowed to participate in whatever exists by way of panchayats and other more informal institutions of political power at the village level. Gandhi's legacy in the contemporary political culture has been distorted to mean encouraging "tokenism" at the very top without bringing about any real changes at the bottom. Thus the myth has come to acquire a powerful hold that Indian women have equal rights in every sphere and that if things are wrong, it is because women choose not to make use of their rights.

Despite great concern for women's rights, Gandhi did not encourage women to organise as a political force in their own right around their own issues. They were to seek their liberation by serving the national cause, in the tradition of selfless social workers. As a result, women never came to acquire any real political power within the Congress. Even the most prominent of women leaders remained peripheral to the hard core decision-making within the Congress because they were not seen as representing any organised constituency of women.

Even as women's participation grew numerically in the national movement, women did not come to play a greater role at decision-making levels. Women were more prominent in running the Ashram on a day-to-day basis by their unremitting services. They were involved in decision-making only at rare and exceptional moments.

This is partly because Gandhi saw an important role for women not in political decision-making but in those parts of the movement which addressed themselves to the task of transforming people's ideas and lives as, for instance, participants in demonstrations, satyagrahis, boycott organisers. Moreover, even within the movement, women were encouraged to be more active in the 'constructive' programme, which had to do with social transformation and social service. Gandhi saw the world of politics and power as too ruthless and corrupt for women. They were to be the moral force in the movement by staying away from the struggle for power and by transforming people's hearts through their quiet, non-violent strength.

The very presence of women was seen as a disciplining force in agitations and struggles. Women were frequently preferred as leaders of picketing squads because Gandhi was afraid that it would be far more difficult to restrain men picketers from using violence. Also, he felt that those against whom picketing was being practised would be less likely to retaliate with violence against women picketers. Thus, on the one hand, emphasis on women's participation in satyagraha sought to ensure that the movement stayed non-violent, while on the other hand, emphasis on non-violence made it possible for larger numbers of women to participate. In fact, Gandhi's non-violence was a powerful revolutionary weapon because it created

a favourable atmosphere for participation of very large numbers of people, especially women, giving them all a meaningful place in the struggle. It is easier for women to prove their courage and strength without resort to violence while in wielding weapons and using physical violence, men usually have the upper hand. Historically, men have come to acquire an almost exclusive monopoly over weapons of destruction and over organised social violence. Therefore, it was out of that faculty which was hitherto considered the source of women's powerlessness that Gandhi forged an effective weapon for political action. In this kind of satyagraha, women in large numbers could participate and even lead, more naturally than men. Again, however, Gandhi's idealising the image of woman as the 'embodiment of sacrifice' and extolling the strength that comes from suffering helped strengthen the prevailing oppressive stereotype of woman as selfless companions and contributors to a social cause defined by men, in the tradition of Sita.

Integral to the image of women as the moral force in society, as the 'embodiment of sacrifice' was the idea of woman having to transcend her sexual needs so that she need not be as a 'slave to any man'. Gandhi did not see the sexual life of women as very important. In his mind, women's needs seem to exist in response only to men's needs. Women are to say 'no' to men when the latter behave 'carnally', like 'beasts'. This is to help men become better human beings. It is best if women renounce sexual contact altogether in order to set free men's energies for higher goals. In all this, there is no place for women's own sexual expression.

Despite insisting on the stereotype of women as running the household while men dominate the affairs of the outside world, in practice Gandhi encouraged a breaking away from these stereotypes. This is most evident in his belief in the superiority of non-violent satyagraha as a weapon of struggle. He learnt this from his wife and it is a form of resistance more often practised by women. So far, this kind of resistance used to be considered 'unmanly'. Gandhi realised that the identification of 'manliness' with violence was likely to lead humanity to destruction. Men needed to emulate women's quiet strength and their resistance of injustice without resorting to violence.

Similarly, Gandhi insisted on every Congressman taking to spinning, hitherto considered a women's occupation, as a necessary qualification. This despite resistance from within the Congress on the ground that this amounted to wasting the energies of men. This was indeed a radical step in breaking the hold of oppressive stereotypes and in weaning men away from aggressive 'manliness'. It was an essential step in purging violence out of society.

Gandhi's action, in bringing women dignity in social life, in breaking down some of

the prejudices against their participation in social and political life, in promoting an atmosphere of sympathetic awareness of their issues, goes far beyond his own views and pronouncements of women's role and place in society.

(Concluded)

Notes

[This is a revised version of a paper I wrote in 1977. I am indebted to my friends Berry and Ruth for their suggestions and help in revising the paper.]

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- 143 Ibid, p 108
- 145 Cited in Tandulkar, op, cit, Vol II, p 34, Vol V, p 196.
- 146 "Bapu's Letters To Mira", Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1949, p 152. Letter dated June 24, 1931,
- 147 Ibid, p 152
- 148 Martin Green, "Tolstoy and Gandhi", pp 163-165
- 149 *Harijan*, March 9, 1940 CW, Vol LXXI p 302.
- 150 *Harijan*, 13.4.1940, in M K Gandhi, *Women*", Navajivan Prakashan, Ahmedabad, 1958.
- 151 Kaka Saheb Karlekar, "*Bapu ki Jhankian*", Navajivan Prakashan, Ahmedabad, 1948, p 6.
- 152 M K Gandhi, "Diet and Diet Reform", Navajivan Prakashan, Ahmedabad, 1949, p 30.
- 153 Ibid, p 16.
- 154 M K Gandhi, "Diet and Diet Reform", op cit, p 41.
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- 156 M K Gandhi, "An Autobiography", The Navajivan Trust, 1983, pp 24-26
- 157 Geoffrey Ashe, op cit, pp 11-12.
- 158 Tandulkar, op, cit, Vol IV, p 63.
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- 160 Ibid, p 4.
- 161 Ibid, pp 52-53.
- 162 Ibid, pp 8-9.
- 163 Ibid, p 65.
- 164 Ibid, pp 65-66.
- 165 Ibid, p 60.
- 166 Ibid.
- 167 Ibid.
- 168 Eleanor Morton, "The Women in Gandhi's Life", Dodd, Mead and Co, New York, 1953, p 148.
- 169 CW, Vol XLVI, May 21, 1931, pp 73-74.
- 170 Ibid, p 74.
- 171 M K Gandhi, "The Role of Women", op cit, p 64. See also CW, Vol LXV p 111.
- 172 Cited in Tandulkar, op, cit, Vol V, p 196.
- 173 Ibid, Vol II, p 249.
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175 M K Gandhi, "Satyagraha in South Africa", Navajivan Publishing House, 1928, p 245.

176 CW, Vol XIII, p 471.

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During 1984-85, the company improved its performance with total crude throughput of 3,413,274 tonnes as against 2,647,000 tonnes in the previous year, sales of Rs 887 crore against Rs 625 crore and profit after tax of Rs 21.61 crore against Rs 2.67 crore. LPG production increased from previous year's 33,700 tonnes to 42,500 tonnes. During the first six months of the current year, production of LPG was 52,700 tonnes. MRL also continues to improve its record in the field of energy conservation, although there is very little scope for it. The company has added five tanks with a capacity of 55,000 tonnes of storage capacity each at a cost of Rs 21 crore.

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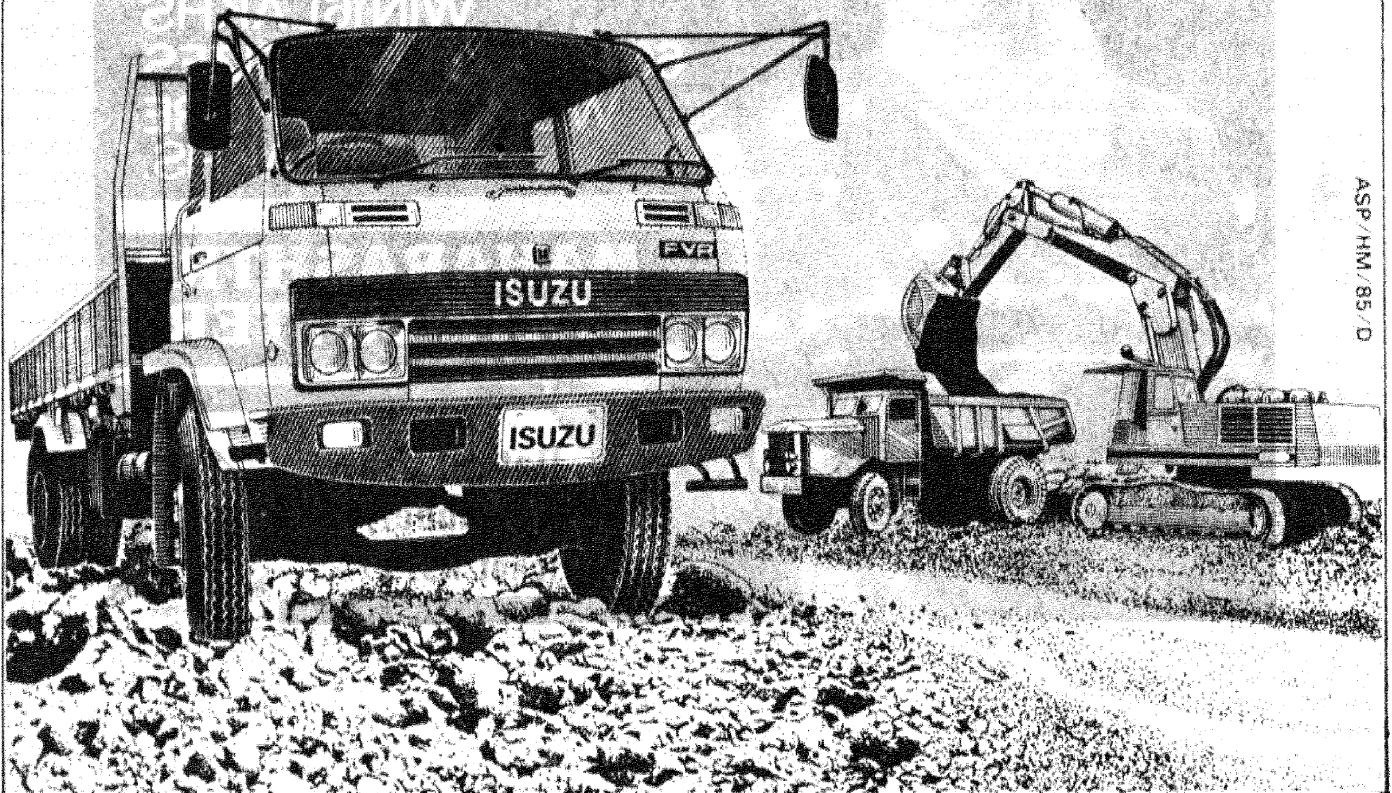
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