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Gandhi and sexuality: in what ways and to what extent was Gandhi's life dominated by his views on sex and sexuality?

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Though research is coming to light about Gandhi's views on sexuality, there is still a gap in how this can be related or focused to his broader political philosophy and personal conduct. Joseph Alter states: "It is well known that Gandhi felt that sexuality and desire were intimately connected to social life and politics and that self-control translated directly into power of various kinds both public and private."* However, I would argue, that the ways in which Gandhi connected these aspects, why and how, have not been fully discussed and are, indeed, not well known. By studying his views and practices with relation to sexuality, I believe that much can be discerned as to how his political philosophy and personal conduct were both established and acted out. In this paper I will aim, therefore, to address: what his views were on sex and sexuality, contextualizing his views with those of the time, what his influences were in his ideology on sex, and how these ideologies framed and related to his political philosophy as well as conduct. Through establishing all this I hope to emphasise the significance of his views on sex in better understanding Gandhi's political philosophy and conduct.

*Joseph Alter, "Celibacy, Sexuality and Transformation of Gender into Nationalism" in *the Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol, 53, No.1 (Feb, 1994). P.45

Introduction

*For men like me, you have to measure them not
by the rare moments of greatness in their lives,
but by the amount of dust they collect in the
course of life's journey*

M. K. Gandhi¹

Though Mohandas “Mahatma” Karamchand Gandhi is probably one of the most written about political leaders and philosophers to date, there are still areas of his life that have been inadequately examined and analysed. Gandhi believed that the public and private spheres of life were intimately connected, and as a result much of what he did in his private life, directly reflected on his public image and ideology. This can be seen, in particular, in regards to his sexual views and practices.

Gandhi's views on sex and sexuality formed an integral part of his theory of politics. Of his five main tenets for which he is most well-known: *swaraj*, *ahimsa*, *swadeshi*, *sarvodaya* and *satyagraha*, each encompassed within it an element of Gandhi's beliefs on sex. As a political leader and figure of nationalism, Gandhi believed that in order to regenerate India, he, himself, had to become as pure a spirit or as perfect a man as he possibly could.

Control over his sexuality formed an integral component of this plan.²

Gandhi's theory on sexuality evolved over the course of time in which he was a political figure, the developments of his views and beliefs occurred alongside and in conjunction with that of his political philosophy. By tracing the development of his theory of sexuality over the course of his life, particularly by identifying the influences that shaped his philosophy and his diversion from these ideologies, as well as by analysing his relationship with his family and the changes in his sexual philosophy over the course of his time spent in politics in both South Africa and India, the far reaching extent to which Gandhi connected his sexual beliefs with his political views and personal conduct can be identified. Indeed, what comes to light is the fact that much of what has been studied about this aspect of Gandhi's life has in fact been misinterpreted. Gandhi was not in fact ‘obsessed with sex’ as many sources have portrayed him to be. Such an interpretation is due to a fundamental cultural misunderstanding of both Hinduism and Indian culture. Rather, his views and practices regarding sexuality were intimately connected with his desire to be a guru, a political *sannyasi*, and as his influence as a public figure evolved, so did his sexual ideology.

¹ Gandhi as quoted in Joseph Lelyveld, *Great Soul : Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2011). pp.x

² Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999). pp.261

Contextualizing Gandhi's sexual ideology

In tracing the development of Gandhi's sexual practices and beliefs, an overview and contextualization of Gandhi's specific views must be established. Gandhi undertook a vow of celibacy in 1906, referring to it as his *brahmacharya* vow. *Brahmacharya*, within Hinduism is one of the four stages of life; specifically it refers to the first stage of life, that of the student. The student, at this stage, while learning about spirituality must retain celibacy. Gandhi adopted the Hindu term '*brahmacharya*' to refer to his own practice of celibacy, despite the fact that he was neither a student nor in the first stage of his life- he had already been married at this point for eighteen years and had conceived four sons. It was during his time in South Africa and right before he undertook his first *satyagraha* vow that he vowed to be celibate. His undertaking of the celibacy vow can be seen as the point of conception of his theory on sexuality.

Gandhi defined his *brahmacharya* ideal as the "search for the Brahman...*Brahmacharya* means control in thought, speech and action of all sense, at all places and at all times. The man or woman who observes such perfect *brahmacharya* is totally free from disease and, therefore, he or she lives ever in the presence of God, is like God."³ He thus connected

brahmacharya not only to religion and self-control but also to health.

It was only a mere few months from the point at which he undertook his celibacy vow that he recognised its national importance and potential and started to pressurise others to take it too, stating: "it is necessary for many Indians to observe *brahmacharya*, even if they get married."⁴ He was displeased with his own son for not having followed suit:

That it has become necessary [for me] to get married is due to the sensual atmosphere [in India]. It is not any dislike for the country but the grief I feel for its present sorry plight that prompts me to say this.⁵

Gandhi connected sexuality to the plight of India's political state from a very early stage, and having undertaken his celibacy vow was quick to cajole others to do the same. From this initial theorizing of his views, Gandhi's sexual ideology underwent an intense development up until his death. His initial view while he was fervently committed to it was not nearly as radical as it was to become.

If the undertaking of celibacy is the basis of Gandhi's sexual ideology, its development can be seen as culminating in a somewhat paradoxical sense with his sexual experiments in the immediate years leading up to his assassination. Gandhi connected his personal

³ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, (New Delhi: Publications Division Government of India, 1999). Vol 28:14, "Brahmacharya" from

Narajivan: 25-5-1924, "pp 22-26 [Herein referred to as CWMG]

⁴ CWMG Vol 6:347, "Letter to Lakshmidas Gandhi," 20-04-1907, pp. 40

⁵ *ibid*

success of controlling his celibacy with the political success of India. During the more difficult periods of the nationalist struggle his views on sex can be seen as becoming increasingly radical. In the final phase of both his life and the nationalist struggle, he was particularly disturbed by the communal violence taking place in India between Hindu and Muslims and by the speculation of partition. Gandhi took the failure of the country to unite and the violence that ensued as a sign of his failure as a *brahmachari*. Gandhi believed that the violence and untruth that pervaded the public domain at the time were reflective of shortcomings in his own *ahimsa* and *brahmacharya*.⁶ He thus sought to challenge his sexuality by taking a number of his female associates, including his two grandnieces Manu and Abha Gandhi, to bed with him. They would each lie naked alongside Gandhi who would also be naked so he could test his sexual control and as such his political control. Such an experiment generated much controversy not only in his time but also in its representation in historic sources. In order to best understand the importance and political relevance behind this experiment an analysis of the development of Gandhi's sexual ideology from its inception must first be assessed and will serve as the undertaking of this essay.

⁶ Vinay Lal, "Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 1-2 (2000). pp.120

Gandhi's sexual views and beliefs helped shape his political ideology and personal conduct. His adherence to his celibacy increased his self-esteem which provided him with the necessary courage to lead the country in its struggle for independence. Therefore his sexual practices can be seen as possessing a necessary psychological element. However, this was not the purpose of his sexual undertaking. Gandhi's main purpose for his sexual experiments was in the hope of securing spiritual power.⁷ Therefore, throughout this essay the spiritual versus psychological dichotomy behind Gandhi's sexual undertakings will also be considered.

Gandhi and Freud: the spiritual & psychological dichotomy

Gandhi, in explaining his own personal experiments with *brahmacharya*, differentiates between his experiences while he is awake and his experiences while in a sleeping state. From such a differentiation one can gather that part of his experimental sexual practices was to reconcile his conscious and subconscious. In this respect, many biographers of Gandhi have attempted to view his life in a psycho-biographic sense, chronicling his life with a Freudian analysis. Even during his life Gandhi was prompted to undertake psychological self-

⁷ Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*. pp. 222

analysis along Freudian lines by Nirmal Kumar

Bose:

Personally, I have practiced the Freudian technique of dream analysis on myself and have derived immense benefit, as it has helped me to bring to the surface submerged desires which had been causing trouble.⁸

Gandhi replied to this, “What is Freudian philosophy? I have not read any writing of his.”⁹ Even during his lifetime, scholars of Gandhi had the urge to study him along the lines of Freudian psycho-history.

Erik Erikson’s “Gandhi’s Truth” is one such biography that aims to do this. Erikson’s methodology was through originology “the psychoanalytic habit of finding the causes of a man’s whole development in his childhood conflicts” that he considered to be “as pernicious as a hagiographic teleology wherein ends are supposed to explain complex developments.”¹⁰ To this extent, Erikson simplifies the complexities of Gandhi’s life and experiments to an incident that happened in Gandhi’s childhood which related to the way in which his father died, and Gandhi’s personal guilt and shame for his role, or lack of role rather, in the instance: “The shame...was the shame of my carnal desire even at the critical hour of my father’s death, which demanded

wakeful service. It is a blot I have never been able to efface or forget.”¹¹

Even though Erikson states that this instance has been “quoted so often and interpreted so much” it is still, according to Erikson, a fundamental childhood episode to study in understanding the Mahatma:

This... ‘curse’ ...It is indicative of an aspect of childhood or youth which comes to represent an account that can never be settled...this curse, clinical theory, would suggest, must be heir to the Oedipus complex.¹²

Erikson thus aims to trace Gandhi’s ‘curse’ through his lifetime. However, such an application along Freudian lines is an oversimplified explanation of Gandhi’s struggles, and carries with it a Judeo-Christian undertone of psychology as Christian sexual ethics, that is inherent in Freudian thinking. Sudhir Kakar points out the weaknesses in such an explanation, saying:

To reduce a man of Gandhi’s stature to early childhood traumas is both wrong in method and evil in influence, for it shuts out the possibility of man’s partaking of Gandhi’s message and person¹³

Thus he begins “questioning earlier idealizations of Western civilization and the Judeo-Christian tradition of which

⁸ Bose, Nirmal Kumar. *CWMG*, Vol 94: Appendix V, “Letter from N.K. Bose, 18-03-1947, pp. 425

⁹ Gandhi as quoted in Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, Loc 2387 of 4059

¹⁰ Kakar, Sudhir. *Mad and Divine*. pp. 141

¹¹ Mahatma Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth* (London: Penguin Books, 2007). pp. 44

¹² Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi’s Truth : On the Originis of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1969). pp. 127-128

¹³ Sudhir Kakar, *Mad and Divine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). pp. 144

psychoanalysis, in spite of some differences in its image of man, is an integral part.”¹⁴ He thus suggests analyzing Gandhi in a Freudian sense by coming “back to Freud with some of the scepticism of the great sceptic himself.”¹⁵

Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and Lloyd I Rudolph, like Kakar, agree that a study of Gandhi cannot take place using conventional Freudian analysis. When assessing the political effectiveness of Gandhian asceticism they argue that the psychological logic behind the relationship he had with his constituents was in fact a “reverse of that envisioned by Freud in his writings on leadership and mob psychology”¹⁶ They argue that such a view is in fact limited and does not account for a leader, such as Gandhi, who was able to mobilize strengths and virtues in his followers. Such a limitation in psychological theory, specifically Freud’s, on leadership is due to the tendency to neglect this moralistic dimension, which in Gandhi’s case can be identified as the spiritual. To look at Gandhi from a strictly psychological, Freudian analysis is to deny Gandhi of his Hindu spiritualism which indeed made up a great tenet of his thinking, thus to look at Gandhi in a more appropriate analysis one must consider the spiritual and

psychological dichotomy inherent in Gandhi’s philosophy

Just as Kakar and the Rudolphs have brought to light some of the difficulties of applying a Freudian analysis to Gandhi, there are many such instances of misunderstanding and misappropriation that must be considered when looking at Gandhi, and so an analysis into previous methodologies of secondary sources as well as current issues in methodology of primary sources must be further explored.

Critique of secondary sources

Like Erikson, who applied Freudian analysis to Gandhi which has Judeo-Christian undertones that are inapplicable to a Hindu political and spiritual leader; many other historians in fact, also reduced aspects of Gandhi’s life to Christian analysis and undertones. Gandhi’s Hinduism has even been so far reduced as to a variety of Christianity.¹⁷ His figuration as a Christian saint, likened to St Augustine, demonstrates that his:

Christianisation actually rested upon some cultural misunderstanding: the ‘polysemic’ nature of perceptions of Gandhi in India offers a striking contrast to the reductionism implied in his transformation into a Christian saint...”¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Intimate Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). pp. 96

¹⁶ Susanne Hoeber Rudolph & Lloyd I. Rudolph, *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1983). pp. 46

¹⁷ Claude Markowits, *The Un-Gandhian Gandhi: The Life and Afterlife of the Mahatma*, ed. Crispin Bates, Anthem South Asian Studies (London: Anthem Press, 2005). pp. 18

¹⁸ Ibid.

Part of the issue in methodology of so many secondary sources and biographies, has to do with Gandhi's iconography as 'father of the nation,' which in turn aims to project a "simplified, bland image of an eminently complex and contradictory personality."¹⁹ Recognition of such a project is especially noteworthy when considering the extent to which historians and sources on Gandhi have failed to acknowledge this particular aspect, the sexual, of Gandhi's life and philosophy. For instance, the obsession with exhibiting Gandhi as a national icon has led to the recent book by Joseph Lelyveld that insinuates that Gandhi was a homosexual to be banned in Gandhi's home state of Gujarat. The *New York Times* coverage of the banning succinctly states this point:

GANDHI is still so revered in India that a book...has been banned in one state and may yet be banned nationwide. The problem, say those who have fanned the flames of popular outrage this week, is that the book suggests that the father of modern India was bisexual."²⁰

The Chief Minister of Gujarat, and controversial leader of the Hindu religion-leaning Bharatiya Janata Party, Narendra Modi, is even quoted in the article as saying, "The writing is perverse in nature...It has hurt the sentiments of those with capacity for sane and

logical thinking."²¹ The book never outrightly states that Gandhi was a bisexual or that he even engaged in any sexual practices with other men but such a passage accounts for what the book strongly suggests about Gandhi's sexuality that resulted in its banning in Gandhi's home state:

'They were a couple'...Kallenbach later remarked that they'd lived together 'almost in the same bed' - but what kind of couple were they?...One Gandhi scholar characterized the relationship as 'clearly homoerotic'.²²

While it is still an issue that the Indian government has sought to limit perceptions of Gandhi's sexual ideologies, nevertheless there is still a fundamental problem in the methodology of Lelyveld's book, itself. There seems to be a crucial cultural misunderstanding in his study of Gandhi's friendship with Kallenbach that fails to account for the way in which Indian men treat and interact with their fellow male acquaintances. Such a cultural misunderstanding seems to be endemic amongst the sources that discuss Gandhi's sexuality within the thesis that Gandhi's experiments were perverse or that he was a homosexual or a nymphomaniac. While Gandhi's experiments were certainly not acceptable within western conventions of sexuality, there is evidence that his experiments

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Vikas Bajaj and Julie Bosman, "Book on Gandhi Stirs Passion in India," *The New York Times*, April 1, 2011.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Lelyveld, *Great Soul : Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*. pp. 88

were formulated within the realm of Hindu traditional thought, as will be discussed.

Methodology

The methods and approaches used in this essay to analyse Gandhi's sexual ideology are through the usage of both primary and secondary sources that discuss his sexual views and practices. The primary sources used are mainly documents and letters that Gandhi wrote himself in which he discussed his views and practices regarding sexuality. These documents were mainly attained through the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (herein referred to as *CWMG*) an online database that comprises of 98 volumes, each containing roughly 500 pages worth of correspondence.

The methodological issues surrounding the primary sources used, mainly concern the database of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* database from which the majority of historical sources used in this essay have been obtained. While the database prides itself on being the standard reference work on Gandhi "due to the intellectual quality of the editorial precision" there are still a significant number of errors and omissions within the newest edition of the database itself released in 2004.²³

Having brought these problems in methodology to light and the methodological

approaches undertaken, a full analysis can now be considered of Gandhi's views on sex and sexuality. This will be approached by first identifying, in Chapter Two, the influences that shaped Gandhi's beliefs, of which there was a broad scope, and the similarities and differences of Gandhi's particular beliefs with those that influenced him. Having contextualized his ideology within its spheres of influence, the application of his views can then be assessed. This will be done by identifying how his views on sex and sexuality affected his relations with his own family, in Chapter Four, and then will move on to address how his views developed and related to the political situations taking place in first, South Africa (Chapter Five) and then India (Chapter Six). Over the course of discussing these areas, such an analysis will serve to exemplify the far reaching extent to which Gandhi's views and beliefs on sexuality influenced his political philosophy and personal conduct.

Gandhi's influences

I want to test, enlarge and revise the current definition of brahmacharya, by which you swear, in the light of my observation, study and experience
M.K. Gandhi²⁴

²³ Tridip Suhrud, "The History of the Controversy," http://www.gandhiserve.org/e/cwm/cwmg_controversy.htm.

²⁴ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 94: 134, "Discussion with Swami Anand and Kedar Nath," 15/16-03-1947, pp. 119

Gandhi's formulation of his particular sexual philosophy was not confined to Hindu practices and beliefs. Rather, his sexual philosophy was influenced by schools of thought emerging not only from India, but also from Britain, and elsewhere in the West. His espousal of celibacy "can be explained partly by his own circumstances and partly through the influence of strands of thought emerging from both Hinduism and Victorian England."²⁵ Furthermore, his unique beliefs and practices regarding the undertaking of the celibacy vow were also influenced by Jain and Christian beliefs, as well as by both Western philosophers and Indian thinkers of the time. Through an analysis of these cultural, religious and intellectual influences, one can better understand how Gandhi formulated his philosophy as well as how it changed over time and, finally, how these changes in his thinking developed and influenced his political philosophy and personal conduct.

Hindu spermatorrhea tradition

Much of the commentary surrounding the influences behind Gandhi's views on sex and sexuality consider the Hindu tradition of spermatorrhea to be an overarching factor.²⁶ Known as 'Dhat syndrome,' this traditional Hindu belief can be identified as a

preoccupation with semen loss related to beliefs about the relationship of semen to spiritual and psychological health. Such a view dates back to ancient Hindu literature, within which the conserving of semen was seen to be essential as it contained the power to resist physical illness.²⁷ Morris Carstairs studied the psychological effects of this belief tracing the underlying anxiety apparent in certain Hindu societies to the widely held belief that "it takes forty days and forty drops of blood to make one drop of semen."²⁸ Carstairs further speculated that this was a sort of 'castration anxiety' and in a manner resonant of the Freudian psychology already discussed this was due to the father in the Indian family serving as a "forbidden oedipal symbol." Erikson can certainly be seen as prescribing to such a view, as he fixates not only on Gandhi's oedipal relationship with his father but also on its inverse manifestation in the relationships Gandhi had with his sons. Erikson believed that Gandhi's views on sex could be attributed to a "deeply Indian preconception with seminal continence and mental potency."²⁹ Sudhir Kakar, who had, as discussed earlier, questioned Erikson's methodology, somewhat coincidentally and ironically also ascribes to such

²⁵ Patricia Caplan, "Celibacy as a Solution? Mahatma Gandhi and Brahmacharya," in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, ed. Patricia Caplan (London: Routledge, 1987). pp. 286

²⁶ Lal, "Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality." pp.125

²⁷ Joel Paris, "Dhat: The Semen Loss Anxiety Syndrome" *Transcultural Psychiatry* 29, no. 109 (1992). pp.3

²⁸ Carstairs quoted in Lal, "Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality." pp. 125

²⁹ Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth : On the Originis of Militant Nonviolence*. pp. 42

a view, stating: “the ascetic longings of yogis who seek to conquer and transform sexuality into spiritual power, has been a perennial preoccupation of Hindu culture.”³⁰ Vinay Lal, though he disagrees with the extent to which Gandhi’s views were an espousal of dhat syndrome, does however- like those previously mentioned- draw upon Freud in bringing to light the similarities between Gandhi and Freud’s theories of sublimation in order to demonstrate how anxiety about the loss of semen, however pronounced it may be in India, is a commonality across different cultures too.³¹ More specifically, such a view was widely prevalent as well in 19th century Britain. Indeed Gandhi’s views as alluded to by a select few scholars, including Lal, may have also been shaped by Victorian norms. Lal as well as Joseph Alter both contest the significance of dhat syndrome. Both scholars negate by Bhikhu Parekh’s view that “Gandhi’s theory of sexuality rested on a primitive approach to semen.”³²

Indeed, one must not be confined solely to the view that Gandhi’s view of sex and sexuality was based only on traditional beliefs within Hinduism such as dhat syndrome simply because Gandhi was Hindu. Such an approach is an oversimplification; instead one must look

at different influences that may have played a role as well as the different circumstances that may have shaped Gandhi’s beliefs.

Victorian influences

The time Gandhi spent in Victorian England, between 1888 and 1891, highly influenced his beliefs on the practices of sex and sexuality. Due to his early child marriage in 1883 and the arrival of his first son in 1888, he had, from a young age, already been exposed to sexual practices and marital pressures for bearing offspring. This early exposure to sexuality certainly made him particularly impressionable to the discourse on sexuality taking place in Victorian England at the time. Popular Victorian discourse on sex suggests that Victorians believed that the sex instinct “was a powerful force that need[ed] to be channelled in the proper way to be beneficial to humanity.”³³ Thus, they “sought to discern the natural laws of sex,” through self-control and the spiritualization of desire, “in order to exploit its powers to promote individual and social progress.”³⁴ Sensual desire in marriage was sublimated into the quest between husband and wife for spiritual and social companionship.³⁵ Notions of such Victorian

³⁰ Kakar, *Intimate Relations*. pp118

³¹ Lal, “Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi’s Experiments in Celibate Sexuality.” pp.126

³² Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi’s Political Discourse*. pp.203

³³ Steven Seldman, “The Power of Desire and the Danger of Pleasure: Victorian Sexuality Reconsidered,” *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 1 (2001). pp.48

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 48-53

³⁵ ibid

discourse are evident in Gandhi's own thinking.

Victorian thought, too, on the subject of sexuality very much revolved around the theory of spermatorrhea. In the Victorian context, this notion of spermatorrhea- the unintended flux of semen involved in wet dreams or premature ejaculation- served as evidence that the sexual apparatus was diseased. What is particularly noteworthy is the parallel between this Victorian notion of spermatorrhea and the Hindu disease of dhat syndrome also known as jiryan, which Castairs actually translated directly to mean spermatorrhea.³⁶ Defined loosely, both theories believe that "the production of semen is highly weakening to men"³⁷ and that one must preserve his vital fluid.³⁸ As has been discussed, this was not the sole influence on Gandhi's beliefs, but its resonance in Hinduism as well as Victorian thought means that it can certainly be attributed as a factor that Gandhi was affected by as he indeed moved between both schools that espoused it. Gandhi can be seen to carry this theory into his philosophy when he said about sensual passion, "Thus, for the sake of a grain of pleasure, we lose a maund of vitality."³⁹

Christian influences

Gandhi's particular philosophy on sexuality was also influenced by Christian religious tradition. Gandhi was invited, in 1931, by the Catholic Church to follow the example of St. Augustine and indeed many of his views on sexuality are reflective of similar views of this revered Catholic saint.⁴⁰ In particular, St Augustine, like Gandhi although much, much before, made a connection between food and sexuality when he said:

What is sufficient for health is not enough for pleasure. And it is often a matter of doubt whether it is the needful care of the body that still calls for food or whether it is the sensual snare of desire still wanting to be served...Set down, then, in the midst of these temptations, I strive daily against my appetite for food and drink.⁴¹

Gandhi, in discussing his version of *brahmacharya* also makes this connection, "It is my experience that anyone who has not conquered the palate cannot conquer the sex impulse. It is very difficult to conquer the palate. But victory over one is essential for the other victory"⁴² What is interesting to note, however, is the slight difference between their two beliefs. Whereas St Augustine's attitude towards food is as an attempt to "gain a general

³⁶ Caplan, "Celibacy as a Solution? Mahatma Gandhi and Brahmacharya." P. 286

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ Lal, "Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality." pp.127

³⁹ Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Volume 13: 66, taken from *General Knowledge About Health*, 9. "An Intimate Chapter" 26-5-1913, pp.92-99.

⁴⁰ Mario Prayer, "Mahatma Gandhi and the Nationalist India as Seen by the Catholic Church, 1920-1948," *Journal for Cultural Research* 16, no. 4 (2011). pp.378

⁴¹ St. Augustine, "Book Ten," ed. Albert C. Outler, *Augustine: Confessions* (Library of Congress Catalog, MCMLV). Chapter 31, Section 14-47

⁴² Gandhi, *CWMG*, 28:14. "Brahmacharya", Taken from *Navajivan*, 25-5-1924. pp. 25

freedom from the grip of sensuality,” therefore treating inhibition as any other sensory input; for Gandhi, food is a “primary regulator of the genital impulses.”⁴³

Through Gandhi’s personal connection between food and celibacy, one can see how his views on sexuality influenced his political philosophy. Gandhi often fasted during political struggles and this was a developed tool derived from his experiments in celibacy. Just as Gandhi saw control of the palate as a necessary measure in the upkeep of celibacy; fasting developed as a tool that was used not only as a protective measure against the waning of one’s celibacy, and thus, psyche; but, also became a political tool he used to ensure protection against the waning of his political power.⁴⁴

Gandhi was also deeply affected by the Trappist monks he met in South Africa who influenced not only his chastity but also his vision of communal living. The Trappist monks of the Cistercian order form a monastery of Catholicism and they are noted for their silence and other austerities.⁴⁵ He described the monastery as: “a quiet little model village, owned on the truest republican principles. Every man is a brother, every woman a sister....Both the brothers and the

sisters observe a strict vow of silence and of chastity”⁴⁶ The Trappist monks’ celibacy vow within the monastic community can be seen as influencing Gandhi’s undertaking of celibacy within his own settlements and ashrams.

Intellectual influences

Gandhi stated in 1936: “Three persons have influenced me deeply, Tolstoy, Ruskin and Raychandbhai.”⁴⁷ All three of these thinkers influenced various aspects of the development of his own philosophy, including his sexual philosophy. These men shared his revulsion with genital sexuality. Tolstoy and Rajchandra sought to transform sexual passion into a more universal religious quest. Ruskin, on the other hand, sought to transform sexual passion into a moral and aesthetic fervour.⁴⁸

Gandhi not only read Tolstoy’s work but also corresponded with him over a series of letters. Tolstoy outlined his ideas on sexuality in his short book, *Kreuzer Sonnata*, published in 1889, the release of which corresponds well with the time at which Gandhi would have been most impressionable to other influences on this topic. Tolstoy in his book outlines his idea on chastity not only for the unmarried but also for the married: “continence, which forms a necessary condition of human dignity in the single state is still more binding in

⁴³ Kakar, *Intimate Relations*. pp. 98

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Footnote in Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Volume 1: 66, “A Band of Vegetarian Missionaries”, published in *The Vegetarian*, 18-5-1944, pp. 244

⁴⁶ ibid

⁴⁷ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Volume 36: 535 “Preface to Shrimad Rajchandra”, 11-05-1936, pp. 468

⁴⁸ Kakar, *Intimate Relations*. pp. 124

marriage.”⁴⁹ Much of what he states is in line with Gandhi’s own philosophy and thus, this essay probably served as a great influence. Just as Gandhi links control of the palate to chastity, so does Tolstoy: “in order to abstain, they must, in addition, lead a natural life, not drink, not stuff themselves, not eat mean and not avoid labour.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, Tolstoy suggests that “rather than enter into marriage in order to procreate children, it would be much simpler for such people to sustain and save the lives of those millions of children perishing around us.”⁵¹ Along similar lines, Gandhi suggests to the people of India in his essay “India’s Plight,” that the plague and starvation present in India at the time was due to the sin of adultery which could happen in marriage, too, when sex is undertaken as carnal pleasure rather than used as a means of procreation. He tells the people of India, as Tolstoy does, that in order to solve India’s problems, the people, even if married, must refrain from sex.⁵² Gandhi was highly influenced in this aspect of his life, as in many, by Tolstoy’s writings. He took elements of Tolstoy’s ideas on chastity for the married and unmarried and combined them with Hindu views on *brahmacharya* to create his own sexual philosophy.⁵³

Rajchandra was accredited by Gandhi as the biggest influence in the undertaking of *brahmacharya*: “I cannot definitely say what circumstance or what book it was that set my thoughts in that direction, but I have a recollection that the predominant factor was the influence of Raychandbhai”⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that the year Rajchandra died, 1901, was the same year Gandhi attempted to undertake celibacy. However it is difficult to trace the exact influence of Rajchandra on Gandhi’s sexual philosophy, as most of the correspondences between them were lost, but from the scatterings of references to Rajchandra in Gandhi’s writings, there can certainly be seen a central concern in the relationship between sexuality and salvation, the giving up the former led to the latter.⁵⁵ It was Rajchandra who provided a unique dietary aspect to Gandhi’s sexual philosophy, the giving up of milk, “[t]he late Raychandbhai had written that a person who wants to observe unadulterated *brahmacharya* should give up milk.”⁵⁶ Giving up milk became a crucial step in Gandhi’s observance of *brahmacharya*. What is interesting about Rajchandra’s influence on Gandhi, is the fact that even though Rajchandra was a Jain, yet, he was also the one who helped

⁴⁹ Leo Tolstoy, *Kreutzer Sonata* (Lexington, K.Y: Print to Order, 1889). pp. 4

⁵⁰ Ibid. pp.2

⁵¹ Ibid. pp.4

⁵² Gandhi, CWMG, Volume 8: 26, “India’s Plight” from *Indian Opinion* 28-12-1907, pp.31-33

⁵³ Kakar, *Intimate Relations*. pp.96

⁵⁴ Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*. pp. 194

⁵⁵ Kakar, *Intimate Relations*. pp.94

⁵⁶ Gandhi, CWMG, Volume 14: 267 “Letter to Maganlal Gandhi, Around 1914, pp.331

Gandhi resolve his doubts about Hinduism as a religion.⁵⁷

Jain influences

Certainly, one can trace Jain influences in Gandhi's sexual resolve. Jain scriptures contain numerous passages on the inner happiness of the homeless life, the freedom that comes with the abandonment of family ties. This is a belief Gandhi not only held but also put into practice in the treatment of his wife and sons, and such a belief can be traced to the Jain scripture,

Uttaradhyayana Sutra:

When a monk has left his children and
wives, and has given up worldly actions,
Nothing is pleasant to him, nothing
unpleasant,
There is much that is good for the sage, the
houseless monk
Set free from all ties who knows himself
how to be alone.⁵⁸

What is also unique about Jainism, and certainly influenced Gandhi's unique philosophy, is that "virtue...consists of chastity in word, thought and deed and renunciation of all worldly interests (sometimes interpreted in an extreme way that men should go naked)." ⁵⁹ Gandhi believed in this notion of virtue and

chastity, and certainly followed the extreme interpretation of chastity through renunciation by dressing almost naked, as Churchill refers to him as the "half-naked seditious fakir."

However, Jainism stems from Hinduism, and so it is difficult to trace the extent to which Gandhi was influenced by either religion especially as he was taught much about Hinduism from Raychandra, a Jain. This uncertainty is evidenced in the reasoning behind his nakedness, which in this essay has been possibly attributed to Jain influences, though Gandhi attributes it to Vaishnava theology, specifically referring to the scene in Krishna's life where the gopis lose their clothes. What is most noteworthy is that despite any liberties Gandhi took, either in his Jain or Vaishnavan reasoning for his state of nakedness, he saw his state of (un)dress as exemplifying his chastity and, thus, used his nakedness towards "the service of a political and philosophical conception of truth."⁶⁰

Vaishnava influences

The Gandhi family belonged to the Hindu sect of Vaishnavism and the influence of the beliefs of this sect is certainly inherent in Gandhi's sexual thinking. Followers of Vaishnava, unlike the tenets of Hinduism that is built upon polytheism, believe in the monotheistic idolatry

⁵⁷ Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Volume 36: 535 "Preface to Shrimad Rajchandra", November 5, 1936, pp. 468. Gandhi states: "When I began to feel doubts about Hinduism as a religion. It was Raychandbhai who helped me to resolve them"

⁵⁸ Quoted in Ainslee T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition : From the Beginning to 1800*, ed. Ainslee T. Embree, Second ed., 2 vols., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). pp. 8

⁵⁹ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Second Edition ed., 2 vols., vol. 1 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008). pp.263

⁶⁰ Lal, "Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality." pp. 132

of the god Lord Vishnu.⁶¹ It is sometimes said that the monotheism of Vaishnavism was borrowed directly from Christianity, such a connection may serve as a reasoning as to why Gandhi's philosophy is so often oversimplified along Christian lines. In terms of Gandhi's sexual philosophy, the beliefs of Vaishnavism on celibacy are particularly noteworthy, for a chief feature of Vaishnavism is the ironic refinement of celibacy that can be found in the tantric version. Gandhi, himself, stated that he read Woodruffe's translation of the Tantras so here too there is historic proof of the relevance. The tantric reworking in Vaisnavism can be summarised as such: the aspirant is trained to perform the sexual act without desire, thus divorcing sexual impulse from human physiology and any conscious or unconscious mental representation of it." Such a representation, whether conscious or unconscious was certainly a preoccupation of Gandhi's, and such tantric techniques, according to Radhakrishnan, would have been familiar to Gandhi through his Vaishnavite upbringing.⁶² There are a few particularly significant points when considering this. Firstly, Gandhi seemed to be following the examples of Vaishnavas such as Ramanada and Viswanatha. Ramanada would take young temple prostitutes to his garden where he would oil and bathe them while remaining

uninfected himself. This is reminiscent of Gandhi's later experiments in the last years of his life when he would take young female associates to bed with him to prove he was 'uninfected' by his sexuality. Along similar lines, Viswanatha would lie with his wife without touching her in a way to demonstrate he had control over his senses.⁶³ Again, this is reminiscent of Gandhi's final sexual experiment. Furthermore, Hindu Vaishnava culture provided a sanction for men's feminine strivings and raised these strivings to the level of a religious spiritual quest.⁶⁴ This again bears significance in looking at Gandhi's sexual experiments, particularly again his last, for it has often been said that in undertaking his sexual practices he did so in an attempt to be more like a woman. By bringing to light the relevance to his own spiritual upbringing it brings to light the strivings within, and importance of considering, Gandhi's sexual practices as forming part of his religious spiritual quest.

Gandhi and his family

All of us brothers have been treated as a ringmaster would treat his animals... You have always suppressed us. You have never spoken to us.

M. K. Gandhi⁶⁵

⁶¹ Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 1. pp. 423

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Girja Kumar, *Gandhi & His Women Associates*, Kindle ed. (New Delhi: Vitasta Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2007). Kindle Ed. Loc. 1788 of 6119

Though Gandhi is commonly known in India as “Father of the Nation,” such a title was often at the expense of the very children he was father to and his wife, Kasturba. With his wife and children, Gandhi, over the course of his life, distanced himself, choosing instead to adopt members of the ashram and the people of the nation as his children and family. His relationship with his family and his gradual distancing from them can be attributed to his desire to be a *sannyasi* and thus he saw them more as a burden and living proof of his inability to fully attain his spiritual hopes and ambitions.

Kasturba Gandhi

Kasturba, as Gandhi’s wife, was obviously most affected by his *brahmacharya* vow. Gandhi in fact never discussed the undertaking of celibacy with Kasturba until the day he decided to pledge *brahmacharya*, though he did discuss it with others including Chaganlal and Maganlal Gandhi as well as Albert West.⁶⁶ Gandhi recounts his decision in his autobiography, stating, “After full discussion and mature deliberation I took the vow in 1906. I had not shared my thoughts with my wife until then, but only consulted her at the time of taking the vow. She had no objection.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Arun & Sunanda Gandhi, *The Untold Story of Kasturba, Wife of Mahatma Gandhi* (Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 1998). pp.138

⁶⁷ Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*. pp. 197

Whether Kasturba actually had any objections remains unknown and is difficult to discern due to the lack of material sources from Kasturba’s perspective. Gandhi’s grandchildren in their biography of Kasturba reiterated this difficulty: “Given so little information to work with, Gandhi biographers, over the years have been equally terse in their accounts of this crucial moment between my grandparents.”⁶⁸ Gandhi’s own statement to her having no objection cannot be taken at face value, as at the point of writing his autobiography he had a subjective view towards converting his readers to take on his vow. In not giving Kasturba a voice in the matter, he carried forth this view to the public stating in 1924, “Husband and wife do not have to obtain each other’s consent for practicing *brahmacharya*.”⁶⁹ However he later changed his view when he then stated, ““a husband cannot take the vow of *brahmacharya* without the consent of his wife.”⁷⁰ Such an instance, of Gandhi not giving his wife a chance to discuss the matter, only works to confirm the patriarchal nature of their relationship and serves as an example of how Gandhi was not necessarily the foreword thinker on matters of gender that he is often made out to be.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Gandhi, *The Untold Story of Kasturba, Wife of Mahatma Gandhi*. pp. 140

⁶⁹ Lal, “Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi’s Experiments in Celibate Sexuality.” pp. 111

⁷⁰ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 72: 214. “Letter to Premabehn Kantak”, 25-07-37, pp 155

⁷¹ Gandhi, *The Untold Story of Kasturba, Wife of Mahatma Gandhi*. pp.146

Gandhi's decision to undertake celibacy despite having a wife can – according to his grandsons, again – be best attributed to the fact that “ideals of loving God and serving one's fellow men were incompatible with love or marriage, which amounted to serving oneself.”⁷² Gandhi had, for a while, been avoiding Kasturba before her arrival in South Africa in various ways and forms. For instance, by the time Kasturba and their sons joined Gandhi in 1898, the couple had spent a total of mere months together in the eight years previous. He even referred to their separation as a decision that was “almost involuntary...yet [it was one that] proved to be a blessing to us both.”⁷³ According to Sudhir Kakar it is reasonable to assume that part of Gandhi's hesitation in allowing Kasturba and the boys to join him in South Africa could be due to his desire to be celibate, something he had attempted (prior to 1906) in 1901 but failed at due to Kasturba's arrival.⁷⁴

Gandhi's desire to be separated from his wife can be seen numerous times over the course of his life until the instance of her death. Even when she was critically ill, he put his political ambitions ahead of her as can be seen in a letter he sent her while she was critically ill:

I am very much grieved but I am not in a position to go there to nurse you. I have offered my all to the *satyagraha* struggle. My coming there is out of the question. I can come only if I pay the fine, which I must not. If you keep courage and take the necessary nutrition, you will recover. If, however, my ill luck so has it that you pass away, I should only say that there would be nothing wrong in your doing so in your separation from me while I am still alive.⁷⁵

Even on what may have been her death bed, Gandhi refused to give up his *satyagraha* vow for her sake. Gandhi in this instance also talks about her separation from him; something he recurrently gave her the option of and most likely subconsciously hoped would happen in his desire to be a *sannyasi*. He even stated in a letter to his friend Kallenbach, “a man who wishes to work with detachment must not marry.”⁷⁶ Gandhi asserted in his lifetime, however, not that his decision to be celibate had anything to do with his desire to be an ascetic but rather that by taking the vow he had freed Kasturba, “From that day when I began *brahmacharya*, our freedom began. My wife became a free woman, free from my authority as her lord and master and I became free from my slavery to my own appetite which she had to satisfy.”⁷⁷ Gandhi thus made a connection between freedom and sexuality which he espoused on the nation. The metaphor of

⁷² Ibid. pp140

⁷³ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Volume 9:171, “Letter to Mrs Chanchalbehn Gandhi”, 28-01-1909, pp.289

⁷⁴ Kakar as quoted in Lal, “Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality.” pp. 114

⁷⁵ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 9: 128: “Letter to Mrs. Kasturba Gandhi,” 09-11-1908, pp. 210

⁷⁶ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 14: 127, “Letter to Hermann Kallenbach”, 12-04-14, pp. 145

⁷⁷ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Volume 77: 73, “My Life,” 4-11-39, pp. 62

slavery was one he used in relation to Indian independence throughout his political career. Refraining from sexuality allowed one to be free, and so freedom for the country depended on the upkeep of this ideal. Gandhi also believed that by proclaiming *brahmacharya* he had elevated his wife to the status of an equal, “My wife was ‘inferior’ when she was the instrument of my lust. She ceased to be that when she lay with me naked as my sister.”⁷⁸ However, the fact that she was neither considered in his decision nor attained complete freedom to speak her mind and thoughts once Gandhi had undergone the vow demonstrates the fallacies that were embedded in Gandhi’s sexual logic.

Gandhi, though he cared very much for his family, had a clear desire to be a *sannyasi* and a guru. Even Kasturba noticed this as Gandhi quotes her as saying: “‘Yes, Bapu [Gandhi] is an absolute sadhu where I am concerned.’”⁷⁹ Gandhi was equally as fortuitous with his sons in his desire to be a *sannyasi* he equally desired for them to be so too. When they were merely boys, Kasturba accused Gandhi of trying to turn their sons into sadhus before they were even men.⁸⁰

Gandhi’s rejection of his familial responsibilities coincided with around the same

time as his rejection of sex. In 1907, Gandhi decided to abandon an insurance policy taken out for his wife and children. This caused dispute with his brother who, rightly so, believed Gandhi was neglecting his family.⁸¹ Gandhi responded by saying that by adopting a life of poverty he was supporting a wider family⁸², “I use all the money for the public good...those who are more dependent on me have a greater claim on me.”⁸³ Gandhi thus placed those less fortunate, how every many there may be, above his own family. This became a pattern that in its initiation coincided with his *brahmacharya* vow, emphasising his belief that public service was inconsistent with family life and that public service needed to be placed above familial responsibility, at any cost.

Gandhi and his sons

Though Gandhi distanced himself from his family he continued to be very strict with his sons and expected them to conform to his specific ideologies. He is quoted as saying in such regards: “What I expect from the Gandhi family is that all members should devote themselves exclusively to service work, observe the utmost self-control and have no

⁷⁸Gandhi, CWMG, Volume 94: 149 “Letter to Nirmal Kumar Bose” 17-03-1947, pp.133

⁷⁹ Gandhi, CWMG, Volume 60:256, “Letter to Mridula Sarabhai,” 30-03-33, pp 212

⁸⁰ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal* (Paarl: Kwela Books, 2004).

⁸¹Judith Brown, *Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Pp42

⁸² Richard Sorabji, *Gandhi & the Stoics: Modern Experiments on Ancient Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Pp 38

⁸³ Gandhi, CWMG, Vol 6: 347, “Letter to Lakshmidas Gandhi” about 20-04-07, pp. 396

desire for wealth. They should not marry and those who are married should observe *brahmacharya*.”⁸⁴ He tried to pressure his sons into joining him as a *brahmachari*, and encouraged them to abstain from marriage and carnal desire regardless of their marital status. In 1906, the same year he took his *brahmacharya* vow, he wrote to his brother stating “It is well if Harilal is married; it is also well if he is not. For at the present at any rate I have ceased to think of him as a son”⁸⁵

Similarly, Gandhi told Ramdas “Every Indian has an especial duty not to marry, a duty one has in a time of distress. Hence, ordinarily I would want you to exercise self-control and observe inviolate *brahmacharya* for life. With the passing of time, desire will grow weaker, your physical and mental strength will increase and you will forget the thought of marriage.”⁸⁶

Gandhi was especially harsh on his oldest son, Harilal. In fact, he blamed Harilal’s behaviour on himself and Kasturba and their wonton ways from his younger days, “He was born during what I regard, relatively, as my period of indulgence....Therefore, myself and Ba, to the extent that she was a willing partner in indulgence, are responsible for the condition

in which Harilal lives today”⁸⁷ Gandhi blamed himself for the specificities of Harilal’s degredation, such as drinking, even in his correspondences with Kasturba for Harilal’s drinking,

How sunk in passion I was when he was conceived!...Parents are in this way undoubtedly responsible for the character of their offspring. Now there is only one thing we can do, namely, purify ourselves...Our purification is bound to have a conscious unconscious effect on Harilal.”⁸⁸

Gandhi thus justified to Kasturba their need to be celibate as a solution for amending Harilal’s behaviour.

Gandhi’s relationships with each of his sons can be characterized as such: Harilal was never in his favour, Manilal maintained his distance geographically by remaining in South Africa, Devdas was always resentful of Gandhi’s eccentricities, Ramdas was the only one he maintained a consistent relationship with though even then he always worked to probe him.⁸⁹ Gandhi sought to maintain strict control over his sons’ lives even despite his distancing. However, as a result the relationship he had with each of them was always tenuous and he even admitted that he had closer relationships with his “colleagues

⁸⁴ Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Vol 56: 322, “A Letter”, 07-08-1932, pp 311

⁸⁵Gandhi, CWMG, Vol 6: 231. “Letter to Lakshmidas Gandhi, 2-6-1907, pp.237

⁸⁶Gandhi, CWMG, Vol 18:63 “Letter to Ramdas,” 01-06-1919, pp.27

⁸⁷Gandhi, CWMG, Vol 39:3 “Letter to Kumi,” 6-8-1927, pp. 27

⁸⁸Gandhi, CWMG, Vol 63:211. Letter to Kasturba Gandhi, 2-22-1934, pp. 196

⁸⁹ Kumar, *Gandhi & His Women Associates*. Kindle ed. Loc 1687 of 6119

who” he considered to be “even closer to than [his] own sons.”⁹⁰

Gandhi’s representation of himself as a *sannyasi* and guru was in the hopes that he too would be held to the political esteem and power given to these religious figures. In taking up the *brahmacharya* vow, he was, in mind, dedicating himself to a life of meditation and poverty, just as a *sannyasi* does. However, whereas a *sannyasi* renounced all worldly ties, Gandhi was unable to do this due to his four sons and Kasturba. Instead he reformulated the concept of the *sannyasi* to mean that he would remain at the service of the people of the world.

⁹¹ Gandhi, instead, maintained a certain equidistance from those around him, whether family, friend or foe. His act of celibacy can be seen as an act of maintaining that equidistance, rather than giving Kasturba or his sons privilege over all the other people of the nation whom he considered himself father to as well. In taking on the role as all-encompassing parent, mother even rather than father, as he was fondly called Bapu; he dealt with his actual relatives with a sense of nonattachment.⁹²

Gandhi in South Africa

I shall have no such union with my wife. I shall try to persuade her to observe brahmacharya

⁹⁰ Gandhi, CWMG, Vol 30, “Speech at Untouchability Conference” 17-12-1924. pp 104

⁹¹ Lelyveld, *Great Soul : Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*. pp.17

⁹² Sorabji, *Gandhi & the Stoics: Modern Experiments on Ancient Values*. pp.38

and seek her cooperation in my effort. We shall not share the same bed. I shall look after her in all other ways and bear her pure love.

M. K. Gandhi⁹³

The time Gandhi spent living in South Africa between 1896 and 1914 played a significant role in shaping his political philosophy and personal conduct. South Africa gave him a vision of public work that included political activism at the service of humanity, rather than personal advancement. It was during this time that there can be seen most clearly the gradual merging of Gandhi’s ‘home’ and ‘public’ domain through his two experiments in communal living as well as his *brahmacharya* vow and *satyagraha* campaign. His time in South Africa shows how the conditions of the Indian people “increasingly made demands on his time, his skills, his compassion and his sensitivity, culminating in his vow of celibacy, by which he cut the ties of natural affections and obligations in order to free himself for the wider service of man and woman.”⁹⁴

The Zulu rebellion

The turning point in Gandhi’s outlook and the culminating point of the merging of public and

⁹³ Gandhi in Girja Kumar, *Brahmacharya: Sexuality and Love* (New Delhi: Vitasta Publishing Pvt. Ltd. , 2011). pp.213

⁹⁴ Judith Brown, "The Making of a Critical Outsider," in *Gandhi and South Africa: Principles and Politics*, ed. Judith Brown and Martin Prozesky (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1996). pp.42

private domains came as a result of his experiences during the Zulu Rebellion in 1906. Gandhi was involved in the Indian Ambulance Corps, on the side of the British, redressing wounds and helping the injured. This was the first instance in which he realized the true necessity of public service as well as the power affected by discipline of the body:

A man going to the battle front...learns to discipline the movement of his limbs...Instances are known of unruly and wayward men who went to the front and returned reformed and able fully to control both their mind and body.⁹⁵

It was his decision to join the Ambulance Corps during the rebellion that made him realize the hindrance that family commitment played in his desire to fulfil public service. The burden of having had to have made a number of arrangements for his family- moving them from their home to Phoenix led him to the realization that if he “wanted to devote [him] self to the service of the community in this manner, [he] must relinquish the desire for children and wealth and live the life of a *vanaprastha*- of one retired from household cares.”⁹⁶ Upon his return he left his family at Phoenix while he pursued his other political and personal goals.

His experiences during his time in the Ambulance corps, “proved to be a very

important epoch” in his life.⁹⁷ From this experience Gandhi drew a direct correlation between his battlefield experiences and sexuality and so between non-violence and celibacy or *ahimsa* and *brahmacharya*, he avowed each of these tenets consecutively in 1906, shortly after his return.⁹⁸

Brahmacharya and satyagraha vows undertaken

His role in the rebellion also led him to realize the importance of vows: “a vow, far from closing the door to real freedom, opened it.”⁹⁹ This directly led to his vow of *brahmacharya* and then in turn to his vow of *satyagraha*, offered at the Empire Theater in Johannesburg on September 11, 1906. Speaking on the importance of such vows and the undertaking of them he stated:

Personally, I hold that a man who deliberately and intelligently takes a pledge and then breaks it, forfeits his manhood... But if I can imagine a crisis in the history of the Indian community of South Africa when it would be in the fitness of things to take pledges, that crisis is surely now.”¹⁰⁰

While there is no direct correlation between his *brahmacharya* vow and his

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Lelyveld, *Great Soul : Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*. pp. 70

⁹⁹ Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*. pp.197

¹⁰⁰ Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Volume 5: 309, “The Mass Meeting” taken from ‘Satyagraha in South Africa’ Chapter XII; S. Ganesan, Madras; 1928. pp. 335

⁹⁵ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 5, 259 “Should Indian’s Volunteer or Not” pp.273

⁹⁶ Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*. pp.196

satyagraha vow evident from his writings at the time, except in the instance that the breaking of vows results to a forfeit of manhood, Gandhi made the correlation more distinct in his autobiography where he stated that “though unknown to me, the *brahmacharya* vow had been preparing me for it [*satyagraha*].”¹⁰¹

Phoenix settlement

Gandhi established the Phoenix settlement as a site of communal living on the premise of rural self-sufficiency outside of Durban in 1904. His readings of Tolstoy and Ruskin inspired him to undertake such a project and their teachings were “translated into a litany of vows” that included precluding to a “sexually abstemious...self-sustaining way of life.”¹⁰² The residents at Phoenix settlement followed a Benedictine sort of lifestyle, probably influenced heavily by the Trappist monastery Gandhi had visited in 1894, as discussed in the prior chapter. The very name ‘Phoenix’ has significance when looking at Gandhi’s views on sexuality as the settlement was named after the bird “who has no mate but renews life by a somewhat different procedure.”¹⁰³ This reflects the fact that Gandhi may have become somewhat conscious of his desire to be without

a mate, and to be a *sannyasi*, as well as his desire to renew life by different means—alluding to his unique *satyagraha* campaign of militant nonviolence, founded on the pre-requisite ideals of celibacy and *brahmacharya*. It was during his time at Phoenix that Gandhi discussed his undertaking of the *brahmacharya* vow with his fellow community members, and it was here that he resided when he started his *brahmacharya* vow. Phoenix Settlement proved to be the initiating point of many of Gandhi’s theoretical espousals. It was not only his first attempt at starting a communal living utopia that would develop into the later establishments of Tolstoy Farm as well as his ashrams in India, it was also the initial place from which he first deliberated with others whether to undertake his *brahmacharya* vow, undertook it as well as encouraged his followers and fellow community members to follow suite, something he would continue to do and even develop as a requirement for all members by the time he started the Sabarmati Ashram outside Ahmedabad in 1916. Phoenix and the *brahmacharya* vow were thus intimately connected as “indispensable preconditions for his first great non-violent resistance campaign.” which would begin upon his return to Phoenix from the Ambulance Corps and form an integral part of his first *satyagraha* campaign.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ *An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*. pp 70

¹⁰² Lelyveld, *Great Soul : Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*. pp.13

¹⁰³ Rudolph, *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma*. pp. 55

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*. pp. 55

Having taken his *brahmacharya* vow in 1906, in 1907, the newspaper, *Indian Opinion* that was self-sufficiently run from Phoenix, published an article titled 'India's Plight.' The significance of this article is that it was the first public statement Gandhi and his associates made about this connection between their sexual ideology and political philosophy. In the article they blame the degradation of India, "the plague, starvation etc," that had "become more widespread" on the "sinfulness of the people."¹⁰⁵ This sinfulness, he defined as "the sensuality-adultery- prevalent among us."¹⁰⁶ By adultery, they did not simply mean "intercourse with another man's wife," but rather "adultery even in intercourse with one's own wife. Sexual intercourse is justified only when it is the result of a desire for offspring."¹⁰⁷ They then stated their solution to the situation, which was that the Indian people should not marry: "In case he is helpless in regard to marriage, he should abstain from sexual intercourse with his wife...No one will lose anything by observing truth and celibacy."¹⁰⁸ This was not only the first instance of public discourse on the subject of sexuality for Gandhi, it was also the first instance of its public linkage with his political philosophy. In just the span of this one article, he brought to light his view that the

regeneration of India required celibacy as well as connecting two of his fundamental philosophical beliefs, truth and celibacy. This set the stage for what was to be a common discourse Gandhi would partake in through publications in his various newspapers over the years, and established the beginnings of his connection between sexuality and politics in the public arena.

Tolstoy farm

The success of Gandhi's final *satyagraha* between 1908 and 1914 can be attributed to "the spiritual purification and penance" afforded by Tolstoy Farm."¹⁰⁹ Tolstoy Farm was established in 1910 and its importance in the final *satyagraha* campaign was affirmed by Gandhi himself who said that "Tolstoy Farm proved to be a centre of spiritual purification and penance for the final campaign."¹¹⁰ While on Tolstoy farm, Gandhi conducted a number of experiments to test his theories on sexuality. Some of these experiments included allowing the boys and girls "to bathe in the same spot and at the same time."¹¹¹ In what sounds quite familiar to some of his later experiments, he also slept amongst them: "the boys and girls would spread themselves around [me]. There

¹⁰⁵ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Volume 8, 26, "India's Plight," in *Indian Opinion*, 28-12-1907, pp. 33

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*

¹⁰⁷ Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁹ Surendra Bhana, "The Tolstoy Farm: Gandhi's Experiment in 'Co-Operative Commonwealth'," *South African Historical Journal* 7, no. 1 (2009).

¹¹⁰ M.K Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, trans. Valji Govindji Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House). Pp 235

¹¹¹ *Ibid*.

was hardly a distance of three feet between any two beds.”¹¹² His experiment came to a halt with disturbing results for Gandhi:

One day one of the young men made fun of two girls...the news made me tremble...I remonstrated with the young men, but that was not enough. I wished the two girls to have some sign on their person as a warning to every young man that no evil eye might be cast upon them, and as a lesson to every girl that no one dare assail their purity.¹¹³

His solution was to cut off the girls' hair. In conducting such an experiment, Gandhi related it back to his *satyagraha* vow:

Experiments such as I have placed on record are not meant for imitation...I have here taken note of them only to show how far a man can go in certain circumstances and to stress the purity of the *Satyagraha* struggle. This very purity was a guarantee of victory. Before launching on such experiments a teacher has to be both father and mother to his pupils.¹¹⁴

This was the first time Gandhi referred to himself as playing a dual role as both father and mother, something he would aspire to be for the rest of his life culminating with his grandniece Manu, with whom he slept naked in his final sexual experiment, calling him 'bapa' mother.

In a stance quite different from that which he would take in India, Gandhi accepted the fact that some of the residents of Tolstoy Farm, and therefore some of his *satyagrahis* would

not be *brahmacharis*. He realized, quite differently from his view in India, that it was not possible to recruit only “*brahmacharis*” for what he referred to as his “army.”¹¹⁵ This was quite a reasonable view compared to what he would later state and be troubled by regarding his army of volunteers in India whom he often forced to convert to celibate ways.

Gandhi's time in South Africa provided a private and public arena from which Gandhi could start to test and establish his views and practices regarding sexuality. In the private sphere, he was able to attempt as well as successfully undertake his *brahmacharya* vow, in 1901 and 1906, respectively. In the public arena, using his communal residencies as a testing ground- Phoenix and Tolstoy Farm- he was able to develop a discourse regarding the connection between his sexual beliefs and greater political truths and ambitions. Once he had succeeded in relaying his views within the confines of these two communities, he wasted no time in making it known to the public, mainly through his articles, his views and beliefs regarding sexuality and their relevance to the political context of the time. Gandhi's celibacy vow gave him the confidence he needed to climb upon the political stage with assertion and he thus it was inextricably linked in with his *satyagraha* vow and campaign and his overall political role in South Africa.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. pp 213

Gandhi in India

A young girl who is in the same place of granddaughter to me by relation shares the same bed with me, not for any animal satisfaction but for (to me) valid moral reasons.

M. K. Gandhi¹¹⁶

Gandhi's time in India, from his return in 1915 up until his death in 1948, proved to be the most challenging for his views and practices concerning sexuality and their relation to his political philosophy and personal conduct. It was during this time that Gandhi most intimately connected his sexual views and practices to his political philosophy. Gandhi arrived in India in 1915, and from this point onwards undertook the role of a 'political *sannyasi*,' a religious leader who renounced worldly pleasures but still lived in the world to make it better.¹¹⁷ The clearest indication of his role as a renouncer was through his sexual practices.

Sabarmati Ashram

The first instance of Gandhi's views on sex and sexuality being incorporated into his political philosophy can be seen through his establishment of the Sabarmati Ashram, also known as *Satyagraha* Ashram, in Kochram. Gandhi opened the ashram on the outskirts of

his home city, Ahmedabad, on May 20, 1915, within less than six months of his arrival back in India. Thus, in a way, his views on sex and sexuality can be seen as entering the Indian scene from this point. For Gandhi, the ashram served as a sort of "staging ground and local laboratory for experimentation in large-scale socio-political reform."¹¹⁸ Gandhi wasted no time in using the residents of his ashram as lab rats for his sexual beliefs and views. Within a month of establishing his ashram he is quoted in one of his letters as saying about his residents, whom he refers to as pupils:

Pupils [of the Ashram] are to receive education which will incline them to do nothing but national service when their studies are over... While they are still in the stage of *brahmacharya*, students must not go to attend marriages... if there is frequent breaking away from this, building of character is impossible.¹¹⁹

Having established his ashram and laid down his views on its members being its students and so all undertaking *brahmacharya*, he espoused his views in a more public arena in 1916 when he gave his speech on 'Ashram Vows.' Gandhi stated, on explaining the establishment of the Ashram, that he believed: "what any nation needs, but we [Indians] perhaps of all the nations of the world need just now, is nothing else and nothing less than

¹¹⁶ MK Gandhi to Satis Chandra Mukerji in Kumar, *Brahmacharya: Sexuality and Love*. pp 140

¹¹⁷ Lelyveld, *Great Soul : Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*. pp141

¹¹⁸ Joseph Alter, *Gandhi's Body*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). pp.81

¹¹⁹ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 15:15, "Letter to Ranchhodlal Patwari" 10-06-1915, pp 10

character building.”¹²⁰ He goes on to explain how the ashram is exemplifying this character building and makes the vital connection to celibacy, “[t]hose who want to perform national service, or those who want to have a glimpse of the real religious life, must lead a celibate life, no matter if married or unmarried...this is what is placed before those who come to the Ashram.”¹²¹

The nationalist campaign (1915-1946)

The significance of the ashram as testing grounds for his national projects can be identified when looking at the practices Gandhi instituted, such as *brahmacharya*, and its resonance in his theory of self-government, or *swaraj*. Gandhi considered *brahmacharya* more difficult to achieve than *swaraj*, as demonstrated by an article he wrote titled “Swadeshi and ‘*Brahmacharya*’” in which he stated:

Only a few will observe *brahmacharya*, though we wish that all should. If everyone observed it, we would gain the kingdom both of this world and the other. It is part of our dharma to observe it but, by linking it up with *swadeshi*, we make the latter, which is easy to follow as difficult as *brahmacharya*. Having thus seen and explained the difference between the two, I would certainly add that every worker whether man or woman, should observe *brahmacharya* till we have won *swaraj*.¹²²

¹²⁰Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 15: 128. “Speech on ‘Ashram Vows’ at YMCA Madras, 16-02-1916, pp 165

¹²¹ *ibid*

¹²² Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Volume 25, pp.31

In the 1930’s when the nationalist movement was facing difficulties, Gandhi looked for the source of trouble within himself.¹²³ When he was asked by a Congress member “how is it that in quality the Congress is not what it used to be in 1920-25?” he replied in a public statement published in his newspaper *Harijan*:

I can’t shirk responsibility by saying I am no longer in the Congress. ...It follows that there must be power in the word of a *satyagraha* general...the power that purity of life, strict vigilance, and ceaseless application produce. This is impossible without the observance of *brahmacharya* ... I have not acquired that control over my thoughts that I need for my researches in non-violence. If my non-violence is to be contagious and infectious, I must acquire greater control over my thoughts.¹²⁴

Gandhi thus blamed himself for the failures of the Congress and sought stricter and alternative forms of controlling and testing his *brahmacharya* vow. He believed that since he had not achieved such self-control that this accounted for the failures of the movement as a whole and feared non-violence as ideology would then be threatened.¹²⁵ Probably the biggest connection between his sexual ideology and his political was the defining connection he made between non-violence and sexuality.

In 1934 Gandhi carried out an untouchability campaign in Travancore. He

¹²³ Rudolph, *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma*. Pp 43

¹²⁴ Gandhi, *CWMG*, in *Harijan* 23-07-1938, pp. 50-51

¹²⁵ Rudolph, *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma*. pp44

returned in 1937 to celebrate the progress only to be further reignited by the campaign. He decided on this return trip to Travancore that *brahmacharya* had to be incorporated into the program.¹²⁶ In the weeks leading up to his visit to Travancore he twice wrote about one of the social service workers in the Gandhian movement against untouchability. The worker, by the name of Ramnarayan, had been having sexual relations with two young women. This infuriated Gandhi and he chastised the worker in the articles stating, “No worker who has not overcome lust can hope to render genuine service to the cause of Harijans, communal unity, khadi, cow protection or village reconstruction.”¹²⁷ This is quite different to the view he took in South Africa with his ‘army’ for whom he knew it would not be practical to try to commit all his satyagrahis to *brahmacharya*. Instead of realizing what he had been aware of in South Africa, he questioned his leadership and took the failure of the worker personally, as he did in the instances seen with Congress, his son Harilal and his father. He again attributed the failure of his workers, to his own failure as a political leader which he saw as a result of his inability to achieve mastery over his mind and passions. Lelyveld attributes this particular instance of Gandhi’s perceived failure at self-mastery as the moment at which “Gandhi finally convinces

himself that there may be a causal relationship- not just an analogy- between his struggle for self-mastery and India’s struggle for independence. Just as every village needs a social worker who has defeated lust, the nation needs a leader who-however pure his conduct-has banished his wayward thoughts.”¹²⁸

The lead up to this event and its after effect were due to personal experiences Gandhi had with his *brahmacharya* practice. Prior to the Travancore incident, in 1936, Gandhi had an incident that led to him starting to question the adequacy of his own *brahmacharya*. Suffering from high blood pressure and a collapse as a result of it, Gandhi experienced his first conscious desire to have sex. He spoke about it to one of his female associates, Prema Kantak, “The experience which tormented me in Bombay was a strange and painful one. All my discharges so far had occurred in dreams and they never troubled me... But the experience in Bombay occurred while I was fully awake and had a sudden desire for intercourse. I felt of course no urge to gratify the craving; there was no self-forgetfulness whatsoever. I was completely master of my body. But despite my best efforts the organ remained aroused. This was an altogether strange and shameful experience.”¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Lelyveld, *Great Soul : Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*.pp. 271

¹²⁷Gandhi as quoted in Ibid.

¹²⁸ ibid

¹²⁹ Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Vol 69: 32, “Letter to Prema Kantak”, 21-05-1936, pp 24

Such an instance occurred again in 1938, while he was in the midst of preparing for a crucial meeting with Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Broaching the topic to Madeleine Slade, the daughter of British Rear Admiral Sir Edmond Slade (also known as ‘Mirabehn, significantly after Meera Bai, a famous devotee of Lord Krishna), he wrote: “That degrading, dirty, torturing experience of 14th April shook me to bits and made me feel as if I was hurled by God from an imaginary paradise where I had no right to be in my uncleanness.” Gandhi expressed his experience more publicly to his Ashram inmates:

On the 14th I had another type of experience which increased my shame and added to my anguish. I had not made any change in my outward behaviour. But consciously or unconsciously, my mind was preparing itself. While I was caught in that whirlpool, I had to meet Mr. Jinnah... I had lost my self-confidence. I had shamed my *brahmacharya*.¹³⁰

Gandhi sought a connection between his celibacy vow and the upcoming meeting with Jinnah. He needed to find his power and effect in his celibacy in order to prepare himself to meet Jinnah. It has even been claimed that he was believed to have said that if he could master his celibacy in this instance, then he still had a chance of beating Jinnah. Gandhi, at this point, also realized the self-confidence that his *brahmacharya* provides. He resolved as a

solution that “For the time being, and as long as I am able to bear such physical contact with other people, I should not take any service from women which involves physical contact, unless it is absolutely unavoidable.”¹³¹ Gandhi, having decided that the best way to control his *brahmacharya* was through abstaining from physical contact with women, is sharply in contrast with the Gandhi witnessed in 1946, who believed that the best way to test his *brahmacharya* was through overtly intimate physical contact with women.

The final experiment (1946-1948)

The connection Gandhi made between his own control of *brahmacharya* and the political situation of India culminated in the experiment he undertook in the final years of his life. Thus, it is important to note the specificities of the time and location within which Gandhi embarked on this experiment. His undertaking took place in 1946, when the independence of India was finally looming, the very purpose within which his political life had been placed. Yet despite this great achievement that was about to happen, Hindus and Muslims of the country were committing gratuitous acts of violence against each other and there were talks taking place of a possible partition of the nation. Gandhi feared for the country’s integrity. He had, by this point, spent over a

¹³⁰Gandhi, CWMG, Vol 73:256. “Note to Ashram Inmates”, 02-06-1938, pp. 214

¹³¹ *ibid*

quarter century of his life training the people of India in the value and ways in which to succeed in non-violence as a political strategy. He now found that not only were they rejecting his tenet, but furthermore, they were starting to lose their faith in it.¹³² The period of his experiment started in October, 1946 and ended in January, 1948 with his martyrdom. The location, Noakhali, in Bengal, is also significant to note for a relating reason, for it was in Noakhali that communal rioting was widespread and prevalent. Gandhi made the decision to move to Noakhali to face this violent situation frontally.¹³³

Gandhi's connection between his experiment and the political situation regarding communal rioting is particularly difficult to discern, though it must be emphasized not due to a lack of primary sources for which there is a plethora of sources available aside from Gandhi's own account, most notably Nirmal Kumar Bose's and Manu Gandhi's printed recollections. Gandhi was losing power as a public political figure, generally, and was no longer idolized and turned to, to the same extent, by the Indian National Congress, specifically. This experiment, however, only served to distance him further from his closest political allies, friends and family. In spite of this he continued with it until his dying day.

It was within the Indian National Congress that talks of a partition had ensued and the use of violence was coming to be seen as a necessary tactic for independence. Gandhi felt strongly on both accounts. Violence, to Gandhi, was not the answer. Certainly, this worked against the very basis on which he had formed his political ideology and such a tactic would negate his life's work. Furthermore, a division of India on religious grounds would not be an appropriate solution to the communal problem facing the nation as a whole. His opinion was no longer greeted with reverence and unbridled support from within Congress and so he resigned himself to his little corner of Noakhali and BihaVr in an attempt to create a condition of social justice and religious toleration that would help form the basis of the national peace and unity he sought and espoused to.¹³⁴

Without such peace and unity, Gandhi believed, India would not be in the position necessitated to undertake one last act of *satyagraha* in the name of independence.¹³⁵ Gandhi, alienated from the very political party whose effectiveness he had worked so hard to create, was overcome by immense feelings of loneliness and isolation. His undertaking of this experiment can then be seen as perhaps a subconscious attempt to recoup some semblance of a relationship, turning instead to

¹³² Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*. pp 217

¹³³ Kumar, *Gandhi & His Women Associates*. Kindle Ed. Loc 1297 of 6119

¹³⁴ Nirmal Kumar Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2012). Kindle Ed. Loc 162 of 4059

¹³⁵ Ibid.

the deeply personal sort rather than political-though he also hoped to generate political results.

It was within this context that Gandhi then commenced his sexual experiment of sleeping with his female associates naked. Manu and Abha Gandhi, the granddaughters of his brother, were the two co-experimenters with whom his experiment met the most dissatisfaction amongst his critics and colleagues. The relationship between Gandhi's act of sleeping naked with Manu and its efficacy in his political campaign is exhibited in his following statement: "My mind daily sleeps in an innocent manner with millions of women, and Manu also, who is a blood relation to me, sleeps with me as one of these millions."¹³⁶ Gandhi saw his experiment with Manu as reflecting his experiment with the entire population of women of the nation. Gandhi to some extent sought to reach a state of sexlessness, and it was by identifying himself as a woman that he believed he could achieve this. By sleeping with women naked he sought to find out whether he could physically act like a woman too by not having any erections.

The relation between Gandhi's sexual undertaking and his political philosophy was characterized by what Gandhi understood to be the fear and cowardice of the country. He

stated in explaining his vow: "For me Manu's sleeping with me is a matter of dharma, and I am resolved to drive home the lesson that a person cannot give up what is a matter of dharma to him for the love of those who are dear to him or out of fear of anybody."¹³⁷ Gandhi summarized his connection between the political situation in Noakhali and his undertaking of his new experiment by addressing what it was exactly he was hypothesizing through his experiment: "Ever since my coming to Noakhali, I have been asking myself the question, 'What is it that is chocking the action of my *ahimsa*? Why does not the spell work? May it not be because I have temporalized in the matter of *brahmacharya*?...If I shrink from the test, I write myself down as a coward and a fraud."¹³⁸ Cowardice was a term he used repeatedly during this period, when referring not only to himself but also the people. Referring to the political condition in East Bengal he stated:

So long as we feel we can be subjected to these indignities, we shall continue to be so subjected...No police or military in the world can protect people who are cowards...This is why I am opposed to the idea of your evacuating East Bengal en masse. It is no cure for impotence or helplessness.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Volume 93:546, "Letter to Vinoba Bhawe," 10-02-1947, pp. 391

¹³⁷ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 94: 9, "Letter to Balkrishna Bhawe," 18-02-1947, pp.7

¹³⁸ Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Vol 94: 41, "Discussion with A.V. Thakkar," 24-02-1947, pp 38

¹³⁹ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 93:1, "Talk to Relief Workers," 07-11-1946, pp.1

Gandhi's sought to find the rightful solution to this problem by testing the limits of his *brahmacharya*. His experiments with Manu and others became his 'yajna' his spiritual duty: "I have called my present venture a yajna- a sacrifice, a penance. It means self-purification."¹⁴⁰ However, such an undertaking was not at all met with the compliance and support he believed he could reinstate. On the contrary, he was shunned and shirked for his views but, probably due to his stubbornness, Gandhi refused to give it up:

I dare not shrink from putting into action the logical implications of my conviction when I am launched on a sacrifice which consists of the full practice of truth... On the lonely way to God on which I have set out, I need no earthly companions. Let those who will, therefore, denounce me, if I am the imposter they imagine me to be, though they may not say so in so many words. It might disillusion millions who persist in regarding me as a Mahatma.¹⁴¹

Gandhi was indeed, denounced. Out of his political allies some such as Satis Chandra Mukerji, Vinobha Bhave, and GD Birla were neutral but not on his side. Vinobha Bhave for instance argued that if he were a perfect *brahmachari* there would be no need for his experiment, if he wasn't a perfect *brahmachari* he should not undertake such risks by seeking it.¹⁴² There were others who expressed their discontent even further. Sardar Patel furiously

spoke often about Gandhi indulging in adharma through his practices. The editorial board of *Harijan* resigned. His own son, Devdas wrote a letter of strong protest. All in all, he was variously described, as a result of his undertaking, by his harshest critics and more importantly those closest to him and of the general public whose favour he was seeking to reinstate as outrageous, titillating, bewildering and absurd.¹⁴³ Nehru, the nation's first prime minister post-independence, and a mentee of Gandhi even stated that he did not know why Gandhi was so obsessed by the problem of sex and that his sexual views and practices were "abnormal and unnatural" and could "only lead to frustration, inhibition, neurosis and all manner of physical and nervous ills."¹⁴⁴

Interestingly enough, it was the British who actually were the only ones to cut Gandhi some slack, despite his political career being based around their very eradication from the nation. One night, the police turned up to arrest him and found him in bed with an eighteen year old girl, instead of making public their finding they decided that "discretion was the better part of valour, and hushed up the police report."¹⁴⁵

It is interesting to note that all of this was taking place in the months and year leading up

¹⁴³ *ibid*

¹⁴⁴ Nehru as quoted in Patrick French, "The Truth About Mahatma Gandhi: He Was a Wily Operator, Not India's Smiling Saint," *The Telegraph*, January 31, 2013.

¹⁴⁵ Alex Von Tunzelmann, *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire* (London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd. , 2007). Loc. 2585/9880.

¹⁴⁰ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 94: 41, "Discussion with A.V. Thakkar, 24-02-1947, pp. 38

¹⁴¹ *ibid*

¹⁴² Kumar, *Gandhi & His Women Associates*.

to his death, yet the populous, posthumous remembrance of Gandhi, despite these political figures' statements, in no way accounts for this episode of his life. In February 1947, just a little under a year before his death, he talked of publishing a book on relationships which according to him was the greatest spiritual mystery of all time, such a mystery would remain one to him unto his death.¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

I deny being a visionary. I do not accept the claim of saintliness. I am of the earth, earthy...I am prone to as many weaknesses as you are. But I have seen the world. I have lived in the world with my eyes open.
M. K. Gandhi

The desire to be a sannyasi

In trying to establish a conclusion for the reasoning behind Gandhi's sexual ideology and practices it is important to reassert that Gandhi, whether or not he was consciously aware of it, had a desire to be a *sannyasi* and a guru. His marriage and subsequent conception of four sons, however, disallowed him from ever pursuing his spiritual hopes and dreams. Instead, he counter-stanced this desire by creating his own *sannyasi* and guru, in the form of a political *sannyasi* and political guru- or leader- to the people of India in their quest for

nationalism. Gandhi, just as he adapted and reformulated the ideologies of many great thinkers and schools of thought to fit within his own, did just that in application to his sexual views and beliefs.

If one was to ignore the ascetic tradition he prescribed to, Gandhi's practices had no support in Hindu thought.¹⁴⁷ Gandhi even said this for himself when he stated, upon discussing his sexual beliefs: "Let us leave aside Hinduism and consider *sannyasa* independently."¹⁴⁸ It was his firm belief that all must attempt to attain the mind-set of a *sannyasa*, "we all and the entire world have, to some small extent, to live a life of *sannyasa* and those who don't do so writhe in triple agony."¹⁴⁹ His espousal of *ahimsa* which he fervently believed in was, for Gandhi, the main attraction of *sannyasas*: "*Ahimsa* which to me is the chief glory of Hinduism has been sought to be explained away by our people as being meant for *sannyasis* only. I do not share this view. I have held that it is the way of life and India has to show it to the world."¹⁵⁰ Thus Gandhi, consciously sought to be like a *sannyasi* in the hopes of achieving *ahimsa*. In this regard he stated: "It is only by going into isolation from my companions, those on whose

¹⁴⁷ Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*. pp. 258

¹⁴⁸ Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Volume 93:51. "A Talk" published in *Harijan* 8-12-1946.

¹⁴⁹ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 39: 383, "Letter to Bal Kalelkar," 12-08-1927, pp. 387

¹⁵⁰ Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.

¹⁴⁶ Kumar, *Gandhi & His Women Associates*.

help I have relied all along, and standing on my own feet that I shall find my bearings and also test my faith in God.”¹⁵¹

Even in terms of the ascetic tradition, to say that Gandhi ascribed to their views would be an overstatement, as to him “the orthodox conception of the nine-fold wall of protection in regard to *brahmacharya*” was “inadequate and defective.”¹⁵² His aim was to “test, enlarge and revise the current definition of *brahmacharya*” by taking it on as his “duty-dharma- to meet it squarely in the face and find out where it leads to.” He saw the orthodox definition as “a system of prescriptive do’s and don’ts... a baneful effect of society” that had “lowered the ideal and robbed it of its true content.”¹⁵³ Thus he undertook his final experiment, sleeping with his female associates naked, for he believed “to avoid the contact of a woman or to run away out of fear” was “unbecoming of an aspirant after true *brahmacharya*.”¹⁵⁴ He, thus, negates the *sannyasi* who believes in keeping distance from women and sees him as not far testing enough in the means of achieving *brahmacharya*.”

Gandhi’s desire to be a *sannyasi* was never consciously or vocally acknowledged by him. He even went so far as to negate such a

statement, “I am not a *sannyasi*. I have four sons, a wife, sisters and relatives of every description. I love them. I accept their services. I am a fond householder and do not profess to be a *sannyasai*.”¹⁵⁵ His statement may have denied such a desire, but as has been shown, his actions certainly stated otherwise.

Psychological and spiritual dichotomy revisited: the sannyasi

Gandhi struggled greatly with reconciling his awareness of his subconscious with his conscious state of mind. As has been shown, he was deeply disturbed by the inability to gain full control of his subconscious and his sexual drive was the biggest indicator and constant reminder of his subconscious mind. Gandhi was troubled by his experiences from his sleeping state; after all he was in a post-coital state of sleep when he first learned of his father’s death and as has been shown this event impacted his psyche immensely. His final experiment was also a final attempt to gain control of his subconscious by testing the limits and extent to which he had mastered his subconscious by bringing naked women to his bed. Gandhi said that in doing so, he was exploring the ‘utmost limits’ of *brahmacharya* to discern just how far the human mind and body could be pushed and the obstacles encountered and ways in which to

¹⁵¹ Gandhi, CWMG, Vol 93: 51, “A Talk” published in Harijan 8-12-1946.

¹⁵² Gandhi, CWMG, Vol 94:134, “Discussion with Swami Anand and Kedar Nath,” 15/16-03-1947, pp. 119-121

¹⁵³ *ibid*

¹⁵⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵⁵ Gandhi, CWMG, Volume 23:119. “Speech at Public Meeting at Wadhwan” 09-06-1921. pp. 256

overcome these.¹⁵⁶ The violence that had erupted in the final years he took as a personal failure and so attempted to probe his psyche. Though he believed he had eliminated all traces of violence within himself, one still remained that he could not fully gain control over- his sexuality. The preceding incidents of 1934 and 1937 served as a constant reminder of this. Gandhi associated violence with sexuality and so long as he was conscious of himself as a male, this violence would only further erupt, even if he was not conscious of it. Thus, he attempted to become a woman and to test the extent to which this had been achieved.¹⁵⁷

Gandhi's curious mental attitude of becoming a woman, though rare, is one of the established modes of the subordination of sex among spiritual aspirants in India.¹⁵⁸ His reasoning was then along the lines of those seeking spirituality such as *sannyasis*. Saints, such as Shree Ramakrishna, were able to rise above their sexual impulses by identifying themselves as belonging to the opposite sex. In the specific case of Shree Ramakrishna, the psychological identification reached such a high degree that somatic changes followed, and discharges of blood through the pores of the skin appeared periodically, as it would for a woman during her menses.¹⁵⁹

Gandhi directly associated the spiritual with the psychological. This was in the sense that he associated the *sannyasi* as one who has the means and capability to assess his own mental state. He stated: "Sannyasa in a mental state and is reflected in a man's actions. But if another man imitates these actions without the mental state, that will not be sannyasa."¹⁶⁰ Gandhi believed that true spiritual leadership and power could only be attained through the rightful conquering of one's mental state. Thus, Gandhi's desire to be an ascetic, or a *sannyasi*, can be further identified, past the simply spiritual, by studying the psychology of the ascetic. Ascetic literature is particularly preoccupied with sexual purity more than with any other topic and Gandhi too certainly had quite the preoccupation with discussing this in his newspaper articles and private correspondences. Gandhi exhibits all the psychological tendencies of an ascetic and thus can be seen as aspiring to be one himself. The ascetic is described as such:

The ascetic is originally in the grip of a potential depression... which one attempts to counter by adopting one solution- flight- and eventually discovers he has only run into a deeper problem. His second line of defense is then the various manic forms we are accustomed to find in asceticism, along with the denial of the true meaning of these acts. Thus we find the denial of pain... the denial of physical needs in the refusal to take sufficient food; the denial of physical illness; the denial of the basic needs of

¹⁵⁶ Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition, Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*. pp219

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. pp 221

¹⁵⁸ Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol 39: 383, "Letter to Bal Kalelkar," 08-12-1927, pp. 387

companionship, affection and family ties.¹⁶¹

Gandhi exhibited flight when he left for South Africa, confronted with greater problems he then resolved to undertake *brahmacharya* and *satyagraha*. His vows, as well as his actions- fasting, celibacy, non-violence can all be seen as instances of the second line of defense discussed- refusal of food and denial of needs for family ties. Finally, the article states that:

The ascetic can stand isolation, contrary to what one might expect from the many experiments that show the disastrous effects of sensory deprivation: he is not alone. He has an entire population of familial members inside of himself as his eternal bound audience. This explains the obvious exhibitionism involved in so many ascetic practices. The ascetic constructs a dramatic scene, where his life is on stage for all to see- even when nobody is there. For in the end he is always addressing someone.¹⁶²

Such an instance is most exemplified in Gandhi's final experiment, whereby Gandhi refers to directly to his isolation. His entire population of familial members inside of him as his audience can be attributed to the people of India. Thus Gandhi did indeed construct a dramatic scene of exhibitionism for all to see. In terms of his psychological qualities, Gandhi definitely aspired to be a true *sannyasi*, or ascetic.

Gandhi was a '*sannyasi*' who was 'not bound by social customs.' He was "neither a typical politician nor typical religious leader: he couched his political discourse in religious frameworks and consistently used the ascetic disciplines as tools to address India's social and political problems."¹⁶³ By addressing his psychological state but not focusing on it solely but rather in relation to the spiritual ideology of Hindu ascetics, it becomes clear that Gandhi indeed wished to be and sought, both consciously and subconsciously, within the realms of his psyche to be a *sannyasi*.

Summary and remarks

Gandhi's practices and views on sexuality developed significantly over the course of its undertaking. Such changes and developments in his ideology on sexuality were clearly associated with his political philosophy. Having been influenced by Victorian beliefs due to his time in England and Hindu schools of thought on the subject through his 'almost' guru, Shrimad Rajchandra and reading works by Tolstoy, Ruskin, Bureau, and Hare, Gandhi began to see the effectiveness and power that lay in celibacy. Having weighed out the advantages with the disadvantages and holding his public role higher to his familial, while at the Phoenix Settlement Gandhi first

¹⁶¹ J. Moussaieff Masson, "The Psychology of the Ascetic," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35, no. 4. pp 620

¹⁶² Ibid. pp. 621

¹⁶³ Veena R. Howard, "Rethinking Gandhi's Celibacy: Ascetic Power and Women's Empowerment," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 1. pp. 132

experimented and debated the powers of celibacy. While serving on the British side of the Zulu rebellion, Gandhi finally came to the resolve to undertake the *brahmacharya* vow.

Gandhi first connected his sexual ideology to his political by associating the *brahmacharya* vow with the *satyagraha* vow and campaign, thus his sexual ideology was intimately connected with his beliefs in *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and obviously, *satyagraha* (militant nonviolence). While on the *satyagraha* campaign, Gandhi established Tolstoy Farm where he began to conduct a number of sexual experiments that he then associated to other aspects of his political career. His experiments on members of Tolstoy Farm and the Phoenix Settlement were then applied to his undertakings at the Sabarmati Ashram in India when he relocated back in 1915. But more importantly he associated his establishment of Tolstoy Farm in the final stages of the *satyagraha* campaign with the overall success of his political undertaking in South Africa. The success of this he directly associated with his sexual experiments due to the nature of the experiments he conducted while residing at Tolstoy Farm.

Having moved to India, Gandhi continued to use his communal living settlements as a testing ground for what he would and would not press upon the people of the nation of India to pursue for themselves in the name of nationalism. He made celibacy a prerequisite

for those joining the ashram, and taking it a step further then he did in his previous settlements in South Africa, extended that rule even to those who were married. Once he had established his rules on sexuality within the Ashram he then pressed these views upon the people of India through his articles in his newspaper *Indian Opinion* and then *Harijan* as well as by preaching his views at speeches and meetings. Gandhi was a true believer that one must lead by example and so he always made it a point to bind the public and private spheres of his life together. He did this by openly discussing his own journey on the path of celibacy as well as by discussing publicly the lives of his family members, particularly his wife Kasturba and son Harilal, as well as the members of his ashram and finally the workers pledging his campaign around the country. Gandhi, while in South Africa, knew of the difficulty of trying to press his views upon all his followers and so allowed them to decide for themselves whether celibacy was a path they would follow. However, in India, facing even greater political turmoil and setbacks, Gandhi no longer allowed for any leniency to his beliefs and views and allowed for no exemption to be made for those following his path to freedom. This was exemplified by the example of one of his workers who had slept with not one, but two women. The transition to such a stringent enforcement of his ideology is most likely due to Gandhi's own struggles to

maintain power and effectively lead the country. Deterred by the ability of his workers to enforce his ideologies due to, in his view, their promiscuity led him to question his own leadership- if his own workers could not maintain control of their sexuality how could they effectively enforce their policies, questioning this he began to think that perhaps his own control of his sexuality was not as potent as he had originally thought and such a realization led him to embark on what can only be referred to as the 'dark period of his sexual encounters.'

Gandhi's experiments with his women associates such as his doctor, Sushila Nayyar, and grandnieces, Abha and Manu Gandhi, were by no means a perverse or sex-driven initiative. Rather, it was quite the opposite, a means by which to test just how far his celibacy had come since his undertaking of the vow in 1906. The country, in Gandhi's view, had come into crisis, communal rioting and the threat of a partition of the nation led him, again, to question his own sexuality as he felt that if he could not press upon the people the need to remain united, clearly, this was a reflection that his sexual undertakings were not deriving their necessary power. However, due to the nature of the experiment and the fact that for the first time since embarking on sexual experiments he did not make his undertaking public, led those around him to believe that there was some hidden agenda in the act and that perhaps,

Gandhi was no longer the great leader they had previously thought him to be. This was the culminating point of the connection between Gandhi's sexual ideology and his political philosophy and personal conduct. For not only was Gandhi's political power clearly waning at this point, but it was also within this period and experimental undertaking that he was assassinated by Nathuran Godse on the 30th of January, 1948. His death, in relation to his sexual ideology, brings to mind the vivid and moving depiction of his assassination in the scene from Richard Attenborough's movie *Gandhi*, where he is walking accompanied by his grandnieces, Manu and Abha, with whom he conducted his final sexual experiment.¹⁶⁴

Gandhi struggled with his sexual ideology all his life, even when he had developed ideologies and beliefs in other areas he never was able to completely get his head around his sexual beliefs and thus it was his sexual beliefs and ideology that were a constant preoccupation playing on his mind, "truth was inborn in me, nonviolence came to me with great effort, *brahmacharya* I'm still striving for."¹⁶⁵ Due to the complexity of his beliefs, and in lieu his overall political success, what can be discerned is that Gandhi's one failure in

¹⁶⁴ Richard Attenborough, "Gandhi," (1982).

¹⁶⁵ Gandhi as quoted by Pyarelal in 'The Last Phase' re-quoted in Ved Mehta, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). pp. 38

life was to fully reach *brahmacharya*, even despite his consistent celibacy for much of it.

Clearly Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a complex individual and leader. It is convenient to ascribe motivations and characterize some of his behaviour as “dysfunctional, asexual or bi-sexual” or “inappropriate” at the very least, examining them from our perch (and perspectives) today.

It is clearly an understatement to assert that Gandhi was a complex individual, but rooted in that complexity was an amalgamation of different social, religious, and theological mores, which clearly made him what he was, and underlay his achievements. Thus, Gandhi’s sexual ideology under scrutiny and observation by the scholar can be seen as intimately connected with his overall political philosophy and his personal conduct. 🧐

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