

Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality

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THE LIFE OF Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is certainly as well documented as any life of modern times. There are nearly a thousand biographies of him in English alone, and Gandhi himself was extraordinarily prolific, judging from the one hundred volumes of his collected writings. Given the monumental nature of the record of his life, and the scrutiny to which it has been subjected, it is all the more surprising that one of the most critical—and from a certain standpoint among the most disturbing—events in what is otherwise seen as a saintly life should have received so little attention. In the last few years before his assassination in January 1948, but most certainly no earlier than the death of his wife in 1944, Gandhi took to the practice of taking naked young women to bed with him at night. Gandhi, who never wore many clothes to begin with, would himself be naked on such occasions. Three women—his grandnieces Abha and Manu and his personal physician of sorts, Sushila Nayar—were involved in this “experiment” in brahmacharya, which with erroneous simplicity has been rendered as ‘celibacy’. Gandhi described brahmacharya as the “search [for] Brahma [truth],” and thus, in its most ordinarily accepted sense, the “control in thought, word and action, of all the senses at all times and in all places.”¹ Brahmacharya, the elimination of all desire,

¹Gandhi, “What is Brahmacharya?,” *Young India* (June 5 1924), reprinted in M. K. Gandhi, *The Law of Continence: Brahmacharya*, Pocket Gandhi Series, no. 7, ed. Anand T. Hingorani (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964), p. 18. I have not italicized commonly used Sanskrit words such as satya (truth), ahimsa (nonviolence), satyagraha (the name given to Gandhi’s strategy of nonviolent resistance), and brahmacharya, all of which are an indispensable part of any lexicon of Gandhian thought.

was to be obtained by diving into, and realizing, the inner self: and it is this spiritual discipline that furnished the nonviolent resister with true armor. “Without Brahmacharya the Satyagrahi will have no lustre,” wrote Gandhi, “no inner strength to stand unarmed against the whole world. . . . His strength will fail him at the right moment.”²

Many years after Gandhi’s death, Sushila Nayyar provided an account of Gandhi’s brahmacharya experiments. It is she who first shared Gandhi’s bed, but as she was to recall, she never experienced any sexual desire, and felt as she would with her mother. At the outset it was no more than a part of Gandhi’s program of “nature cure.” Gandhi might ask her to lie on his back if his back ached, and Nayyar reports that Gandhi would even go to sleep while she was perched on his back. Subsequently, more often than not, it was Manu who shared Gandhi’s bed. At first Manu had slipped under the covers with her clothes on, and apparently “was snoring within minutes of getting into his bed.” Then, Nayyar says, Gandhi told Manu that their purity had to be subjected to the “ultimate test,” and they were to offer the “purest of sacrifices.” He suggested that they “now both start sleeping naked.”³ Manu, reports Nayyar, readily consented.

There was never any suggestion that Gandhi made improper advances towards Manu or the other two women who on occasion had slept with him, or that the encounter was in the remotest matter sexual, or even that he had entertained “impure” thoughts towards Manu and the other women. Gandhi himself eventually made this matter public knowledge and was to write voluminously on the nature of his experiment, though in this matter there appears to have been some unusual dissimulation on his part, insofar as initially he kept the matter of his sharing a bed with a fully clothed woman a secret. “She often used to sleep with me to keep me warm,” Gandhi said of a fellow ashramite woman by the name of Prabhavati, “even before I was conscious that I was making an experiment.”⁴ He may have suspected that this narrative would seem quite implausible to others, as indeed it did, the common rejoinder being that Gandhi had merely to take recourse to more blankets to keep himself warm. Later, Gandhi would admit that he had erred only in not publicly divulging his practices: by not discussing them, he not only had allowed others to place on his actions whatever constructions they thought desirable, but he had also violated the principle that the seeker of truth can have nothing to hide.⁵

²Quoted by Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Last Phase*, Vol. I, Book Two (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1956; 2d ed., 1966), p. 210.

³Ved Mehta, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 203.

⁴*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* [hereafter cited as CWMG], 100 vols. (New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publications Division, 1954–1995), 79: 213.

⁵CWMG, 87: 90; cf. 86: 423.

In late 1946, then, when Gandhi's brahmacharya experiment came to the fore, he was seventy-seven years old, and it had been forty years since he had engaged in a sexual relationship with any woman, his own wife not excepted. Independence was on the horizon, and Gandhi had already been assimilated in the minds of some into the pantheon not merely of the immortals, but of renowned saints and even gods. It is not for nothing that he had been christened a Mahatma by his great countryman, Rabindranath Tagore, three decades previously; and, as the eminent philosopher and cultural critic Ananda Coomaraswamy reminds us, Mahatmas or "Great Souls" are those who, though having become liberated in this life, *jivan-mukta*, undergo acute suffering to bring succor to ordinary men and women.⁶ Yet, in the waning years of his life, as he was receiving some of the greatest accolades that had ever been showered on him, and as he honorably stood aside from the struggles for power that engaged the attention of the political leaders who were about to condemn the country to vivisection, Gandhi was prepared to face the public ignominy that knowledge of his sexual experiments was bound to produce. Indeed, in an instant he lost many of his friends, and many of his most trusted disciples and colleagues were to forsake him. Many Indian women, who have expressed intense admiration for Gandhi, construe the Mahatma's practice of taking naked young women to bed as an unaccountable blot on an otherwise noble life, and he has not been forgiven this massive indiscretion. The author of the earliest, and what remains to this day the most exhaustive, account of Gandhi's experiments in sexuality was to note much later that he had to publish his account at his own expense, as "after Gandhiji's death everyone wanted to suppress all further discussion of the brahmacharya experiments."⁷ Many of the acclaimed biographies of Gandhi of recent years have nothing to say of this matter,⁸ and the most detailed monograph to explore Gandhi's relations with women, though authored

⁶Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Mahatma," in *Mahatma Gandhi: Essays and Reflections on His Life and Work*, ed. S. Radhakrishnan (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939; 2d enlarged ed., 1949), 63–67. As Coomaraswamy pointedly notes, Mahatma (from the Sanskrit maha = great + atma = soul) is rendered literally as 'Great Soul', but that is far from the meaning it truly implies. A Mahatma is "one who is 'in the spirit', and more than man"; such a Mahatma abandons the 'petty self' and lives only in his 'great self' (p. 64).

⁷Nirmal Kumar Bose, as quoted in Mehta, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles*, p. 193.

⁸Even the biography by Catherine Clement, a French feminist and psychoanalyst, devotes just two sentences to this matter. The caption accompanying a photograph of Gandhi with Manu and Abha, who were his constant companions after Kasturba's death, states: "He had brought up the two orphans and shared a bed with Manu, his favorite, as a way of testing their virtue. The ensuing scandal was deeply mortifying to Gandhi." See her *Gandhi: Father of a Nation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), p. 113. The English translation of the French original of 1989 appears in a series called "New Horizons." The most notable exception to the silence on this matter is William L. Shirer's *Gandhi: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 230–38, though Shirer's account is largely descriptive.

by an Indian woman activist and scholar,⁹ is stunningly silent on this question while being quite profuse in its delineation and critique of Gandhi's views on sexuality and sexual conduct.

One might have expected that Gandhi's detractors,¹⁰ of whom there are many, would have pounced upon the Mahatma for harboring sexual fantasies in the ripe years of his life while proclaiming himself to be a celibate, for compromising the lives of very young women, and for exploiting the vastly iniquitous power relationship that obtained between him and the young women. However, even his critics, whether it be the Marxists, Indian liberals, or Hindu militants such as his assassin, Nathuram Godse, have always understood that though agreement with Gandhi's political and economic views was never to be expected, and that his political conduct may be open to question, his personal life was unimpeachable.¹¹ Gandhi would appear to present an extraordinarily easy target to his critics, but in his death, as much as in his life, he continues to confound his opponents regardless of the shade of their opinion. Indeed, neither Gandhi's advocates nor his detractors have had an easy time with him. The upholders of tradition thought they had found in Gandhi, who was opposed to violent revolutionary change and even declared himself to be a follower of the *sanatan dharma*, or the eternal faith, a reliable ally. But Gandhi had little use for institutional religion, paid little or no heed to caste practices, and unequivocally declared that the authority of the scriptures was to be abrogated whenever the scriptures advocated positions reprehensible to the conscience.¹² It is Gandhi's contribution to social reform, his efforts to improve the position of women and "backward classes," and his advocacy of religious harmony that endeared him to the modernizers; and yet these very modernizers are compelled to castigate Gandhi for his refusal to endorse modern industrial civilization, his critique of scientism, his supposed naiveté about the nature of the modern world and realpolitik, and his seemingly ineffective and concil-

⁹Madhu Kishwar, "Gandhi and Women," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, nos. 40 and 41 (1985), reprinted as *Gandhi and Women* (Delhi: Manushi Prakashan, 1986).

¹⁰Gandhi has had many detractors and critics over the years, among them Marxists, liberals, Dalits, Hindu militants, and modernizers. The best treatment of this subject, though still quite inadequate, is to be found in B. R. Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* (Oxford: Delhi University Press, 1985).

¹¹The real exception here would be American and English critics such as Richard Grenier and Michael Edwardes to whom Gandhi was not merely an eccentric, but a "humbug" and, in the words of the popular English historian Paul Johnson, a "consummate sorcerer's apprentice." See his article "Gandhi Isn't Good for You," *Daily Telegraph* (April 16, 1983). On Edwardes, see Mark T. Berger, "Gandhi and the Guardians—Michael Edwardes and the Apologetics of Imperialism," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (1989).

¹²M. K. Gandhi, "Why I am a Hindu," *Young India* (October 20, 1927), also anthologized in Raghavan Iyer, ed., *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. I: *Civilization, Politics, and Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 26–7.

iatory insistence on persuasion, faith, discipline, and the adherence to non-violence and truth as the preconditions for radical change.

To modernizers such as his own "disciple" Jawaharlal Nehru and the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, Gandhi has too much resemblance to a relic of some bygone age.¹³ His opposition to industrialization and his purported defense of the bourgeois order always made him an abhorrent figure to the Marxists,¹⁴ but lately Indian Marxists are discovering that Gandhi was more attuned to the problems of caste and class in India than their own revolutionary theorists, and that India's deeply syncretistic traditions may be more effective in combating the resurgence of Hindu militant ideologies than secularism of the Western variety. This same dilemma has confronted feminists. While berating Gandhi for holding to conventional views about the relative duties of men and women, for his failure to recognize female sexuality, and for his apparent willingness to have women confined to the prescribed realms of marriage, wifehood, motherhood, and domesticity, Indian feminists nonetheless concede that Gandhi was, paradoxically, instrumental in bringing women into the nationalist movement and allowing them a significant public space. They likewise recognize that he assisted in laying the groundwork for the Indian women's movement by stressing the equality of men and women, rendering respectable the decision of women to forgo marriage for other ends, and holding men to the same standards of moral conduct and responsibility to which women were bound.¹⁵

Gandhi has never been, in consequence, easily appropriable, and both his admirers and critics have found that wrestling with the Mahatma generates acute anxiety. What is, in many respects, the most extraordinary episode in his life must present even graver problems of interpretation, just as it produces a great deal of unease. That, however, can be no warrant for not examining the nature of Gandhi's experiment, its political consequences and moral implications, and the complicated cultural history and logic that informed his practices. It is not pleasing to the self-appointed guardians of

¹³Nehru's profound unease with Gandhi, commingled with intense admiration for the "miracles" that Gandhi was able to work in India, is palpable in all his writings on Gandhi: a good example is his autobiography, *Toward Freedom* (1941; reprint ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 47–53, 65–85, 309–26; for Amartya Sen's predictable and rather impoverished reading of Gandhi, see "Tagore and His India," *New York Review of Books* (June 26, 1997), pp. 55–63.

¹⁴For critical Marxist views of Gandhi, see M. N. Roy, *Selected Writings of M. N. Roy*, 3 vols. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 2: 152–7, 180–4, 310–15; 3:457–8, 566–71; and *Against the Stream: An Anthology of Writings of Saumyendranath Tagore*, 2 vols., ed. Sudarshan Chattopadhyaya (Calcutta: Saumyendranath Memorial Committee, 1975).

¹⁵See Kishwar, *Gandhi and Women*, passim, and Ketu H. Katrak, "Indian Nationalism, Gandhian 'Satyagraha,' and Representations of Female Sexuality," in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 395–406.

his memory and reputation, particularly those who have devoted their lives to what they perceive to be Gandhian causes or have long been associated with various Gandhian institutions, that Gandhi should be associated with what some judge to be unsavory incidents; his status as “Father of the Nation” also appears to demand that only a hagiographic portrait be allowed to circulate. One American journalist who knew Gandhi well maintains, “probably we shall never know the whole truth about Gandhi’s ‘experiments’ with lying naked with naked women in the evening of his life,”¹⁶ while a renowned Indian scholar who was Gandhi’s associate in 1946–1947 feels that the wall of silence will never be brought down, as “the wish to be truthful died in our country with Gandhiji. It was never very strong, even among his disciples.”¹⁷ As Gandhi himself argued, it is not given to humankind ever to know the “whole truth”; nonetheless, an understanding of Gandhi’s experiment in what may be called “celibate sexuality” allows us to probe the extent of his engagement with Indian sexual, political, and spiritual traditions, and to consider how far his insights into sexuality extend beyond parameters that have seldom been conceived even by the proponents of free love. As I will argue, Gandhi takes us into that realm of the politics of the body where ‘woman’ and ‘man’ must be reconfigured, and in this sense he provides a striking illustration of the manner in which the postmodern is already prefigured in the premodern.

I: THE VOW OF BRAHMACHARYA AND THE COMPANY OF WOMEN

On February 22, 1944, Kasturba Gandhi died in the Aga Khan’s Palace in Poona as a prisoner under British custody. A well-known photograph of the Mahatma taken at this time shows a forlorn and utterly dejected Gandhi sitting by his wife’s deathbed, almost unable to comprehend the enormity of his loss.¹⁸ Through sixty-two years of a long and at first tumultuous married life, the two had developed a friendship, association, and political companionship unusual in the annals of Indian marriage. Their early years of married life were spent largely in separation, as Gandhi left for London to pursue his studies and then took up a career in South Africa. Neverthe-

¹⁶Shirer, *Gandhi*, p. 238.

¹⁷Nirmal Kumar Bose, as quoted in Mehta, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles*, p. 194. Gandhi was never addressed as Gandhi except by British officials, newspaper editors, and strangers. To most Indians he was “Bapu,” or Father; and then he was “Bapuji,” the suffix “ji” being an honorific. At other times he was “Mahatmaji.” He is now spoken of as “Gandhiji.”

¹⁸This photograph is reproduced in, among other works, Clement, *Gandhi*, p. 99; Robert Payne, *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969; reprint ed., New York: Smithmark Publishers, 1995), following p. 416; and D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: The Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, 8 vols. (new ed., New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India), Vol. 6, between pp. 32 and 33.

less, five years after his marriage at the age of thirteen, Gandhi was already a father; and over the course of the next thirteen years, Kasturba was to give birth to three more sons.

In 1906, when he was thirty-seven years old, Gandhi, the father of four children, took a life-long vow to abjure from all sexual relations with his wife or any other woman. He had first decided upon this course of action in 1901, and it may have been, as one scholar has conjectured, his reason for not wanting Kasturba and their children to join him in South Africa upon his return to that country.¹⁹ The presence of his wife, Gandhi might have felt, would weaken his desire to abjure any sexual contact with her. But Gandhi was unable to keep to his resolve, and at least intermittently must have continued to maintain sexual relations with Kasturba. Finally, in 1906, as he was about to launch a major nonviolent campaign to resist the “harassing and degrading restrictions in South Africa” to which Indians were subject,²⁰ Gandhi decided to embrace brahmacharya, or complete celibacy. Gandhi’s autobiography suggests that Kasturba was of the same mind as her husband, but it is not quite clear how far Kasturba was consulted before Gandhi reached his monumental decision. He might not have thought her acquiescence to his decision critical, as at this point in his life he appears to have held the view that “husband and wife do not have to obtain each other’s consent for practising brahmacharya”: “mutual consent is essential for intercourse, but no consent is necessary for abstention.”²¹ The author of an eight-volume biography of Gandhi, who aims at sketching a hagiographic profile of the Mahatma as the man who was destined to free India from the servitude of British rule, is extraordinarily laconic about Gandhi’s assumption of celibacy. He notes that Gandhi discussed “the vow of brahmacharya with his intimate co-workers and conveyed his resolution to Kasturbai.” One might have thought that Gandhi would discuss the matter with Kasturba and convey his resolution, insofar as it had to be conveyed to anyone else, to his fellow workers. His biographer adds: “Thus brahmacharya which Gandhi had been observing ‘willynilly’ since 1900 was sealed with a vow in the middle of 1906.”²² An American biographer states, likewise, that Gandhi told Kasturba of being “irrevocably determined

¹⁹ Sudhir Kakar, *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 94.

²⁰ Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, 1: 75.

²¹ CWMG 30: 143. Much later in life, Gandhi held a contrary view: responding to a query from a married man who wished to observe brahmacharya in opposition to his wife’s wishes, he said, “A husband or wife can strive for any aim which was not present in the minds of both at the time of marriage, only with the consent of the other party. In other words, a husband cannot take the vow of brahmacharya without the consent of his wife.” See CWMG 66: 70.

²² Tendulkar, *Mahatma* 1: 77.

to live in perfect chastity. An obedient wife, she accepted this decision as she accepted all the other demands he made on her.”²³

Gandhi’s close association with his wife would henceforth take different forms. Kasturba never acceded to her husband’s wishes easily, and Gandhi’s autobiography itself furnishes a remarkable testimony to her tenacity and independence of judgment, and the sharp disagreements she came to have with him when, in the first two decades of their marriage, he unreasonably sought to bring her under his control.²⁴ But Kasturba gave Gandhi her support in his quest for social, economic, and political equality for Indians in South Africa and India, and she was among the first of the satyagrahis, or nonviolent resisters, sent from Phoenix into the Transvaal to protest the decision of the South African government to declare all non-Christian marriages null and void.²⁵ After their permanent return to India in 1914, and Gandhi’s entry into the Indian political scene in 1917, Kasturba was to become even more of a political actor. She would take his place at political meetings which he was unable to attend and was particularly active in the long periods of his various imprisonments. In time she acquired a political personality of her own,²⁶ though in a short introduction Gandhi provided to a biography of Kasturba after her death, he described the “root cause which attracted the public to Kasturba” as her ability to lose herself in him. Gandhi says that he “never insisted on this self-abnegation. She developed this quality of her own. At first I did not even know that she had it in her. According to my earlier experience, she was very obstinate. In spite of all my pressure she would do as she wished. This led to short or long periods of estrangement between us. But as my public life expanded, my wife bloomed forth and deliberately lost herself in my work.” Most significantly, Gandhi was to add: “What developed the self-abnegation in her to the highest level was our Brahmacharya.” Gandhi says that he made a resolve to become a brahmacharya “and Ba, as she was affectionately called, accepted it as her own”; indeed, he admits, brahmacharya was “more natural for her than for me,” and so he arrives at the formulation of “our brahmacharya.”

²³ Payne, *Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 160.

²⁴ Writing to a European woman on March 12, 1928, Gandhi had this to say about his treatment of Kasturba: “But I thought that if people recognize me as a gentle peace-loving man, they should also know that at one time I could be a positive beast even though at the same time I claimed to be a loving husband. It was not without good cause that a friend once described me as a combination of sacred cow and ferocious tiger.” See Iyer, ed., *Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1: 28–9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 256–8.

²⁶ The memory of Kasturba in modern India is, unfortunately, confined to the handful of octogenarians and others who were active in the freedom movement. It is not that her slide into relative oblivion was inevitable, owing to the much greater presence of her husband; rather, it is the other Gandhis, Indira and her clan, who were to monopolize the public space with the name of Gandhi.

It is from this time that they became "true friends" and ceased to live as a married couple in the conventional sense of the term; and, correspondingly, Kasturba "had no other interest in staying with me," says Gandhi, "except to help me in my work."²⁷

Though Gandhi took the vow of brahmacharya, he did not thereby cease to mix in the company of women. Quite to the contrary, he adored their presence and was almost always surrounded by many women disciples and initiates. Gandhi had a considerable female entourage and conducted a number of what in the West would be understood as "platonic" relationships. After Madeleine Slade, the daughter of an English admiral, arrived in India in 1925 to serve Gandhi and, in her words, "the cause of oppressed India," she rapidly assumed Kasturba's duties and would henceforth be Gandhi's cook, nurse, and helpmate.²⁸ It was Madeleine, or Mirabehn as she was called,²⁹ who accompanied Gandhi on his trip to London in 1931 to attend the Round Table Conference, and who ministered to his daily needs. Mirabehn was exceedingly possessive of the Mahatma, demanded his constant attention, and felt a need for close physical proximity to him at all times. Gandhi often had to send her away and described the many mis-sives they exchanged during these periods of separation, which Mirabehn found agonizingly painful and which Gandhi himself described as "love messages" full of "spiritual agony."³⁰ Gandhi recognized, as on one occasion in 1927, that he had been "very severe" with Mirabehn, but said he "could not do otherwise. I had to perform an operation and I steadied myself for it." In the same vein, he wrote a few days later: "I have never been so anxious as this time to hear from you, for I sent you away too quickly after a serious operation. You haunted me in my sleep last night and were reported by friends to whom you had been sent, to be delirious, but without any danger."³¹ Mira was to write in her autobiography that "the pain of our parting would not leave me," but Gandhi, while acknowledging that she was beside herself with the pain of separation, nonetheless insisted

²⁷ Introduction by M. K. Gandhi to Sushila Nayyar, *Kasturba: Wife of Gandhi* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill, 1948), [p. 9].

²⁸ Madeleine Slade, *The Spirit's Pilgrimage* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1960). Her description of her first meeting with Gandhi is priceless: she was ushered into Gandhi's presence, and was "conscious of nothing but a sense of light." Madeleine fell to her knees; then hands gently raised her up, and a voice said: "You shall be my daughter" (p. 66).

²⁹ Madeleine was renamed Mira in emulation of the great Mirabai, the sixteenth-century female saint who imagined Krishna as her lover, and whose rapturous devotion for Krishna took the form of ecstatic bhajans or devotional songs, which have ever since been considered one of the greatest treasures of Awadhi-Bhojpuri-Hindi literature.

³⁰ Gandhi's letters to Mira were published in the United States as *The Love Letters of Mahatma Gandhi*. See also Mira Behn, ed., *Bapu's Letters to Mira (1924-1948)* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1949), p. 42.

³¹ Mira Behn, ed., *Bapu's Letters to Mira*, pp. 42-3.

that she should cultivate the detachment that would make her a “perfect woman”: “You must not cling to me as in this body. The spirit without the body is ever with you. And that is more than the feeble embodied imprisoned spirit with all the limitations that the flesh is heir to. The spirit without the flesh is perfect, and that is all we need. This can be felt only when we practice detachment. This you must now try to achieve.”³²

In staking the position that a detached and yet intense relationship with women in his married state constituted no abrogation of his conjugal vows, and that a true spiritual relationship could not be predicated on the ephemeral attachments of the flesh, Gandhi was doubtless also drawing on the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, which dwells on the manner in which the soul merely inhabits the body and counsels the cultivation of a frame of mind whereby one renounces not so much action as the fruits or rewards of actions.³³ A man aspiring to master his senses and conquer the ego, renounces not so much women, which would have been the way of Indian sages, as that attachment to sex which makes impossible the selfless passion of which the Gita sings. Mirabehn was only one of many women with whom Gandhi, a married man, had an extraordinarily close relationship. The Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar has described the intensely possessive feelings towards Gandhi entertained by another young woman, Prema Kantak, who came in her twenties to stay in Gandhi’s ashram. Kakar hazards the opinion that “in the ashram, the competition among women for Gandhi’s attention was as fierce as it is in any guru’s establishment today.”³⁴ But Gandhi’s relationships with women can by no means be confined to this category of experience. His personal physician for some years was another woman, the aforementioned Sushila Nayyar: she was to be a party to his future experiments. One of his closest political associates, and perhaps the only friend who took the liberty of playfully mocking Gandhi, was Sarojini Naidu. It is she who, adverting to Gandhi’s long ears, nicknamed him “Mickey Mouse”³⁵ and coined the famous quip, “it takes a great deal of money to keep Bapu living in poverty.”³⁶ Thus, though as his wife Kasturba clearly stood apart from all the other women in Gandhi’s life, such women as Mirabehn and Sushila Nayyar were no less dear to him, and in certain respects they occupied a niche in Gandhi’s life that no one else could fill.

How soon after Kasturba’s death in February 1944 Gandhi commenced his experiments in brahmacharya remains uncertain. The photographs from

³²Slade [Mira Behn], *The Spirit’s Pilgrimage*, pp. 92–3.

³³M. K. Gandhi, *Gita According to Gandhi or the Gospel of Selfless Action*, ed. Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1946).

³⁴Kakar, *Intimate Relations*, p. 111.

³⁵Payne, *Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 277.

³⁶Geoffrey Ashe, *Gandhi* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), p. 267.

the last four years of his life show his two grandnieces, Abhabehn and Manubehn (particularly the latter), to be his constant companions. One year before her death, Kasturba induced the prison governor at the Aga Khan's Palace in Poona to allow Manu, then fifteen years old and suffering a term of imprisonment in Nagpur for her part in the "Quit India" movement, to join Kasturba as her nurse companion. Manu arrived at the palace in March 1943 and soon established her place as the devoted servant to both Kasturba and Gandhi. As Kasturba lay dying, she entrusted Manu to Gandhi's care.³⁷ Six weeks after Kasturba's death, Gandhi himself fell seriously ill, prostrated by a serious attack of malaria. Kasturba's death had debilitated him: as Gandhi himself put it, "I cannot imagine life without Ba. . . . Her passing has left a vacuum never to be filled. . . ." But Manu was there to nurse Gandhi back to health; and she came to have a special place in his affections. In a touching and remarkable testament that Manu penned a few years later, she described the manner in which Gandhi brought her up as his daughter and the interest he took in her mental growth, health, nutritional needs, and physical and spiritual development. Gandhi washed and oiled her hair, taught her spinning, and even cooked for her, though he himself usually ate little more than nuts, fruits, and boiled vegetables. Manu, let it be noted, called her little testament *Bapu—My Mother*.³⁸

II: SLEEPING WITH THE VIRTUOUS

Manu was eighteen years old when, in early December 1946, she joined Gandhi in the remote villages of Noakhali in East Bengal. The tortuous road that led Gandhi to Noakhali cannot be traced here, but it suffices to note that some of its Muslim inhabitants had taken it upon themselves to empty Noakhali of its minority Hindu population. (In Bihar, not much later, the Hindu community would mindlessly enact its revenge, but that is another story.) The massacres in Noakhali commenced on October 10, 1946, and slowly the stories of the orchestrated orgies of violence, the brutal murder of men, the abduction and rape of women, and the torching of entire villages made their way into the media and the portals of power in Delhi. No sooner had Gandhi received reliable information of these monstrosities than he decided to make his way to Noakhali. That mantra, "Do or Die," which he had given to the nation in 1942, as he launched the final movement against British rule in India, now beckoned him to proceed to the violence-torn and malaria-stricken Noakhali in a demonstration of his deeply held belief that Hindus and Muslims were perfectly capable of living together in harmony. His fellow satyagrahis and

³⁷ Mehta, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles*, p. 197.

³⁸ Manubehn Gandhi, *Bapu—My Mother* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1949).

companions were dispatched to various Muslim villages to take up residence there, and Gandhi, after moving from village to village, set himself up in the village of Srirampur.

Gandhi's entourage, this time unusually small, consisted of Parasuram, who served as his typist, and Nirmal Kumar Bose, a Bengali scientist on the faculty at Calcutta University. For some years, Bose had been interested in Gandhi's work and thought, and had been waiting for an opportunity to observe him firsthand; Gandhi, on his part, required the services of an able interpreter, as he was without knowledge of Bengali. Bose also came to serve as Gandhi's secretary and personal assistant, and it was he who prepared Gandhi's meals, helped him bathe and shave, and attended to all his other personal needs. As Bose understood, Gandhi had never been "physically so alone" since his return to India in 1915: he was without trusted friends and associates, his wife had passed away, and his female companions were scattered in Noakhali and elsewhere. To Bose it appeared as though "Gandhiji was bent upon putting up with as much inconvenience as possible, if thereby he could somehow gain access into the hearts of the Muslim peasantry of Noakhali."³⁹ Now, as negotiations for India's independence were taking place, Gandhi might well have thought that his teachings had been abandoned and that his trust in the efficacy of nonviolence was highly misplaced.

A month after Gandhi's arrival in Srirampur on November 20, 1946, however, Manu came to join him⁴⁰ and started sleeping in Gandhi's bed at once. Bose had taken to keeping a diary, and recorded the following entry for December 20: "When I reached Gandhiji's room even before 4 in the morning, I heard him talking to Manu in a low voice in his own bed, where she had gone to sleep at night."⁴¹ Bose reports Gandhi as telling Manu that "he personally felt that he had reached the end of one chapter in his old life and a new one was about to begin. He was thinking of a bold and original experiment, whose 'heat will be great.'"⁴² One can reasonably surmise that by the "bold and original experiment" Gandhi meant his recourse to testing himself as a brahmachari. Before long Parasuram had approached Gandhi to unburden his mind on "certain private matters," and Bose likewise discussed with Gandhi his relations with women. On December 31, Gandhi informed Bose that it was "indeed true that he

³⁹ Nirmal Kumar Bose, *My Days with Gandhi* (Calcutta: Nishana, 1953), p. 55. Gandhi himself released a statement to the press on November 20 in which he described himself as placed in the midst of "exaggeration and falsity," "unable to discover the truth," and faced with "terrible mutual distrust." To test his belief in satya and ahimsa, Gandhi added, "I am going to a village called Srirampur, cutting myself away from those who have been with me all these years, and who have made life easy for me." See *CWMG* 86: 138.

⁴⁰ Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, p. 113.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

permitted women workers to use his bed, this being undertaken as a spiritual experiment at times." Even if there were

no trace of passion in him of which he was conscious, it was not unlikely that a residue might be left over, and that would make trouble for the girls who took part in his experiment. He had asked them [the girls] if, even unconsciously, he had been responsible for evoking the least shade of evil sentiment in their heart. This 'experiment', as he called it, had been objected to by distinguished co-workers like Narahari (Parekh) and Kishorelal (Mashruwala); and one of the grounds of their complaint had been based on the possible repercussions which the example of a responsible leader like him might have upon other people.⁴³

As this excerpt from Bose's diary shows, a number of Gandhi's associates were unhappy with his 'experiment', and expressed their view that someone in Gandhi's position should have shown a keener sense of moral responsibility. Gandhi's stenographer, Parasuram, evidently found it impossible to stay any longer with him, for on January 2 Gandhi wrote a brief reply to what must have been a very lengthy letter: "I have read your letter with great care. I began it at 3 a.m.; finished reading it at 4 a.m. It contains half truths which are dangerous." While complimenting him on his "frankness and boldness," Gandhi averred that Parasuram had wronged him and the girls by suppressing his opinions for so long; and as there was a "conflict of ideals," Gandhi would not prevent him from exercising his wish to be relieved of his responsibilities. In keeping with his view that the practice of nonviolence was in no manner compatible with secrecy, Gandhi told Parasuram that he was "at liberty to publish whatever wrong you have noticed in me and my surroundings."⁴⁴ The same day, Gandhi dictated another letter to Mirabehn, who appears to have sent him an anxious query, adumbrating the spiritual meaning and context of his experiment. "Everything depends," he told Mira, "upon one's purity in thought, word and deed, using the word 'purity' in its widest sense. Then there may be no cause for even so much as a headache. Only get hold of this fundamental fact." Gandhi described his objective as wanting to "empty" himself "utterly," and thus achieve the condition whereby God would then "possess" him. In the most telling passage, Gandhi wrote: "Then I know that everything will come true but it is a serious question when I shall have reduced myself to zero. Think of 'I' and 'O' in juxtaposition and you have the whole problem of life in two signs."⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., p. 134.

⁴⁴ CWMG 86: 299–300; also published in Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, pp. 135–6.

⁴⁵ CWMG 86: 314.

Parasuram left him, Gandhi wrote to a friend, because “he did not believe in my ideals. . . . The immediate cause I think was that Manu shared the same bed with me.”⁴⁶ While recognizing that Manu was like a granddaughter to Gandhi, and that their relationship was nothing but innocent, Parasuram thought that the impropriety of the action lay in that it constituted a bad example for other men, who were without Gandhi’s purity, nobility of purpose, and spirituality of discipline. His departure did not prevent “fresh objections” from pouring in, and now some of Gandhi’s closest and most respected associates stepped up their criticism.⁴⁷ Kishorelal Mashruwala, who was then editing Gandhi’s weekly magazine, *Harijan*, relinquished charge, and Gandhi acknowledged, “[His] agony is difficult to bear. He is so upset that he is on the verge of breaking down.”⁴⁸ Gandhi wondered whether the women at his ashram in Sevagram were “suffering,” but in Noakhali he was unable to see any signs of the women having been affected. As he admitted, “Maybe that prevents me from feeling the full impact of people’s reactions.” Yet his own resolve had become “firmer than ever,” for that which required hedges, he was to write to his disciple and fellow brahmachari Vinoba Bhave, could not be “true brahmacharya.”⁴⁹

Nonetheless, over the course of the next two months, Gandhi entered into a conversation with many of his friends and relatives over the issue of his experiment and in a characteristic vein apprised the audiences at his prayer meetings of the fact that, at his behest, his granddaughter was sharing his bed with him. On the evening of February 1, 1947, at the village of Amishapara, he referred to the “small-talks, whispers and innuendoes” of which he had become aware. Saying that he did not wish “his most innocent acts to be misunderstood and misrepresented,” he averted to the Prophet’s saying that he wanted not those eunuchs in his service who had become so by an act of operation, but those who became such by prayer to God. Gandhi described this as his aspiration: “It was in the spirit of God’s eunuch that he had approached what he considered was his duty. It was an integral part of the *yajna* he was performing and he invited them to bless the effort. He knew that his action had excited criticism even among his friends. But a duty could not be shirked even for the sake of the most intimate friends.”⁵⁰ The same day, in a letter to his son Manilal, Gandhi described his ahimsa, or belief in nonviolence, as “being severely tested” and pleaded with him to remain indifferent to the public criticism of Gandhi’s actions: “Do not let the fact of Manu sleeping with me per-

⁴⁶ Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, p. 136.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴⁸ Gandhi, letter to Vinoba Bhave, February 10, 1947, in *CWMG* 86: 452.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *CWMG* 86: 420; see also Pyarelal, *The Last Phase*, Vol. I, Book II, pp. 219–20; Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, p. 154; *Harijan*, February 23, 1947.

turb you. I believe that it is God who has prompted me to take that step. If, however, you cannot understand, do not get upset and bear with me.”⁵¹ In the meantime, Gandhi continued with his experiment, and it is only as an unexpected sequel to a conversation on February 25, 1947, between Gandhi and Amritlal Thakkar, a very prominent Indian social reformer whose advice Gandhi often sought, that Manu ceased to go to bed with Gandhi. Thakkar appears to have convinced Manu that, while he did not doubt her “perfectly innocent and undisturbed sleep” as she lay besides Gandhi, it would be prudent to give up the experiment. Manu consented to Thakkar’s request, provided Gandhi agreed, and with the understanding that in doing so, “she had renounced nothing, surrendered not an iota. The concession was only to the feelings and sentiments of those who could not understand his (Gandhiji’s) stand and might need time for new ideas to sink into their minds.”⁵² Thereafter, Gandhi appears to have suspended his experiment, and though Manu and Abha would continue to be by his side for the remainder of his life, being his constant companions and serving as his ‘walking sticks’,⁵³ it is possible that he never went to bed with either of them again, or indeed with any other woman.

III: CONTINENCE AND THE BLOT OF LUST

Gandhi’s experiment in “sexual celibacy” or “celibate sexuality” paves the way, as I shall argue, for an enhanced understanding of his relations with women, his simultaneous reliance on, and defiance of, Indian traditions of sexuality and sexual potency, his advocacy of androgyny, and his articulation of the relationship of nonviolence to sexual conduct. Though it would be wholly erroneous to speak of the sexlessness of Gandhi, who appeared to many of his friends, associates, and visitors as possessed of a “strong sexuality,”⁵⁴ it is quite clear that he sought to cultivate the ideal of brahmacharya, and more specifically its component of celibacy—understood as voluntary abstinence from sex—while decrying the tendency, particularly pronounced among those with spiritual aspirations, to segregate the sexes. Gandhi evidently relished the company of women, and his

⁵¹ Letter to Manilal Gandhi, 1 February 1947, in *CWMG* 86: 415.

⁵² Pyarelal, *The Last Phase*, Vol. I, Book II, p. 226; *CWMG* 87: 14–16.

⁵³ Gandhi leaned, in the last years of his life, on the shoulders of Manu and Abha, who walked and stood on either side of him. Nathuram Godse, Gandhi’s assassin, pushed aside the two girls when he shot the Mahatma point-blank. Manu died in 1969, the centenary year of Gandhi’s birth. Abha is still alive: a recent, albeit short, account of her life with Gandhi and her activities is found in S. Theodore Baskaran, “Witness to history,” *The Hindu* (January 29, 1995, Sunday Magazine), p. II. I am grateful to my friend Henry Ranjeet of Kolam Travels, Madras, for bringing this article to my attention.

⁵⁴ Shirer, *Gandhi*, p. 230.

life and writings are a striking testimony to his emphatic willingness to reject varying standards of sexual mores for men and women and to persuade women to give up false standards of modesty which ironically undermined the true capacities of feminine power. Gandhi's brahmacharya experiment also enables us to pose some questions, which have been most inadequately addressed, about Gandhi's renunciation of power, his understanding of the nature of political power in the twentieth century, and his view that the ontology of the female is superior to that of the male.

"The core of the Gandhian teaching," wrote T. K. Mahadevan in a seminal piece on Gandhi's political philosophy, "consists of one piece—and no other. It is truth."⁵⁵ The primacy of satya, or truth, in Gandhi's thinking is widely accepted, and Mahadevan was surely right in pointing to the folly of ascribing greater interpretive importance to ahimsa, or non-violence. Gandhi is, in the popular conception, the Prophet of Nonviolence, and it is the various nonviolent campaigns which he waged in the struggle to free India from British rule that have won him a place in the popular imagination. But Gandhi himself termed his movement of non-violent resistance satyagraha, the force of truth, and as Mahadevan has so persuasively argued, he can be located within an Indian tradition which has accorded an extraordinarily privileged place to the quest for truth. "He is a satyagrahi," Gandhi was to say, "who has resolved to practice nothing but truth, and such a one will know the right way every time."⁵⁶ Though the cardinal principle in Gandhi's thought may well be satya, it is nonetheless revealing that Mahadevan should not have considered the place of brahmacharya, alongside satya and ahimsa, in Gandhi's conception of the ethical and political life. To a very large extent, his views on sexuality and brahmacharya have been an embarrassment to his admirers, while provoking outrage among his detractors. "I cannot imagine a thing as ugly as the intercourse of man and woman,"⁵⁷ averred Gandhi with scarcely a trace of any misgiving, and such frequently voiced sentiments, though less harshly expressed in his later years, were not calculated to earn him the goodwill of those who took a more 'modern' and 'healthy' view of sex. Having taken the vow of brahmacharya, which is commonly understood as abstinence from sex, Gandhi counseled others to become celibate as well; moreover, celibacy was to be observed, not merely by the young and the unmarried, but also by married couples. Though sexual intercourse outside marriage was unpardonable, even within marriage it had no place, in Gandhi's view, except as a regrettably unavoidable means to

⁵⁵T. K. Mahadevan, "An Approach to the Study of Gandhi," in *Gandhi, Theory and Practice*, ed. S. C. Biswas (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1969), p. 46.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 49, citing a letter by Gandhi, June 9, 1914.

⁵⁷*CWMG* 23: 102.

create progeny. The observance of celibacy among the unmarried was scarcely a matter for congratulation, for Gandhi held that the true meaning of celibacy could only be realized within a marriage. The institution of marriage provided a legal sanction to the sexual intercourse of man and woman, husband and wife, and celibacy could only be constituted as a worthy sacrifice when sexual intercourse, though construed as a natural right and a pleasure in which indulgence could legitimately be sought, was forsaken. Brahmacharya commanded married people to behave as though they were unmarried.⁵⁸

While some of Gandhi's associates took heart in his teachings and emulated their leader, the greater number of men and women who worked with him considered his views, in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, "unnatural and shocking." Gandhi "has gone to the extreme limit of his argument," Nehru added prosaically, "and does not recognize the validity or necessity of the sexual act at any time except for the sake of children; he refuses to recognize any natural sex attraction between man and woman." Describing Gandhi as "absolutely wrong in this matter," Nehru thought it likely that his advice, if followed, could only lead to "frustration, inhibition, neurosis, and all manner of physical and nervous ills."⁵⁹ More recent assessments, scholarly and journalistic alike, adopt almost entirely the same argument: thus Bhikhu Parekh, critiquing Gandhi for subscribing to a "dualist ontology" that made him hold steadfast to the distinction between the "physical" and the "spiritual," finds Gandhi incapable of making a distinction between the sexual act involved in rape and the sexual act that takes place between loving spouses.⁶⁰ Gandhi's "ideas and preachments" on the subject of sex seemed to one of his most intense admirers to be "outlandish and almost inhuman," and Nehru appears to have encapsulated a fairly common view that Gandhi was "obsessed" with sex.⁶¹

Insofar as Gandhi's espousal of brahmacharya has been taken seriously, then, it is deemed to be nothing more than a zealous advocacy of celibacy,

⁵⁸ Gandhi, *Law of Continence*, p. 55.

⁵⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *Toward Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), pp. 316–17.

⁶⁰ Bhikhu Parekh, "Gandhi's Theory of Non-violence: His Reply to the Terrorists," in *Terrorism, Ideology and Revolution*, ed. Noel O'Sullivan (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), pp. 193–94. This is also the opinion of Gandhi's respected biographer Geoffrey Ashe, who attributes Gandhi's shortcomings on the subject of sex to the inability of Hindus through the centuries to strike a "balance." Gandhi "never grasped," says Ashe, "that a sexual companionship might be ennobling and generous. Myopia in this quarter was his tragic flaw, all the more tragic because he was free from vulgar prudery." Ashe views Gandhi's position on sex, having in it the "shadow of something pallid and life-denying," as unfortunate, more particularly as it obfuscates his otherwise extraordinary insights into human nature (*Gandhi*, pp. 181–82).

⁶¹ Shirer, *Gandhi*, p. 119; Nehru, *Toward Freedom*, p. 317.

and Gandhi's insistence on recommending celibacy even to married couples is construed as evidence of his irrational and almost monstrously insensitive view of "human nature." The most generally accepted interpretation of Gandhi's acute difficulties with sex and his refusal to recognize any "legitimate" sexual desire traces the origins of Gandhi's views to a calamitous incident that took place in the early years of his marriage.⁶² As recounted by Gandhi himself, he was sixteen years old, and his father was bedridden, indeed on the verge of death. Gandhi was one of his father's principal attendants, and every night he massaged his legs, gave him medication, and ministered to all his needs. "I loved to do this service," Gandhi wrote, and throughout his life he was to retain this extraordinary capacity for nursing sick people and animals to health: long before men were challenged to demonstrate their feminist credentials by showing themselves capable of nurturing and caring, Gandhi was an avid male nurse and feminine healer. One evening as he was nursing his father, Gandhi was consumed by lust for Kasturba. Though she was pregnant, Gandhi could not contain himself and left his father's side to consummate his desire—as he adds, "that too at a time when religion, medical science and commonsense alike forbade sexual intercourse." Gandhi had not been with Kasturba, rudely awakened from her sleep, for more than "five or six minutes" when a servant announced that Gandhi's father was dead. Had not "animal passion" blinded him, Gandhi wrote, he would have been by his father's side in the last moments of his life: he should have been rendering his father "wakeful service," not indulging in "carnal desire." The "shame" of his desire was not to be forgotten, and in his autobiography of 1927, Gandhi characterized it as

a blot I have never been able to efface or forget, and I have always thought that, although my devotion to my parents knew no bounds and I would have given up anything for it, yet it was weighed and found unpardonably wanting because my mind was at the same moment in the grip of lust. I have therefore always regarded myself as a lustful, though a faithful, husband. It took me long to get free from the shackles of lust, and I had to pass through many ordeals before I could overcome it.⁶³

The child born of that lustful moment, moreover, was to die within a few days of birth. "Nothing else could be expected": the laws of compensa-

⁶² Shirer, *Gandhi*, p. 232; Kakar, *Intimate Relations*, pp. 86–91; see also Lynne Shivers, "An Open Letter to Gandhi," in Pam McAllister, ed., *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1982): 181–94, esp. pp. 189–91.

⁶³ M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. from Gujarati by Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1927; reprint of 2d ed., 1959), Book I, Ch. IX, "My Father's Death and My Double Shame," pp. 21–3. Since there are many editions of the autobiography, references to book and chapter are provided.

tion cannot be arrested, and Gandhi added for good measure: "Let all those who are married be warned by my example."

Though Gandhi's own assessment of the ineffaceable shame left by his "carnal desire" is not to be doubted, it behooves the imagination to suppose, as might a psychoanalyst, that Gandhi's view of brahmacharya was shaped primarily by an incident from his adolescent years, and that henceforth he was to construe the sexual life as distasteful, merely a form of gross material existence. Gandhi had, almost from the outset, found the narrow and widely accepted conception of brahmacharya as the abstinence from sexual intercourse woefully inadequate, and he did not think that the practitioner of brahmacharya could be judged by the moral conventions of the day. No one who desired but merely failed to realize the desire could be considered celibate: "So long as the desire for intercourse is there, one cannot be said to have attained brahmacharya. Only he who has burned away the sexual desire in its entirety may be said to have attained control over his sexual organ."⁶⁴ As Gandhi was to stress repeatedly over the course of many years, "Brahmacharya means control of the senses in thought, word and deed."⁶⁵ Brahmacharya did not mean that one could not touch a woman "in any circumstances whatsoever." But, in so touching a woman, it was not implied "that one's state of mind should be as calm and unruffled during such contact as when one touches, say, a piece of paper. . . . He [the brahmachari] has to be as free from excitement in case of contact with the fairest damsel on earth, as in contact with a dead body."⁶⁶ Gandhi had so averred in 1926, but this formulation late in his life must have appeared to him as somewhat tentative, for in a letter to his female friend Amrit Kaur on March 18, 1947, the capacity to partake of the private company of naked women was to constitute an integral part of his definition of brahmacharya. Gandhi now described the "meaning of brahmacharya" thus: "One who never has any lustful intention, who by constant attendance upon God has become proof against conscious or unconscious emissions, who is capable of lying naked with naked women, however beautiful they may be, without being in any manner whatsoever sexually excited." The richer meaning of being able to lie "naked with naked women" without having any sexual thoughts would then flower into the more sublime teachings of the scriptures: a "full brahmachari," Gandhi noted, is "incapable of lying, incapable of intending or doing harm to a single man or woman in the whole world," and such a person remained "free from anger and malice and detached in the sense of the Bhagavadgita." Gandhi's definition of brahmacharya in an instant takes us away from celibacy towards self-realization, and a brahmachari correspondingly is described as a "person who is making daily and

⁶⁴M. K. Gandhi, *Key to Health* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1948), p. 44.

⁶⁵Gandhi, *Law of Continence*, p. 45; cf. also p. 21, 53, 56, 58, *passim*.

⁶⁶Navajivan, February 26, 1925, in Gandhi, *The Law of Continence*, p. 25.

steady progress towards God and whose every act is done in pursuance of that end and no other.”⁶⁷

No less important than that dark night of his youth when Gandhi abandoned his dying father for his pregnant wife (and so, on a different reading, embraced life over death) was an experience from the eve of his life where he was awakened to the possibility that his spiritual discipline was seriously wanting. One evening in 1936, as he was recovering from a physical breakdown induced by long hours of work, Gandhi was given a jolting and painful reminder of the inadequacy of his brahmacharya, which he said he had been “trying to follow . . . consciously and deliberately since 1899.” He dreamt of a woman and, as a consequence, experienced an erection which caused a seminal emission. There had been only “one lapse” previously in his “thirty-six years’ constant and conscious effort” to remain pure in thought and deed, he wrote, and only on that occasion had he experienced such “mental disturbance.” He felt utterly “disgusted” with himself, and at once acquainted his “attendants and the medical friends” with his “condition.” But this was a matter where others could only be sympathetic listeners: “They could give no help. I expected none.” Nonetheless, he adds, “the confession of the wretched experience brought relief to me. I felt as if a great load had been raised from over me. It enabled me to pull myself together before any harm could be done.”⁶⁸ Gandhi doubtless took the view, not uncommon in India, that a true brahmachari experiences no sexual passion even in the dream state.⁶⁹ Towards the end of the year, he was to advert to this matter again in his weekly newspaper, *Harijan*, this time in more characteristically ominous and even apocalyptic tones. He says that his “darkest hour” came to him when, in his sleep, he felt as though he wanted to experience the body of a woman. That was not pleasing to him, for

a man who had tried to rise superior to the instinct for nearly forty years was bound to be intensely pained when he had this frightful experience. I ultimately conquered the feeling, but I was face to face with the blackest moment of my life and if I had succumbed to it, it would have been my absolute undoing.⁷⁰

The “path of self-purification,” as Gandhi would readily concede in his autobiography, is “hard and steep,” and from his own standpoint he had

⁶⁷ Letter to Amrit Kaur, March 18, 1947, in *CWMG* 87: 107–8.

⁶⁸ Gandhi, “Nothing Without Grace,” *Harijan* (February 29, 1936), reprinted in Tendulkar, *Mahatma* 4: 52. The previous “lapse” was in 1924: see *CWMG* 40: 312.

⁶⁹ *CWMG* 62: 247; cf. Sarasi Lal Sarkar, “A Study of the Psychology of Sexual Abstinence from the Dreams of an Ascetic,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 24 (1943): 170–75 at p. 170.

⁷⁰ *Harijan* (December 26, 1936), cited by Shirer, *Gandhi*, p. 233, and in part by Ashe, *Gandhi*, p. 329.

faltered once too often. His political triumphs seemed rather easier than the conquest of “subtle passions,” and he acknowledged that since his return to India he had had “experiences of the dormant passions lying hidden within [him].”⁷¹ In May 1924, Gandhi had reported having had “bad dreams,”⁷² but the intensity of his wet dream of 1936, a recurrence of which on April 14, 1938, once again left him shocked and repulsed,⁷³ gave him other reasons for alarm. Many commentators hold that Gandhi ascribed to the view, said to be especially prominent in India, that a man must preserve his ‘vital fluid’, most particularly because, as common wisdom had it, semen is not easily formed: indeed, as the anthropologist Morris Carstairs framed the widely-held belief of his informants, “it takes forty days, and forty drops of blood to make one drop of semen.”⁷⁴ The “ascetic longings of Yogis who seek to conquer and transform” sexuality “into spiritual power,” opines Kakar, “has been a perennial preoccupation of Hindu culture,”⁷⁵ and Erik Erikson thought that Gandhi’s conduct late in his life could be reasonably rooted in a “deeply Indian preconception with seminal continence and mental potency.”⁷⁶ Writing on sexual matters for his newspaper, *Harijan*, in 1936, pursuant to his own nocturnal troubles, Gandhi himself adverted to a discussion of the “vital fluid,” insisting that any expenditure of it other than for the purpose of procreation constituted a “criminal waste,” the “consequent excitement caused to man and woman” being an “equally criminal waste of precious energy.” “It is now easy to understand,” wrote Gandhi, “why the scientists of old have put such great value upon the vital fluid and why they have insisted upon its strong transmutation into the highest form of energy for the benefit of society.”⁷⁷ “If a man controls his semen except on the occasion of such

⁷¹ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, “Farewell,” p. 371.

⁷² Ashe, *Gandhi*, p. 254.

⁷³ CWMG 62: 30.

⁷⁴ Morris Carstairs, *The Twice-Born* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968), p. 83; see also Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989), pp. 177–8. The fear of semen loss is described by some scholars as being particularly prominent in India: see Joel Paris, “Dhat: The Semen Loss Anxiety Syndrome,” *Transcultural Psychiatric Research Review* 29, no. 2 (1992): 109–118, and A. Bottero, “Consumption by semen loss in India and elsewhere,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 15 (1991): 303–20. An Indian psychiatrist reports a belief held by many of his patients that 40 meals produce one drop of blood, 40 drops of blood are required to produce one drop of bone marrow, and 40 drops of bone marrow yield one drop of semen: consequently, it requires no great imagination to surmise why the preservation of semen should so forcefully be insisted upon! See S. Akhtar, “Four culture-bound psychiatric syndromes in India,” *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 34 (1988): 70–74.

⁷⁵ Kakar, *Intimate Relations*, p. 118.

⁷⁶ Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1969), p. 404.

⁷⁷ Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, 4:59.

purposeful cohabitation,” Gandhi wrote elsewhere, “he is as good as an avowed brahmachari,” but for “an avowed brahmachari” of his aspirations no such indulgence was permitted.⁷⁸ To this one can add the observation, whose more extended and ripe meanings cannot here be explored, that in both mythological and folkloric Indian traditions, the semen retained by a yogi is thought to turn into milk, and such a yogi is said to develop breasts. “The yogi thus becomes,” writes Wendy O’Flaherty, “like a productive female when he reverses the flow of his male fluids.”⁷⁹

In various Indian schools of spiritual ecstasy encapsulated under the term ‘tantrism’, or in otherwise obscure religious cults, the retention of semen is considered vital as well, and one scholar has argued that Gandhi commenced his experiment “only a few years” after he had read Sir John Woodruffe’s writings on the tantra tradition.⁸⁰ In all other respects, however, Gandhi’s doctrines bear little resemblance to the theories of tantra, and he would have unequivocally condemned tantra’s advocacy of passionless sexual intercourse as a means of attaining spiritual prowess. Gandhi was nothing if not passionate, but sexual intercourse was not his chosen medium to express his eroticism. There are also evident similarities between Gandhi’s ideas and Freud’s theory of sublimation, and such anxiety about the loss of semen as has been recorded by psychologists and social workers, however pronounced in India,⁸¹ is commonly experienced in other cultures as well. More to the point, the belief that loss of semen weakens the male, depriving him of the energy required to sustain the family and uplift society, was widely prevalent in nineteenth-century Britain, and some scholars have been inclined to the view that Gandhi’s stance on sexuality may also have been shaped by what purport to be Victorian norms,⁸² and most certainly by some loathing for the body. Thus some feminists, while admiring Gandhi’s efforts to bring women into the political life of the

⁷⁸ CWMG 62: 247.

⁷⁹ Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 44.

⁸⁰ Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*, p. 200. Gandhi’s secretary in later years, Pyarelal, says that Gandhi recommended the study of tantra: *Gandhi, The Last Phase*, 2 vols. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1956), 1: 589. This appears to be corroborated by Gandhi’s remarks to his interlocutors on March 15–16, 1947, that he had read works on tantra (CWMG 87: 91).

⁸¹ Cf. James W. Edwards, “Semen Anxiety in South Asian Cultures: Cultural and Transcultural Significance,” *Medical Anthropology* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 51–68.

⁸² For a brief comparison between Victorian and Gandhian ideas of sexuality, see Pat Caplan, “Celibacy as a solution? Mahatma Gandhi and Brahmacharya,” in Pat Caplan, ed., *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality* (London: Tavistock, 1987): 271–95 at pp. 278–9, 286–7. It is no longer widely accepted that there was nothing much more to Victorian sexual mores than repression, and Foucault’s hypothesis that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries share an uncommon concern for sex has been influential. See Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

country, have thought that Gandhi's relations with Kasturba may have been informed by this disgust for the body, and that had he shared a more equitable life with Kasturba, he would have learned from her that "our bodies are gifts, not hindrances."⁸³

IV: GANDHI'S VAGINA: A POLITICAL ACCOUNT OF SEMEN

Whatever Gandhi's own pronouncements about the imperative to preserve the "vital fluid," any interpretation which fixates on this aspect of his thought, or on what is taken to be his troubled view of the body as an obstacle to spiritual enlightenment, does not offer a compelling insight into the more striking relationship between Gandhi's advocacy of brahmacharya, his political life, and his espousal of femininity. For even as enthusiastic and careful a student of Gandhi's life as the Indian political scientist Bhikhu Parekh, the whole matter of Gandhi's "bizarre" sexual life can virtually be dismissed with the observation that his "theory of sexuality rested on a primitive approach to semen." Working almost entirely within a positivist framework, Parekh has nothing much to say except that Gandhi's ideas about the "production and accumulation" of semen were "untrue," and that the old man was "wrong" to "mystify" semen by ascribing it with "life-giving power," just as he was "wrong to associate it with energy"; indeed, "the very concept of *ojas* or spiritual energy is largely mystical and almost certainly false." Yet, as is amply clear, there are innumerable mystical traditions and sexual practices around the world for which there is no "evidence" or "basis in facts,"⁸⁴ and this ought not to compel us to confine our explorations to the most common forms of heterosexual love. Likewise, the supposition that to Gandhi his own body was a "foreign" object, for which any person of intense spiritual inclination could have nothing but fear and loathing, can scarcely be reconciled with everything else we know about Gandhi's relation to his body. Few men could have been as finely attuned to the rhythms of their bodies as Gandhi was with his, and accounts of ashram life suggest his remarkable ease with his nakedness. Far from avoiding all contact with women, as we have previously observed, Gandhi reveled in their company, and it is preeminently through the sense of touch that he consorted with the men and women around him. He would dictate letters to his secretaries or conduct other important business while his body was being massaged, and he thought nothing of putting his arms around the shoulders of friends, associates, and even visitors. He kept a careful record of the food he ingested, and his bowel movements were of as much concern

⁸³ Judy Costello, "Beyond Gandhi: An American Feminist's Approach to Nonviolence," in McAllister, ed., *Reweaving the Web of Life*, p. 179.

⁸⁴ Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*, p. 182.

to him as were the negotiations for Indian independence. Gandhi's attentiveness to matters of sexuality, hygiene, nutrition, and the presentation of the body was his way of injecting the body into the body politic, and nowhere does he show the Brahmin's disdain for the polluting body or the modesty regarding one's own body which he decried in the Indian female

If the physiological account of semen loss has little to commend to our attention, can we profitably render what we might call a political account of semen? In his next life, Gandhi had often said, he would like to be reborn as an untouchable, the most exploited element of Indian society, and numerous times he gave the impression of wanting to be reborn as a woman. In either case, one would be positioned to gain a more complex phenomenological understanding of the nature of oppression. In his arduous quest for mastery over his sexual desires, Gandhi appears to have found masculinity a nearly insuperable obstacle, and he may have thought that women had, in this respect, an enviable advantage. It is almost plausible to speak of Gandhi's vulva envy. Among Indian renunciates, as the psychoanalytical investigations of one Indian brahmachari's dreams suggest, the idea is prevalent that "as long as the penis remains, one cannot be a true ascetic."⁸⁵ It is not sufficient to curtail the activities of the penis or to prevent it from achieving a state of excitability; it must be made to disappear within the body. When the sexual passions are subdued, and the mind is prepared by means of a rigorous discipline for the exercise of abstinence, the penis begins to shrink; gradually it becomes inverted and "draws itself within the body in such a way that its very root enters into the body. By this process its appearance becomes that of a female sexual organ, while really it is the disappearance of the male sexual organ from outside the body."⁸⁶ In their own perverse way, Gandhi's militant detractors—such as his assassin and members of the Hindu paramilitary organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), who held him responsible for India's partition and the inability of the Indian government to protect Hindus even in the nation's capital—may have been signifying their fear that Gandhi was not quite a man when they threw at him the epithet *hijra*, which in common parlance stands for a castrated or intersexed man who takes on the identity of a woman.⁸⁷

Though it cannot be known how the women who partook in Gandhi's experiment "experienced" his body, the preponderant portion of the biographical and anecdotal literature suggests that the women who were intimate with him may have ceased to think of Gandhi as a man. Manu's aptly named book, *Bapu—My Mother*, points to that as much as the frequently

⁸⁵ Sarkar, "A Study of the Psychology of Sexual Abstinence," p. 174.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁸⁷ See Vinay Lal, "Hijras in India: Gender-Bending and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality," *Suitcase* 3, nos. 1–2 (1998): 60–73.

noted observation that women felt entirely at ease in his company. Consequently, when Manu, Abha, and Sushila Nayyar agreed at various times to share Gandhi's bed with him, there is no reason to suppose that they felt they were lying besides anyone other than a woman, sharing as Indian women commonly do a bed amongst themselves. No one so far has ventured to suggest that Gandhi was in this manner another Ramakrishna,⁸⁸ an unlettered Indian saint whose androgyny was striking, but this may only be from a reluctance to concede that someone who immersed himself as much in politics as did Gandhi could have been so suffused with spirituality. Ramakrishna counseled men that they were to "assume the attitude of women" if they wished to conquer passion.⁸⁹ It is said of Ramakrishna that from his childhood he could take on, whenever he willed, the characteristics of the female sex. He was allowed in the company of women not merely because he could readily assume a woman's voice: as one of his women devotees was later to write, "To us [women devotees] Sri Ramakrishna did not usually seem to be a man at all. It seemed that he was one of us. That is why we did not feel the slightest shyness or hesitation in his presence, as we normally do in the presence of men."⁹⁰ When he assumed the *madhura bhava*, or the position of the lover as she approaches God, Ramakrishna would dress in feminine attire and imitate feminine behavior: he would be the Radha to Krishna. Witnesses furnished accounts of Ramakrishna "menstruating": he would sit in samadhi, absorbed in the divine, and blood would ooze from the pores of his skin.⁹¹ "As soon as he was dressed as a woman," writes his biographer Christopher Isherwood,

Ramakrishna's mind became more and more deeply merged in the mood of womanhood. Those who saw him were amazed at the physical transformation which seemed to take place; walk, speech, gestures, even the smallest actions were perfectly in character. Sometimes, Ramakrishna would go to the house in the Janbazar district which had belonged to Rani Rasmani and live there with the women of the family, as a woman. They found it almost impossible to remember that he was not really one of themselves.⁹²

⁸⁸ Of all his biographers, Ashe comes closest to viewing Gandhi as akin to Ramakrishna, though he ultimately disavows any such comparison: see his *Gandhi*, pp. 130–32, 260–63.

⁸⁹ Mahendranath Gupta [known as "M"], *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda, 2 vols. (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1980), 2: 595.

⁹⁰ Swami Chetanananda, ed. and trans., *Ramakrishna as We Saw Him* (St. Louis: Vedanta Society, 1990), pp. 357–9.

⁹¹ Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. Swami Jagadananda (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1952), pp. 233–4.

⁹² Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (1950; reprint ed., New York: Simon and Schuster/Touchstone Books, 1965).

Gandhi may not have been similarly merged into womanhood, but it is in this spirit that we should take his oft-expressed remark that he was “half a woman”; and if the testimony of his women associates and friends is any reliable guide, they expressed themselves before him as they would before other women. Moreover, if Manu and other female devotees had placed themselves under his tutelage, Gandhi might also have thought of his obligation to train them as brahmacharis, to bring them to that point of concentrated awareness where they ceased to think of themselves as inhabiting the body of a woman.⁹³

In his aspiration to embody femininity, then, Gandhi may have been relying upon familiar idioms of Indian thought, though it is instructive how far he departed from Indian textual and customary traditions as well. He roundly ignored those traditions which enjoined upon their male followers to keep at a physical remove from women. “A brahmachari, it is said,” wrote Gandhi in 1938, “should never see, much less touch a woman. Doubtless a brahmachari may not think of, speak of, see or touch a woman lustfully. But the prohibition one finds in books on brahmacharya is mentioned without the important adverb,” that is “lustfully.” Recognizing that observance of brahmacharya was difficult “when one freely mixes with the world,” Gandhi nonetheless added that “it is not of much value if it is attainable only by retirement from the world.”⁹⁴ In all domains of life, Gandhi rejected the segregation of the sexes, even preferring (unusual for Indians of his time) coeducational schools to single-sex schools. He thought that Indian women’s refusal to be attended by male gynecologists or surgeons originated from a false sense of shame, though he recognized that there were “unscrupulous doctor[s]” who took advantage of their patients.⁹⁵ Writing to the young Muslim daughter of a friend on the subject of an enema, in whose efficacy Gandhi reposed much trust, he put the matter quite candidly: “Whether the person who helps you with the enema is a man or a woman, it should make, and I am sure it will make, no difference to you at all.”⁹⁶ To a brahmachari, in the event, this could be no important consideration.

Most tellingly, though, Gandhi appears to have found some sustenance in certain strands of Vaishnava theology and literature. During the course of one long exposition of his views on brahmacharya, Gandhi had remarked: “When the Gopis were stripped of their clothes by Krishna, the legend says, they showed no sign of embarrassment or sex-consciousness

⁹³ *Harijan*, November 14, 1936; C. Shukla, ed., *Gandhi As We Know Him* (Bombay: Vora and Company, 1945), p. 47.

⁹⁴ CWMG, 67:194–5.

⁹⁵ Joshi, *Gandhi on Women*, pp. 209–11.

⁹⁶ Letter to Amtul Salaam, January 2, 1947, in CWMG 86: 300.

but stood before the Lord in rapt devotion.”⁹⁷ Subsequent to disclosures about his experiment, this story was to find its way into his public speeches. The reference here is to a famous scene in Krishna's life where the gopis or cowherdesses, having stripped at the banks of the river Yamuna to take a bath, are about to emerge from the water when they find their garments missing. When they look around them, they find Krishna dangling them from a tree upon which he is perched; the gopis implore him to return their clothes, while Krishna reminds them that since each of them had set their hearts on him, uttering a prayer that would grant them Krishna as their husband, they should be prepared to walk into his presence without a trace of shame.

The *Bhagavata Purana*, the preeminent text of Krishna devotion, states explicitly that “bashfully they [the gopis] looked at each other and smiled, but none came out of the water.” When eventually they do so, notwithstanding their most earnest pleas that they should be spared this indignity, they cover “their private parts with the palms of their hands.” But Krishna is not so easily appeased: since in entering the water in a naked state after taking a religious vow the gopis had committed a transgression, they were to expiate their sin by raising their folded palms to their heads and prostrating themselves on the ground. Each gopi attempts to comply with Krishna's injunction by raising one of her hands, while her other hand continues to cover her genitals; this only provokes Krishna to the observation that such a mode of rendering obeisance constitutes a gross violation of the ethics of worship, and that the Lord cannot be satisfied other than by a complete fulfillment of religious observances. In this manner the gopis, now aware of the nature of their transgression, submit in a state of complete nudity, and their clothes are returned to them.⁹⁸ Their obeisance has been rendered, and now they can reasonably await its fulfillment: it is also characteristic of Krishna that, recognizing the longing each gopi has for him, the longing that each one of us has to be merged into the absolute and to receive the favors of the divine lover, he exercises the power within him to satisfy each gopi. Thus, in the received versions of the Krishna legend, he can be with nearly 20,000 gopis simultaneously, though each lives in the illusory state that she alone is the object of his affections.⁹⁹ Yet this “satisfaction” has no necessary, or even any, referent to sexual intercourse: indeed, one of Krishna's myriad names is *Acyuta*, “the one whose

⁹⁷ Pyarelal, *The Last Phase*, 1: 224.

⁹⁸ Ganesh Vasudeo Tagare, trans. and ed., *The Bhagavata Purana* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978), Part IV, Book X, Chapter 22, pp. 1395–99.

⁹⁹ The amorousness and frivolity of Krishna do not sit easily with many modernizing Indians, obsessed as they are with demonstrating that Krishna, much like Muhammad or Christ, was a historical, rational, and somber figure. Typical of this profound unease is Asha

seed does not fall,” since once sexual orgasm has been achieved, the erotic play is over.¹⁰⁰ This interpretation is unequivocally echoed in a Hindi proverb, where it is said of Krishna, “*Solah sahasra nari phir bhi brahmachari*” [He has sixteen thousand women but still remains a celibate.] It is perhaps against this backdrop that we should view Gandhi’s comment to his disciple Vinoba Bhave: “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.”¹⁰¹

Whatever liberty Gandhi appears to have taken in suggesting that the gopis showed no embarrassment in appearing before Krishna in a state of nakedness, what is particularly illustrative is the manner in which Gandhi sought to deploy the trope of nakedness in the service of a philosophical and political conception of “truth.” Though no detailed thoughts can be entertained here over Gandhi’s sartorial politics, it is germane that over the course of a lifetime Gandhi came increasingly to shed clothes. In the early years of his youth, as a law student in Britain, he had endeavored to dress as an English gentleman, and it was not until he thrust himself into the struggle to procure Indians’ political rights in South Africa that he simplified his dress. It was around the time of the noncooperation movement of 1920–1922, by which time Gandhi had already initiated a daily regimen of spinning and also urged it upon the nation as part of a program of national rejuvenation, that he further shed his clothes, choosing to move around only in a simple loincloth, a shawl thrown over his chest during the winter months.¹⁰² This is the image with which he would henceforth be associated, captured perhaps nowhere better than in his remark to an English reporter in 1930, as he was questioned about whether he proposed to go dressed in this manner to have tea with His Royal Highness at Buckingham Palace, that the King-Emperor was wearing enough for both of them. In a similar vein, while taking note of Churchill’s insulting remark that the prospect of direct negotiations between the British

Goswami’s *Krnsa-Katha and Allied Matters* (Delhi: Y. R. Publications, 1994), where the author remarks that the Puranic and epic accounts of Krishna’s 16,108 wives ought to be discounted, since Krishna “surely could not have been so fickle and frivolous about his marriage which in fact is a very important social event in human life” (p. 174).

¹⁰⁰The temple-dancers of Orissa, the subject of a study by the anthropologist Frederique Marglin, offered her an extended account of why Krishna must not spill his seed: see “Types of sexual union and their implicit meanings,” in J. S. Hawley and D. M. Wulff, eds., *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982): 298–315 at pp. 306–7. The god Shiva, who is often represented as a yogi, likewise has the ability to hold an erection without spilling his seed, and indeed his erect phallus is symbolic not only of his power to impregnate but also of his chastity. See O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, esp. II.2.B.

¹⁰¹Gandhi to Vinoba Bhave, February 10, 1947, CWMG 86: 453.

¹⁰²Gandhi, “My Loin-Cloth,” *The Hindu* (15 October 1921), reprinted in CWMG, 21: 225–7.

government and a “half-naked seditious fakir of a type well known in the Orient” was too nauseating to be contemplated, Gandhi had expressed the hope that he might become completely naked.

V: NAKED BEFORE GOD: THE INFINITE PLAY OF SEXUALITY

Gandhi had set for himself the ambition to appear naked before God, which for him was nothing other than Truth, and consequently come face to face with the “Truth.” At this particular juncture, when India was almost on the verge of independence, he was tormented by the awareness that his teachings on ahimsa had been less successful than he had hoped. The tone of his statement released to the press on November 20, 1946, as he was about to proceed to the village of Srirampur in Noakhali district, reveals his deep foreboding: “I find myself in the midst of exaggeration and falsity. I am unable to discover the truth. . . . Truth and ahimsa by which I swear, and which have, to my knowledge, sustained me for sixty years, seem to fail to show the attributes I have ascribed to them.”¹⁰³ He had striven to maintain Hindu-Muslim harmony, even fasted (oftentimes with grave consequences to his health) whenever there had been a major recrudescence of communal violence, and no issue since the mid-1920s had occupied more of his attention; and yet, well more than twenty years after his attainment of Mahatmahood, he now seemed to have little control over the unfolding of events. This is scarcely to say that Gandhi believed that his Mahatmahood conferred on him powers which were rightfully his, or that his word should have had, as it apparently once did, the force of law. If his utterances no longer commanded obedience, that was a sure sign that his voice did not carry very far into the public sphere. However, everything in Gandhi’s own philosophical leanings, and most particularly his conception of truth, disposed him to the belief that the violence and untruth which pervaded the public domain were reflections of some profound shortcomings in his own practice of ahimsa and brahmacharya. Satyagraha implies that the individual carries within himself or herself the burden of social failings, and that one reads from social developments as from a mirror the history of one’s own thought and practices. “Ever since my coming to Noakhali,” Gandhi reported to Bapa Thakkar in 1947, in his endeavor to explain why he commenced upon his experiment, “I have been asking myself the question ‘What is it that is choking the action of my ahimsa? Why does not the spell work?’ May it not be because I have temporized in the matter of brahmacharya.”¹⁰⁴ If his teachings of ahimsa had failed to avert communal rioting, Gandhi was prone to think that there was something profoundly amiss in his own

¹⁰³ *CWMG* 86: 138.

¹⁰⁴ *CWMG* 87: 14.

practice of ahimsa. “There must be some serious flaw deep down in me which I am unable to discover,” he wrote, and again he added with insistent, even compulsive force: “There must be something terribly lacking in my ahimsa and faith which is responsible for all this.”¹⁰⁵

That “serious flaw” deep down inside him which he had “failed to discover” might have set Gandhi on the trajectory of the last great—albeit troubled—experiment of his life, but in this trajectory of reasoning there appears at first sight to be more than a faint trace of an almost furtive attempt to recoup the power that he had exercised with unrivaled authority for over two decades. While profoundly committed to the democratic ethos, to the point where he refused to distinguish between intellectual elites and common workers, much as he thought the labor of the hands to be at least as productive and worthy as the labor of the mind, Gandhi’s methods were nonetheless often autocratic. In 1939, for example, he had suffered an unprecedented defeat when his candidate for the presidency of the Congress received fewer votes than Subhas Chandra Bose, who was later to flee India and offer Germany and Japan the services of the Indian National Army. Not accustomed to having his wishes defied, Gandhi made it impossible for Bose to function as president and within a few months had procured his resignation. When he commenced his experiments in brahmacharya sometime after his release from jail in mid-1944, he had to make some effort to reestablish his preminent presence on the Indian political scene, and in the negotiations for independence he was only one of several leaders with whom the British parleyed; at the same time, witnessing the communal carnage—which would accelerate greatly in the last year before his death—his loss of moral authority must have struck him with even greater force. In consonance with Indian teachings, one of his biographers suggests, Gandhi was under the circumstances particularly prone to accept the view that his power to influence events would be enhanced if he could test himself as a brahmachari.¹⁰⁶ Stretching this argument yet further, it appears not unreasonable to conclude that, forsaking the position that Gandhi had advocated since his early days in South Africa that the ends never justify the means, he was even prepared to make the young women who idolized him the instrument of his quest for political power.

Any such interpretation, as I have throughout been endeavoring to argue, cannot really be sustained. That Gandhi would now resort to the vul-

¹⁰⁵ *CWMG* 86: 302. On January 10, 1947, Gandhi addressed his son Ramdas on the same subject, and after informing him of the experiment he had undertaken of sharing his bed with Manu, added: “I am still surrounded by darkness. I have no doubt whatever that it indicates a flaw somewhere in my method. Take it as though I had confined myself to this place [Noakhali] to detect that flaw. It must lie somewhere in my practice of ahimsa. Could it be that I am nurturing only weakness in the name of non-violence!” (*CWMG* 86: 335).

¹⁰⁶ Ashe, *Gandhi*, p. 377.

gar, not to mention reprehensible, notion that any means were permissible in order to enhance his political fortunes can scarcely be reconciled with anything we know of Gandhi's political philosophy, his decisive rejection of instrumental rationality, his practices of satyagraha, and—as even his critics concede—his willingness to endure the most dangerous risks to his own life in his resolve to bring the violence to an end. Alone among Indian leaders, Gandhi entirely repudiated the trappings of power and understood that in the visible sovereignty and display of power reside the seeds of its destruction. He was more attuned to the nature of power in the modern age than the politicians who more than fifty years after his death consider the number of security guards attached to them as the index of their power and prestige. By this yardstick, Gandhi, who refused protection even after an attempt on his life, was a mere commoner.¹⁰⁷ It is instructive that he never held office after having established a decisive moral authority over the Congress in 1920, and that from the mid-1920s onwards he was not even a member of the party over whose destiny he presided and which had been charged with liberating India from British rule. Gandhi was most certainly perturbed, indeed mortified, by the communal violence that had broken out, but this in no manner leads inescapably to the conclusion that unable to accept the loss of his influence, he was now prepared to abandon his convictions and the principles of satyagraha in the pursuit of his political ambitions. He had committed, in his own language, “Himalayan blunders” before,¹⁰⁸ most particularly during the 1920–1922 noncooperation movement which he had felt compelled to suspend when it had degenerated into violence, and his political difficulties from 1945 to 1947 can easily be overstated. Then, in 1922, he had faced with remarkable equanimity a prison term designed to prevent him from preaching sedition, and had so embraced a form of powerlessness that would have the curative and rejuvenative effect of launching him into the next stage of the struggle for India's spiritual, political, and social revival. In the last years of his life, Gandhi again seems to have been seized with the desire to be stripped clean, and such was his disdain for power that he was altogether prepared to face calumny and opprobrium. As a brahmachari, he had put limits upon himself with respect to “contacts with the opposite sex,” but these limits now struck him as unacceptable, as constraints placed upon his constant engagement with the truth.¹⁰⁹

On more than one occasion Gandhi had described his life's endeavor as nothing but a concerted effort to reduce himself to “zero.” This is the note

¹⁰⁷ For a more detailed discussion, the reader is referred to Vinay Lal, “The Security Fantasies of the Indian Nation-State: Black Cat Commandos, Gunmen, and Other Terrors,” *South Asia* 20, no. 2 (December 1997): 103–38.

¹⁰⁸ Payne, *Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 333.

¹⁰⁹ CWMG 67: 194–8.

on which he concludes his autobiography of the mid-1920s, and a year before his death he was to put the matter in similar terms in a letter to Mirabehn: "If I succeed in emptying myself utterly, God will possess me. Then I know that everything will come true but it is a serious question when I shall have reduced myself to zero. Think of 'T' and 'O' in juxtaposition and you have the whole problem of life in two signs."¹¹⁰ To empty oneself is not only to render oneself a vehicle for something else, to become capable of being possessed, but to lead life to the fullest. Gandhi's nakedness needed no adornment, and any adornment would have been an effrontery to his nakedness. Appearing naked before the world, Gandhi would yet scarcely have championed nudity: he had no "private parts," not even, despite his (near) androgyny, a penis-vagina. Having renounced sex, Gandhi had by no means abjured sexuality; quite to the contrary, he was to embrace it in the amplest measure. In the language of James Carse, Gandhi was an exponent of infinite rather than finite sexuality. Where players at the finite game of sexuality view persons as the expressions of sexuality, Gandhi was interested in sexuality as the expression of persons; and where finite players relate to the body, infinite players relate to the person in the body. "Finite sexuality is a form of theater in which the distance between persons is regularly reduced to zero," writes Carse with extraordinary prescience, "but in which neither touches the other." Gandhi had not the power of touch, for he was no miracle-maker, but he had the vision of touch: "Finite players play within boundaries," adds Carse, but "infinite players play with boundaries"; infinite players of sexuality play not *within* sexual boundaries, as do heterosexuals, bisexuals, lesbians, and homosexuals, but *with* sexual boundaries.¹¹¹ Gandhi, who abhorred sex, was yet the most consummate player at the game of sexuality.

¹¹⁰ CWMG 86: 314; *Autobiography*, p. 371: "Farewell."

¹¹¹ James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), pp. 12, 91–103.