
Father of the Nation

Although in much of his life and work Gandhi tried to maintain a series of dialogues, there were crucial areas in which his record in this respect was not a good one. This chapter examines one such area, that of his practice of patriarchy. Gandhi always acted the patriarch, and he was expected by many of his followers to do so. They related to him as they would a daughter or son towards a father, addressing him respectfully as 'Bapu' (father). He often signed off his letters to such people with 'Bapu's blessings'. He claimed that he treated all women as he would a 'sister or daughter'.¹ He ran his ashrams as a benevolent but authoritarian patriarch. In his own family life he demanded obedience from his wife, Kasturba, and his four sons and their wives. It was hard for him to accept when a 'daughter' or 'son'—real or adopted—sought to assert their independence; there were acrimonious quarrels, leading in some cases to sharp and bitter breaks. In all these ways he was in a very personal sense the 'father of the nation'.

Patriarchy, by its nature, allows at best only a limited degree of dialogue, whether between husband and wife, father and child, or elder and younger. Patriarchy is characteristically monologic. M.M. Bakhtin has defined the

monologic as the voice of an entrenched authority that denies any meaningful dialogue with another person or group. Even when equality is accepted in theory, in practice it perceives the other as 'merely an *object* of consciousness, and not another consciousness', in the process denying that the other has 'equal rights and equal responsibilities': 'Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge it in any *decisive* force. Monologue pretends to be the *ultimate word*. It closes down the represented world and represented persons.'² In these respects, Gandhi's practice of patriarchy was monologic.

This can be demonstrated to start with through an examination of the history of Gandhi's own family life—an often-distressing and sad affair—to see how his patriarchy was rooted in an everyday familial practice. I shall then go on to look at Gandhi's understanding of sexual desire and female sexuality. From both a feminist and a psychoanalytical perspective, there is much in Gandhi's practice and belief that was problematic in the extreme. I shall also examine how all of this cast a long shadow over his admirable aspiration to better the position of women in India. Although his encouragement of women to take an active part in his campaigns of civil resistance helped to give many women in India a new sense of empowerment, this did not lead, within the nationalist movement, to any ideological challenge to his patriarchal ways.

Gandhi's Family Life

Gandhi was married in 1882, when he was thirteen, to Kasturba, who was the same age. It was an arranged marriage—they had already been betrothed for six years. In his autobiography, he commented that 'I took no time in assuming the authority of the husband.'³ The marriage was thus consummated, and the couple then lived together while he studied in high school in Rajkot. He doubted her faithfulness to him at that time, and not only kept a close eye on her but tried to restrict her movements. She refused

to obey him, going out and about as she wished. As he later stated: 'This sowed the seeds of a bitter quarrel between us.'⁴ Within three years, Kasturba was pregnant.

It was at this juncture that his father, Karamchand, became gravely ill. Although Gandhi tended him as a dutiful son, his mind was on his wife and he continued to have sexual intercourse with her. This was to prove for him in retrospect a 'double shame'; first, he was forcing himself on a pregnant woman, and second, he was doing it as his father lay dying.⁵ He was in fact having intercourse with Kasturba at the moment of Karamchand's death. His 'lust' at that moment was for him 'a blot I have never been able to efface or forget...' When Kasturba gave birth soon after, the baby died in a few days. He saw this as a divine judgement on his 'lust', implying that a wife and child should expect to be punished by God for the failings of a husband and father. In future years, he was to implement such a will by continuing to punish Kasturba. As Erik Erikson has pointed out in his psychoanalytical study of Gandhi, the incident provided a 'cover' or reason for a way of behaving that had deeper and more structural roots.⁶ Gandhi would also express this logic—of divine retribution on women and children for the sins of men—in a more public sphere, as we shall see later.

Over the following years, Gandhi continued to be harsh in his demands for obedience from Kasturba. Despite claiming in his autobiography that he had regarded her as his equal, he compelled her to do many things that she believed to be wrong. Although he accepted that this was a cause of tension between them, he argued that he acted always for her own good. In his autobiography he recounted one particular instance that occurred in 1898 in South Africa, when he insisted that she empty the chamber pot that had been used by a guest, who was a Dalit Christian. 'Even today I can recall the picture of her chiding me, her eyes red with anger, and pearl drops streaming down her cheeks, as she descended the ladder, pot in hand. But I was a cruelly kind husband. I regard myself as her teacher, and so harassed

her out of my blind love for her.'⁷ Little respect is shown for his wife in this passage that was written nearly thirty years later.⁸

There was worse to come. He relates how he then objected to her attitude, demanding that she carry the pot cheerfully. She abused him: 'Keep your house to yourself and let me go.' Gandhi lost his temper and, in his words, 'caught her by the hand, dragged the helpless woman to the gate ... and proceeded to open it with the intention of pushing her out.' She shouted back that he was a shameless man: 'Being your wife, you think I must put up with your cuffs and kicks?' Gandhi claimed that he then realised that he was in the wrong and backed down. He commented: 'The wife, with her matchless powers of endurance, has always been the victor.'

We know of this incident because Gandhi was honest enough to describe it in his autobiography, written many years later. He explains his bad behaviour in terms of his continuing sexual 'infatuation', and argues that once he took his vow of celibacy he was able to maintain a strict non-violence in this respect, and that his relationship with Kasturba improved accordingly. In other respects, however, he continued to assert himself against his wife. He refused to give any credence or respect to her opinions or intellect: 'Kasturba herself does not perhaps know whether she has any ideals independently of me.' He then immediately contradicted this by stating: 'It is likely that many of my doings have not her approval even today. We never discuss them, I see no good in discussing them.' He went on to declare that her thoughts were of no matter because 'she was educated neither by her parents nor by me at the time when I ought to have done it.' Kasturba was thus condemned as being ignorant and lacking any worthwhile opinions of her own. All she had were her prejudices that she had learnt to keep to herself.

He wound up this chapter of his autobiography by trying to paper over these glaring contradictions:

But she is blessed with one great quality to a very considerable degree, a quality which most Hindu wives possess in some measure. And it is this: willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, she has considered herself blessed in following in my footsteps, and has never stood in my way of my endeavour to lead a life of restraint. Though, therefore, there is a wide difference between us intellectually, I have always had the feeling that ours is a life of contentment, happiness and progress.⁹

It seems, however, that Kasturba had little choice but to put up with her family situation without obvious complaint. There could be no real 'contentment' or 'happiness' in such a circumstance. In this, Gandhi showed himself to be very insensitive to his wife's emotional life.

His relationship with his eldest son, Harilal, and Gulab, his wife, was also a troubled one. Harilal was born in 1888, while Gandhi was a college student in Bhavnagar. During the boy's infancy he was away for three years in London. The father whom Harilal first learnt to look up to was the flourishing lawyer of the early years in South Africa, the patriarchal head of a prosperous and westernised family. This all changed radically when Gandhi decided to adopt a simple and austere way of life. He ordered his sons to wash their clothes, cook their own food, chop wood, work in the garden—even in the bitter cold of winter— and forced them to walk long distances rather than use means of transport.¹⁰ Harilal found it extremely hard to adapt to this new regime. He wanted to go to university or study law, but Gandhi would not agree to this as he now held that such institutions were deeply corrupting. At the age of eighteen, Harilal escaped to India, where he hoped to create an independent life for himself. This proved difficult, for Gandhi had not given him a conventional education and he lacked paper qualifications. When Gandhi heard a rumour that he had married Gulab, the daughter of a leading Kathiawadi lawyer who was his friend, Gandhi retorted that he had ceased to think of Harilal as his son 'for the present at any rate'.¹¹ As Erik Erikson has asked in relation to this

episode: how can a son cease to be such on a temporary basis? He sees this as one more example of the 'patriarchal bad manners' that characterised Gandhi's relationship with his eldest son.¹²

A year later, Harilal and Gulab were married. Gandhi told him to return to South Africa alone, but instead Harilal came with his new wife. Gandhi resented the obvious love the couple had for each other, and tried to take her in hand in an authoritarian way, causing her great emotional suffering. He was very annoyed when she became pregnant and later gave birth to a daughter, as this revealed that the couple were having sexual intercourse despite his injunctions.¹³ He punished them by demanding that Harilal be the first to court arrest and go to jail during the satyagraha of 1908. Gandhi acted as his lawyer during his trial, insisting before the judge that the punishment should be as severe as possible.¹⁴ In a public statement made a week later, he said that his twenty-year-old son was 'only a child' and that it was 'a part of Harilal's education to go to gaol for the sake of the country.'¹⁵ Harilal spent nearly a year in prison in all, constantly anxious about Gulab. He had good reason to be, for Gulab developed an alarming cough, excruciating earache and sores all over her body.

Once out of jail, the relationship between father and son deteriorated further. Harilal still wanted to go to university. He objected to Gandhi's treatment of Kasturba, something Gandhi shrugged off by arguing that she did not know her own mind. In 1911, Harilal returned to India, and after some studies in Gujarat tried to establish himself in business in Calcutta. In 1915 the rest of the family followed him back to India, settling in Ahmedabad, a thousand miles away from Calcutta. In 1916 Gandhi's second son Manilal sent some money to relieve his brother's hardships. When Gandhi came to know of this he was furious and expelled him from the ashram. Manilal ended up back in South Africa, where he spent the rest of his days.¹⁶

Harilal then suffered a deep tragedy when Gulab died suddenly in the influenza epidemic of 1918, leaving him to look after their two daughters and two sons. He took to drink and was often seen to be inebriated in public. His business ran into difficulties in the early 1920s and he embezzled a large sum of money from a friend of his father. When Gandhi heard of this he denounced his son in his journal *Young India*. He stated that the two of them had been at odds for the past fifteen years:

There is much in Harilal's life that I dislike. He knows that. But I love him in spite of his faults. The bosom of a father will take him in as soon as he seeks entrance. For the present, he has shut the doors against himself. He must wander in the wilderness. The protection of a human father has its decided limitations. That of the Divine Father is ever open to him. Let him seek it and he will find it.¹⁷

The deity that Harilal eventually embraced was hardly the one that had been in Gandhi's mind, for in 1936 he underwent a conversion to Islam, becoming 'Abdulla Gandhi'. The ceremony of admission to the new faith took place in a Bombay mosque before a large audience, and the news was broadcast all over India.

By now, Gandhi realised that his son was a broken man, and his reaction was one of sadness rather than patriarchal rage, though he still felt compelled to moralise on the subject of conversion. He said that he had no objection to Harilal changing his religion in good faith, but he feared that it was done for selfish reasons.¹⁸ He believed that Harilal had taken loans from some unscrupulous Pathans in Bombay, and they were taking their interest in the form of this 'conversion. If this was the case:

Harilal's apostasy is no loss to Hinduism and his admission to Islam a source of weakness to it, if, as I apprehend, he remains the same wreck that he was before. ... conversion is a matter between man and his Maker who alone knows His creatures' hearts. And conversion without a clean heart is, in my opinion, a denial of God and religion.

Conversion without cleanness of heart can only be a matter for sorrow, not joy, to a godly person.¹⁹

Kasturba's reaction to her son's escapades was more direct and emotionally honest. After reading in a newspaper that he had been arrested by the police in Madras for drunk and disorderly behaviour in a public place at midnight, she wrote to him pleading that he change his ways:

My dear son Harilal, ... I have been feeling very miserable ever since I heard about this incident ... I have been pleading with you all these long years to hold yourself in check. But you are going from bad to worse. Now you are making my very existence impossible. Think of the misery you are causing your aged parents in the evenings of their lives.

Your father says nothing to anyone but I know the shocks you are giving him are breaking his heart. You are committing a great sin in thus repeatedly hurting our feelings. Though born as our son you are indeed behaving like an enemy.

Every morning I rise with a shudder to think what fresh news of disgrace the newspapers will bring. I sometimes wonder where you are, where you sleep, what you eat. Perhaps you take forbidden food ... I often feel like meeting you. But I do not know where to find you.²⁰

She told him also that his father loved him very deeply, and was prepared even now to look after him and to nurse him back to health. Kasturba also wrote a distressed letter to Harilal's Muslim friends, saying that they seemed to want 'to make his mother and father a laughing stock of the world ... I am writing this in the hope that the piteous cry of this sorrowing mother will pierce the heart of at least one of you, and you will help my son turn a new leaf.'²¹

Harilal's sad decline seems to have united the ageing father and mother in mutual grief. The anger of the old animosities faded away. But Kasturba's health had suffered, and there is little doubt that her death in jail in Pune in

1944 was hastened by her enduring sadness in this respect. When she lay dying, Harilal came to see her twice. On the first occasion she was overjoyed, but on the second he came drunk and she beat her forehead in anguish. He was removed and she never saw him again. Next day, she begged Devdas to look after Harilal's children. Gandhi was by her bed day and night, nursing her with devoted care and determined to be with her at the end, succeeding here where he had failed with his father. His wish was fulfilled, for she died in his arms on 22 February 1944. She was cremated next day, and Gandhi sat by the pyre from morning to evening. For weeks afterwards he was listless and ill.²² From then until the end of his own life he observed a day of remembrance for her on the 22nd of each month, in which the entire *Bhagavad Gita* was recited at his early morning prayer.²³

Gandhi continued to try to win back Harilal. In early 1947, he wrote to his son asking him to join him in East Bengal in his work for Hindu-Muslim unity. Harilal never replied.²⁴ Less than a year later, Harilal was in Delhi when his father was assassinated. His younger brother Ramdas lit the funeral pyre while he remained in the crowd an anonymous watcher. He was suffering from tuberculosis, and in less than six months time was himself dead.²⁵

Gandhi and Sexual Desire

Gandhi interpreted his sexual desire for his young wife as a detraction from his duty towards his father. He also believed, following an old tradition in India, that a loss of semen drained a man's vitality. Erikson has pointed out: 'Where such imagery is dominant and some obsessive and phobic miserliness is added, as is universally the case in adolescents convinced that ejaculations are draining them, all sexual life assumes the meaning of depleting a man's essence.'²⁶ Once in public life, he began to see his sexuality as a hindrance in this sphere also. In this, he regarded his sexuality as a passion to be disciplined, rather than something that provided the basis for a

relationship. Love, for him, was defiled by sexual intercourse.²⁷ In his autobiography he explains many of his early shortcomings and failures, both personal and political, in terms of his continuing sexual profligacy. Only after he had taken his vow of celibacy in 1906 could his full strength be realised. Typically, he took this momentous decision unilaterally, only consulting Kasturba after he had made up his mind. He stated that she had no objection.²⁸ Even if she had objected, one doubts that he would have paid her any heed.

Gandhi was not the only Indian nationalist who was striving at that time to be chaste; it was an aspiration shared by many of those who followed the path of violent terrorism during those years. The latter can be seen to have internalised the colonizer's argument that an uncontrolled and lax sexuality had undermined the virility of the Indian people, allowing them to be conquered by a more manly race. Following Swami Vivekananda, they believed that sexual restraint would lead to moral regeneration. Gandhi was not impressed by this desire to build a more 'masculine' Indian persona. His aim was different, that of striving to assert the 'feminine' principles of love, selfless service and non-violence.²⁹

For Gandhi, sexuality in men was a powerful, intrinsic force that could be mastered only by hard self-discipline. Sexuality in women, by contrast, lacked such power, for women were, in his eyes, naturally abstemious. He saw women as 'the mother of man' and 'too sacred for sexual love'.³⁰ Because he expected women to be pure and virtuous, he was harsh and unmerciful with those who failed in this respect. Thus, while on the one hand he placed women on a pedestal as 'sisters of mercy' and 'mothers of entire humanity', on the other he blamed them for luring men into immorality.³¹ He refused to sanction the use of contraceptives, as they, in his opinion, encouraged sexual pleasure, profligacy and vice. A woman who used contraceptives was no better than a prostitute.³²

He reserved a particular loathing for prostitutes, whom he saw as evil temptresses luring men to their ruin. When some prostitutes of Barisal in Bengal asked to be allowed to join the Congress in 1920, he told them that there was no way that he could accept them while they continued in their calling. Madhu Kishwar says in this context: 'It is significant that Gandhi never displayed this kind of self-righteousness *vis-à-vis* better known exploiters of society. The doors of the Congress were not closed to even the most tyrannical of landlords or the most corrupt of businessmen.'³³

In directing his rebukes at the prostitutes, rather than at their clients, Gandhi revealed a male fear of female sexuality. The idea of women luring men towards doom is of course an inverted understanding of the relationship of power actually experienced by such women. There were other occasions on which Gandhi applied such a logic. When, for example, a young male resident of the Tolstoy Farm in South Africa teased two young women, Gandhi felt that it was not enough to tell off the boy. 'I wished the two girls to have some sign on their person as a warning to every young man that no evil eye might be cast upon them, and as a lesson to every girl that no one dare assault their purity.'³⁴ After much thought he decided that the only way 'to sterilize the sinner's eye' was by their agreeing to have their hair cut off. They were at first unwilling to accept this, but Gandhi brought them round through pressure, and he himself cut off their hair. He claimed that the two young women gained by this experience and also 'hoped that young men still remember this incident and keep their eyes from sin.'³⁵ In this case, Gandhi was blaming girls who were being sexually harassed. His assumption was that the young men would not have acted as they did without some laxity on the part of the girls.

Gandhi himself was always in doubt as to his success in achieving full mastery over his passions. He set high standards for himself in this respect, being wracked by a sense of failure whenever he had an involuntary discharge of semen in his sleep. He assumed that he had not entirely

conquered his desires.³⁶ This led to his experiment of 1946—7, when he sought to test his celibacy by sleeping with naked and nubile young women without feeling any sexual stirrings.³⁷ He did this at a time of great difficulty for India, when he felt a need to enhance his spiritual powers so as to be equal to the situation. His success in this respect (his advanced age could have been a factor in this) may have given him the moral strength to act with supreme courage—as he did—in the face of the terrible division and carnage of those years.³⁸ He does not, however, seem to have been concerned with the psychological effects that this experiment might have on the young women with whom he slept, such as nineteen-year-old Manu, his cousins granddaughter.³⁹

Marriage and Patriarchy

The British had always been highly critical of the way in which women were treated in India, seeing it as one of the chief markers of Indian social and cultural 'backwardness'. Indian social reformers had responded to this by demanding a ban on sati, an end to child-marriage and an acceptance of widow remarriage by high-caste Hindus. They had deplored the illiteracy and ignorance of women in India, and had sought to create a 'new woman' who was literate, cultured and pure. She was to be a well-informed companion and a model wife for her husband, a teacher for her children, and an exemplary manager for the household as a whole. In this way, she would take her place as a worthy yet subordinate citizen of the nation. As Uma Chakravarty puts it: 'the interlocking of an indigenous patriarchy with new forms of patriarchy brought in by the colonial state produced a situation where apparently spaces opened up for women but were simultaneously restricted.'⁴⁰

Gandhi's own thoughts on the women's question were rooted in this patriarchal agenda. The first major statement that he made on the subject after his return to India in 1915 was at an educational conference in Gujarat

in October 1917. He focused, appropriately given the venue, on the need for education for women. It had, however, to be an education with a difference:

As Nature has made men and women different, it is necessary to maintain a difference between the education of the two. True, they are equals in life, but their functions differ. It is woman's right to rule the home. Man is master outside it. Man is the earner, woman saves and spends. Woman looks after the feeding of the child. She shapes its future. She is responsible for building its character. She is her children's educator, and hence, mother to the Nation ...

If this is the scheme of Nature, and it is just as it should be, woman should not have to earn her living. A state of affairs in which women have to work as telegraph clerks, typists or compositors can be, I think, no good, such a people must be bankrupt and living on their capital.⁴¹

He went on to deplore the custom of child-marriage that stood in the way of the education of women. The young wife became merely a household drudge and was unable to provide adequate companionship to a husband. He deplored those men who treated their wives as they would an animal and condemned the couplet attributed to Tulsidas: 'The drum, the fool, the Sudra, the animal and the woman—all these need beating,' arguing that it was either a later interpolation or the poet was merely mouthing the prejudices of his time without any reflection. 'We must fight this impression and pluck out from its very root the general habit of regarding women as inferior beings.'⁴² Four months later he stated that the maltreatment of women by even the most ignorant and worthless of men impoverished the Indian spirit. Nationalists were to go out and educate women.⁴³

Gandhi believed strongly in the institution of marriage, which he saw as a bastion of morality. He refused to consider the relationship between husband and wife as being in any way hierarchical, arguing that it should be considered a partnership between equals. Because of this, men had no right to make sexual claims on their wives without their consent.⁴⁴ Until the

1930s, Gandhi preferred that marriages be within broad caste bounds, but in his later years he came round to the view that caste mattered less than compatibility. He was however opposed to marriage customs that he saw as being demeaning towards women. He condemned child marriages, on the grounds that if the child-husband should die, the girl was left a widow for life. He believed that child-widows should be allowed to remarry. In the case of adult widows, he preferred that they should remain unmarried and chaste, but if this proved too hard to maintain, they should remarry. He was opposed also to expensive marriage celebrations and dowries, preferring instead simple weddings, with garlanding of the couple in front of friends and relatives. At the time, this was known as *Gandhi lagan* (Gandhian marriage). Women were also encouraged to stop wearing jewellery, to wear clothes of simple and cheap khadi, and not to overdress. He was opposed to the practice of purdah for women. He also encouraged families to cook simple food so as to save women from drudgery. He also sought to counter the pressure placed on wives to produce children by valorising marriages in which the partners remained chaste. At one wedding, he blessed the couple with the words: 'May you have no children.'⁴⁵

Gandhi was a strong believer in the sanctity of the family, and saw marriage, like religion, as a force for 'restraint'.⁴⁶ In this, he failed to take into account the fact that almost the entire burden of restraint rested on women, any failure on their part being punished severely, while the misdemeanours of husbands were generally overlooked. He argued that women could fight oppression within the family through satyagraha against the men, and although he knew that men often enforced their will in a vicious manner, he was confident that the strength of the women would in most cases prevail. He even stated that women who were faced with rape should prefer to give up their lives rather than surrender their virtue and chastity.⁴⁷ In this, he once again placed the chief onus for moral behaviour on women rather than men. This may be taken as a compliment to women,

but it seems unreasonable and unfair for Gandhi to have expected women to bear the major burden in such matters.

So committed was Gandhi to the institution of marriage that he even stated in 1917 that children born outside wedlock were like vermin who should not be preserved. For this reason, he had no time for orphanages that brought up such children. In the words of Madhu Kishwar, 'it is hard to comprehend the violence of thought underlying this sentiment considering that he never used similar language or expressed such sentiments against well known exploiters of society, and would not have condoned violence against them as he does against little babies who could not by any stretch of imagination be held responsible for being born of people who refused to take responsibility for them.'⁴⁸ Gandhi also revealed his patriarchal sentiments over the matter of defending family or community honour. In disputes over matters of honour, women were frequently made to bear the burden of family or community honour. It was believed to be particularly shaming if a family or community could not defend its female members from sexual violation, rape or murder. Rather than condemn a mentality which made women the prime bearers of such 'honour', Gandhi surrendered to his patriarchal prejudices by arguing that a father would in such circumstances be justified in killing his daughter: 'it would be the purest form of *ahimsa* on my part to put an end to her life and surrender myself to the fury of the incensed ruffian.'⁴⁹

He seems to have modified his opinions on this issue to some extent during the last decade of his life. In 1942 he stated that there was absolutely no justification for holding a woman to blame for being raped and subjecting her to social ostracism as a result: 'Whilst the woman has in point of fact lost her virtue, the loss cannot in any way render her liable to be condemned or treated as an outcast. She is entitled to our sympathy for she has been cruelly injured and we should tend her wounds as we would those of any injured person.'⁵⁰ He even said that it was acceptable for women to fight back against rapists: 'When a woman is assaulted she may not stop to

think in terms of *himsa* or ahimsa. Her primary duty is self-protection. She is at liberty to employ every method or means that come to her mind in order to defend her honour. God has given her nails and teeth. She must use them with all her strength and, if need be, die in the effort.⁵¹ Men, likewise, were entitled to use violence to prevent a woman being raped.

During the partition period of 1947 there were many cases in which men killed the women of their families rather than have them 'shamed'. In cases in which women were abducted or raped (and rape was assumed whether or not it had occurred), they were commonly rejected by their families as being 'dishonoured'. When confronted with the suffering caused through this logic of 'honour', Gandhi issued repeated appeals to families to accept back with an open heart any women members who had been abducted, stating: 'I hear women have this objection that the Hindus are not willing to accept back the recovered women because they say that they have become impure. I feel that this is a matter of great shame. These women are as pure as the girls who are sitting by my side. And if any one of those recovered women should come to me, then I will give them as much respect and honour as I accord to these young maidens.'⁵² No longer, it seems, was he so sure that women deserved to bear the blame for the sexual crimes of men.

Women and Satyagraha

The most significant respect in which Gandhi went beyond the agenda of the nineteenth-century social reformers was in his injunction that women should play an active role in their own emancipation through satyagraha. In a letter of June 1917 he reminded his followers of the bhakti *sant* Mirabai, who, he said, had waged satyagraha against her husband to maintain her chastity, converting him into a devotee through her moral power.⁵³ He also invoked Sita, who, he claimed, maintained her purity by standing up to both Ravana and Ram.⁵⁴ He believed very strongly that women who wished to remain chaste should follow the example of Mirabai and refrain from sexual

intercourse, even if they were married and had to resist their husband's will in this respect. He praised those women who had made a decision to remain unmarried and chaste throughout life—serving society rather than a family—in the process resisting the huge social pressures there were to get married.

In this respect, Gandhi's emphasis on celibacy, or brahmacharya, had a particular value for women, for it could provide a means for resisting male domination in a way that was legitimised in their culture. For men, it could provide a mark of their commitment to a non-exploitative and equal relationship with women. Critics of Gandhi's brahmacharya tend to ignore this issue and focus on the admittedly problematic matter of his beliefs about male semen and moral power. While Bhikhu Parekh, for example, raises legitimate questions about the efficacy of such beliefs, which he labels as 'largely mystical and almost certainly false', he takes an over-optimistic and gendered view of male sexuality: 'A man who assigns [sexuality] its proper place in life and gratifies it within limits is far more at peace with himself and free of its domination than one locked in a mortal battle with it.'⁵⁵ This argument is clearly gendered—a man speaks for his own. It presumes that male sexuality is essentially benign, failing to understand that in a patriarchal society the 'limits' which men define serve their interests rather than women, so that what is 'proper in life' becomes the routine exploitation of women. Gandhi knew that the only effective limit in such a society was strong self-control and moral self-discipline.

Gandhi believed that women had a moral power that was particularly suited to satyagraha. 'To call a woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage?'⁵⁶ Gandhi scorned the extremist nationalists' attempts to revive a 'male' vigour in India as a counter to the masculinity of British

colonialism. In his opinion, this could lead only to violence and hatred.⁵⁷ He preferred to stress the 'female' principle of non-violence. Ashis Nandy has argued in this respect that Gandhi 'rediscovered' womanhood as a civilizing force in human society. He holds that Gandhi's role model was above all his mother, who combined a strong religious faith with confidence in her power to have her own way within the family. In valorising such 'female' values, Gandhi was taking on both a patriarchal Sanskrit tradition that devalued woman, and also the colonial valorisation of masculinity. In its place he combined elements of Indian folk culture that celebrated the female principle with a Christian belief that the meek would inherit the earth. Like St. Francis he wanted to be the bride of Christ.⁵⁸ Or, we may add, like that of the young cowherd women—the gopis—whose love for Krishna became spiritual rather than physical once they experienced his true being.⁵⁹

Although Gandhi argued that women were best suited for domestic life, he also encouraged them to participate in political activity as the equals of men. At the Gujarat Political Conference at Godhra in 1917 he said that in not including women in their movement they were walking on one leg.⁶⁰ During the Kheda Satyagraha of 1918, Gandhi made a point of encouraging women to become involved. He insisted on women sharing the platform with him during meetings—women such as Anandibai, a widow from Pune, who told the audience in Karamsad village that she wished she held land in Kheda so that she could also refuse her taxes and risk having it confiscated.⁶¹ When, on one occasion, Gandhi saw that only men were attending a meeting, he rebuked the audience: 'It was my hope that women also would be present at this meeting. In this work there is as much need of women as men. If women join our struggle and share our sufferings, we can do fine work.'⁶² In some cases, special meetings were held for women.⁶³

Gandhi's emphasis on hand-spinning from 1920 onwards gave legitimacy to women's activity and allowed them to participate in the struggle in a new way. He stated that in matters concerning swadeshi, women should put the

interest of the nation before even that of their husbands. The nation was thus considered to have precedence over the household.⁶⁴ Gandhi also encouraged women to take a leading role in the picketing of liquor shops during the Non-Cooperation movement of 1921–2.⁶⁵ This campaign struck a chord with many women, who resented the fact that their husbands squandered their hard-earned incomes on drink rather than provide for their families. Also, their intoxicated husbands often beat them up. Gandhi believed that the presence of women on the picket line helped sustain an atmosphere of non-violence, while at the same time it deterred 'undesirable characters' from joining the protest.⁶⁶ Encouraged by the evidence of this new spirit of assertion, he looked forward in July 1921 to the day when 'women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation', and stated that they should be given the vote and a legal status equal to men.⁶⁷

Women were soon even taking the initiative in protests. During the Bardoli Satyagraha of 1928, for example, Vallabhbhai Patel had advised women not to join the picket lines on one particular occasion as he feared that the police intended to beat up or even fire on the protesters. One woman later recalled: 'Undeterred by the warnings given by Sardar Patel, I led a group of fifty sisters in spite of promulgation of the article under Section 144, broke through the police cordon and joined the picket lines. I was arrested along with twenty-four of my sisters. This was my most unforgettable experience of the satyagraha.'⁶⁸ Women's participation in the struggle was taken onto a new plane during the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930–1. Gandhi had initially stated that only men should break the salt laws, but his women followers refused to accept this decree and went ahead and manufactured salt on a large scale. As Usha Mehta says: 'I remember, during the salt *satyagraha*, many women of all ages came out to join the movement. Even our old aunts and great-aunts and grandmothers used to bring pitchers of salt water to their houses and manufacture illegal salt. And then they would shout at the top of their voices: "We have broken the salt Law!"'⁶⁹

Women also took out early morning processions, known as *prabhat pheris*, when they walked through the streets of their towns and villages singing religious and nationalist songs. Because such processions were normally of a purely religious nature, the authorities were reluctant to clamp down on them lest they be accused of religious persecution.

The anti-liquor campaign reached fresh heights in 1930–1. Due to some violence by male picketers during the 1921–2 movement, Gandhi insisted in 1930 that anti-liquor protest should be the preserve of women satyagrahis. Kasturba Gandhi played a prominent role in this campaign, organising the cutting down of around 25,000 toddy trees during the period of the salt satyagraha, and picketing government auctions of liquor shops. In many cases, not a single licence was sold, and in some areas liquor revenues dwindled to almost nothing. The women also attended religious and social functions and urged the people to forsake liquor.⁷⁰

In Ahmedabad city, the Rashtriya Stree Sabha (Nationalist Women's Organisation) launched an intensive swadeshi campaign, which involved almost daily processions of khadi-clad women through the streets singing patriotic songs, house-to-house collection of foreign cloth which was then burnt in public, the distribution of cyclostyled sheets from door to door, and picketing of shops selling foreign cloth. They also picketed liquor shops—which could be hazardous, as they were subject to abuse by men who wanted to buy liquor. They had however strength in numbers, and many felt exhilarated and empowered in their new public role. Although the police were at first reluctant to arrest women, increasing numbers were sent to prison, becoming celebrated public figures in the process.⁷¹

As the movement progressed, and more and more of the male participants were arrested and jailed, women came increasingly to the fore. By early 1931, the authorities, frustrated by their inability to break the spirit of resistance, moved onto the offensive against women. The situation became ugly in Gujarat after a seventeen-year-old inmate of Gandhi's

ashram in Ahmedabad called Lilavati Asar organised a routine procession of women through the town of Borsad in Kheda District on 15 January. She was arrested, taken to the police station and slapped on the face until she passed out. The police claimed later that she was a hysterical girl, subject to fainting fits.⁷² She was then taken to the Sabarmati prison in Ahmedabad. A local woman from Kheda called Benaktiben organised another procession in Borsad on 21 January to protest against the treatment meted out to Lilavati; 1,500 women from 31 different villages participated. They were mostly from the locally dominant caste of Patidar peasants, who were at that time supporting the struggle by refusing to pay their land tax. As soon as they had assembled, the police charged them and beat them with their lathis and rifle butts, at the same time showering them with sexual abuse. Women who fell to the ground were kicked by heavy police boots, or pulled by the hair. The women later stated that the police were reeking of alcohol. Kasturba Gandhi visited the women four days later and saw their cuts and bruises. She stated that: 'This is the first occasion in my life, when I have seen such inhuman treatment meted out to ladies in Gujarat...', or for that matter, she added, anywhere in India.⁷³

The *Borsad Satyagraha Patrika* later published a list of 115 injured women who came from nineteen different villages. The ages of 61 of them were given—the youngest was 15 and the oldest 65. Their overall average age was 25.⁷⁴ One of them, sixteen-year-old Kashiben Trikambhai Patel of Bochason, stated that:

When Madhumati Ben was being beaten I tried to protect the [national] flag when I was given a blow on the left shoulder and was dragged by the hair so forcibly that I fell on the ground. Before falling down, I was given 2 or 3 blows by hand on my cheek, and some blows on the loin. I tried to get up when I got 3 pushes on the chest. They again caught hold of my hair and made me stand. Three blows on the left foot: six to seven on the right thigh and one blow on the back. After receiving two pushes of the butt-end of the rifles, I fainted.⁷⁵

Gangaben Vaidya, an older woman who was on the managing board of Gandhi's ashram, recounted how she had been beaten until blood poured from her head: 'The other sisters bore the blows with exemplary bravery. In some case the assaults were outrageous, many being kicked on their chests with the heels of the policemen's boots. Not one budged an inch, everyone stood unflinching at her post. Whereupon came this sudden access of courage and strength, I wonder. God was with us I am sure. He gave us the strength.'⁷⁶ Gandhi praised her fulsomely in his reply: 'How shall I compliment you? You have shown that you are what I had always thought you were. How I would have smiled with pleasure to see your sari made beautiful with stains of blood. I got excited when I knew about this atrocity, but I was not pained in the least. On the contrary, I felt happy.'⁷⁷

During this period, women from all parts of India proved themselves the equal of the male freedom fighters, and in many cases their superior. In the process, they gained a new sense of empowerment. In the words of Aruna Asaf Ali:

Gandhiji's appeal was something elemental. At last, a woman was made to feel the equal of man; that feeling dominated us all, educated and non-educated. The majority of women who came into the struggle were not educated or westernised ... The real liberation or emancipation of Indian women can be traced to this period, the 1930s. Earlier, there had been many influences at work, many social reformers had gone ahead, it was all in the air. But no one single act could have done what Gandhiji did when he first called upon women to join and said: 'They are the better symbols of mankind. They have all the virtues of a *satyagrahi*! All that puffed us up enormously and gave us a great deal of self-confidence.'⁷⁸

The Critique of Patriarchy

Fellow nationalists and women activists never subjected Gandhi to any strong criticism for his patriarchal attitudes. In this, we find a contrast to his other major fields of work, in which sharp differences were expressed in a way that forced him to often qualify or modify his position. His close women followers in his ashram and elsewhere revered him as 'father', accepting his patriarchal persona without a murmur. More independent women nationalists never took up this issue. Notable in this respect was Sarojini Naidu, a woman of intellect and power who had fought with success for the women's franchise and who served as President of the Congress in 1925. She described Gandhi as 'my father, my leader, my master'.⁷⁹ The strongest dissent came from within his own family, but this was brushed aside as being informed by ignorance in the case of Kasturba and immorality in the case of Harilal. We shall never know how Gandhi might have responded to a strong feminist critique.

There have, however, been subsequent critiques from a broadly feminist perspective. Madhu Kishwar, as we have seen, points out the 'age-old patriarchal bias' that informed his attitude towards women.⁸⁰ Despite her specific criticisms, she holds that Gandhi was far more radical in his actions than in his theory, for he provided an unprecedented role for women in political work. And not only this—he asserted that women were superior to men as satyagrahis.⁸¹ By 1931, she asserts, Gandhi's initiative in this respect was so accepted that the Congress was able to pass a resolution committing itself to the equal rights of women.⁸²

Although it is true that many women gained a new self-confidence and pride through their nationalist work, their participation failed to shake the structure of patriarchy in any very profound way. In an article on women in the nationalist movement in Bengal, Tanika Sarkar, also writing from a feminist perspective, has described the unprecedented degree of public protest by women during the Civil Disobedience Movement there. They took part in processions, picketing and blockading of roads with their own

bodies to prevent the passage of police vehicles. When male satyagrahis were arrested, women took their place, and some became the local 'dictators' of the movement. This led to brutal counter-reprisals, involving insults, molestation, beating and even firing, with one young Mahisya woman, Urmilaben Paria, being shot dead. Sarkar argues that all of this became possible because such militancy was depicted as being almost a religious duty at that time.

The most crucial element in dovetailing the feminine role with nationalist politics was perhaps the image of Gandhi as a saint or even a religious deity and the perception of the patriotic struggle as an essentially religious duty. According to this perception, joining the Congress agitation would not really be politicisation, a novel and doubtful role for women, but sharing a religious mission—a role deeply embedded in a tradition sanctified by the example of Meera Bai and the 'sanyasinis'. The stress on the personal saintliness of Gandhi, a subtle symbiosis between the religious and the political in the nationalist message under his leadership, enabled nationalism to transcend the realm of politics and elevate itself to a religious domain.⁸³

In this, Sarkar argues, Gandhi was in certain respects in tune with a tradition going back to Bankimchandra and the extremist nationalists, in which the country became a part of the Hindu pantheon as the highest deity of all—the Motherland. Women were linked to this, as an embodiment of the Shakti of the Mother Goddess. Through nationalism, this Shakti could be released. In the earlier manifestation, however, this Shakti was seen as a violent power. 'The Gandhian movement resolved the tension beautifully by retaining the religious content of nationalism while turning the movement non-violent and imparting it a gentle, patient, long-suffering, sacrificial ambience particularly appropriate for women. If the movement is non-violent then no dangerous, aggressive note is imparted to the feminine personality through participation.'⁸⁴

The downside to this, from a feminist perspective, was that this militancy failed to mount any challenge to the institution of patriarchy.

Whether in Gandhian movements or in more militant alternatives to it, nationalists rarely sought a permanent reversal of the customary role of women in and outside political action. Politicisation was internalised as a special form of sacrifice in an essentially religious process. The language, imagery and idiom of the entire nationalist protest remained steeped in tradition and religion as self-conscious alternatives to alien Western norms. And herein lay the paradox: such strong traditionalist moorings alone permitted the sudden political involvement of thousands of women. But that in its turn inhibited the extension of radicalism to other spheres of life.⁸⁵

In Gujarat, too, the vigorous participation of women in the nationalist struggle failed to undermine prevailing patterns of patriarchy in any substantial manner. When I was carrying out interviews of peasant nationalists in the 1970s, I found it hard to gain access to women activists, even though they had played a prominent role in the struggle in 1930–1. The men commonly stated that they could tell me all I needed to know. If pressed, a woman who was known to have participated in the movement was sometimes summoned to the front room of the house. There was no equality in such a space, for while I and the males sat on chairs, the women normally sat on the ground, their heads covered in the presence of the patriarchs, speaking hesitantly and with inhibition. Only in a few exceptional cases, as with the remarkable widow Dahiba Patel, did I manage to obtain any worthwhile testimony through such means.⁸⁶ This experience revealed that power relationships in such families had not been altered in any profound way by women's participation in what was in other respects a 'freedom struggle'.

Sujata Patel, in another critique, has argued that there was a strong class and caste bias in Gandhi's prescriptions for women. Most of the women participants in the movement were, she states, from a middle- class, higher-

caste background.⁸⁷ She criticises Gandhi's claim that women were more biologically suited to life in the home than working outside it for wages, arguing that his understanding in these respects was that of an upper-caste and middle-class male, whose ideal woman was cloistered in the home. The stricture thus essentialised a sexual division of labour determined by class. It ignored the fact that the majority of Indian women of his day earned their livelihood through field-labour and factory-work and that most were compelled to do so through necessity. The only source of earning he could suggest for women was hand-spinning—something which could earn only very small sums of money in practice. Gandhi thus failed to provide any space within his movement for the economically independent woman.⁸⁸ Patel is also highly critical of his opinion that a woman had to make a choice between being either a housewife or a political worker dedicated to an unmarried life of service to the nation. In effect, this meant that women were left with a choice of either looking after the home as a wife, or working outside as an asexual being, in the process denying their biological being. Gandhi does not, in Patel's opinion, provide any grounds for a serious attack on patriarchy. She thus denies that Gandhi can be seen in any way as a messiah of the contemporary women's movement in India.⁸⁹

Besides these critiques by intellectuals, it is important also to examine the way in which modern women activists and political workers have felt either empowered or reduced by Gandhi's legacy. I shall examine women's activism within the Gandhian tradition in the post- independence period in chapter eight, in relationship to the anti-liquor movement after independence and the struggle for peasant women to have the right to gain ownership of land through land reform. In the case of the former, there has been considerable militancy among women, though Gandhi's influence has been patchy. In the case of the latter, women who started within the Gandhian tradition launched a campaign for land for women against the advice of their male colleagues. There was therefore a strong debate, with the women's position being taken up and championed by feminists. In this case,

as in others, the Gandhian tradition of resistance has been deployed as a means for the empowerment of women, while his patriarchal beliefs are firmly rejected.

To conclude, Gandhi's approach to the question of women's emancipation was one that, on the whole, he shared with many male nationalists and social reformers of his day, namely that women should receive education, should not be married off early and should be allowed to remarry if widowed. He deplored the practice of seclusion and a rigid separation of the sexes. Like the social reformers, he believed that women were biologically more suited to a life in the home. Similarly, he was a strong defender of the institution of marriage, which he saw as inculcating a sense of morality. He believed that women had a duty to defend the honour of their family. He insisted that men should treat their wives with more consideration, advocating, for example, the easing of women's household work through a simple cuisine, and a curb on their sexual demands. The latter was a particularly significant and original intervention in a social milieu in which few women were in a position to resist the unwanted sexual advances of their husbands and other men. By valorizing sexual abstinence and celibacy for men and women, Gandhi provided a means for setting limits on this routine but gross form of exploitation. Gandhi also went further than most of his contemporaries in insisting that women should play an active and positive part in the nationalist movement. In left-led trade union protests of the 1920s and 1930s, for example, women's issues were consistently marginalized by the male leaders. Unlike Gandhi, these leaders did not even attempt to address women's issue in a serious manner.⁹⁰ In this way, the Gandhian movement stood out for the way in which it allowed many women in India to gain a new sense of empowerment.

Few feminists can, however, accept his prescriptions for women, arguing that they were rooted in a patriarchal ideology that would always prevent the full self-realisation of women. Gandhian patriarchy has, from this perspective, to be rejected in a wholesale manner. Some feminists would

argue that this calls into question Gandhi and his legacy as a whole. Others, like Kishwar, refuse to take such a step, arguing that the negative elements of Gandhi's patriarchy were outweighed by the positive social and political benefits he helped achieve for women.

Patriarchy has survived as an institution in part through its coercive violence, but in part through its inculcation of strong ties of affection. The patriarch is at the same time feared, hated and loved. Such a dialectic has likewise informed the relationship of many Indians towards their own national 'father', and it is one that is likely to continue to resonate so long as patriarchy flourishes.