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Source: *Feminist Review*, 2010, No. 94 (2010), pp. 38-54

Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40664128>

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94 | **to be pure or not to be: Gandhi, women, and the Partition of India**

Debali Mookerjea-Leonard

abstract

This article examines Gandhi's writings, speeches, and correspondence, produced mainly from 1946 to the end of his life, on the subject of violence against women during the riots surrounding the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Gandhi, the article demonstrates, persistently fails to address the gender pathology revealed at the heart of South Asian society by these violations, a pathology to which men were subject, but of which women were the victims. The article compiles a comprehensive overview of Gandhi's shifting positions during this brief, though cataclysmic, period, in the belief that in so doing a certain core aspect of mainstream Indian nationalism's patriarchal underpinnings can be laid bare to critique.

keywords

Gandhi; women; chastity; violence; Partition of India

feminist review 94 2010

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introduction

The pre-eminent Indian political and social activist Mohandas K. Gandhi's (1869–1948) involvement in the anti-colonial struggle was accompanied by fundamental changes in the character of the Congress Party, the leading force in the Indian anti-imperialist movement. His modulation of the political discourse and his choice of the tactic of *Satyagraha* (lit. 'persistence in truth') were important factors in the large-scale participation of women in the freedom movement. In addition to women's political mobilization, Gandhi was concerned with improving their social circumstances. In a 1921 article in *Young India*, he censured Hindu practices detrimental to women's wellbeing, and demanded women's suffrage and juridical equality:

I passionately desire the utmost freedom for our women. I detest child-marriages. I shudder to see a child widow, and shiver with rage when a husband just widowed with brutal indifference contracts another marriage. I deplore the criminal indifference of parents who keep their daughters utterly ignorant and illiterate and bring them up only for the purpose of marrying them off to some young men of means. Notwithstanding all this grief and rage, I realize the difficulty of the problem. Women must have votes and an equal legal status. (Gandhi, *CWMG*, 23: 468-469)

Progressive as his views are, the passage still demonstrates a tension in Gandhi's politics. On the one hand, adopting a moralistic tone, laden with 'I detest', 'I shudder', 'I deplore', 'shiver with rage', Gandhi reconstitutes the authority of the enlightened Hindu (male) political subject outraged by cruelties perpetrated on women. On the other hand, he recognizes that to end women's suffering they must enjoy full equality before the law and full participation in the electoral process.¹

Similarly radical is Gandhi's admission of the social equality of the sexes. But this unorthodox claim is predicated on his belief that gender is destiny – that is, the social role of the individual is inextricable from the performance of his/her gender. Only in the province of the intellect are the two sexes equal. 'Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities', noted Gandhi in a speech on women's education, at the Bombay Bhagini Samaj in 1918, and added:

[S]he has an equal right to freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his. This ought to be the natural condition of things. ... Man and woman are of equal rank, but they are not identical. ... Man is supreme in the outward activities of the married pair and, therefore, it is in the fitness of things that he should have a greater knowledge thereof. On the other hand, home life is entirely the sphere of women and, therefore, in domestic affairs, in the upbringing and education of children women ought to have more knowledge. (*CWMG* v. 16: 273-275)

¹ Geraldine Forbes writes that in an article 'Women and the Vote' published in *Young India* on 24 November 1920, Gandhi 'stated that he wanted women to take their proper place by the side of men but he would not support a "votes for women" campaign' (*Forbes*, 100). Despite repeated searches for the article in Gandhi's collected works and *Young India 1919-22*, I have not been able to locate it.

In calling for an education that takes the gender of the subject into account, Gandhi's opinion that women are equal but different was underpinned by his faith in the absoluteness of the public-private divide, which he considered the 'natural' state of things, and he thus supported the continuation of this form of gendering of social space. Women's space, according to Gandhi (and every other Indian patriarch), is the home. Concerned about women's chastity, he further regarded the home a safe space because, within the home, a woman's bodily purity was not at risk. Given his endorsement of women's isolation from the sphere that politics most directly involves, the purpose of their participation in the political process may seem unclear. But, Gandhi's insistence on the separation of the spheres was linked to his larger project of inducting women into the nationalists' cause, from inside the home – through spinning. The demand for a more active and public role in the national struggle (rather than spinning at home) would come from women themselves.

Feminist scholarship on Gandhi is marked by both enthusiastic approbation and persistent anxiety. For instance, in her analysis of his speeches and correspondence, Madhu Kishwar writes that Gandhi viewed women not as passive recipients of humanitarian initiatives, but as active agents with a capacity for self-determination. She notes that he 'helped women find a new dignity in public life, a new place in the national mainstream, a new confidence, a new self-view and a consciousness that they could themselves act against oppression' (Kishwar, 1985a: 1694). Assessing Gandhi's role in the movements for women's rights in India, Radha Kumar similarly states that his 'most important contributions were to legitimize and expand women's public activities in certain ways, extending the latter so that it cut across class and cultural barriers (Kumar, 1993: 83). Refining Kishwar's claim (cited above regarding women gaining a 'new dignity', 'new confidence' etc.), Kumar contends that 'it must be acknowledged that Gandhi's views were expressed at a time when women had already begun to find these attributes for themselves, not only in public professional life, as doctors, teachers, social workers etc., but also in public political life, in nationalist and reformist campaigns, as well as in worker and peasant agitations' (Kumar, 1993: 83). Both scholars also point out the weaknesses of Gandhi's leadership. As Kishwar says,

One of the limitations of Gandhi's thinking ... was that he sought to change not so much the material condition of women as their 'moral' condition. ... He failed to put an economic content into his concept for emancipation. Gandhi failed to realise that, among other things, oppression is not an abstract moral condition, but a social and historical experience related to production relations. He tried changing women's position without either transforming their relation to the outer world of production or the inner world of family, sexuality and reproduction. (Kishwar, 1985a: 1699)

In this vein, Kumar also notes that Gandhi's 'definition of women's nature and role was deeply rooted in Hindu patriarchy, and his inclinations were often to limit the women's movement rather than push it forward ... [and] it took many years of pressure from nationalist women before he was to appeal to women to join in public campaigning' (Kumar, 1993: 83). In another influential study 'Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi', Sujata Patel claims that Gandhi created for women 'a new arena of domination ... in the domestic sphere' (Patel, 1988: 380). But she argues that he 'used essentialist arguments to reaffirm [women's] place as mother and wife in the household' and insofar as 'there was an attempt ... to invert the essentialist 'separate spheres' doctrine, Gandhi fails in this task miserably because he is only able to extend logically the doctrine rather than demolish it' (Patel, 1988: 386).

Scholars like Suresht R. Bald (2000), Geraldine Forbes (1996), David Hardiman (2004), Ketu Katrak (1992), Madhu Kishwar (1985a, b), Radha Kumar (1993), Sujata Patel (1988) and others have addressed Gandhi's views on the nature of women's oppression, and/or his role in bringing women into the freedom struggle. This article does not rehearse the same issues. Instead, the essay examines Gandhi's correspondence, speeches, and writings, produced mainly from 1946 to the end of his life, on the subject of violence against women during the riots surrounding the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Gandhi, I demonstrate, persistently fails to address the gender pathology revealed at the heart of South Asian society by these violations, a pathology to which men were subject, but of which women were the victims. The article compiles a comprehensive overview of Gandhi's shifting positions during this brief, though cataclysmic, period, in the belief that in so doing a certain core aspect of mainstream Indian nationalism's patriarchal underpinnings can be laid bare to critique.

a divided Gandhi

The Partition: The escalating hostilities in the Indian subcontinent during the mid-1940s, between Hindus and Sikhs, on the one hand, and Muslims, on the other, reached its horrific climax in the Partition of August 1947. The Partition was simultaneous with British decolonization of the subcontinent and led to the emergence of India and Pakistan as sovereign nation-states. This dramatic act of cartographic revisionism was marked by unprecedented violence – resulting in the deaths of 1 million persons; and massive relocations – involving an estimated 12–15 million people. Also, more than 80,000 women were abducted and/or violated by men from the rival religious community.

Gandhi's responses to the intimate violence women endured in the communal conflicts of 1946–1947 were diverse and fraught with contradiction. At one extreme was his advice to the Hindu women raped in the Noakhali riots of 1946,

'to commit suicide by poison or some other means to avoid dishonour ... to suffocate themselves or to bite their tongues to end their lives' (*CWMG* v. 92: 355), and that 'women must learn how to die before a hair of their head could be injured' (*CWMG* v. 92: 344). Continuing in the same vein, the proponent of non-violence valorized pre-emptive suicides as a sign of strength and lauded the deaths of Hindu and Sikh women in a speech on 18 September 1947:

I have heard that many women who did not want to lose their honour chose to die. Many men killed their own wives. I think that is really great, because I know that such things make India brave. After all, life and death is a transitory game. Whoever might have died are dead and gone; but at least they have gone with courage. They have not sold away their honour. Not that their life was not dear to them, but they felt it was better to die than to be forcibly converted to Islam by the Muslims and allow them to assault their bodies. And so those women died. They were not just a handful, but quite a few. When I hear all these things I dance with joy that there are such brave women in India. (*CWMG* v. 96: 388-389)

In this passage death, national honour, patriarchal values, and communalized identities conjoin with a brutal and brutalizing nationalism that extols self-sacrifice. Also implicit is a certain sanctioning, even rationalizing, of violence as patriotism, of interpreting women's chastity as a reservoir of national honour, and their deaths as the articulation of their *free* choice. Though in the above passage he never specifies how rape or religious conversion devalued the victim's existence so fundamentally that death alone offered a viable solution, the suggestion itself is disturbing.

In what appears to be a reversal of position, a few months after the pronouncements quoted above, Gandhi urged the social rehabilitation of abducted and/or violated Hindu and Sikh women recently repatriated from Pakistan saying:

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. That woman is as pure as the girls who are sitting by my side. And if 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. (G.D. Khosla, *A Stern Reckoning*, cited in Menon and Bhasin, 1993: WS-7)

Here, Gandhi recommends the acceptance by families of their violated women-members. In so doing, he confronts the general social intolerance women experienced – to which his (and others') repeated emphases on chastity over many years may have contributed.² (The use of 'maidens' in this passage is interesting since it prioritizes the virginity of the young women.) In calling for the social reinstatement of violated women, Gandhi speaks on behalf of the Indian state which in 1947 undertook jointly with Pakistan a 'Recovery Mission' to repatriate abducted women, as well as expressing his compassion at their predicament. His speeches and writings illustrate that he always counselled against the rejection of violated women.

² The following report published in *The Statesman*, dated 15 March 1947, attests to Gandhi's influence on popular thinking: 'The story of 90 women of the little village of Thoa

Khalsa, Rawalpindi district ... who drowned themselves by jumping into a well during the recent disturbances has stirred the imagination of the people of Punjab. They revived the Rajput tradition of self-immolation when their menfolk were no longer able to defend them. They also followed Mr Gandhi's advice to Indian women that in certain circumstances even suicide was morally preferable to submission' (cited in Butalia, 1993: WS-16).

The two moments above illustrate contradictory positions in Gandhi's thought on the subject of intimate violence against women. It is a contradiction between physical purity and moral virtue. On the one hand, Gandhi claims that chastity and purity are literal, physical facts and that the annihilation of physical purity is something so catastrophic that it ought to be resisted, he suggests, by the pre-emptive annihilation of the body itself. 'Personally I believe', he wrote to Sumangal Prakash, 'that a woman, if she has courage, would be ready to die to save her honour. In discussing this matter with women, I would, therefore, certainly advise them to kill themselves in such circumstances, and explain to them that it is easy to take life if one wished to do so' (*CWMG* v. 56: 67). Bodily purity is, in this Gandhian discourse, a physical property of which the woman is guardian but which can be physically taken from her by an act of force. This emphasis on bodily purity is bound to a repressive patriarchal understanding of sexuality and grounded in the idea of the inviolate body. For example, replying to a set of questions on the treatment of raped women, Gandhi advocates humanitarian handling saying that the woman is not 'to be condemned or treated as an outcast. She is entitled to our sympathy for she has been cruelly injured'. His response however begins with 'the woman has in point of fact lost her virtue' (*CWMG* v. 82: 41). And, '[t]his equation of rape with loss of virtue', notes Kishwar, 'reflects the age-old patriarchal bias' (Kishwar, 1985a: 1691).

The other line of Gandhi's thought is that the victim remains unsullied by the acts of violence performed on her. This reflects a modern liberal ethic that one is only responsible for the acts one intends and not for accidents that one could not foresee or forestall – that morality rests upon intentionality. Additionally, alternating with the emphasis on bodily purity is his view that preservation of life is the absolute good. In his letter of 4 June 1927 Gandhi communicated to Shardabehn Kotak that:

if a woman's mind is pure, her virtue is not violated and she is not stained by sin, even though she may have been raped. ... A pure woman, therefore, should never be afraid of her modesty being violated. On the contrary, she may remain confident that, if her mind is steadfast, her body will always remain inviolate. (*CWMG* v. 39: 5)

His response to the plight of the victims of the Noakhali riots almost two decades later was similar: 'I have no doubt', he says,

that girls forcibly abducted have committed no crime, nor incurred any odium. They deserve the pity and active help of every right-minded man. Such girls should be received back in their homes with open arms and affection and should have no difficulty in being suitably matched. (*CWMG* v. 92: 396)

'A woman' Gandhi noted 'is worthy of condemnation only when she is a willing party to her dishonour' (*CWMG* v. 82: 41). Yet, Gandhi is never fully consistent as a liberal thinker and, more than mere contradiction, he ultimately attempts, by

alternation, to fuse together his views regarding physical purity and moral virtue into a single construction of the ideal nationalist subject.

Gandhi's most fundamental preoccupations have, however, essentially remained unchanged through both sets of seemingly contradictory views: his chief concern, in both, is with bodily purity. It is only that the logic of patriarchy of the first has been supplemented by the liberal understanding of morality of the second. Gandhi tries to square the circle by insisting that because, in this liberal sense, violation entails no moral failing, the woman remains pure. The nation as a moral community of patriarchal householders is obliged to acknowledge the repatriated victims of rape and abduction as 'daughters' of the nation nonetheless. Thus does Gandhi acknowledge a certain nationalist logic for the Indian state's efforts to restore women to their families, so that they would not become wards of the state, as many women eventually did. The victims are not recovered as citizens who as such enjoy the protection of the state. Rather, the state acts as the agent of an enlightened modern patriarchy. The will of the women themselves is accordingly disregarded as is their demand for justice.

chastity and nationalism

[S]wadeshi is not merely a means of protecting India's wealth but that it makes for protection of women's honour ... (Gandhi, *CWMG* v. 19: 404)

Permeating much of Gandhi's speeches and private correspondence is a pre-occupation with chastity. His anxiety with the preservation of Hindu women's chastity, most particularly, represents an inheritance from nineteenth-century Hindu cultural nationalists. The earlier nationalists did not invent this obsession with women's chastity. In some form or another, it dates back at least to the time of the *Manavadharmashastra* (*The Laws of Manu*) and is rooted in pre-modern family structure, and social and reproductive forms. But in colonial India, women's chastity was discursively re-configured into a political prerequisite for national belonging. Women's chastity was the location for a discursive struggle over manhood, nationhood, and citizenship. The idea of the chaste Hindu woman as an inviolate national space enabled the colonized Hindu man to recuperate his threatened masculinity in a repressive, and oppressive, way. By protecting and regulating women's chastity, identified with the virtue of the nation, the elite Hindu man exercised a kind of spiritual sovereignty over the country.

Gandhi's nationalism, however, represents a partial democratization of the earlier patriarchal fixation with women's chastity. Specifically, he elaborates a programme where women could remain at home and remain chaste while at the same time becoming agents of nationalism. The domestic sphere was, through the nationalist movement, expanded in an attempt to absorb sociality into itself. The virtue of chastity is complemented by the Gandhian virtue of labour, though,

³ See Gandhi's comments about women labourers at Umreth (CWMG v. 18: 385-386).

again, of quasi-domestic variety (he censured wage labour for women fearing their loss of chastity). The work Gandhi enjoined women to do was to spin cotton which he said was 'the best protection for the chastity of our poor women, and to tell the truth, of all women' (CWMG v. 18: 386). He offered spinning as an alternative to the unpleasant work-conditions poor women often encountered, and which he felt put their chastity at risk.³ This strategic deployment of spinning was instrumental in securing the involvement of women in developing an indigenous textile industry, which had been ruined by the imports from Manchester that inundated Indian markets. By producing homespun cloth, women could contribute directly towards rebuilding the national economy. It was in tune with Gandhi's political project of *swaraj* (self-rule) through a self-sufficient *swadeshi* economy (swadeshi meaning 'of one's own country' was a form of economic nationalism that insisted on the exclusive use of Indian-made goods). Realizing that the acceptance of *khadi* (hand-spun and hand-woven cloth) by women was crucial to its popularity, he repeatedly addressed himself to them, linking its production and use not only to the 'national good', but also to the preservation of chastity and ultimately, the protection of the purity of the soul. The interlacing of nationalism, religion, chastity and economics together with their shades of the sentimental provided a formula whose mass appeal was guaranteed. Thus using a virtue-discourse as an alibi to promote an economic programme, Gandhi simultaneously policed the publicness of women.

The example of virtuous chastity which Gandhi repeatedly set before women was that of Sita – a character originally from Valmiki's Sanskrit epic *Ramayana* (*Rama's Journey*). It was, however, Tulsidas's Hindi re-working of the epic in *Ramcaritamanas* (*Sacred Lake of the Acts of Rama*) that influenced Gandhi with its devotional character. The princess of Mithila, Sita, is the wife of Rama, the crown-prince of Kosala. When Rama is exiled to the forest for 14 years, Sita accompanies him. There, she is abducted by the demon king Ravana and taken to Lanka (Sri Lanka). (A divine curse on Ravana guaranteeing instant death if he ever lustfully touches an unwilling woman protects Sita from his desire.) Rama eventually retrieves her, but refuses to accept her back since she lived in Ravana's residence. To prove her chastity, Sita successfully undergoes a trial by fire and is restored to him. Later as king, Rama learns of his subjects' disapproval of his decision to reaccept Sita. To allay this discontent, he banishes Sita, an expectant mother, to the forest. Years later, she is invited to the palace to join Rama in completing a ceremonial sacrifice; upon her arrival, he asks her to prove her chastity to his subjects by undergoing once more the fire ordeal. Instead, Sita appeals to the earth goddess and requests redemption if she, Sita, has always remained devoted to Rama and undefiled. The goddess emerges and taking Sita with her, withdraws.

In Gandhi's speeches and writings, Sita of the epic acquired a new nationalist virtue. The discourse of cultural nationalism in the nineteenth century had

already set Sita up as the model of the chaste, devoted, and silently suffering wife, that is, the model Hindu woman. With Gandhi, Sita became the icon of self-sacrifice, devoted to swadeshi economic independence or autarchy achieved through patient domestic labour. Gandhi encouraged women to imitate 'Sita's virtues, Sita's humility, Sita's simplicity, and Sita's bravery' (*CWMG* v. 40: 162). To emphasize both her bodily purity and her nationalist virtue, Gandhi said at a women's meeting in Sukkur, in 1929, that 'If you want to establish swaraj in India, which for you and me can only mean *Ramarajya* (kingdom of Rama/God), you must become pure in mind and body like Sita, for then alone you will become mothers of heroes. And as a first step towards attaining bodily purity you must wear pure, homespun khadi just as Sita did' (*CWMG* v. 45: 53). Gandhi's de-sexualized Sita wore homespun cloth and worked patiently at her spinning wheel day after day. She embodied the ideal to which women in his movement could and should aspire – that of the labouring nationalist ascetic. (The cultivation of physical chastity and moral virtue in combination took the form of a denial of pleasure i.e., a deliberate de-sexualizing of the body, and Gandhi repeatedly recommended that married couples practice celibacy.)

Gandhi never doubted that women themselves were enthusiastic about his political programme of establishing *Ramarajya* in India – the political utopia that, he believed, assured its subjects of harmonious community. And yet, the kingdom of Rama was the place from where Sita had been exiled. On the basis of mere suspicions of infidelity, she had been banished by a husband to whom she had already once demonstrated her devotion by undergoing an ordeal of fire. In his anxiety to satisfy his subjects, Rama chose to ignore the question of Sita's happiness. In calling for *Ramarajya* as the desideratum for postcolonial India, Gandhi implicitly endorses a patriarchal despotism, in which even women pure of mind shall ever remain banished for a fault beyond their capacity of will or intention.

Insofar as Gandhi was concerned, Sita's chastity was more than a simple signifier of her moral uprightness, it was her security against violation. Sita, Gandhi declared, 'for the protection of her virtues did not need the assistance of Rama, her Lord and master. The chronicler of the history of Sita and Rama tells us that it was the purity of Sita, which was her sole shield and protection' (*CWMG* v. 40: 162). Of course Gandhi creatively re-worked the familiar narrative mostly omitting the reasons traditionally given for Ravana not violating her chastity.⁴ Where he elaborated further, Gandhi dismissed the divine dispensation that protected Sita as merely metaphorical because it would undermine her personal resolve to remain chaste, 'We know the meaning of a boon', he said, '[i]t is only a symbol. Every woman who has inviolable purity of character enjoys the same boon as Sita did' (*CWMG* v. 50: 235). He further added, showing little regard for evidence, that 'Any man who casts an evil glance at such a woman would be instantly burned to ashes' (*CWMG* v. 50: 235).

⁴ One of the few times Gandhi mentioned it was in a letter to Shardabehn Kotak (*CWMG* v. 39:45).

5 The reference to Sita also entered the arena of legislative debates on the question of the desirability of the recovery mission for abducted women (see Butalia, Das, and Menon and Bhasin).

Gandhi continued to make references to Sita's chastity even as communal riots ravaged the subcontinent. On 26 November 1947, for instance, advising the families to rehabilitate their women-members subjected to intimate violence, he added, 'It is my belief that any woman who has the purity of Sita cannot be touched by anyone. But where can we find women like Sita these days? And not all women can be like Sita' (*CWVG* v. 97: 399). According to Gandhi, if the victim had the purity of Sita, she would not have been 'touched by anyone'; the passage thus suggests that violation is the consequence of the victim's moral failings, her lack of Sita-like resolve to remain pure. The words could hardly have brought comfort to violated women, but more importantly, one must ask if the issue of the victim's purity is even relevant.⁵ On the other hand, as Gandhi well knew it was Sita's fate to have her virtue impugned regardless of actual fact.

protecting women

The woman who calls upon Rama when in danger will surely be protected by Him. Which evil man will dare to approach a woman who is prepared to die? Her very eyes will shine with such light that any vicious man will be unnerved by it. (Gandhi, *CWVG* v. 25: 437)

What could a woman do to preserve her chastity if she was under threat? Gandhi urged 'every sister to pray thus on arising every morning: 'O God, keep me pure, give me the strength to preserve my chastity, strength to preserve it even at the cost of my life. With thee as my protector whom need I fear?' He claimed that 'such a prayer made with a pure mind will surely protect every woman' (*CWVG* v. 25: 437-438). And by way of proof of the effectiveness of prayer in guarding the body against violation, Gandhi cited the example of Draupadi from another Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*.

In the second book of the *Mahabharata*, the five Pandava princes, and their wife Draupadi, are invited by their cousins, the Kauravas, to a game of dice. The eldest Pandava prince, Yudhishtira, successively stakes his kingdom, himself, his brothers, and Draupadi; and loses all to the Kauravas. The Kaurava prince Duryodhana summons Draupadi to the royal assembly, but she refuses questioning the legality of Yudhishtira's wagering her. Duryodhana orders his brother to bring her forcibly into the royal court, and to disrobe her. Bereft of all other protection, Draupadi prays to Lord Krishna. He responds by performing a miracle – the length of the cloth wrapping her is made unending, and so, undressing her is impossible.

In Draupadi's prayers to Krishna to salvage her modesty, Gandhi found a shining example of 'passive resistance' through a surrender of human agency and the placing of trust in the divine. 'Who will say', Gandhi asks,

after reading the *Mahabharata*, that Draupadi was dependent on others? Who will call Draupadi dependent, Draupadi who, when the Pandavas failed to protect her saved herself

by an appeal to Lord Krishna? We cherish as sacred the names of seven women as chaste and virtuous wives. Were they dependent? A woman who has the strength to preserve her purity, to defend her virtue – to call such a woman dependent is to murder language and violate dharma. (CWMG v. 31: 338)

He interpreted her dependence on the divine as a sign of her inner strength, not helplessness. (He ignored entirely Draupadi's reproach of the Kaurava elders present at the gathering, and her curse on the family.) Moreover, God's agency was obscured in Gandhi's re-telling, with grace becoming a function of devotion. But, his admiration of Draupadi's actions begs the question that, while passive resistance was effective as a political strategy of opposition to colonial rule, was it a deterrent to intimate violation?

From the standpoint of women's agency, Gandhi's putting the onus (mostly) on the woman to protect herself against violation instead of depending on a man to come to her aid is noteworthy. Men were not exempt from the responsibility,⁶ but it devolved on women as well. But how were women to defend themselves? In a few instances, Gandhi offered them a more concrete solution than prayer (needless to say, he opposed the use of weapons). In a 1932 article, he initially suggested that the victim '[i]f she truly has courage in her and also compassion' she will 'melt [her attacker] with the radiance of her compassion', but added that, a woman who had not reached that state, will 'become enraged. In her rage she will slap him and raise such a row that he will run away from the scene. Or he will fall at her feet then and there' (CWMG v. 56: 454-455).⁷ Ten years later, in another article he again asserted that 'the flame' of a woman's 'dazzling purity' will compel her attacker, 'however beastly a man', to 'bow in shame' (CWMG v.82: 41), but went on to say:

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. (italics in original; CWMG v.82: 42)

The insistence that, in order to resist violation, women die through force of will pervades much of Gandhi's thinking. Elsewhere he said,

[women] must develop courage enough to die rather than yield to the brute in man. It has been suggested that a girl who is gagged or bound so as to make her powerless even for struggling cannot die as easily as I seem to think. I venture to assert that a girl who has the will to resist can burst all the bonds that may have been used to render her powerless. The resolute will give her the strength to die. (CWMG v.74: 355-356)

Given Gandhi's emphasis on death before dishonour, could we read women's mass-suicides during the communal riots of 1946-1947 as their final expression of agency over the *only* territory they could control – their bodies? But, if the

6 A man, Gandhi said, 'must not be a passive onlooker. He must protect the woman. He must not run for police help; he must not rest satisfied by pulling the alarm chain in the train. If he is able to practise non-violence, he will die in doing so and thus save the woman in jeopardy. If he does not believe in non-violence or cannot practise it, he must try to save her by using all the force he may have. In either way there must be readiness on his part to lay down his life' (CWMG v.82: 42-43). To forestall violation, Gandhi even justified the protector's killing the woman and surrendering himself to her attacker as 'the purest form of *ahimsa*' (Gandhi, CWMG, 43: 59).

7 As for 'those who have not a living faith in non-violence', Gandhi said 'will learn the art of ordinary self-defence and protect themselves from indecent behaviour of unchivalrous youth' (CWMG, 74: 356).

exercise of agency entailed the death of the subject, how could it be empowering? Urvashi Butalia interrogates the nature of women's agency during the Partition in her essay 'Community, State and Gender'. Her study focuses on three key constituencies: women who 'chose' death over violation and/or conversion by the rival community; abducted women; and, women involved in recovery work. For reasons of relevance my discussion will be confined to the first two groups. Referring to women's collective drowning, Butalia asks whether their decision to die was driven by genuine consent or subtle coercion (their internalization of patriarchal views on women's chastity, the demands of their circumstances and of the community, etc.). The women, she finds, were 'simultaneously agents and victims' (Butalia, 1993: WS-15). Nevertheless, their heroic 'choice' was celebrated by many, including Gandhi (passage cited earlier).

Conversely, many abducted women suffered a suppression of their individual-will. Despite their frequent resistance to the forcible repatriations undertaken by both India and Pakistan, the women were returned to the 'right' country, and thus denied the right to self-determination, particularly regarding domicile (and therefore, citizenship). The Inter-Dominion agreement reached between the two countries 'categorically stated that the women's wishes were of no consequence' (Butalia, 1993: WS-17). As I have discussed elsewhere, 'The women were important only as objects, bodies to be recovered and returned to their "owners" in the place where they "belonged," a belonging determined by the state and which advanced the [Indian] state's claims both nationally (recovery of Hindu and Sikh women) and internationally (return of Muslim women)' (Mookerjea-Leonard, 2004: 34). In contrast to Gandhi's praise for women's suicidal 'choice', he left no room for non-compliant abductees to exercise preference. The 'Father of the Nation' endorsed the state's recovery efforts with,

The Hindu and Sikh women carried away by force *should be restored* to their families. Similarly the Muslim women taken away *should be restored* to theirs. This task should not be left to the families of the women. It should be our charge. ... It is said that *the women concerned do not now want to return, but still they have to be brought back*. Muslim women similarly *have to be taken back* to Pakistan. (emphasis mine; CWMG v. 98: 8-9)

Whereas Gandhi lauds women's suicides as conscious acts by intending subjects, his emphases on 'should be restored' and 'have to be brought back/taken back' override the express will of living women who 'do not ... want to return'. This is because women's unwillingness to be restored to the family and the nation was regarded as dissent, and had to be contained by depriving them of choice (while the suicides could be safely contained within a patriarchal discourse of family/national honour).

Gandhi, however, was not alone in insisting on women's repatriation. If anything, his was one of the more compassionate voices. Studies by Butalia (1993, 1995, 2000), Veena Das (1995), and Ritu *et al.* (1993, 1998) of debates in the Legislative

Assembly find that the subject drew impassioned responses. Many Congress-wallahs and, particularly, Hindu nationalists vociferously demanded the retrieval of national property (Hindu and Sikh women) from Pakistan. On the other hand, there was in India opposition to this form of sanctioned coercion, although with little effect.

victimhood and culpability

If we take count of cases of rape in the world, we shall discover that such incidents are very rare. A woman's virtue is violated through both the man and the woman acting voluntarily, and if a woman is self-controlled and pure in mind, violation of her virtue is impossible. (Gandhi, *CWMG* v. 39: 4)

It seems from Gandhi's words about Draupadi, in the previous section, that a woman's violation, can only be her fault – the failure to pray and have faith in the divine. Thus, in a little over two months after he had claimed that the women and girls forcibly abducted during the Noakhali riots 'have committed no crime' (*CWMG* v. 92: 396), he changed his stand totally. On 3 January 1947, he is reported to have said 'not the men of Noakhali only were responsible for all that had happened, but women too were equally responsible' and renewed his call to women 'to be fearless and have faith in God like Draupadi and Sita of the past' (*CWMG* v. 93: 229). While he does not elaborate further, the question remains, how were women 'equally responsible' for the violence visited on them?⁸ Alternatively, from a Gandhian perspective, how could the perpetrator be held blameworthy at all?

Along these lines were the observations made in June 1947 while violence raged across northern India: 'If the atrocities one hears of are perpetrated on women, the fault does not lie with men alone. Women are also responsible. I know that today women have taken the downward path. In their craze for equality with men, they have forgotten their duty' (*CWMG* v. 95: 233). Gandhi's choice of words, more specifically the use of 'craze' is particularly revealing of his attitude towards women's struggle for a more equal and just society. 'Craze' is a word whose many synonyms range from fad, rage, fashion, frenzy, mania, obsession to derangement and hysteria, but do not include aspiration, longing, or yearning. Moreover, the passage comes remarkably close to a blank assertion that women are not only the victims but also the agents of their own violation. How precisely the 'craze' for equality between the sexes made women responsible for their bodily violation is not explained. Nor is the 'duty' to which he refers; although, for women, it is clearly *not* the duty owed to the self.

Gandhi's conceptualization of rape subtracts from it the element of force, the violent superseding of the woman's will, 'I believe' he said 'and doctors also hold the same view, that no woman can be absolutely and simply raped. Not being prepared to die, a woman yields to the wrongdoer. But a woman who has

⁸ Gandhi's view that women were also to blame for violence done to them is evident in his response to an incident at Tolstoy Farm in South Africa (*CWMG* v. 34: 201–202). Upon learning that two girls had been teased by a young man, Gandhi persuaded the girls to cut off their hair 'so as to give them a sense of security and at the same time to sterilize the sinner's eye'. Referring to this incident, David Hardiman writes, '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' (Hardiman: 104). Gandhi made a

similar response to a letter from a young woman complaining about harassment by men (see *CWMG v. 74: 355*).

overcome all fear of death would die before submitting to the outrage' (*CWMG v. 55: 445*). In his correspondence with Mahadev Desai, Gandhi took this even further, 'Not only I but medical jurisprudence holds it impossible for a woman to be outraged so long as she does not relax. A woman who is not ready to die relaxes, may be reluctantly, and submits to the hooligan' (*CWMG v. 56: 462*). By submitting to criminal force, or as Gandhi puts it 'relaxing', instead of choosing to die the woman becomes a participant in her violation. As the project of Congress nationalism shattered against the intransigence of Partition, all that remained was the possibility of total self-sacrifice. The violence of the Partition, while destroying the collective potential of independence, nevertheless left open the possibility of individual salvation, if only through self-willed death.

While this view is consistent with Gandhi's celebration of pre-emptive suicides, there is nevertheless a contradiction here between the actions of the mythical women he recommended as prototypes and what he prescribed for real women. Given that Sita and Draupadi were, according to him, ideal women, it is rather curious that neither woman was ever forced to choose suicide in the face of forcible abduction or public disrobing. But more importantly, were the actions of Sita and Draupadi in the ancient epics viable solutions to the problems in the present, or in fact, possibilities at all? The brutalities women suffered during the riots could scarcely be explained in the rhetoric of women's lack of devotion to God, or as a problem of chastity (see Gandhi's speech on 26 November 1947, cited earlier). Gandhi's emphases on the preservation of chastity at any cost, I suggest, makes it difficult for him to respond adequately to these atrocities. By talking in terms of virtue, he denies the actual complexion of the problem. In the end, faced with the undeniable facts, he could only conclude that abducted and violated young women had failed a test, that their moral virtue was inadequate to the demands of true nationalism.

chastity and death

[T]hat man does not exist nor will he ever be born who can force himself upon a woman who values her chastity. It has, of course, to be admitted that not every woman possesses this spiritual strength and purity. (Gandhi, *CWMG v. 25: 437*)

Given Gandhi's recommendation that women die to preserve physical chastity, it might be argued that Gandhi's asceticism is fundamentally death-driven. And, yet, he condemned in no uncertain terms the practice of sati or a widow's self-sacrifice on her husband's funeral pyre. Responding to a report of a sati performed in Bombay in 1932, Gandhi said,

I ... regard the alleged self-immolation of this sister as vain. It certainly cannot be set up as an example to be copied. Don't I appreciate at least her courage to die? – I may perhaps be asked. My reply is 'no' in all conscience. ... Why should I take upon me the sin of even unconsciously leading astray some ignorant sister by my injudicious praise of suicide?

Satihood is the acme of purity. This purity cannot be attained or realized by dying.
(*CWMG* v. 55: 28)

So, according to Gandhi, satihood is the acme of purity, but this bodily purity cannot be realized by dying. And further, the praise of suicide even if it is in service of the preservation of purity is injudicious – and yet, as I have demonstrated above, he did recommend suicide repeatedly for the preservation of chastity. In some cases, women's suicide for the purposes of preserving chastity is censured, in others, approved. Beneath the seeming contradiction, I suggest, it is possible to trace some coherence in Gandhi's thought: if a woman's chastity is under threat, even a perceived threat, her suicide is justified, even required; but, when there is no risk of violation, destruction of the body for purposes of preserving purity, is futile. In Gandhian discourse, life is not for the possibility of the refinement and satisfaction of desire. It is to be lived in the spirit of self-sacrifice – labouring hard for the community. Purity through labour and self-sacrifice are ends in themselves, and are to be dissolved in suicide only when their preservation in any other form is impossible.

In this article I have endeavoured not so much to expose the underlying logic of contradictions in Gandhi's thought as simply to show the manner in which Gandhi's thinking about women's sexuality and purity motivate so much of his thinking and the resultant political positions. More specifically, the aim here has been to demonstrate how leadership of the Congress movement against British imperialism suffered from a failure of comprehension of, and response to, the mass rapes that accompanied the Partition. That is, Gandhi's statements, the contradictions of which I have attempted to explore here, missed out entirely on the most important aspects of the situation he was reacting to and were therefore woefully inadequate. More forcefully stated, Gandhian politics itself participated in the patriarchal logic whose violent brutality was so horrifically exposed by the fate suffered by so many women on both sides of the new Partition borders.

By focusing on the moral or purity status of the victim, Gandhi, in his public statements, failed to draw attention to the issue of the socially deep-rooted psychopathology that expressed itself with such dramatic horror in the mass abduction and rape of women by men in that period. With few exceptions, for instance, when he says, 'We have all become goondas (hoodlums). ... It is the men who commit rape that should feel ashamed' (*CWMG* v. 97: 399), the criminal and moral culpability of thousands of Indian and Pakistani men actively or passively engaged in crimes against women forms no part of Gandhi's discourse. This fact alone constitutes nothing short of a staggering failure of leadership and vision. Some of the most deep-seated inadequacies of mainstream Indian nationalism were exposed by those acts, the way in which nationalism at its core was expressive of regressive psycho-sexual norms. This Gandhi could not

recognize, precisely because of his own participation in the patriarchal logic at work in the mass violence against women at that time.

The second aspect of the event of which Gandhi is unaware is the actual character of the choices and dilemmas faced by the women victims of Partition. While, of course, there were at the time of Partition violent rapes of women in many areas, far more characteristic of the gender violence we associate with that period is the widespread abduction of unmarried girls by members of all three communities – Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim. This was the background to many of Gandhi's statements where he was responding to attempts by the state to repatriate Hindu and Sikh abductees. Whether in his unsettlingly explicit descriptions of actual physical submission to violation or his more understandable discussion of force and consent, Gandhi can only imagine the plight women faced in terms of the moment of violation. His rhetoric has no room for the woman who under duress goes with her abductor to become his wife and who is reluctant to part from him and return to her own family. This, as has been well documented, was a phenomenon quite widespread and it is significant that so many women 'chose' to submit to their abduction rather than risk rejection by their families and natal communities. The very possibility and legitimacy of such rejection depended fundamentally on the rhetoric of purity which actuated so much of Gandhi's thought.

Perhaps the cruellest irony of Gandhian discourse derives from the fact that most Indian women who became abductees were not urban middle-class women for whom at least a modicum of self-expression and wilfulness was available. Gandhi's preoccupation with women's purity or moral virtue is simply out of place in a society in which practically no room whatsoever is allotted to women in decisions that determine their domestic circumstances and their sexual availability. The fact that many women preferred to remain in the homes of their abductors rather than return to an uncertain fate where they were likely to be rejected by their families and to be considered unmarriageable itself constituted a most telling condemnation of the prevailing nationalism. While Gandhi's rather disturbing preoccupations with 'relaxation' may tell us something about his own imagination and that of his own confirmed supporters, they are far removed from the genuine circumstances and hard decisions faced by many women – Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim women alike – at the time independence was won from the British.

acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this project were presented at the annual conference of the British Association of South Asian Studies, 2006 and the Women's Studies Research Group Lecture Series at James Madison University, 2009. I thank the audiences for their helpful comments, especially, Annette Federico, Laurie

Kutchins, Ann-Janine Morey, and Mary Thompson. I also thank the editors and the anonymous referees of the *Feminist Review* and Spencer A. Leonard for their generous advice with the article.

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doi:10.1057/fr.2009.39