

Broadly.

Gandhi Was a Racist Who Forced Young Girls to Sleep in Bed with Him

By Mayukh Sen — December 3, 2015

Be the self-righteous misogynist you wish to see in the world.

In August 2012, just before India's 65th Independence Day, Outlook India, one of the country's most widely circulated print magazines, published the results of a blockbuster poll it had conducted with its readership. Who, after "the Mahatma," was the greatest Indian to have walked the country's soil? The Mahatma at the center of this smarmy question was, of course, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

There's nothing surprising about the fact that Outlook passed this assumption off as truth. Gandhi has become the obvious, no-duh barometer for Indian greatness, if not greatness in general. After all, who doesn't like Gandhi? We've come to know him as this frail, nobly malnourished old man with a purely moral, pious soul. He's a guy who ushered in a new grammar of nonviolent resistance to India, a country he helped escape the constraints of British imperial rule. He soldiered through some valiant hunger strikes until a Hindu nationalist shot, killed, and effectively martyred him.

My maternal grandfather went to jail with Gandhi in 1933, so I grew up knowing this myth was cobbled together from half-truths. My grandfather took the lessons he'd learned in jail to begin an ashram in the bowels of West Bengal. As a consequence, my parents raised me with an intimate understanding of Gandhi that teetered between laudatory and critical. My family adored him, though we never really bought into the idea that he single-handedly orchestrated India's independence movement. This is to say nothing of Gandhi's bigotry, which we didn't touch in our household. In the decades since his assassination in 1948, the image of Gandhi has been constructed so carefully, scrubbed clean of its grimy details, that it's easy to forget that he predicated his rhetoric on anti-blackness, a vehement allergy to female sexuality, and a general unwillingness to help liberate the Dalit, or "untouchable," caste.

Gandhi lived in South Africa for over two decades, from 1893 to 1914, working as a lawyer and fighting for the rights of Indians—and only Indians. To him, as he expressed quite plainly, black South Africans were barely human. He referred to them using the derogatory South African slur kaffir. He lamented that Indians were considered "little better, if at all, than savages or the Natives of Africa." In 1903, he declared that the "white race in South Africa should be the predominating race." After getting thrown in jail in 1908, he scoffed at the fact that Indians were classed with black, not white, prisoners. Some South African activists have thrust these parts of Gandhi's thinking back into the spotlight, as did a book published this past September by two South African academics, but they've barely made a dent on the American cultural consciousness beyond the concentric circles of Tumblr.

Around this same time, Gandhi began cultivating the misogyny he'd carry with him for the rest of his life. During his years in South Africa, he once responded to a young man's sexual harassment of two of Gandhi's female followers by forcibly cutting the girls' hair short to make sure they didn't invite any sexual attention. (Michael Connellan, writing in the Guardian, carefully explained that Gandhi felt women surrendered their humanity the minute men raped them.) He operated under the assumption that men couldn't control their basic predatory impulses while simultaneously asserting that women were responsible for—and completely at the mercy of—these impulses. His views on female sexuality were similarly deplorable; according to Rita Banerji, writing in *Sex and Power*, Gandhi viewed menstruation as the "manifestation of the distortion of a woman's soul by her sexuality." He also believed the use of contraceptives was the sign of whoredom.

He confronted this inability to control male libido head-on when he vowed celibacy (without discussing it with his wife) back in India, and using women—including some underage girls, like his grand-niece—to test his sexual patience. He'd sleep naked next to them in bed without touching them, making sure he didn't get aroused; these women were props to coax him into celibacy.

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Kasturba, Gandhi's wife, was perhaps his most frequent punching bag. "I simply cannot bear to look at Ba's face," he once gushed about her, because she was caring for him while he was sick. "The expression is often like that on the face of a meek cow and gives one the feeling as a cow occasionally does, that in her own dumb manner she is saying something." An apologist's response to this, of course, would claim that cows are sacred beings in Hinduism—and so Gandhi's likening of his wife to a cow was really a veiled compliment. Or, perhaps, we could chalk it up to mere marital annoyance. When Kasturba came down with pneumonia, Gandhi denied her penicillin, even though doctors said it would cure her; he insisted the new medicine was an alien substance her body should not take in. She succumbed to the sickness and died in 1944. Just years later, perhaps realizing the grave mistake he'd made, he willfully took quinine to treat his own malaria. He survived.

There's a Western impulse to view Gandhi as the quiet annihilator of caste, a characterization that's categorically false. He viewed the emancipation of Dalits as an untenable goal, and felt that they weren't worth a separate electorate. He insisted, instead, that Dalits remain complacent, waiting for a turn that history never gave them. Dalits continue to suffer from the direct results of prejudices sewn into the cultural fabric of India.

History, as Arundhati Roy wrote in last year's seminal essay "The Doctor and the Saint," has been unbelievably kind to Gandhi. This has given us the latitude to brush off his prejudices as mere imperfections, small marks on clean hands. Apologists will insist that Gandhi was flawed

and human. Perhaps they'll morph his prejudices into something positive, proof that he was just like us! Or another type of rhetorical defection: the argument that illuminating Gandhi's prejudices demonstrates how Americans harbor a sick fascination with India's problems, as if Western writers are obsessed with concocting social ills for the subcontinent out of thin air.

These are the mental gymnastics we engage in when we're eager to mythologize. The vile traits Gandhi exhibited persist in Indian society at large today—virulent anti-blackness, a blasé disregard for women's bodies, careful myopia around the piss-poor treatment of Dalits. It's not a coincidence that these very strains of Gandhi's rhetoric have been stamped out of his legacy.

But how do you live up to a ridiculous sobriquet like "the greatest Indian"? This is a colossal burden to place upon anyone—to dub him the greatest person to hail from a country that's home to billions of people. Creating a false idol involves a great deal of forgetting. It's easy to slobber over a man who didn't really exist