



Gandhi Used His Position To Sexually Exploit Young Women. The Way WE React To This Matters Even Today

By Rita Banerji — October 2013

It is a fact. Gandhi had young women in his ashram, some of them still teenagers, one of them his own grand-niece (Manu Gandhi), sleep naked with him in his bed at night. This was an aspect of Gandhi that I had not read about before, and it surprised me at first. I was researching for my book "Sex and Power" which looks at the history of sex and sexuality in India, and it was important for me to investigate this further.

My initial tendency was to regard this as 'gossip' but then some of the biographies confirmed it as fact, but also hurriedly dismissed it as something that we all apparently should accept as the eccentricities of 'great' men! That's not a logical argument for me and so I began to dig into archives for more information till a complete picture emerged. And that picture upset me. I saw Gandhi as a classic example of a sexual predator — a man who uses his position of power to manipulate and sexually exploit the people he directly controls.

Most angering for me, was reading about the psychological and emotional trauma of the girls and women who he used for his 'experiments', which is what he called these incidents. The word 'psychotic' repeatedly came up in various documents with regards to these women's mental state. The women, most of whom were in their late teens or early twenties (not surprisingly, given he could have 'experimented' with the older women or even his own wife!) were repeatedly described as depressed and weeping, and seemed to be completely in his control. Besides this, some of the archival references lead me to believe that Gandhi may well have been practicing the traditional, historic form of Indian celibacy — which hinges on one thing only — and that is control of ejaculation. Everything else is permitted.

What I could not understand is why school texts and biographies have selectively edited out this information because it was a big and explosive aspect of the inner dynamics of the Gandhi ashram and its inmates for the last 10 years of Gandhi's life. It eventually led to the partial break-up of his inner-core circle. But Gandhi is long dead. So why should the naked girls in Gandhi's bed matter today? Well, because the issue goes way beyond Gandhi. What really matters now, and it matters deeply, is how we respond to what Gandhi did. Today we like to believe that we are far more progressive in terms of recognising and condemning the abuse of power by men for sexual exploitation and abuse. And yet, I repeatedly find every time I bring this up (for eg. in this article Gandhi to Asharam: Who Empowers the Sex-Crimes of Gurus?) most people's responses are defensive and regressive! But this is what surprised me the most! Compared to our reactions and responses today, the people in Gandhi's time seemed to be far more progressive! They not only recognised that he was abusing his position and power in a way that was unethical and depraved, but they outright condemned it, confronted it, and eventually forced him to stop.

On March 16, 1947, Nirmal Kumar Bose, one of Gandhi's closest associates wrote a letter to Kishorlal G. Mashruwala, another of Gandhi's close colleagues, saying, "When I first learnt about Gandhi's experiment in which a girl took off her clothes and lay under the same cover with him and he tried to find out if any sexual feeling was evoked in him or his companion, I felt genuinely surprised. Personally, I would not tempt myself like that and more than that, my respect for [women] would prevent me from treating her as an instrument in my experiment."

N.K. Bose's letter was only one of the many exchanges among Gandhi's closest associates and friends in the first half of 1947, about this practice of his, that angered and upset many. These included prominent leaders of India's freedom movement such as Vallabhai Patel, J. B. Kriplani and Vinobha Bhave. Many of them confronted Gandhi directly, and others stopped associating with him. This 1947 storm in the Gandhi camp was set off by R. P. Parasuram, a young man from Kerala, who for two years had served as Gandhi's personal secretary and typist and watched his personal affairs from close by. Like many students in India at that time, Parasuram too, had idolised Gandhi and after his studies, had travelled to Gandhi's ashram to live and work with him, and help with India's freedom movement. But two years after working with Gandhi, Parasuram quit the ashram and his job. Before he left, he wrote a 16-page long letter explaining his distress at what he had witnessed in Gandhi's behaviour with girls and women in the ashram — which included other things besides his 'experiments' in bed. He said that as much as he had worshipped Gandhi, his conscience did not allow him to stay silent any longer. And that in order for him to continue, Gandhi had to concede to five of his demands (all of which dealt with Gandhi's physical interactions with girls at the ashram) which he listed in the letter. [See the letter below.] On January 2, 1947, Gandhi responded to Parasuram's letter with, "I cannot concede your demands. Since such is my opinion and there is a conflict of ideals, you are at liberty to leave me today."

Parasuram did leave as did some of Gandhi's other close associates. But others, especially those who were in more senior positions as friends and associates, continued their pressure on Gandhi to stop. One of the things that was a big issue was Gandhi's hypocrisy and manipulation, to what seemed to many, to serve his own ends. Gandhi had made an unwritten rule of celibacy for all the inhabitants of his ashram. Oddly, he would even make married couples take this vow because he believed that this was central to his philosophy of non-violence. Sexual stimulation of any sort, he preached, evoked violence in one's thoughts and behaviour. He would tell them that even touching each other was unacceptable. He made the life of one of his own sons, whose wife got pregnant, absolutely hell, angry that they had had sex when he had forbidden them to! Yet he was free to do as he pleased. He was so confident that he wouldn't be challenged. Swami Anand and Kedarnath in a question and answer grilling from March 15-16, 1947, shot off questions like, "Why did you not take your coworkers into confidence and carry them with you [into] this novel practice?" and "Why do we find so much disquiet and unhappiness around you? Why are your companions emotionally unhinged?" The Congress President J. B. Kriplani told him that he was simply, "exploiting human beings as means rather than as ends in themselves." N.K. Bose suggested this course of action for Gandhi: "... he should not allow Manu [Gandhi's great-niece]

to sleep in the same bed with him until he had tried enough to educate the public into his new way of thinking, or the public had got all the fact[s] about him and clearly expressed its disapproval. Then he [can go] back to his practice with the full brunt of his suffering for the opinion which he held right." Vallabhai Patel told Gandhi off to his face. He said what he was doing was 'adharma' (immoral). In a classic, egotistical way Gandhi retorted to Patel by telling Balkrishna Bhawe "for me Manu sleeping with me is a matter of dharma (moral duty)."

But under this onslaught, Gandhi eventually conceded defeat, even if not willingly. He said he felt like a "broken reed." His ego and narcissism had been broken by people around him who fortunately understood and did better than we do today. This is the question that I'd like to ask everyone reading this: Why is it that it's hard to say that Gandhi, the hero of India's freedom movement had also used his power and position to sexually exploit/abuse girls and women who came under the mantle of his leadership?

Below is an extract from R. P. Parasuram's 16-page letter to Gandhi just before he quit. He called it his letter of "indictment."

I January, 1947. Srirampur Revered Bapu, I write these lines in sorrow and pain. You know how shy and unforward I have been these two years. You must imagine to what depths I must have been agitated then to overcome my shyness and become bold and that too with a man who is considered by many to be the greatest man living. You must also ponder over the fact as to what it is that has made me bold and say things so boldly. It is because I feel I am so clearly in the right and you so clearly in the wrong. It is the cause that gives me the courage. It is not that I did not know these before. I knew and kept quiet. I thought, "Why should I bring these to him?"

There are men like Kanu [Gandhi], Kishorilal bhai [Mashruwala], etc., experienced men and men knowing you fully. And then I had not the courage. I have come over my shyness with you. When [at] first I came to the ashram, I came with high respect for the ashram and its inmates and its way of life. All that was knocked off in 24 hours. After coming here I must confess to having lost a portion of the respect I had for you. You are the Father of our Nation. You have taken us so far along the path of freedom and independence. You must see the hand of God in the fact that I have overcome my shyness. I object to your sleeping in the same bed with members of the opposite sex. In February 1945 or so, I was given the draft of a statement to type. I was shocked by the contents...I must tell you that even before I know of this. One day Amin-bhai came and told me that he was shocked to see Manu [Manu Gandhi — Gandhi's own grand niece] getting into your bed. In those days I was more shy than I am now. My only friend in the ashram was Amin. Even then I came to know of the discussions about this affair because the ashram people are so careless and can't keep their mouth shut. Everybody objected to your doing this.

Apart from the question of any affect on you, what about the effect on girls? There is something of other wrong with them [the women who sleep naked with Gandhi]. [The]

Punjabi girl who lived opposite my room in Matunga. She used to weep unrestrainedly and that not caring whether others saw her or not. She laughed also unrestrainedly. And then here is Dr. Sushila-behn [the 24-year-old in-house physician at the ashram who Gandhi also used for his 'experiments']. How many are the days when she has not wept? She is a doctor and yet she is always a patient, always is ill. Who has heard of a doctor who cries out at night? Even then the whole thing is considered wrong by the world. I do not like it. Nirmal babu [Bose] does not. Sucheta-behn [Kriplani] did not like it and said, "However great he may be, he cannot do such things. What is this?" You must admit that there is something in our objection. You cannot waive it aside. As for blood relations [this is in reference to Manu Gandhi]. The world is sceptic even there. There have been cases of immorality between father and daughter, brother and sister. I object to your having massage done by girls. When I was studying in college, I read a report saying you were being massaged by Dr. Sushila-behn. And now I find you do get yourself massaged by girls. Those people who know that you are naked during massage time say that you could at least put a cover over it [his genitals]. The same objection I hold against girls coming to the bathroom when you go there. Ramachandran saw you like that and said you had fallen a little from his estimation. However great you may be, you cannot do these things. Your placing your hands on shoulders of girls. You had written once that you gave up this practice because others intimated you with evil intention. I have not come across any other writing saying you could resume it. So it was strange to me why you resumed it.

During the two years I have been with you, about 50 letters or so objecting to this practice from admirers and calumniators came. None of them got any reply. Your being seen naked [during his bath and massage] jars on the mind of strangers, admirers though they might be. Ramachandran did not like it. He said it was the limit. Ever since the 17th December [1946], when in the small hours of the morning you made those dreadful sounds, dreadful because it came from you man of such eminence, even otherwise unbecoming for any wise or old man, my head has not been at peace. I have heard of another such instance from Mr. Ramachandran of the API [Associated Press of India] when you told Sushila-behn to leave you. I have seen such another instance at Delhi. But this event shook me to my depths. I said to myself that God and the nation would not forgive me if I kept quiet. You commit Himalyan blunders. But you refuse to see these things and when told, you are irritated. I say you are conceited and constitute yourself to be the repository of all the wisdom in the world. And now to my charges. Unless [my demands] are fulfilled, I [will] depart. I beg to differ and go away. Your actions to which I object: 1. Your sleeping with any member of the opposite sex. 2. Being massaged by any member of the opposite sex. 3. Allowing yourself to be seen naked by any member of the opposite sex. 4. Allowing yourself to be seen naked by strangers and even by people who are of your party who are not so intimate. 5. Placing your hands on the shoulders of girls when walking.