

Available online at <http://www.ijims.com>

ISSN - (Print): 2519 – 7908 ; ISSN - (Electronic): 2348 – 0343

IF:4.335; Index Copernicus (IC) Value: 60.59; UGC Recognized -UGC Journal No.: 47192

Body As The Site of Reform and Swaraj for Gandhi

Nitika Ladda

Centre for Political Studies

Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

Abstract

The following paper attempts to understand the politics of and on the body by looking into the practices of Gandhi during the national movement. By focusing our attention on the body of Gandhi, we can be equipped better to deal with the salient aspects of nationalist project as whole. The body serves as an important point of analysis because in the modern discourse the body of individuals is at the centre of exercise of power. Body then as such is not an isolated category rather it gets constantly manipulated to make it docile, efficient and economic through constant supervision and coercion. The analysis of certain practices of somaticity in Gandhi such as celibacy, diet and health reform can help us understand what it means to train the body in a certain manner. The paper explores the link that exists between the body of an individual with the nation and how the aspect of sovereignty should be present in both the body and the nation. The focus of the paper is to introspect how the idea of body was reworked by Gandhi as the site of reform and struggle against colonialism. The nature of Gandhi's politics and moral philosophy was deeply ingrained in his own bodily practices, therefore an investigation of the body to begin with should help us make better sense of Gandhi and the nationalist project as a whole. Apart from a political and philosophical idea, *swaraj* was also a metabolic principle for Gandhi, and we must adopt a lens that takes into account this dynamics of embodiment while seeking to understand Gandhi.

Key words: Gandhi, body, reform, power, swaraj

Introduction

In the struggle against colonialism in India, the role played by Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi has a significant relevance. After the arrival of Gandhi in the domain of national politics, the movement gradually became widespread and involved Indian masses from all backgrounds thereby doing away with the elitist rationale of the movement. The Non Cooperation Movement (1920), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930) and Quit India Movement (1942) launched by Gandhi, attracted the participation of people from all backgrounds- women, students, workers and farmers. Thus, the change that came about in the nature of anti-colonial struggle under the guidance of Gandhi was tremendous. This aspect of the Gandhian politics has been analysed in detail. In this paper, I seek to understand the dynamics of the Gandhian strategy during the national struggle but from a different perspective. The aim in the paper is to highlight the intimate link that Gandhi sought to establish with the national body politic through his own body. In doing so, I will be looking into the views and practices of Gandhi on prostitution, celibacy (*brahmacharya*), the fasts undertaken by him, the nature of his dietetics- vegetarianism and the experiment of sleeping with naked young women in the last stages of his life. What is most striking about Gandhi's experiments', says Joseph Alter, 'is their utterly banal character, and Gandhi's own virtual obsession with seemingly mundane, utilitarian issues of diet, health, and, above all else, the control of sexual passion.'¹ Gandhi made the body into an absolutely important factor in everyday life. Thus, let us note at the very outset that the body was not an isolated category in his thoughts, rather it was culturally situated and located within a matrix of power. The body was constantly reconfigured and manipulated in various ways by Gandhi in order to achieve the perfect form of *swaraj*, since according to him the body of the individual was the fundamental basis of self-rule (*swaraj*). For Gandhi the only road to *swaraj* was *satyagraha*, the force of love or of the soul and for him only those trained in the act of self-suffering and sacrifice would be able to rise up against the tyranny of British rule. The nature of political and social practices against imperial rule was embodied in a thick sense for Gandhi and that is why it becomes essential to closely examine the various bodily experiments undertaken by the great

¹Alter, Joseph S. "Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1, February 1994:45-66, p. 61.

leader. The question that emerges to the mind is what was the connection that Gandhi sought to establish between his own body and the nation? Gandhi through his own embodiment negated a total masculinist definition of the body thus we also need to ponder what kind of body was he talking about?² Also another point of reference that emerges is how was it possible for Gandhi to make the entire country go along these courses? Is it possible that by attributing the importance of health for *swaraj*, Gandhi was trying to make every individual responsible for the attainment of self-rule in a deeper sense? Or was it his critique of modern civilization that led him to emphasize self-control and discipline with regard to one's body? Thus to understand and answer these questions one needs to delve into the way the body was inscribed and disciplined by Gandhi for the formation of a perfect *satyagrahi*, capable of living up to the ideals enunciated by him. In the course of analysing the politics of Gandhi, one cannot make a neat distinction between Gandhi's personal experiments with dietetics, celibacy, hygiene and nature cure and his search for Truth; between his personal obsession with health, his faith in non-violence and his program of socio-political reform. The idea of *Swaraj* was not just limited to home rule and freedom from colonial government, rather it evoked a notion of freedom that could only be achieved through the ethical government of the self and rigorous practice of self-discipline in the pursuit of truth. According to Gandhi without governing the soul of the nation, home rule would be equivalent to accepting, "English rule without Englishmen" of rendering India, "not Hindustan but Englishistan".³ Ananya Vajpeyi in this context has argued that Gandhi frequently switched registers between the idea of an individual and a collective selfhood, thus addressing both India and every person in it, thus potentially addressing almost every Indian.⁴

In the quest for inserting the body into the nation a strictly disciplined and regimented manner, the practice of being a *brahmachari* for Gandhi was of quintessential importance. For Gandhi the practice of *brahmacharya* had a political agenda written on it as the regimen was supposed to produce a citizen marked with strength, vigour and vitality. According to Sudhir Kakar, 'brahmacharya was one leg of a tripod of which the other two were nonviolence (ahimsa) and truth (satya).'⁵ In 1906, when Gandhi was thirty-seven years old he took a life-long vow to abstain from all kinds of sexual relations with his wife or any other woman. The idea of celibacy for Gandhi was not merely an abstinence from sexual relation per se, but it meant the control of the senses, word and deed in totality. Gandhi quite often articulated in his writings that his capacity to work fearlessly in the political arena was a result of the psychic power gained through celibacy.

One of the most important reasons for *brahmacharya* and sexual abstinence was the preservation of seminal fluid. Gandhi upheld a puritanical view about sex since he saw it as the 'most energy consuming and enervating of all human activities.'⁶ The wastage of seminal fluid with the power to create another life was an 'indication of gross ignorance.'⁷ As stated by him, the secretion of semen from the sexual glands should be utilized for enhancing one's mental, physical and spiritual energy. The sexual activity led to the loss of semen which was the sole source of energy in the human body and according to Gandhi through the right spiritual practices semen could be transformed into ojas or spiritual energy, the source of spiritual power. Parekh also points out that Gandhi was convinced that *brahmacharis* like him would be capable of transforming the face of India since they would have the energy to ignite the Indian masses for the cause of freedom. Gandhi was concerned about the wastage of semen especially in the case of the youth (the case of self-abuse or masturbation among them). For him the key to good spiritual, physical and mental health was possible only with the conservation of the vital energy.

Gandhi in his political endeavours would always seek to find links with his own body. In this regard as aforementioned the component of celibacy was the crucial one since for an explanation of his political failures and sense of despair, Gandhi at all times would look for shortcomings in his practice of sexual abstinence wondering if the God of desire had triumphed in him

² Gandhi through his politics of the body takes us into a realm where the relation between 'woman' and 'man' must be reconfigured.

³ Gandhi, M. K. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938, p. 25.

⁴ Vajpeyi, Ananya. *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India*. United States of America: Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 50.

⁵ Kakar, Sudhir. *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989, pp. 93-94.

⁶ Parekh, Bikhu. *Colonialism Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhian political discourse* Sage Publications: New Delhi, 1989, p. 197.

⁷ Gandhi, M.K. *Key to Health*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1948, p. 46.

thus depriving him of his powers. Gandhi always made it a point to reassure himself of the strength of his celibacy especially in times of political crisis. In this light, it is essential to mention one of the experiments undertaken by Gandhi which has outraged and shocked many which and have come to be known as “having naked young women sleep with him when he was old” although their intent and outcome were far removed from the familiar connotations of the phrase. This final experiment undertaken by Gandhi to test the power of his celibacy was undertaken when the country was filled with communal tensions and conflict between the Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi on reaching Noakhali, in East Bengal was devastated to see the situation there and the failure of his idea that Hindus and Muslims could live peacefully. Witnessing the communal carnage, Gandhi took recourse to testing himself as a *brahmachari*. In this context Gandhi would ask one or another of his few close women associates (his 19 year old granddaughter, Manu among them) to share his bed and then try to ascertain next morning whether there was any trace of sexual feeling, either in himself or his companions.

In spite of widespread criticism on the nature of experiment, Gandhi continued with his experiments and denying the accusation that they could have ill effects on the women involved. Rather Gandhi vehemently defended his experiments and saw them as an integral part of the Yagna, he was performing,⁸ the sole purpose of which was a restoration of personal psychic potency that would help him to regain control over the political events and men which was fatally slipping away from him. Thus in this way Gandhi saw his own body being connected with the problems of the nation and he firmly believed that all sorts of violence and untruth which pervaded in the public domain were reflections of shortcomings in his own practice of ahimsa and *brahmacharya*.

The essence of Gandhi’s idea of *swaraj* then lay in the fact that individuals should be able to rule themselves which was only possible after a certain degree of self-modification. *Swaraj* for Gandhi was a self-experiential phenomenon which could be attained only with, ‘a stable character’, acquired ‘by the practice of certain virtues’. This is how *swaraj* was connected with the practice of *brahmacharya* and various forms of self-control and bodily mortification. The body is thus subjected to an exercise of power, which Foucault would call a microphysics of discipline, in order to be in accord with the nature of political rule. Keeping this line of thought in mind, let us look at some more practices of *brahmacharya*, which stood for a total control of senses in Gandhi, operationalized through the control of the palate and self-restraint in all aspects of life. Gandhi was convinced that a few *brahmachari* like him would be capable of transforming India, since they would have “the enormous physical, psychic and spiritual energy required to ‘ignite’ the Indian masses and to ‘fire’ them with enthusiasm.”⁹ Gandhi in some sense saw the body as a hindrance to achieve the greater things in life and thus he emphasized on a strict disciplining of the body by being a celibate and diverting the body away from any kind of passion.¹⁰ At the same time Gandhi also regulated his intake of food and sex as a central plank of his concept of self and his concept of politics.¹¹ The constant interest that Gandhi showed regarding diet, dietary reform and fasting associated with his body has serious political undertones as well.¹² At the same time there is an intimate link between Gandhi’s emphasis on vegetarianism, its relation to ahimsa and *brahmacharya* and its connection with bodily administration.

Perhaps the most important component in dietary restrictions was the act of fasting, to which Gandhi attached a lot of physical, moral and spiritual importance. Fasting for Gandhi was the cure for epicurean disease and it was imperative for the

⁸ The idea of yagna is crucial here since Gandhi saw self-discipline as a process of self-sacrifice. The element of attaining purity and being sovereign over one’s own body also emerges in this context. Gandhi in this context denied allegations of his own experiments and thus also failed to take account the personal voices of women who were a part of the experiments. Even in this context it can be argued that the element of violence exists on the bodies of women and also on the body of Gandhi to some extent.

⁹Parekh, Bikhru. *Colonialism Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhian political discourse*. Sage Publications: New Delhi, 1989, pp. 201-202.

¹⁰ It will not be wrong to argue that Gandhi was drawing on the teachings of Bhagvad Gita whereby it is mentioned that the soul merely inhabits the body.

¹¹ Gandhi thus believed in a strict disciplining and purification of the body and thus in this sense he sought to undertake all sorts of bodily experiments on himself and others who were closely associated with him. In this sense it can be argued that at times Gandhi also ignored or failed to take into account the nature of implicit violence on others which was built into his own bodily practices. The question is not about an agentic individual here who might have had say on the nature of experiments undertaken by Gandhi, but more of the role of exemplar which Gandhi personified.

¹²Roy, Prama. “Meat-Eating, Masculinity, and Renunciation in India: A Gandhian Grammar of diet.” *Gender & History*, Vol. 14, No. 1, April 2002:62-91, p. 63.

selection and restriction of diet which would ultimately help conquer one's senses.¹³ Gandhi was famous for his fasting in the public arena and in his political career, 'he undertook as many as seventeen fasts unto death as well as innumerable fasts of restricted duration in the course of his lifetime.'¹⁴ He started fasting in South Africa, but fasting and bodily mortification for political ends only took place after his arrival in India. As we know, many of the fasts that he undertook were pivotal in the sequence of events that led up to independence and had the effect, if not the intent, of making him the focus of intense national and international attention. Gandhi's strategy of fasting cannot be understood in monolithic terms since he deployed it to different ends, ranging from political to spiritual to moral. In order to understand fasting in Gandhi we must consider it a political strategy but we also need to situate it in Gandhi's concern with diet-reform, self-discipline and moral health, connected in turn to his practice of *brahmacharya*.

For Gandhi a proper disciplining of the body was crucial for all individuals and thus his emphasis on the proper forms of diet and regulation of food intake. Gandhi has in Hind Swaraj critiqued the modern medicine's excessive care for the body, its failure to treat the moral and spiritual cause of the disease and the violence of the methods involved in modern medicine. In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi while critiquing modern medicine has argued that, "Men take less care of their bodies, and immortality increases...the fact remains that doctors induce us to indulge, and the result is that we have become deprived of self-control and have become effeminate."¹⁵ In the same vein it can then be said that Gandhi undertook experiment in dietetics and insisted on discovering cheap, nutritious and easily prepared foods.

While talking about the question of health and medicine in Gandhi it is important to argue that for Gandhi the question of sovereignty of the nation was important (Swaraj) but at the same time the idea of being sovereign over oneself was also very important. In this context knowledge of one's body was important so as to regulate the body in the most efficient manner. Gandhi conceived bodies to be as singular (sovereign entity) and thus knowing the body was fundamental in the terms of its activities and metabolism.¹⁶ The careful management of the body through self-discipline and self-control helps in the attainment of self-perfection which is imperative in the fight for Swaraj since in nationalism the body is synonymous with the country, a perfect state of *swatantrata*.¹⁷ The phenomena of having Swaraj over one's body helps in being self-sufficient and self-contained which ultimately leads to independence and freedom.

Gandhi saw the body as a bag of filth and there was a constant emphasis on the need for personal hygiene and cleanliness since that would make easier the task of attaining *swaraj*. He seemed to draw a fascinating connection between morality, hygiene, social reform and political action. There was a staunch belief on his part that the body as bag of dirt can be put to use but for that it was imperative to purify it and keep it in a fit condition. In this regard Gandhi's view on prostitutes becomes important and articulates the link between body and nation as emphasized by him. Prostitutes as overtly sexual figures were the clear obverse of the chaste and pure individual. On Gandhi's part there was a constant refusal to include prostitutes in the national movement which reflects his visions of the national collective. It can be said that the prostitutes posed a threat to his ideas on celibacy and his abhorrence to sex and the sexual potency of women posed a challenge to his vision of an acceptable polity.¹⁸ For Gandhi prostitutes were worse than thieves as they stole the virtue of man and prostitution for him was a self-degenerated moral choice. Herein we can see the process of normalization at work in Gandhi

¹³Kakar, Sudhir. *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989, pp. 98-99.

¹⁴Roy, Prama. "Meat-Eating, Masculinity, and Renunciation in India: A Gandhian Grammar of diet." *Gender & History*, Vol.14 No.1 April 2002: 62-91, p. 74.

¹⁵Gandhi, M. K. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938, pp. 50-52.

¹⁶ In this context it can be argued that Gandhi retrieved the concept of sovereignty from the state and generalized it as a quality vested in the individuals. In this sense individuals has the capacity to serve non-violently and were capable of suffering and sacrifice for the nation, thus again re-inserting the body dimension here. For Gandhi then freedom and sovereignty were available to thus who were fearless enough to accept suffering.

¹⁷Alter, Joseph S. *Gandhi's Body Sex, Diet and the Politics of Nationalism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, p. 153.

¹⁸ In Gandhi we can see the working of the dynamics of purity-pollution but not in the strict sense of the caste system. The purity and pollution was more manifested in the kind of body that Gandhi articulated constantly and thus always meant to regulate the sphere of the national movement by keeping the 'impure' bodies outside.

as to only how certain body could be a part of the national movement. The normal self was an outcome of rigorous bodily discipline and tactics and thus a certain kind of identity was prioritized over the others.

Through an understanding of Gandhi's bodily practice and dietary regime it becomes clear that for him as a leader the purification of the body through strict disciplining was imperative for the nation as a whole. According to him satyagraha meant that an individual carries within himself or herself the burden of social failings. The body is made the site of nationalism, and *brahmacharya* its agency of reform, the individual is held responsible for embodying such things as freedom, truth, peace and happiness, as well as the more typically physical attributes such as strength and good health.

In retrospect it can be said that the body lies at the centre of Gandhi's idea of the political. Apart from health reasons the focus on body directly manifests the matrix of power whereby the body features at the centre of important manoeuvres. At the same time it is only a certain kind of a normalized body that is seen as important and thus the politics of the body works at various levels of exclusion. The case of Gandhi and his analysis of various embodied practices help us to better understand the multiple dimensions of somaticity which gets articulated in the politics of nationalism. Thus for Gandhi the perfect body was the first step to attain *swaraj* and the body was thus overwritten into the political agenda of independence.

Bibliography

- Alter, Joseph S. *Gandhi's Body Sex, Diet and the Politics of Nationalism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
- Devji, Faisal. *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence*. London : Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Gandhi, M. K. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938.
- Kakar, Sudhir. *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality*. New Delhi: Penguin Books., 1989.
- Parekh, Bikhu. *Colonialism Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhian Political Discourse*. Sage Publications: New Delhi , 1989.
- Parel, Anthony (Ed.). *Hind Swaraj and other writings*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Rabinow, Paul (Ed.). *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.
- Vajpeyi, Ananya. *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India*. United States of America: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Alter, Joseph S. "Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1, February 1994:45-66.
- "Gandhi's Body, Gandhi's Truth: Nonviolence and the Biomoral Imperative of Public Health." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 2, May, 1996:301-322.
- Lal, Vinay. "Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 9, No. 1/2 (Jan. - Apr., 2000):105-136.
- Roy, Prama. "Meat-Eating, Masculinity, and Renunciation in India: A Gandhian Grammar of diet." *Gender & History*, Vol. 14, No. 1, April 2002:62-91.
- Sakaria, Ajay. "Gandhi's Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 101, No. 4, Fall 2002:955-986.
- Tambe, Ashwini. "Gandhi's 'Fallen' Sisters: Difference and the National Body Politic." *Social Scientist*, Vol. 37, No. 1/2 (Jan. - Feb., 2009):21-38.