

Sexography of Mahatma Gandhi

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ABSTRACT

Objective: A study on the sexography of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) that remain scattered in his books, brochures and voluminous letters was attempted. The focus of this appraisal is *not* on what Gandhi did, but on what he wrote and spoke about human sexual behavior.

Methods: Gandhi's oeuvre (books, brochures, and pamphlets) available in print as well as correspondence and speeches available in digital version of *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* were searched. Those items which indicated an appropriate sexuality theme were studied.

Results: Gandhi had acknowledged that he was familiar with the writings on sexuality by Havelock Ellis and Bertrand Russell; but, he had not read any of Freud's works. His primary focus of activism in sexography was that coitus other than for the purpose of procreation is sin. He was also against the promotion of 'artificial' birth control methods and promoted self-control as the alternative. Despite criticism from his concerned followers, in mid 1930s and 1940s, Gandhi practiced shunmatism and considered it as a reliable experiment for his concept of *brahmacharya*.

Conclusion: Whereas in 1927, Gandhi defined '*brahmacharya*' simply in 12 words as 'control of the senses in thought, word and deed', after 20 years in 1947, his meaning of '*brahmacharya*' expanded to 115 words that included 'emissions', 'lying naked with naked women' and 'making progress towards God'.

KEY WORDS

birth control, *brahmacharya*, semen, sense organs, sex education, shunmatism

INTRODUCTION

Apart from being a political activist, philosopher and public health advocate, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1949)¹⁻⁶ was also a prolific writer, who had written on topics ranging from *ahimsa* (non-injury to living beings in thought, word and deed) to Zulus of South Africa (Fig.1). While he had his admirers among the native Indians and non-Indians^{7,8}, Gandhi also had his detractors and critics among native Indians⁹ and non-Indians, for what Arthur Koestler noted as 'crankiness' habit¹⁰. On Gandhi's writings, Nirad Chaudhuri noted derisively, "They illuminated nothing, not even that verbal obsession of his — Truth. He probably wrote more than a million words on that alone, but after reading all that no one could discover what exactly he meant by Truth..."¹¹

Fifty years ago, Stanley Pacion contributed an essay with a caption, 'Gandhi's struggle with sexuality'.¹¹ Since then, Gandhi's eccentricities and struggle with human sexuality per se and what he did in his self-described 'experiments' on *brahmacharya* had received recognition from controversial author journalists like Koestler¹⁰, psychoanalysts^{12,13}, historians^{14,15} and biographers^{16,17}.

Though Gandhi did not have medical qualifications, his credentials related to healthcare includes advocacy of naturopathy and vegetarianism, activism in public health and campaign against artificial birth control methods. As such, akin to my previous two reports on William Masters¹⁸ and Alex Comfort¹⁹, the focus of this appraisal is *not* on what Gandhi did, but on what he wrote and spoke about human sexual behavior.

METHODS

Gandhi's oeuvre (books, brochures, pamphlets and letters) available

in print²⁰⁻²⁴ as well as correspondence and speeches available, in digital version of *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*²⁵ were searched. Those items which indicated his thoughts on human sexual behavior were chosen for this appraisal. Primary sources for Gandhi's sexography, arranged in chronological order, are presented in Table 1.

COMMENT

Brahmacharya

As presented in Table 2, Gandhi seems to have developed an 'avid dislike' to sexual behavior after fathering 5 children, and in 1906 took a vow of '*brahmacharya*' (loosely interpreted as celibacy). In the remaining forty years of his life, Gandhi actively campaigned against (1) marital sex, excluding for reason of procreation; (2) contraceptive use. With advancing years, Gandhi's interpretation of what he meant by '*brahmacharya*' expanded to encompass his version of 'truth'.

Pioneering birth control campaigner, Margaret Sanger (1879-1966), after having a discussion with Gandhi in 1935, had recorded about Gandhi's sex-related inhibitions as follows:

"...His state of mind would not change. After reading his autobiography, I thought I saw the cause of his inhibitions. He himself had had the feeling which he termed lust, and he now hated it. It formed an emotional pivot in his brain around which centered everything having to do with sex."²⁶

In his autobiography^{21,22}, Gandhi had acknowledged the influence of three individuals as those who 'have left a deep impress on my life, and

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Table 1: Primary Sources for Gandhi's Sexography

Books/Booklets authored by Gandhi ¹	Year(s) of Publication in English
1. <i>A Guide to Health</i> Pt.1, Ch.9 Sexual relations Pt.2, Ch.8 Maternity and child birth	1921
2. <i>The Story of My Experiments with Truth</i> Pt.1, Ch.4 Playing the Husband Pt.1, Ch.7 A tragedy (contd.) Pt. 1, Ch.9 My father's death and my double shame Pt, 3, Ch.7 Brahmacharya I Pt.3, Ch.8 Brahmacharya II Pt. 3, Ch.25 Heart searchings	1927 (vol.1) and 1929 (vol.2)
3. <i>From Yeravda Mantir</i> Ch.3 Brahmacharya or chastity	1932
4. <i>Key to Health</i> Pt. 1, Ch.10 Brahmacharya	1948
5. <i>Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)</i> ² vol.68, 1935-1936 Item 238 Interview with Margaret Sanger, <i>Harijan</i> , Jan.25, 1936 Item 323 Nothing without Grace, <i>Harijan</i> , Feb.29, 1936 Item 331. Speech at Gandhi Seva Sangh Meeting IV, at Savli, Mar 4, 1936 Item 338. Speech at Gandhi Seva Sangh Meeting VI, at Savli, Mar 6, 1936 Item 360. Birth Control (I), <i>Harijan</i> , Mar 14, 1936. Item 387. Birth Control (II). <i>Harijan</i> , Mar 21, 1936. Item 402. For the Young. <i>Harijan</i> , Mar.28, 1936. Item 418. For Contraceptives. <i>Harijan</i> , Apr 4, 1936. Item 467. A youth's difficulty. <i>Harijan</i> , Apr 25, 1936. Item 499. Letter to Premabehn Katak, May 6, 1936. vol.69, 1936 Item 32. Letter to Premabehn Katak, May 21, 1936. Item 558. Heading for Promiscuity, <i>Harijan</i> , Oct.3, 1936. vol.70, 1936-1937 Item 78. Obscene advertisements, <i>Harijan</i> , Nov.14, 1936. Item 86. Letter to Shrilal, Nov.14, 1936. Item 112. Sex Education, <i>Harijan</i> , Nov.21, 1936. Item 148. Birth-Control through self-control, <i>Harijanbandhu</i> , Nov. 29, 1936. Item 149. One enemy alone, <i>Harijanbandhu</i> , Nov.29, 1936. Item 438. Letter to Sohanlal Oberoi, Feb.17, 1937. vol.71, 1937 Item 49. Married Brahmacharya, <i>Harijan</i> , Mar.20, 1937. Item 85. A voice in the wilderness. <i>Harijan</i> , Mar. 27, 1937. Item 167. Advice to newly married couples. <i>Harijan</i> , Apr. 24, 1937. Item 183. The Cause of It. <i>Harijan</i> , Apr. 24, 1937. Item 258. The Marriage Ideal. <i>Harijan</i> , Jun. 5, 1937. vol. 94, 1947 Item 134. Discussion with Swami Anand and Kedar Nath, Mar 15/16, 1947. Item 143. From the Diary, Mar.16, 1947. Item 149. Letter to Nirmal Kumar Bose, Mar 17, 1947. Item 152. Letter to Amrit Kaur, Mar.18, 1947.	1958-1994

¹Gandhi wrote the original script in Gujarati (his native tongue). English translations were done by his assistants: A. Rama Iyer, from the translated Hindi text (1), Mahadev Desai and Pyarelal (2), Valji Desai (3) and Dr. Sushila Nayar (4).

²<https://www.gandhiashramsevagaram.org/gandhi-literature/collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi-volume-1-to-98.php>

captivated me: Raychandbhai by his living contact; Tolstoy by his book, *The Kingdom of God is within you*; Ruskin by his [essays] *Unto this Last*.²⁷ The personal lives of these three individuals may shed some light on Gandhi's thinking on human sexual behavior²⁷.

Raychandbhai (aka Rajchandra, 1867-1901) was an Indian Jain

mystic philosopher and poet. (Fig.2) Gandhi met him face to face on July 6, 1891. He was a pearls and diamond merchant. He was married when he was 20, and had four children (two sons and two daughters) in his brief life span of 34 years. Gandhi had written, 'though I could not place Raychandbhai on the throne of my heart as Guru, he was, on

Table 2: Notable Dates and Events in Gandhi's Life relating to his Sexography

Year-Month-Date	Age of Gandhi (yr)	Event
1869-Oct 2		birth in Porbandar, Bombay Presidency, India
1883 May	13	marriage arranged to Kasturba (1869-1944)
1885 Nov.16	16	death of father Uttamchand Gandhi, aged 63
1886	16	death of first child in 3-4 days after birth.
1888 Aug 23	18	birth of 2 nd child - first son Harilal.
1888 Sept.4	18	sailed to England to study law.
1891 Jan.	21	death of mother, but the news withheld from Gandhi by family elders.
1891 July 6	21	returned to India: introduction to Raychandbhai (1867-1901), whom Gandhi held as his influential mentor.
1892 Oct. 28	23	birth of 3 rd child — second son Manilal
1893 April	23	left for South Africa.
1896	26	returned to India from South Africa.
1896 Nov.30	27	went to South Africa, with wife and children.
1897 Jan. 2	27	birth of 4 th child — third son Ramdas
1900 May 22	30	birth of 5 th child — fourth son Devdas
1901 Oct.	32	returned to India again, from South Africa.
1902 Nov.	33	recalled to South Africa.
1906 July	37	took vow of <i>brahmacharya</i> for life in thought, word and deed.
1914	45	returned to India permanently.
1919	50	mid-life crisis — emotional entanglement with Saraladevi Choudhurani, (1872-1945)
1920	51	resolution of emotional entanglement by severance of letter correspondence.
1921	52	publication of 147 page pamphlet, ' <i>A Guide to Health</i> '.
1927 and 1929	58 (and 60)	publication of autobiography, ' <i>The Story of My Experiments with Truth</i> ', which covered Gandhi's life until 1920.
1932	62	publication of <i>Yeravda Mantir</i> (Weekly letters written by Gandhi, during his incarceration in 1930, at the Yeravda Central Prison, Poona.)
1935 Fall	65	practised shunamitism*
1944 Feb.	74	death of wife Kasturba Gandhi.
1945 Spring	75	continued to practice shunamitism*.
1947 first half	77	continued to practice shunamitism*.
1948 Jan. 30	79	assassinated on his way to prayers.
1948	79	publication of <i>Key to Health</i> (written by Gandhi's detention at the Aga Khan Palace, during the 'Quit India' agitation.

*the Biblical practice of an old man sleeping with young virgin(s) to preserve his youth, though Gandhi called it as his '*experiments on brahmacharya*'.

many occasions, my guide and helper²¹⁾.

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) was a famed Russian writer, older to Gandhi by 41 years. He married when he was 34 in 1862 and his wife Sophia (Sonya) was only 18; Tolstoys had 13 children, between 1863 and 1888. Among these, 3 children died in infancy and two more wouldn't survive childhood. Gandhi corresponded with Tolstoy, during the last year of latter's life²⁸⁾.

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was a British social thinker and art critic, older to Gandhi by 50 years. He married when he was 29 in 1848, and this marriage was annulled after six years due to non-consummation. Later in life, Ruskin also had a liking to teenage girls.

Among the 167 short chapters in his autobiography, Gandhi had specifically focused on '*brahmacharya*' in two of them. Few specific points included in this chapters were,

- (1) '*Brahmacharya* means control of the senses in thought, word and deed.'
- (2) 'Whilst in England I had read something about contraceptives...Dr. Allinson's birth control propaganda...If it had some temporary effect on me, Mr. Hill's opposition to those methods and his advocacy of internal effort as opposed to outward means, in a word, of self-control, had a far greater effect, which in due time came to be abiding.'
- (3) 'It was in South Africa that I came to realize the importance of observing brahmacharya even with respect to my wife. I cannot

definitely say what circumstance or what book it was, that set my thoughts in that direction, but I have a recollection that the predominant factor was the influence of Raychandbhai...'

- (4) 'After full discussion and mature deliberation I took the vow in 1906. I had not shared my thoughts with my wife until then, but only consulted her at the time of taking the vow. She had no objection. But I had great difficulty in making the final resolve.'

On Sex Urge and Coitus

Advising the young on the theme of sex urge in March 1936, Gandhi wrote, '*Sex urge is a fine word and noble thing. There is nothing to be ashamed of in it. But it is meant only for the act of creation. Any other use of it is a sin against God and humanity.*' A week later, on the theme on contraceptive use, Gandhi's observation on coitus was,

'It is not proved to my satisfaction that sexual union in marriage is in itself good and beneficial to the unionists. To the contrary effect I can bear ample testimony from my own experience and that of many friends. I am not aware of any of us having derived any benefit, mental, spiritual or physical. Momentary excitement and satisfaction there certainly was. But it was invariably followed by exhaustion. And the desire for union returned immediately the effect of exhaustion had worn out.'

It may not be wrong to rebut Gandhi that not only coitus, even other physiological activities such as eating, active exercise and studying also

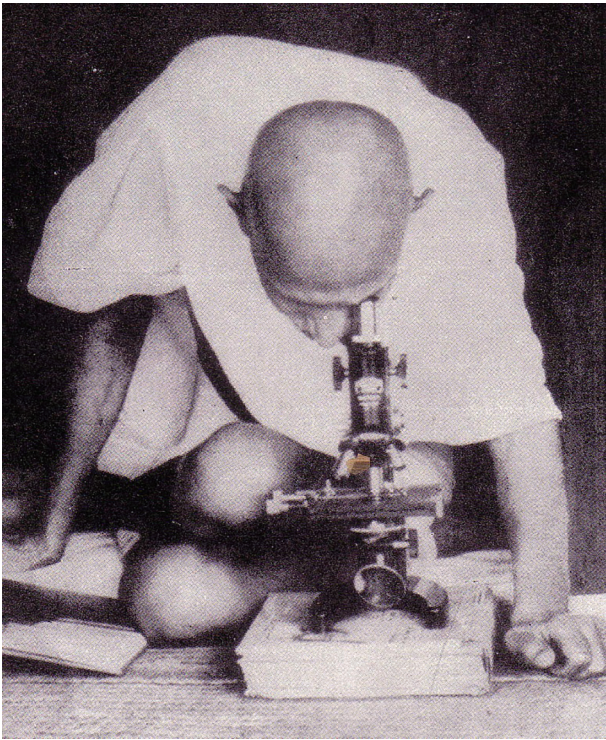


Figure 1: Mahatma Gandhi, observing a specimen under a microscope.



Figure 2: Rajchandbhai (aka Rajchandra) Gandhi's Indian mentor.

produce similar effects of momentary excitement and satisfaction, followed by exhaustion.

On Sex Education

In 1936, Gandhi supported sex education for children and juveniles with the following words:

"Preoccupation with sex is daily becoming more marked in Gujarat as in the rest of India. And what is more, those who fall under its sway feel as if there is something meritorious about it sexual science is of two kinds, that which is used for controlling or overcoming the sexual passion and that which is used to stimulate and feed it. Instruction in the former is as necessary a part of a child's education as the latter is harmful and dangerous and fit therefore only to be shunned."

Compared to his Victorian –era contemporaries who turned a blind eye on sex education, Gandhi was a progressive because he supported sex education for juveniles, with a caveat:

"The sex education that I stand for must have for its object the conquest and sublimation of the sex passion. Such education should automatically serve to bring home to children the essential distinction between man and brute..."

On Birth Control

In his 1936 commentary on Birth control, Gandhi had observed,

"The sole object of sexual intercourse according to the new light was the desire for progeny, never gratification of the sexual instinct. Simple gratification of the instinct would be counted according to this view of marriage as lust. This may appear to be a harsh expression to use for our enjoyment which has hitherto been regarded as innocent and legitimate. But I am not dealing with custom. I am dealing with the science of marriage as propounded by Hindu sages. Their presentation may be faulty, it may be altogether wrong. But for one like me who believes in several Smriti texts as inspired and based on experience, there is no escape from a full acceptance of their meaning."

In the same commentary, Gandhi did pay compliments to the initiatives taken by Margaret Sanger as follows:

'I have great regard for Mrs. Margaret Sanger and her followers. She impressed me much by her great zeal for her cause. I know that she has great sympathy for the women who suffer because they have to bear the burden of carrying and rearing unwanted children...'

Nevertheless, Gandhi asserted,

"Truth is not truth merely because it is ancient. Nor is it necessarily to be regarded with suspicion because it is ancient. There are some fundamentals of life which may not be lightly given up because they are difficult of enforcement in one's life. Birth control through self-control is no doubt difficult. But no one has yet been known seriously to dispute its efficacy and even superiority over the use of contraceptives."

Gandhi's defense of his Shunamatism practice

Shunamatism is a Biblical (Old Testament) rejuvenation practice whereby an aging man sleeps with young girls possibly in the nude. This custom allegedly originated in Shunam (or Shunem), an ancient village in Palestine²⁹⁻³¹. As is indicated in Table 2, in 1930s and 1940s, Gandhi became the target of criticism for practicing shunamatism, for what he called as his experiments on '*brahmacharya*'. Though this controversial practice had been conveniently ignored by Gandhi's early hagiographers (probably due to the sympathy wave generated after his death from January 1948 assassination), since 1990s biographers^{16,17} had come forward to discuss the deleterious consequences to Gandhi's half a dozen young women companions who shared his bed¹¹.

When confronted by his friend and writer Swami Anand (aka Himmatlal Dave, 1887-1976), who had known Gandhi since 1915 and had functioned as the editor/manager of Gandhi's journals *Navjivan* and *Young India*, with a question, 'Why did you not, according to your wont, take your co-workers into confidence and carry them with you before embarking on this novel practice? Why this secrecy?' Gandhi responded on March 15, 1947 as follows,

"No secrecy was intended. Everything was fortuitous. Previous consultation with friends was ruled out by the very nature of the thing. Besides, I hold that previous consent was unnecessary..."

When his friend prodded further, "The irreparable harm, if you weaken the foundation of the moral order on which society rests and which has been built up by long and painful discipline, is obvious. But

no corresponding gain is apparent to us to justify a break with established tradition. What is your defence?" Gandhi critiqued the orthodox tradition and elaborated his evolving thoughts on brahmacharya, as follows:

"No moral progress or reform is possible if one is not prepared to get out of the rut of orthodox tradition. By allowing ourselves to be cribbed by cast iron social conventions, we have lost. The orthodox conception of the nine fold wall of protection in regard to *brahmacharya* is in my opinion inadequate and defective. I have never accepted it for myself. For 20 years I was in closest touch with the West in South Africa. I have known the writings on sex by eminent writers like Havelock Ellis and Bertrand Russell and their theories. They are all thinkers of eminence, integrity and experience. They have suffered for their convictions and for giving expression to the same. While totally repudiating institutions like marriage, etc., and the current code of morals — and there I disagree with them — they are firm believers in the possibility and desirability of purity in life independently of those institutions and usages."

Gandhi considered himself as a reformer, and continued his rebuttal further.

"A reformer cannot afford to wait till others are converted; he must take the lead and venture forth alone even in the teeth of universal opposition. I want to test, enlarge and revise the current definition of *brahmacharya*, by which you swear, in the light of my observation, study and experience. Therefore, whenever an opportunity presents itself I do not evade it or run away from it. On the contrary, I deem it my duty — dharma — to meet it squarely in the face and find out where it leads to and where I stand. To avoid the contact of a woman or to run away from it out of fear, I regard as unbecoming of an aspirant after true *brahmacharya*. I have never tried to cultivate or seek sex contact for carnal satisfaction. I do not claim to have completely eradicated the sex feeling in me. But it is my claim that I can keep it under control."

Though Gandhi had mentioned that he had read Havelock Ellis and Bertrand Russell, four days later, in another letter dated March 19, 1947, to Nirmal Kumar Bose (who was also pained by Gandhi's shunmatism practice and appealed to him to stop it), Gandhi replied, he hasn't read Freud: "What is Freudian philosophy? I have not read any writing of his. One friend, himself a professor and follower of Freud, discussed his writings for a brief moment. You are the second..."

In another letter, drafted on the previous day (March 18, 1947) to his frequent woman correspondent Amrit Kaur (1887-1964), Gandhi defined his 'meaning of *brahmacharya*' as follows:

'One who never has any lustful intention, who by constant attendance upon God has become proof against conscious or unconscious emissions, who is capable of lying naked with naked woman, however beautiful they may be, without being in any manner whatsoever sexually excited. Such a person should be incapable of lying, incapable of intending or doing harm to a single man or woman in the whole world, is free from anger and malice and detached in the sense of *Bhagavadgita*. Such a person is a full brahmachari. Brahmachari literally means a person who is making daily and steady progress towards God and whose every act is done in pursuance of that end and no other.'

CONCLUSION

Whereas Gandhi defined '*brahmacharya*' in 1927 simply in 12 words as 'control of the senses in thought, word and deed', after 20 years in 1947, his meaning of '*brahmacharya*' expanded to 115 words that included 'emissions', 'lying naked with naked women' and 'making progress towards God'.

Gandhi's selective use of ancient Hindu texts to support his viewpoint cannot be ignored as well. While he adhered to the principles of Hindu Shastras, *Smritis* and *Bhagavad Gita*, he ignored the teachings of Vatsyana's *Kama Sutra*, Tiruvalluvar's *Thirukural* and other Hindu texts which promoted sexuality discipline. In his introduction to the new translation of *Kama Sutra*, Alain Danielou did record, 'Mahatma Gandhi, educated in England, sent squads of his disciples to smash the

erotic representations on the temples. It was the poet Rabindranath Tagore who managed to halt this iconoclastic massacre.'³² Did Gandhi ever repent for such thoughts of destruction of Indian cultural heritage? We don't have a clue.

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