

Gandhi's Brahmacharya Controversy: Exploring Historical Boundaries in His Experiments with Women

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Abstract: *The controversial Brahmacharya trials conducted by Gandhi remain a subject of vigorous debate and captivation. Gandhi's ideology was rooted in the principle of brahmacharya, which encompasses celibacy or abstaining from sexual activity and is integral to his spiritual and social beliefs. Gandhi challenged his determination and commitment to Brahmacharya by sleeping unclothed with young women, including his grandchildren, to confront and conquer his desires. The trials received both praise and condemnation, with some viewing them as commendable displays of self-restraint, while others considered them to be inappropriate and harmful. Advocates of Gandhi contend that these actions were integral to his lifelong pursuit of truth and self-discipline, but detractors assert that they contradict his principles of nonviolence and reverence for all sentient beings. Nevertheless, discussions over Gandhi's ethical boundaries and the complexities of his character continue to arise because of the controversy surrounding his Brahmacharya experiments. Acquiring knowledge about these experiments enables us to have a deeper understanding of Gandhi's struggles and his enduring impact on the domains of activism, spirituality, and social transformation. This dissertation aims to investigate and comprehend the deeply personal dimension of Gandhi's life through a historical examination of the sources that influenced and motivated Gandhi to embrace and adhere to the aforementioned path of Brahmacharya. Furthermore, this study endeavours to build a chronological sequence of events about this Gandhian deed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of his character.*

Keywords: Gandhi, Brahmacharya, Controversy, Gandhian Studies

Gandhi's contentious Brahmacharya experiments continue to be a source of intense discussion and fascination. Gandhi's ideology was based on the concept of brahmacharya, which refers to celibacy or sexual abstinence and

is essential to his spiritual and social convictions. Gandhi tested his resolve and devotion to Brahmacharya by sleeping in the nude with young ladies, including his granddaughters, in an attempt to face and overcome his cravings. Both praise and criticism were directed towards these experiments; some saw them as admirable demonstrations of self-control, while others saw them as improper and abusive. Supporters of Gandhi argue that these deeds were a part of his lifelong search for truth and self-mastery, while critics claim they go against his ideals of nonviolence and respect for all living things. Even yet, debates over Gandhi's moral limitations and the intricacies of his persona are still sparked by the controversy surrounding his Brahmacharya experiments. Gaining knowledge of these experiments helps us to better understand Gandhi's hardships as well as his lasting influence on the fields of activism, spirituality, and social change. This paper tries to study and understand this very private aspect of Gandhi's life with a historical exploration of the sources, that inspired Gandhi to follow and stick to the above-mentioned path of Brahmacharya. Secondly, this paper also tries to establish a chronology of events, of this Gandhian act, to get a better picture of his personality.

In a quest to review the existing literature, on this topic, besides many, academic studies in particular are harshly critical of Gandhi's stances on sexuality and other issues. These include works such as N. K. Bose's *My Days with Gandhi*, Jad Adam's *Gandhi: Naked Ambition*, Nicholas F. Gier's "Was Gandhi A Tantric", Arundhati Roy's Introduction viz. "The Doctor and The Saint" for B.R. Ambedkar's new edition of the book "*Annihilation of the Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*", Veena R. Howard's "Rethinking Gandhi's Celibacy: Ascetic Power and Women's Empowerment" and Vinay Lal's "Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality".

They sought to understand Gandhi's deeper personal relationships with women. This group of scholars talked about his controversial experiment. Conflicts with Gandhi led to the departure of Nirmal Kumar Bose, who had chronicled Gandhi's Noakhali Brahmacharya experiments. In an essay published later on the topic, he stated that Gandhi's Brahmacharya acts with his young women were an honest attempt to achieve greater levels of self-purification and that he learned that he was becoming more and more capable of practicing the highest forms of ahimsa as a result of this process. Bose also thought that Gandhi was trying to atone for [in the context of 1947–1948], not standing with his father [Karamchand Gandhi] before his celestial aspirations in 1885 by suppressing his carnal impulses.¹

Arundhati Roy, on the other hand, was very critical of Gandhi's late-life sleeping habits with his young nieces Abha and Manu. She claimed that Manu and Abha were testing samples, speaking for the entire society of women and that Gandhi viewed women as a type rather than as a separate, independent creature.² Roy's account of Gandhi's experiment is true, but

without a thorough examination of Gandhi's experiment, her conclusion sounded hurried.

More thorough examinations of this aspect of Gandhi's life have been done, among others, by Bhikhu Parekh and Nicholas F. Gier. Parekh claims that Gandhi provided five reasons for his "experiment's" defence. Bhikhu claims that one of the reasons was that Gandhi compared the Brahmacharya experiments to sacred fire and decided to jump in knowing that he would either be saved or burned. These practices functioned as a way to develop one's spiritual potential and use one's spiritual advancement to obtain further refinement in political power. Gandhi thought that achieving political victory while maintaining moral integrity was essential to peaceful politics.³ Gandhi's actions cannot be justified by this or any of Bhikhu's other arguments. Gier also studied and discussed the Gandhian Brahmacharya experiments and concluded that Gandhi was not serious in conducting the disputed tests or trustworthy in his explanations for them.⁴ The studies, mentioned above are crucial. Taking inspiration from the literature briefly cited above, this paper attempts to address the need for a more comprehensive and relevant biographical analysis that might help us understand these isolated and humiliating aspects of the life of this great saint of nonviolence.

Women in Gandhian controversial Brahmacharya experiments:

Gandhi began putting his hands on the shoulders of young women during his daily and evening walks in the 1920s. He referred to Manu Gandhi and other women fondly as his walking sticks. On the same path, the next stop was a daily massage done by young women. A bath followed the massage, and the presence of a female attendant was nearly required. Sushila Nayyar was a common sight at such events. She would take her bath simultaneously. Gandhiji would close his eyes on such occasions to avoid shame.⁵ Gandhiji provided a vivid description of the washing routine after it sparked among the ashramites' bathing gossip. The next step on the path was the ritual of young women sleeping near, with, or next to him. What began as a simple sleeping arrangement evolved into practice to achieve the nirvana of perfect brahmacharya. According to Girja Kumar, Gandhi was brutally honest about his experiment. He exchanged facts with his closest associates, with a good awareness that it would become a part of the public knowledge.⁶ Gandhi gave up his experiment for the first time in August 1932 with much reluctance. However, it did not last. He periodically resumed and quit the practice of sleeping naked with his young female disciples in 1935, 1936, 1938, 1939, 1945, and 1947⁷ as a part of an experiment with the truth.

The sources of Gandhi's Brahmacharya Experiments:

Gandhi was simultaneously fighting for two separate achievements, one was the very obvious, the political freedom of India, but he was, at the same

time, also constantly striving for his freedom from all kinds of sensualities and temptations. Personal freedom was a relative term to Gandhi, as for him, personal freedom was never possible at an individual level, it always had to be only at the collective level.

Brahmacharya's life was the Gandhian way of reaching out for the achievement of higher levels of personal freedom. In this regard, Gandhi's pivotal enemy was the god of desire, *Kama*. To shield himself against the *Kama*, Gandhi sourced vital inspirations from different religious discourses, ranging from Hinduism to Jainism to Islam to Christianity.

To achieve the brahmacharya-styled desired level of personal freedom, Gandhi attempted to follow the Indian tradition, which was best exemplified by the carving of the half-man, half-woman Ardhanareswara found in Hindu temple niches.⁸ Gandhi was also pleased to receive assistance from Manu, an ancient lawgiver who had described the first child as being born out of obligation and subsequent offspring as being born out of carnality. He was even happy when he learnt information about 'married brahmacharya' from the Smritis. According to the revised view, married people who rigorously followed the Smritis' instructions were just as brahmacharis as those who had never wed.⁹ During his stay in Noakhali, Mahatma claimed that the Prophet Mohammad had disregarded eunuchs who were made that way through surgery in a public speech in Amishapara. But he accepted the eunuchs that God had created through prayer. Such a goal was his.¹⁰ Then again, Gandhi referred to the Bible in the same context by citing that there were numerous eunuchs, some of whom were made so by men; some of whom made themselves so for the aim of reaching out to the *Kingdom of Heaven* and others of whom were so born from the mother's womb.¹¹ Thus, Girja Kumar opined that natural eunuchs habituated [only] in Gandhi's model society and were considered examples of *Brahmachari*. In fact, the extinction of humanity was Gandhi's path to enlightenment.¹² Gandhi also had a Christian view of sin that associated sex with sin.¹³ Gandhiji's perceptions of Brahmacharya were also largely influenced by certain Buddhist impressions. In 1895, he went to the Trappist Buddhist monastery in Pinetown, Natal. The austere lifestyle of Trappist monks in South Africa intrigued him. His mentality was forever changed by their vows of quiet and celibacy; they, too, served as his role models for community existence.¹⁴ The Vaishnava upbringing of Gandhi was also inspired by the Jaina tradition, which was very important to the Gujarati way of life. His two key ideas, Satyagraha and Brahmacharya, did, in fact, exhibit a distinctly Jaina influence.¹⁵

Not only this, Gandhi's thinking was forever changed by the sculptures that adorned the Belur temple's walls in Karnataka. It was carved in stone by expert artisans from mediaeval India, and it represented lust or passion in the shape of a scorpion. The sensual portrayal of a scorpion biting a woman was realistic, and in fact, the force of its venom had rendered her nude. After lifting its tail and resting at the woman's feet in triumph, it

grinned at her. None other than the specie male was the scorpion of passion. Gandhi was now operating at full capacity after being moved by the work of art that featured a humble scorpion. He continued by equating sexual desire to a scorpion.¹⁶

Besides religious thoughts, Gandhi also took inspiration from certain individuals both from the Indian and European contexts. Gandhi's favourite role model of perfect Brahmachari was *Rishi Shukadeva*¹⁷, even though Gandhi had little interest in travelling to the Himalayas as the Rishi did. Gandhi also should have found some solace in the tale of *Rishyashranga*, a figure from Valmiki's Ramayana who, like Gandhi, finds joy in self-control but will not be affected by it. The young ascetic had lived solitary in his ashram, never having seen a woman. When he saw the first woman, he was utterly astounded. The proverb from long ago has a lesson for Gandhi.¹⁸

Gandhi has been obsessed with Brahmacharya for his entire life. The ideologies of the Mahatma and *Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa* were quite similar. Ramakrishna's entire spiritual homily had been characterised as a sermon about sex. Along with having a strong concern with sex, he also had a strong obsession with what was known as misplaced sexuality, as evidenced by the premise of his talks.¹⁹ While acknowledging the impossibility of eradicating *kama* from their world, Ramakrishna and Gandhi seemed united. Gandhi frequently argued that the idea of flawless brahmacharis only existed in the mind. He never asserted that he was a flawless Brahmachari. Ramakrishna similarly also acknowledged that lust did not go away till the realisation of God. Even after that realisation, some of it still existed as long as the body did, but it was unable to raise its head. He told everyone not to believe that he was also completely free of it.²⁰ Ramakrishna depicted inspiration from the old Vaishnav tradition in Bengal, and his obsession with Kali worship was heavily influenced by the Saivite Sakta cult. The Gandhi family also came from a larger Vaishnav circumstantial. Shrimad Rajchandra, also known as Kavi, arguably had the most impact on Gandhi. He went by Rajchandra Rajivbhai Mehta in real life. He was a diamond and jewel connoisseur by occupation. Gandhi lavished Kavi with adulation. Kavi was the only person who could be referred to as Gandhi's guru. Kavi, who was around Gandhi's age, had a significant impact on Gandhi in his early 20s. Kavi's mother was a Jain, his father was a Vaishnavite, and his family's home was close to both a Vaishnav shrine and a Jain monastery. Kavi embodied qualities that were both Jain and Vaishnav. Gandhi was motivated by Kavi to adopt the Brahmacharya vow in 1906. Gandhi received the same zeal as Kavi's ardent desire to see God face to face through the strict Brahmacharya practice. Therefore, it appeared that Kavi was where the Jain values of brahmacharya (purity), ahimsa (non-violence), Arya (non-stealing), and aparigraha (non-possession) originated for Gandhi. He also learnt about milk's ability to arouse passion from Rajchandbhai.²¹ Lastly, Gandhi was also particularly influenced by the thoughts of English philosopher and thinker Bertrand Russell and

psychologist Havelock Ellis²² in embracing celibacy.

The Brahmacharya experiments:

Gandhi had decided to go to war with the '*Kama*'. Where others had failed, he wanted to succeed. He loved to fight, though, and if it was a worthy opponent. It was an expensive and arduous battle. He was battling with Nature, after all. Young Gandhi in the initial years of his marriage with Kasturba was quite obsessed with the *Kama*, which he rightfully admitted in his autobiography. A few instances of Gandhi's early life gravitated Gandhi towards celibacy. The first incident being the death of his father, Karamchand Gandhi. When his father passed away in 1886, he was in his bed busy with Kasturba. This act of Gandhi, afterwards was disapproved by his own moral and ethical agencies, leading to the accumulation of internal guilt and shame in Gandhi. This guilt forever haunted Gandhi for the rest of his life, as the same Gandhian guilt was visible to Margaret Sanger in the 1937 Gandhi-Sanger interview. Sanger was certain that Gandhi would never consider sex as anything pleasant, pure, or healthy. The sexual experience that occurred simultaneously with his father's passing away left him feeling shocked and responsible.²³ He became more and more opposed to sex and temptation after that guileful personal experience. After lots of exploration and two failed attempts and after enjoying marital bliss for twenty-three (23) years, Gandhi ultimately embarked on his lifelong voyage of marrying Brahmacharya in South Africa. At the Phoenix settlement, Gandhi aggressively strove to spread this brahmacharya practice to the rest of the ashram dwellers. His commitment to Brahmacharya was enhanced by a little-known occurrence from 1907. He was detained alongside Kaffir and Chinese offenders in the Transvaal jail following his arrest on November 30th, 1907. He shared several dreadful evenings and nights with them. He had to endure the embarrassment of witnessing a Chinese and a Kaffir uncover one other's genitalia and play with each other sexually. Gandhi had to remain awake all night at least once to defend himself from a homosexual rape. This must have had a role in his discomfort over sexual mating, human genitalia, physical arousal, and physical proximity between the sexes.²⁴ Gandhi spoke openly and without hesitation about sexual passion, lust, primal need, and sexual congress. The marital union had no appeal in his eyes.²⁵ He believed that it was only the precursor of fleeting exhilaration and joy but that it only actually produced physical tiredness, spiritual contempt, and unhappiness. In answer to a question, Gandhi stated he was not aware of any advantage, mental, spiritual, or physical, from sexual meeting and scoffed at the nameless correspondent who had remarked that man was fundamentally an artist and creator who enjoyed exploring the underground nooks and corners of physical love.²⁶

Gandhi also relentlessly advocated that the path to brahmacharya and humanity's ultimate emancipation was the training of the appetite through restricted eating habits, which also helped in preserving semen, a critical

bodily fluid. He found a direct link between brahmacharya and eating habits.²⁷ He recommended fasting as an extreme measure. Gandhi spoke about the so-called vital fluid as God's gift that must always be protected, held, and conserved. Gandhi accepted this conventional Indian belief through medical theories that were in direct opposition to it.²⁸ Gandhi was accused of having sadistic tendencies by eminent American psychiatrist Erik Erikson, who conducted a thorough interview with him. Gandhi's sadism could occasionally be heard in his statements where his disgust with sensuality goes, for instance, against women as a source of evil,²⁹ against eating food since it was no better than faeces, and against milk because it was a fatal element.³⁰ A very similar sentiment was also echoed by Abha and Kanchan. They had no intention of adhering to brahmacharya, according to what Abha and Kanchan informed Gandhi, and instead wanted to relish the desires of sex. They just stayed very unenthusiastically with Gandhi in the Brahmacharya experiments and stripped out of concern of hurting Gandhi's sentiment.³¹

In 1914, Gandhi wrote to Raojibhai Patel, that removing the senses did not eliminate the instincts in the mind³² to the extent that eunuchs were also full of senses. As a result, they developed a reputation for committing abnormal things. The Saraladevi-Gandhi phase though short-lived also left some long-lasting scars on the Gandhian mind. From the first quarter of the 20th century onwards, Gandhi started to put his hands on the shoulders of young females³³, massages and bathing practices. Gandhi's excellent tactile faculty has been noticed by Professor Bhikhu Parekh, who was astute enough to do so. Gandhi was extremely sensitive and found physical touch to be enticing, just like the majority of Indians do. Finding a casual photo of Gandhi when his hand was not on someone's shoulder or he was not patting someone on the back was difficult³⁴, which was Gandhi's method of testing his vow of brahmacharya. Gandhi believed that the only natural attraction between men and women should be between siblings and parents and children.³⁵ By 1926, he was self-assured enough to claim that if Gandhi could then live as a friend and brother to his wife and could view the fairest young unmarried woman as his sister or daughter, there would then be optimism for the lowest and the lost.³⁶

Gandhi was quite worried about his appetite pressing involuntarily discharged because he was a practising Brahmachari. To his close confidantes such as Premabehn Kantik, Mirabehn, and Amrital T Nanavati, Gandhi admitted having dirty dreams and involuntary semen discharges in the years 1927, 1936, 1938, and 1940.³⁷ Due to involuntary discharges in his sixties and seventies, Gandhi was a concerned soul. He showed a high level of moral fortitude by acknowledging his guilt.³⁸ Such events naturally occur in a healthy and normal human being. These appeared to Gandhi to be flaws in his Brahmacharya practice. When there were none, he would look for them. He spent his entire life fighting against his impulses. Even if he was successful in maintaining a strict brahmacharya regimen when he was

awake, there was no assurance that impure thoughts wouldn't creep into his brain during his sleeping hours.³⁹

The topic of Brahmacharya is too delicate to be discussed in public, although Gandhiji seemed at comfort in doing so. In actuality, he acted too frank, no privacy existed that was worth the name. He slept outside, in open spaces, or in rooms with doors left open. During his sleep hours, he would be surrounded by a plethora of ashram women. On beds next to him, they slept. They would frequently share a bed to keep warm for his shivering body, which was hardly dressed other than his signature half-dhoti.⁴⁰

All these controversial Gandhian acts created severe waves of criticism in the then-contemporary colonial Indian society and even extended to the British parliament, though it was least bothered about its developments.

Gandhi's latter life, which started in the late 1930s, was rife with such controversies. There was a lot of discussion on the brahmacharya practices. There were a ton of rumours and negative references in the Indian media. Even across the oceans, word quickly spread. Professor Edward Thompson, a renowned historian, spoke of damaging rumours about Gandhi's purported sensual encounters with women. The Bombay Chronicle reported from its Allahabad Office that shocking news information had emerged on the Gandhi rumours circulating in the House of Commons. According to reports, Edward Thompson, who then paid a visit to Allahabad, shed some light on the peculiar mindset present in England. According to Thompson, who spoke with political figures here in colonial India, there were three rumours about Gandhi floating through the House of Commons, giving the impression that Gandhi had ceased to be a saint. These rumours revolved around Gandhi's [newly found] spiritual life.⁴¹ Arthur Koestler used some clever lines about Gandhi having lured numerous young women into chastity much later. Even Arthur was capable of creating sensations as he wrote citing an instance when the British police arrived to capture Gandhi one of the nights, they discovered the Mahatma in bed with an eighteen-year-old girl.⁴² They made a furious report, unaware of the experiment's essentially spiritual origin, which the British authorities wisely kept classified.⁴³ Gandhi's experiment always had as its goal of eliminating the distinction between men and women. His bedroom served as his workspace. And long before the term unisex became common or trendy, he argued for its cause.

About the mentality of the female participants who participated or participated in the Brahmacharya experiments, Gandhi wrote to Munnalal G Shah that he didn't want to leave anyone out.⁴⁴ Gandhi had already cited four names Lilavati Asar, Bibi Amutussalaam, Prabhavati and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur. Might be they would say that they weren't his test subjects; they slept with Gandhi like a mother.⁴⁵ Gandhi wouldn't disagree with them. Here, mentioning that such a thing had occurred was sufficient. Abha Gandhi, Kanchan Shah, and Vina Patil were not included in the experiments in his opinion. If Gandhi made a distinction between sleeping together and

the experiment, he thought there was a significant difference between the two. He continued by saying that Abha only spent three nights with him. Kanchan only slept for one night. One may call Vina and Gandhi sharing a bed an accident. She slept close to Gandhi, that much was certain. Her case would have been entirely different if Abha had continued. Kanchan's situation was quite terrible. Gandhi had no idea who she was [Kanchan].

Kanchan wasn't with Gandhi even for barely an hour, if his memory served him correctly, Gandhi then forbade both Abha and Kanchan from sharing the bed with Gandhi after seeing that Munnalal and Kanu [Gandhi] were offended. Gandhi further recommended Abha and Kanchan to inform Bhansali in addition to Munnalal and Kanu. Thus, it would become clear that these three names were ineligible for the experiment. There was no sign of the presence of Lilavati [Asar], Amutussalaam, Rajkumari (Amrit Kaur), or Prabhavati as they were outside the ashram then. Gandhi purposely incorporated Prabhavati into the experiments. Perhaps he shouldn't, even before Gandhi realised, he was experimenting, she frequently slept next to Gandhi to keep him warm. When she was shivering on the floor, Gandhi used to call her toward him. This was a very old tale. Gandhi was distressed to see that Kanchan was struggling with a misunderstanding, but he could do nothing.⁴⁶ The Gandhian experiment's female participants were servile, confused, and listless. Regarding this matter, Gandhi freely submitted his acceptance to Krishnachandra by saying that he was referring to what he had done naturally. Nearly all of them would reluctantly strip. He had stated in writing that they did so at his urging. This was the only way if Gandhi wanted to always be a Brahmachari and wanted women to be Brahmacharis as well.⁴⁷ Many people believed Gandhi lacked considerable physical charm. But he emanated a lot of appeal in the eyes of his female coworkers. Maybe his male companions didn't see it.

According to Professor Gier, In 1938, Gandhi began his brahmacharya experiments⁴⁸ and Gier cited ten women who had shared the bed with Gandhi.⁴⁹ At Gandhi's Sevagram Ashram, when his wife Kasturba was still alive, Gandhi started cultivating his sacrosanct associations [as he liked to call it] as early as 1938. In addition to sharing a bed with him there, Sushila Nayar regularly massaged Gandhi, even in front of guests and, as already mentioned, they took showers together. Gandhi claimed that about Nayar she had experienced everything Gandhi had to offer. She was more focused on Gandhi. As a result, Gandhi would even force her to sleep by his side without any hesitation.⁵⁰ Nayar later informed Ved Mehta that she used to sleep with Gandhi the same way she would with her mother before even Manu entered the scene. Calling those early days as brahmacharya experiments was out of the question. It merely comprised a natural remedy. Later, as inquiries concerning Gandhi's intimate relationships with women began to surface, the concept of brahmacharya experiments was born.⁵¹ From 1926 till 1948, Lilavati Asar, who was linked to Gandhi, slept in Gandhi's bed and also served him by bathing and massaging him. While

assisting, Sharada Parnerkar slept next to Gandhi. In October 1940, she was in critical condition, and Gandhi regularly administered her laxatives.⁵² Amtul Salaam was a Patiala-born Punjabi whom Gandhi referred to as his crazy daughter. She served Gandhi as a masseuse and co-sleeper. Gandhi once wrote about the happiness he brought to Salaam when he gave her a massage.⁵³ Due to her lack of sexual interest or desire, Gandhi believed Prabhavati Narayan, the wife of Jayaprakash Narayan, would make a picture-perfect marital brahmachari. She not only shared the bed with Gandhi but also rendered personal services to him. Amrit Kaur, who was wedded to a prince from Rajasthan, spent thirty years as a close friend of Gandhi. She slept in Gandhi's quarters alongside the younger women despite being older. She also assisted Gandhi with massages and baths. In 1947, Sucheta Kriplani, a professor at Benares Hindu University and a member of independent India's Parliament, served in Gandhi's Peace Brigade in East Bengal. She kept up her Brahmachari marriage to eminent socialist and saint J. B. Kriplani. Gandhi battled tenaciously against the Sucheta - J.B. merger. Gandhi frequently encouraged Mrs. Kriplani to lie in his bed, but Gandhi demanded that married couples always sleep in separate quarters in his Ashrams. Bengali Abha Gandhi travelled to East Bengal with Mahatma. When she was only sixteen years old, she began sleeping with Gandhi and also assisted him in the bath and laundered his clothes.⁵⁴

Kanchan Shah, a married female who also had a one-night fling with Gandhi, was prohibited from participating in brahmacharya experiments as a result of her purported desire to have sex with him.⁵⁵ After that incident, Shah and her husband received the following orders from Gandhi regarding Brahmachari marriage there should not be any touching between them, they must not speak with one another, must not join forces to do any work and shouldn't use each other for any kind of service.⁵⁶ However, Gandhi's women disciples provided him with regular assistance in his acts, regularly. Kumar opined that taking what he denied to others was hypocritical and that Gandhi's commitment to becoming a brahmacharya was an act of retaliation from his side against everyone else.⁵⁷ Manu Gandhi stayed with Gandhi for the final eight years of his life. She was his brother's granddaughter. The majority of narratives of Gandhi's Brahmacharya experiments centre on those with Manu in East Bengal in 1946–1947. He admitted at that time that it might be a misunderstanding and a trap, and he appeared to be remembering his earlier experiments at Sevagram, as Gandhi said that he had already risked purgatory, but he was nonetheless sure that he had embarked on a sacrifice that entailed the full practice of truth and the progress of a bravery-inspiring non-violence.⁵⁸ He asserted that these trials were now a sacred responsibility [yajna] rather than a trial that could be viewed as optional. Manu's father had to find another place to sleep when Gandhi came to visit since that hut, where Gandhi slept with Manu, was known as a hallowed, holy ground.⁵⁹

It was unclear whether the women just slept close to him, shared the same cover/blanket, or did so either dressed or bare.⁶⁰ They looked to have first slept next to Gandhi before snoozing naked beneath the same blanket. Importantly, Gandhi acknowledged that each of them would only strip if he prompted them to.⁶¹ Sushila Nayar remembered Gandhi explaining to Manu the reason for being completely naked at Noakhali by saying that the Muslims could kill both of them at any time so they must now both begin sleeping naked to put their purity to the final trial.⁶² Gandhi defined his sharing bed with Manu as a daring and novel trial that called for both a skilled Brahmachari like him and a woman free from passion like Manu.⁶³ Manu admitted to Gandhi that she had never had any sexual urge, just as she might have had with her mother. Gandhi predicted that the heat would be intense, perhaps due to these favourable circumstances.⁶⁴ Manu deserved admiration because it was, she, not Gandhi who proposed that they should stop sharing a bed. Gandhi's claim that Manu's lack of experience caused the tests to end rather than any failure on his part made it more difficult to give him credit. Just five days prior to Gandhi's murder, he accused Manu of failing to recognise the potential of the maha-yajna, as stated by Kumar.⁶⁵ Thus, Manu was to blame and not Gandhi. When they got back to Delhi, Manu and Gandhi started sleeping together again and did so all the way through January 1948.⁶⁶

A handful of feminist and Gandhian academicians have debated his debatable experiments of sleeping with naked women and have come to various conclusions on speaking about Gandhi's Brahmacharya trials. The secondary sources on this topic of Gandhi sleeping naked with young women primally divided for or against Gandhi.

Arundhati Roy opined on Gandhi's brahmacharya experiments that Gandhi saw women as a category rather than as an individual, that the entire species may, in his eyes, be represented by a very tiny sample of a few physical specimens, including his grand-niece.⁶⁷ Scholar Rita Banerji has this opinion about Gandhi and his experiments that Gandhi was a prime instance of a sensual marauder—a person who abused the authority he had over others by manipulating and sexually abusing them.⁶⁸

Parekh, on the other hand, gave a list of the five validations Gandhi gave for conducting his Brahmacharya experiment. Gandhi's decision to enter the sacred fire [the experiment] and either be burnt or saved [either qualify or fail], according to Parekh, was one of the causes. Gandhi's sexual yajna was a means of harnessing the core elements of his mental agency of spiritual Shakti and getting it to produce crucially important political returns. He believed that political success and morality were deeply linked with each other.⁶⁹ Veena R. Howard advanced the conversation further by writing that Gandhi wanted to give Manu an equal partnership, therefore he included her in the Brahmacharya Yajna. Gandhi, Veena continued, wanted to make Manu a perfect brahmachari as well and wanted to give women equal freedom [same as their male counterparts] to make their contributions

in deciding the parameters of brahmacharya, so he defined celibacy to include more than just controlling one's sperm, true brahmacharya was a purest holistic control of all the senses.⁷⁰

Then, how can we view Gandhi's sleeping with young ladies differently? Gandhi himself wrote that he was trying to develop into a eunuch psychologically. If he is successful, he will also physically become one. The only authentic Brahmacharya was that.⁷¹ Gandhi wanted to feel about women as women and wanted to be accepted by them as a sister or mother rather than as a man, this was the opinion of J. Jordens discussing the aims of the Gandhian Brahmacharya experiments.⁷² Gandhi's lifetime endeavour to entirely transform into a woman in his thoughts and deeds could be observed in this regard.⁷³

Notes and References (End Notes)

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- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 31
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- 10 *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, Volume 86, February 1st, 1947, p. 420, Amisshapara (hereinafter referred to as CWMG)
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- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 15
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 14
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- 16 CWMG, Volume 34, September 15, 1927, p. 460
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- 18 CWMG, Volume 30, March 7, 1926, p. 86, *Harijan*
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