

The Mother in the “Father of the Nation”

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INDIA has just finished observing the 126th birthday of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, known to Gandhi’s intimate friends and acquaintances as Bapuji, to most other Indians (including, curiously, his detractors) as Gandhiji, and to the rest of the world as Mahatma Gandhi. He is also, in official Indian broadcasts and in official representations of him, ‘Father of the Nation’, and it is by this designation that a grateful country remembers him on his birthday and other solemn occasions — or so one presumes. As the chief architect of the nation’s independence movement, Gandhi no doubt led, or *fathered*, the country to emancipation from British rule. Indeed, in no other country was the association between the freedom struggle and one man so close as it was in India. In shaping all the principal moments of the movement, from the struggle in Champaran to the non-cooperation movement of 1920-22, the civil disobedience movement, the Salt Satyagraha, and the Quit India Movement, Gandhi was to have the authorial and decisive voice. It is under the Mahatma’s guidance that the movement, unique among anti-colonial struggles in the Third World, remained largely non-violent, and it is largely on Gandhi’s account that the movement was bound to a certain ethical conception of political and public life. It is Gandhi’s vision that was supposed to have inspired Nehru, purportedly his ‘successor’, and that



Gandhi at a prayer meeting in Lahore

led, among other sources of political wisdom, to the formulation of fundamental rights for all Indian citizen, and safeguards for minorities, in the new constitution. If ever the appellation ‘Father of the Nation’ has seemed appropriate, it was never more so than in the case of Mahatma Gandhi.

Though Gandhi has always been an unacceptable, and sometimes hated, figure for people of certain political persuasions, such as Marxists, Naxalites, and orthodox Hindus of certain types, and for many Punjabis and Bengalis who perhaps unthinkingly were to place the blame for the partition and consequently their own dislocation on Gandhi’s shoulders, there has been a surprising

unanimity on conceding the title of the ‘Father of the Nation’ to him. The designation has become sacrosanct in a manner that makes it undesirable, for the common fate of those who are venerated is that they are worshipped, vilified, or ignored, but almost never understood. Only in very recent years, if the aspersions cast on his name by Mayavati and Kanshi Ram are any indication, has he seemed to some major groups in our country to be less than the ‘Father of the Nation’. In the most extreme form of the allegation, he is said to have merely fathered a tribe of dull, corrupt, vulgar, and singularly unattractive politicians. It is in any case transparent that no greater mockery is made of the ‘Father of the Nation’

and his teachings than by those politicians who, in an annual and totemistic enactment of modern political ritual, lay wreaths at his *samadhi* every October 2nd. In yet another caricature of Gandhi, the Mahatma is represented merely as a shrewd bania and upholder of *sanatan dharm*, appearing in the guise of a saint, master of the art of dissimulation.

Though many of the criticisms of Gandhi do him a great deal of injustice, and are too contemptible to be worthy of a response, a strong case is to be made for doing away with 'Father of the Nation' as a designation for Gandhi. In remembering Gandhi as the 'Father of the Nation', we turn him into a resolutely masculine figure, a very questionable and dubious enterprise; concurrently, the female half of the population, which more accurately, ashamedly, and alarmingly is less than half, is put on notice that in giving birth to the nation, and wisdom, they had, and will continue to have, no equivalent role to play. The solution scarcely resides in producing a woman, say a Sarojini Naidu or Rani of Jhansi, who might conceivably be thought adequate to play the part of the 'Mother of the Nation'. No woman remembered as the 'Mother of the Nation' would ever achieve parity with the 'Father of the Nation', least of all in a country where the name of the father alone is recorded in passports, official forms, and government records; moreover, the inclusion of women in the narratives of history is, paradoxically, often the easiest way of undermining the centrality of women's issues, the gendered nature of our discourses, and the deep structuring of patriarchy.

It is incontestably evident that Gandhi had a deep interest in, and profound awareness of, issues

primarily affecting women. Most singularly, Gandhi was a firm advocate of equality between men and women, and he was not prepared to countenance discrimination against women in any form. In the matter of sexuality, for instance, he deprecated those 'double standards' by which a man who engaged in unregulated sexual conduct was easily forgiven, even considered 'liberal', but a woman who did likewise was considered a prostitute, traitor to her sex and to the noble ideals of wifehood and motherhood. This is scarcely to say that Gandhi thought that both men and women could engage in promiscuous sexual activity; rather, he wished to hold men to the same standards to which women were held. Men were least entitled to pontificate on the morals of women, or to act as custodians of their virtue; and as he once put it pointedly, "Why is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity? Why should men arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity?" Gandhi's advocacy of equality between the sexes, nevertheless, did not prevent him from being patriarchal, most notably with respect to the occupations to be followed by women. In fact he could be insufferably sanctimonious about these matters. He did not think that women should assume the roles and occupations pursued by men, and he was rather adamant in adhering to the view that the principal bread-winner would continue to be the man. But the value of housework was not, in Gandhi's view, thereby demeaned, and indeed he was of the opinion that women, in contributing to good standards of housekeeping, nutrition, sanitation, and hygiene, were thereby performing a far more valuable service to the nation than engineers, scientists, and other experts. Besides, as Madhu

Kishwar has noted, what is so striking about Gandhi is that, unlike politicians whose pronouncements are habitually radical but whose practices are to the same degree retrograde and insulting to women, Gandhi was orthodox in his pronouncements but refreshingly radical and experimental in his practice. (See *Gandhi and Women*; Manushi Prakashan, 1986) Thus Gandhi himself laboured to devise ways which would enable women to spend less time in the kitchen and his own diet consisted of largely uncooked food. By admitting women into his ashram, he offered them the choice of something other than marriage, and among his close political associates and confidantes were a number of women. A much larger number of prominent Indian women, such as Kamala Chattopadhyay, Sarojini Naidu, Usha Mehta, Sushila Nayar, and Aruna Asaf Ali, have testified to the part played by Gandhi in drawing women away from their homes, and in bringing them into the midst of the independence struggle. Many Indian feminists have, not unexpectedly, recognised Gandhi as an unequivocal champion of women's rights — though Gandhi's language was the language of duties not rights — and an avid listener to women's voices.

As Ashis Nandy has so eloquently argued, a "major element in Gandhi's philosophy was his rediscovery of womanhood as a civilizing force in human society." It is also the case that his practices were informed by a concerted endeavor to bring women into the public realm; and one could go so far as to say that Gandhi sought to feminise politics and the public realm. It is partly within this context that one must view Gandhi's resort to fasting, his insistence upon spinning, and his resolute conviction of the efficacy of non-violent

resistance. Gandhi thought of women, upon whom fell the role of nurturing the human race, as naturally prone to non-violence in conduct and thought, and more adept at the art of persuasion. Far from being the weapon of the weak, non-violence was the weapon of the strong, and Gandhi held firm to the view that women had greater powers of resilience and resistance than men.

The rules of politics were the rules laid down by men, and only women were capable of humanizing this public sphere and rendering it more accountable to the conscience of men and women. Through his recourse to fasting, Gandhi sought to negate the supposed distinction between men's fasts as political and public, and women's fasts as ritualistic and private, and in so doing he provided a new interpretation to traditions of women's fasting by placing those squarely within a politics of resistance. By taking upon himself the task of spinning, Gandhi sought to draw attention not only to the plight of Indian households, which had been stripped of their earning capacity by the heartless introduction of mechanization, but to the exemplary role of women in keeping the household afloat through their daily efforts at spinning.

As Gandhi had the unique gift of finding the heroic within the trivial, and of eliciting the poetic from the prosaic, so he found in the daily lives of women the most salutary lessons on how to run a country, engage in the political life, and lead a life of economic thrift and moral plenitude. The constant rotation of the spinning wheel, though it might have suggested stagnation to some, was to Gandhi a profound illustration of the sustaining power of women, and of their reliability as keepers of the hearth and guardians of a society's

moral codes. Here, again, there is the difficulty that Gandhi relied upon highly suspect categories of 'nature' and the 'natural', but the net effect of his view of women, and of those 'feminine' practices from which he had a great deal to learn, was such as to empower women and make them feel the equal of men.

Finally, there is the consideration that Gandhi himself had eminently 'feminine' qualities, and he appreciated these qualities in other men as well. During his fast in 1933, undertaken on behalf of the cause of Harijan upliftment, he found the highest words of praise for Sardar Patel, later to be known as the 'Iron



Gandhi with his grand daughter Abha and Dr. Sushila Nayar his personal physician on the day he started his January 1948 fast against Hindu-Muslim riots

Man' of India, for the Sardar had nursed him with such care and affection that Gandhi was reminded of his own mother. Gandhi himself acquired something of a reputation for nursing not only his wife Kasturba, but the inmates of the ashram, his friends and acquaintances, and the animals at his ashram. There is the famous story told of the time when, engaged in a critical meeting with members of the Cabinet Mission on 2 May 1946, Gandhi withdrew to attend to his goat that had been hurt that morning. When he did not return for more than fifteen minutes, Stafford Cripps and his colleagues went looking for him, and were more than a trifle annoyed to find Gandhi applying mud over the sprained ankle of his goat. In his autobiography, Gandhi wrote of how he acted as a nurse to his father, and both during the Boer War and World War I, he volunteered his services as a nurse. To nurse others was a "passion" with him, and all his close associates, particularly the women around him, were to recall with intense longing and admiration the times when Gandhi's words and hands had lulled them in their illness to a comfortable sleep. No one put it more suggestively than Gandhi's grandniece and companion of the last few years, Manubehn, who authored a book to which she gave the title, *Bapu — My Mother*.

We must, thus, pause to reflect on the appropriateness of describing Gandhi as the 'Father of the Nation'. Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, found in Gandhi's recourse to fasting and advocacy of spinning sure signs of effeminacy, and there are many others among India's modernizers and business elites who have condemned Gandhi to the periphery as an example of a soft and feminine leader who could not survive in the

modern world. But Gandhi was possessed of a civilizational sensibility where the boundaries between the masculine and the feminine were not so easily drawn, a sensibility akin to that which produced images of the *ardhanarishwara* in Indian art and culture, which could give birth to schools of painting where Radha is transformed into Krishna and Krishna in turn sports the looks and clothes of Radha, and which today still has a place, albeit an increasingly maligned one, for a large number of people, the *hijras*, who live on the border between the feminine and the masculine. The presence of the masculine within the feminine, and conversely of the feminine within the masculine, described a dialectical and dialogic relationship between the sexes. Gandhi himself was not reticent in describing his ideal, "A man should remain man and yet should become woman; similarly a woman should remain woman and yet become man."

The nuanced sense of the feminine and the masculine, and of the feminine in the masculine as much as of the masculine in the feminine, is lost in the characterization of Gandhi as the 'Father of the Nation'. Though India has ever been the motherland, patriarchy should not be

so easily appeased; Gandhi had to be invested with an unworthy title, and one for which no equivalent has been found in Hindi, the national language with whose advocacy Gandhi had a long and critical involvement. The fact that we continue to use the expression, 'Father of the Nation', in a language that is still alien to the vast majority of the people who inhabit India, and which betokens power and dominance, points to the signal triumph of the masculine in the political domain. That very liminality, the wondrous ability to stand on the threshold between the feminine and the masculine, the private and the public, the profane and the sacred, the slum and the *ashram*, the vernacular and the classical, is seriously compromised in the designation of Gandhi as the 'Father of the Nation.' Though Gandhi's services to the nation were innumerable, the embodiment of liminality, which is also the liminality of Narasimha, the man-lion who came as Vishnu's incarnation to save the world, was Gandhi's supreme gift to the nation. But it is easier to think of Gandhi himself as a gift to the nation, a gift we can never reciprocate, and which we are still yet to appreciate, and it is apt that rather than characterizing him as the 'Father of the Nation', we should call him *Bharatdan*. □

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