

Saris, Men and Nonviolence: Reflections on Indian Masculinity

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When I began working on this chapter, I discovered I could not find an article with a pro-feminist perspective written by an Indian man. The librarian at a reasonably good documentation centre in Bangalore provided me with several bulky files on women's issues but only a slim one on men's responses. The latter contained a few newspaper clippings from Western contexts, but almost nothing from India. I am aware there are some small efforts to remedy the situation in parts of the country, but they do not add up to much as yet. In the pages that follow I have focused on Hindu tradition but patriarchal attitudes equally permeate the whole of Indian society regardless of religious persuasion. Similar papers will hopefully be attempted from Muslim, Christian, Sikh and other minority perspectives.

Early perceptions of men and women

By way of introduction, I will begin with myself. I was brought up to believe that women were inferior to men. Nobody actually said it, but it was in the air. The pattern of relations within the family and the privileges and power accorded to men were all part of the unspoken script. The men believed in it. So did the women. In my college years, before feminist ideas began to trickle in, I remember proposing the daring idea that both sexes are equal. A tall well-built medical student shot back that I was talking nonsense and she believed women were inferior. It must have secretly pleased me to hear that.

I felt close to my mother in my childhood. She was the one I could throw tantrums at, cuddle and cling to when I felt low, or when my father had thundered at one of us. My father was a kindly man but was mildly bi-polar, which is the name given to the illness that produces mood fluctuations. He could be morose and depressed for weeks, when he hardly spoke, followed by periods when he was irritable and yelled with an intensity that would make us shrivel with fear. When I was three, I remember him throwing a plate at my mother. The plate missed her, crashed against the wall and a ricocheting fragment slashed her arm. She bled profusely and I was terrified. There was little she could do but weep. From an early age I understood that women were meant to quietly accept battering from their husbands and not retaliate.

Wife-battering and the honour of men

Wife battering cuts across all social classes and is deeply ingrained in all our communities and religious groups. Let me mention a case that readily comes to mind. Ramasamy, who lives in a slum nearby, is an unskilled worker, excavating earth for construction, mixing cement and shifting bricks on his head. It is hard work and he is not too strong, frequently developing kidney stones. When he returns home in the evening, he

expects his wife Lakshmi to have a hot meal of rice and dhal (lentil gruel) ready. This does not always happen as Lakshmi works as a maid in three houses and is often asked to do extra time. Every once in a while Ramasamy goes to a nearby hooch joint after work and gets drunk on illicit arrack. He is usually in a foul mood when he returns and Lakshmi has to take his hectoring. If she reacts he beats her up, not too badly mercifully, as she is the stronger of the two and can sometimes give back in measure. She would have left Ramasamy for good if she knew how to cope financially on one income and get assistance from her parents and siblings in bringing up her three children. On a couple of occasions she did leave Ramasamy briefly, taking her children with her. But Ramasamy was heartbroken each time and pleaded for her to return. He wanted her back because he did love her very much, even if he never admitted that his attitude was unjust. Without her there was no household anymore, no one to cook his meals and look after his children. He once told me, 'When a wife does something wrong it is the husband's duty to correct her. If I don't beat her who else will!' Ramasamy's attitude is in keeping with mainstream cultural values in India, while Lakshmi is part of a fledgling non-conformism. But even Lakshmi's desire to quit her husband is ambivalent. A part of her is militant, influenced by the values of a women's organization working in the area, while another part craves for traditional social acceptance in the community.

What angers Ramasamy is that his wife answers back. She rarely breaks down and cries when he insults her, which infuriates him even further. If she cried it would show she was penitent and vulnerable, that his words had found their mark. It would help him reestablish authority over her, allow him to be stern and gentle in turn. He grew up believing a woman was to be patient, hardworking, devoted and self-suffering, attitudes deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche, women believing in them as much as men. Another useful case is of Kanan, the carpenter, who threatens his wife Andalamma every now and then when he is drunk. Once Andalamma tried to drown herself because Kanan in a fit of drunken rage, asked her to go and kill herself. I later asked Andalamma why she had attempted such a foolish act. Brimming with pride she told me, 'When your husband asks you to do something you must do it.'

I knew Andalamma well and was sure she had no intention of dying, that her attempt to drown herself was done in full view of her neighbours, with the knowledge she would be rescued before completing the act. She was the secretary of the neighbourhood unit of a political party. She was not a battered woman in the strict sense for Kanan was a weak man even in his drunken state. He did not have the courage to stand up to her and generally went along with whatever she wished. But Andalamma was in need of redeeming her reputation and showing she was within the cultural matrix, where it is meritorious for a woman to obey her husband's wish. Kanan was even more proud of his wife after that day and Andalamma's standing in the community went up.

The Indian bride: Duties without rights

The notion that a woman's role is to be utterly devoted to her husband is an old one and has been well stated by a western woman Sr.Nivedita, earlier known as Margaret Noble,

who became an ardent disciple of the well known Indian monk Swami Vivekananda. Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century she wholeheartedly restated his view on being feminine:

The Indian bride comes to her husband much as the Western woman might enter a church...For the woman supreme love is ...a duty. Only to the man his mother must always stand first. In some sense, therefore, the relation is not mutual. And this is in full accordance with the national sentiment, which stigmatizes affection that asks for equal return as 'shopkeeping.' ...As a disciple might, she prostrates herself before him, touching his feet with her head before receiving his blessing. It is not equality. No. But who talks of a vulgar equality, asks the Hindu wife, when she may have instead the unspeakable blessedness of offering worship? (quoted in Roy, 1999, P.116)

The frame of reference for male attitudes to women in Indian society is culturally sanctioned and comes from ancient religious scriptures. In the Manusmriti, an important text on Hindu law dating from 200 BC, Manu the lawgiver states that women are weak and fickle in nature and should not be given independence. (Manu, See trans. Doniger and Smith's 1991, Chapter 9) Although she must be held in respect she should be under the control of her father first, then her husband and later her son. A good woman is one who goes about her domestic duties with devotion and bears male offspring for her husband. The importance of the male child is underlined by Manu when he states:

The husband enters the wife, becomes an embryo, and is born here on earth. That is why the wife is called a wife, because he is born again in her. The wife brings forth a son who is just like the man she makes love with; that is why he should guard his wife zealously, in order to keep his progeny clean." (Manu. Trans. Doniger and Smith, 1991,:197)

(The bias towards the male child is still cruelly evident today with female infanticide and female foeticide being widely practiced) ¹

The Hindu epic Ramayana, in the popular version written by the sage Valmiki, is another good source to explore traditional gender attitudes. Sita, the wife of the god Rama, follows her husband into the forest where he is exiled. Kidnapped from the forest she is taken to the palace of the demon king Ravana, who is enamoured of her beauty. Rama eventually rescues Sita after slaying Ravana. But Rama insists that Sita has to endure an ordeal by fire to prove her chastity. Sita comes through victorious, proving she is beyond reproach. Eventually Rama returns with Sita to Ayodhya, where he becomes king. But Sita's trauma is far from over as rumours concerning her chastity still abound. In accordance with tradition Rama unwillingly banishes Sita from the palace. Understandably most Indian men prefer to see Sita as beautiful, dutiful and loyal. Women would also agree, although some might argue that Sita did not take her humiliation lying down. In some versions of the Ramayana she has defended herself somewhat more vigorously at her husband's unfair suspicions.

The quest for manhood

Many modern Indians will believe that to be a man means to be strong and gutsy. I had a sense of this when I was at university. Our college, run by the Jesuits, refused to take part in a citywide demonstration against what some southerners perceived as the unjust imposition of Hindi as the national language by the Central Government in Delhi. Most of the men's colleges in the city of Tiruchirapalli went on strike. When they realized that our college was still working a delegation of students appeared at the gate to present us with saris (the traditional attire of Indian women). The saris signified that we were women, lacking in courage. The provocation was sufficient for the students to storm out of the campus and join the rest of the protesters. In the past Indian men were seen to be effeminate. Consider what Lord Macaulay, who became a Viceroy in 19th century colonial India, had to say. According to him the Indian is: ‘

feeble even to effeminacy. He lives in a constant vapour bath. His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and more hardy breeds...His mind bears a singular analogy to his body. It is weak even to helplessness for purposes of manly resistance; but its suppleness and tact move the children of sterner climates to admiration not unmingled with contempt. (quoted in Rudolph and Rudolph, 1969:164)²

Even Mahatma Gandhi, as a young man, was traumatized by his own perceived weakness. He wrote, ‘It must at the outset be admitted that the Hindus as a rule are notoriously weak.’ (quoted in Rudolph and Rudolph, 1969:167)

Swami Vivekananda, the popular late nineteenth century Hindu monk, referred to Indian men as an unattractive ‘nation of women’. Photographs of Vivekananda were probably calculated to show him as strong and manly, unlike his own guru Ramakrishna who emphasized the feminine dimension. Ramakrishna, who saw himself as the handmaid of God, said, ‘I spent many days as the handmaid of God. I dressed myself in women's clothes, put on ornaments, and covered the upper part of my body with a scarf, just like a women...’(quoted in Roy, 1999, p.97)³ No wonder that Vivekananda, caught in the throes of nascent nationalism, wished to distance himself from this feminine image of his guru. For him,

‘Ramakrishna's unlettered, intuitive, otherworldly ecstasy was not merely reproducible, it was not a fit model to emulate.’ (Roy, 1999, p.107) Vivekananda made this explicit when he said, ‘The older I grow, the more everything seems to me to be in manliness. This is my new gospel. Do even evil like a man! Be wicked, if you must, on a grand scale.’(quoted in Roy, 1999:106) I might add that Vivekananda, despite these views, is a revered figure in the collective consciousness of Indians, both Hindu and non-Hindu. He founded the Ramakrishna mission which is today the most significant Hindu body concerned with theology, education, health and charitable activities.

Gandhi: Nonviolence as feminine energy

Mahatma Gandhi appears to have rejected Vivekananda's masculine ideal and actively associated the feminine with peaceful and communitarian values. For him women were the incarnation of ahimsa (non-violence and love) (see Rudolph and Rudolph, 1969, p.215). Gandhi himself did not hold these views to begin with. In his youth his Muslim friend Mehtab told him that Hindus were weak because they did not eat meat. Mehtab ascribed his superior strength and athletic prowess to being a meat eater. Many of the local people also believed that meat-eating made an Englishman strong and allowed him to rule India. When Gandhi later went to England to study law he continued to imitate the Englishman. But his attempts at Anglicization failed and he began to slowly return to the way of life he was accustomed to, one that was ascetic and self-denying.(see Rudolph and Rudolph, 1969, p.179) It was only a question of time before nonviolence (ahimsa) became the central pillar of his social and political life. Gandhi saw non-violence as representing the potency of women: 'Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage?' (quoted in Rudolph and Rudolph, 1969:192) Gandhi believed that the essence of femininity was superior to that of masculinity and masculinity was better than cowardice.(see Nandy, 1999:53)

Gandhi's appreciation of women is nevertheless within a patriarchal context. He wrote:

It is not for women to go out and work, as men do. If we send them to the factories who will look after our domestic and social affairs? If women go out and work our social life will be ruined and moral standards will decline...I am convinced that for men and women to go out for work together will mean the fall of both. (quoted in Baldt, 2000:81)

But Gandhi was also a believer in 'conscience' and the 'inner voice', and if these made a woman flout social norms it would be acceptable. He insisted that:

The wife has a perfect right to take her own course, and meekly brave the consequences when she knows herself to be in the right, and when her resistance is for a nobler cause. (quoted in Baldt, 2000:81)

Although he believed that the woman's place was in the home he shrewdly used them in agitations against the British to great political effect. Suresh R.Baldt argues that Gandhi realized the impact on world opinion if women peacefully demonstrated against the policies of their colonial rulers.(Baldt 2000) For Gandhi the issue of women's liberation was possibly secondary to the goal of winning independence from the British. Gandhi suffers in hindsight but for that period he was seen as a radical reformer and played a significant role in the emancipation of women. His belief that women could be active in public life and still be good housewives continues to be the norm today.

Gandhian non-violence and the glorification of the woman (however inconsistent) were slowly denuded by the rising tide of cultural nationalism towards the end of the 20th century. Vivekananda's notions of masculinity were more apt for the purpose. In promoting an aggressive nationalism some political organizations went further than Vivekananda and articulated an inimical policy towards minorities like Muslims and Christians. These organizations are unfortunately no longer marginal and are today part of the ruling political establishment. Today a coalition government led by Hindu nationalists rules the country. The seminal ideas of this nationalism largely emanated from the ideas of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar who wanted 'the undying vitality of Hindu manhood' to strengthen a movement that would 'make the enemies of Hindudom shudder.' (see Jurgensmeyer 1994:84)

Jolted into awareness

The passage from patriarchy to an awareness of the oppression of women is not an easy one for most Indian men and I have still to come across one who has made a painless transition. Take my own case. I was twenty-six when I was jolted into angry humiliation by Veronique, a young French woman, at an educational workshop in Paris. That afternoon we were discussing women's issues. Typically, the men remained silent while the women discussed patriarchy and the oppression they experienced. I was not new to women's issues and I was upset that my point of view was not solicited. After all I was a champion in espousing women's issues and several Indian women were regularly present at the sessions I had organized back home. (Obviously I had not then considered that patriarchy could also manifest in men in the garb of women's liberation.) The women who led the discussion at the Paris workshop went about as if the men were not present in the room, although I was certain they wanted us to register every word they said. After politely listening to them for more than an hour several of us were dying to slip out of the room. But we didn't dare for it would have been construed as a further sign of male chauvinism and since none of us wanted trouble we patiently sat it out. Towards the end an unconscious smirk appeared on my face. Veronique noticed the smirk and was quick to grab the opportunity. 'Why are you smiling!?' she asked menacingly. I was momentarily thrown off guard since I was not even aware I was smiling. 'Men always grin or laugh when women's issues are discussed!' she bellowed. I was angry she had picked on me for what I thought was a pardonable misdemeanour, if at all it was one. Later, largely to keep the peace, I went up to her and apologized without feeling remorseful. 'It's easy for men to apologize,' she continued, unwilling to get off the moral high ground. At the time I genuinely believed she was being ungracious, although I did not say anything. As punishment Veronique asked me to go and make tea for all the women in the room. She told me I was being let off lightly. I made the tea and put on a mask of meek gentleness, although I was mortified at what I perceived to be needless aggression. It was an important lesson. Thereafter, I never smiled when women's issues were discussed. On the whole, for many years I avoided discussions when I could help it, although, thankfully, I did not regress into rigid male attitudes. I reluctantly continued to develop an appreciation of the rights of women, although I avoided participating in their

discussions. I think I came to dislike feminists who challenged men. Years later I came to accept the truth of Veronique's intervention and was grateful to her for it.

Cultural nationalism: Reinforcing patriarchal attitudes

Today we are confronted by the twin dangers of aggressive cultural nationalism and a new global macho culture reinforcing traditional male attitudes. The former sees Hinduism as the true religion of India and portrays Muslims and Christians as outsiders. When four Christian nuns were raped in Jhabua recently the general secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a powerful Hindu nationalist outfit, dismissed the incident as the natural outcome of Christian attempts to convert Hindus. Well-known women leaders like Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambara and women's organizations like Durga Vahini have actively contributed in instigating violence against minorities. (see article by Soma Marik in The Telegraph (Calcutta), 29th November, 1999) Today Hindu nationalism has a two pronged and seemingly contradictory approach to women. On the one hand it attempts to reinforce the subordinate position of women and on the other it uses women to join the chorus of intimidation and violence against Muslims and Christians. According to the Hindu right, the main factor behind rape is the demand of women for equal and democratic rights. In 1983, Mridula Sharma, the president of Mahila Morcha, a women's organization, rationalized wife beating and dowry. (see article by Soma Marik in The Telegraph (Calcutta), 29th November, 1999)

Most men I have discussed these issues with would like to believe that there are some qualities that are essentially masculine and others that are feminine. They would feel very threatened with the proposition that the sexes are essentially the same (allowing for biological differences) and that role differences are only historical and cultural constructions. For example, Indians seem to agree with Mahatma Gandhi and do not feel that former prime minister Indira Gandhi was setting a bad example by being active in public life. As Ashis Nandy put it, 'public success does not seem to detract from private womanliness'. (Nandy, 1999:42) A woman like Indira Gandhi may have assimilated aggressive models of leadership that are competitive and non-giving but she also projected a feminine essence related to dress and other behaviour. Aggressive and competitive patterns are not seen as inherently masculine. In mythology and folklore they are also qualities associated with women. (Nandy, 1999) Indira Gandhi herself did not want to be known as a feminist and Madhu Kiswar, the editor of *Manushi*, a women's journal, sees feminism as a loaded eurocentric term. (see Roy, 1999:206) Most men would agree, for other reasons, and advocate a perspective that would support complementarity and difference rather than sameness and equality.

Bollywood and the new man

Aggressive male machismo, fuelled by Hollywood, has progressively seeped into the cultural scene over the last two decades. India's Bollywood (as the hugely popular

Bombay Indian film industry is referred to) has caught up fast and Indian actors like Salman Khan now imitate 'Rambo' Sylvester Stallone in strutting about bare-chested displaying muscular torsos. The aggressive individualism promoted by the global market has also played a decisive role in legitimizing violence and a particular conception of masculinity. The last twenty years have accelerated efforts at women's empowerment but we are also witnessing the hardening of male attitudes and an increase in violence against women. While exact figures are not available, a cautious estimate would suggest that around a thousand women are killed each month in the country. Dowry killings have been in the news regularly for the past two decades. They reveal the new commercial attitudes of sections of the middle class who would see dowry as more worthy than the wife. If the woman's family refuses to pay the full dowry they had promised, or reject fresh demands, an unforeseen 'accident' might well end her young life or she may be subjected to continual battering by the husband and his family. Many women's movements in the country have been highlighting dowry deaths and other violence against women. As a result, there is probably some fear to indulge in these acts, although even this is doubtful as it is well known that most cases are written off as suicide and hardly any of the perpetrators end up behind bars. Even when they are arrested, the unsympathetic attitude of the police and the judiciary see to it that they are acquitted.

A large number of non-governmental organizations are playing important roles in the empowerment of women all over the country. This has led to women being more assertive. But the changing attitudes of women have not led to any significant increase in the capacity of men to appreciate the new feminism. Men have felt threatened and in many cases have reacted with increased ferocity. I remember the case of a couple who worked with me in a village outside Bangalore. As social workers, they were both exposed to ideas on the empowerment of women. But the man beat up his wife whenever she returned late from women's meetings in the villages. He wanted her home early so that the evening meal would be ready in time and there would 'be someone at home when I return.' (For the traditional male the feminine is associated with 'home' and the masculine with 'outside'.) Despite being a social worker he was unable to overcome these old cultural archetypes and only paid 'lip service' to the rights of women.

Gender sensitivity: Are men are in need of help?

It is increasingly clear that the empowerment of women must go along with the 'alternative' empowerment of men if it is not to lead to major conflicts in the family and outside. This new empowerment has little to do with the old brute power that men often exercised over women. This alternative empowerment must replace the old attitudes of authority and domination with equality and complementarity. This process necessitates looking into the cultural archetypes that are deeply embedded in the consciousness of both men and women. It also means that Indian men must accord the same dignity to the wife that they give to the mother. In the end we must work toward women and men who are both humane and empowered. It will benefit nobody to have many men permanently reacting against feminism or conversely being debilitated by the questions it raises.

Most men are so culturally conditioned that they are not deeply aware of the distress and harm they cause women. Even men who are exposed to feminism plead their inability to change in too radical a fashion as they lack, in the words of one male friend, 'the skills to be non-patriarchic'. They prefer a benign and humane patriarchy where they are not radically destabilized. But can women be really empowered with attitudes such as these? Or should women accept that society should move incrementally, a step at a time, and content themselves that some empowerment is better than non at all? For men this is an easier prospect to digest than a sudden overturning of power relations and the bitter and irrational conflicts that follow. Some men understandably feel that a dialogical approach may allow them to more confidently deal with their fears and undergo a degree of positive transformation than the proposals put forward by radical feminists. The majority of Indian women are also probably of a similar disposition. Better to advance towards an increase of liberties and fulfillment than face a broken marriage and isolation. Perhaps if the social conditions were right a fair number of middle-class women might prefer outright divorce to being the objects of violence. But it would be a lonely furrow for most and many women prefer to remain within marriage than face social exclusion, the degree of which would depend on her social class and job qualifications. Despite these considerations many middle-class women are now opting for divorce in the urban contexts and the number is likely to steadily rise. At one end of the continuum is the woman who fuses the traditional notion of the home with modern roles outside the home and at the other we find the new feminism which is convinced of the unfairness of traditional roles and opts for the outside. There is obviously no a priori clarity possible except the touchstone of dialogue and negotiation. Whatever the approach, one precondition is the openness needed on the part of the psychologically defensive Indian male, simultaneously struggling to protect his privileges and deal with the pain that comes with creative change.

Indian men are, however, not beyond redemption. To make their marriages work middle-class men are learning to negotiate new patterns of relationship with their wives. A small minority of men understand the need for both partners to share in household chores particularly where the woman is also employed. Even in more traditional contexts it would be misleading to assume that the situation is bleak and that conjugal happiness is entirely absent. In a large number of families women are respected and play decisive roles in family affairs even if they do not outwardly appear to be doing so. In recent years expressions like 'gender sensitivity', 'gender parity' and 'gender audit' are not uncommon among university educated people and among private and public institutions. The efforts of some non-government organizations have helped immensely to foster a new awareness through gender training sessions. These have helped some men to become aware of daily happenings that should be obvious but are not- that most women wake up much earlier than men, eat later than men, are busier than men and go to sleep later than men. In addition there is an emerging recognition that women in villages and slums (where toilets are not usually available) have to go out to relieve themselves under cover of darkness either before daybreak or at night. The not too threatening atmosphere of these training sessions help men to see the suffering women undergo on a daily basis. It has helped

remove some of the smugness and many men who have gone through these sessions come away with a desire to change their attitudes and behaviour.

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Notes

1. A study published by the National Law School of India University entitled *Female Infanticide and Foeticide* reveals some of the causes and the extent of the problem.
2. Rudolph and Rudolph's *The Modernity of Tradition* contains an excellent chapter on Gandhi's struggle to become more manly and courageous and his subsequent adherence to a 'feminine' non-violence.
3. Ramakrishna advised his disciples to avoid the company of women, except when they could be seen as maternal figures. He spoke of several kinds of sexual intercourse, including: listening to a woman, speaking about her, whispering to her privately, keeping something belonging to her and touching her. Parama Roy states, "Sexual desire could not however be kept in check by mere abstinence; it could only be transcended by becoming this troubling object of desire. The only way to shun women (as seductive figure) was to become woman (of another kind)."