

America's Daughters on Gandhi's Daughters

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J Am Acad Psychiatry Law 28:352-6, 2000

The article "Gandhi's Daughters"¹ is a tale of three Indian heroines. The first is Chaggibai Bhil, a feminist activist in the village of Ghugra located in the Indian state of Rajasthan. The story's setting is an arid section of India's northwestern region in which the people are isolated and poor. Village life follows well-established traditions of caste, family, and clans. Chaggibai is fighting for women's rights and change in the caste/gender hierarchy that is so punitive to women. She was born to the lowest of classes.

The second heroine is Sonia, a 14-year-old bride, at the center of the controversy, for whom Chaggibai is amassing supporters. The recently wed Sonia had moved into the home of her husband's family, as is the custom. It was there that her father-in-law, Devi Lal, raped her. Soon afterward, Sonia's husband, mother-in-law, and Devi Lal left the home. Upon hearing of their imminent return, Sonia tried to hang herself.

Our third heroine is the woman to whom she confessed the rape, the woman who discovered her following her suicide attempt. Although the author did not name her, it is this third woman, Devi Lal's mother, who is the major character in the story. Her courage spurred the unusual outcome. Sonia's grandmother-in-law went to the Women's Rights Union to seek their help in punishing her son for having committed the rape. The group of women, including Chaggibai and Devi Lal's mother, prevailed upon Sonia to file a formal complaint. While the women

gathered the clothes bearing telltale stains of the rape, Sonia made her complaint to the police.

Ironically, Sonia's own father, humiliated by the rape and the embarrassment it brought upon him, lashed out at her publicly. He ordered her to commit suicide to restore the honor of the family. In this area of India, the victim's entire family bears the burden brought by the shame of rape. Even siblings of the rape victim have difficulty finding suitable spouses once the rape is known.

What makes this story noteworthy is the shift from the usual course of events, thanks in large part to the gathering momentum of the feminist movement in India. One of the outcomes of the movement was the Panchayat Act of 1992, requiring women to occupy a third of the *panchayats* (village council) seats and a third of the *sarpanch* (village chief) posts. Chaggibai had been elected a *sarpanch* despite her most humble origins. Against considerable odds, she mobilized women of the villages to stand up and be counted. She accomplished a great deal of social change that included the repair of school buildings, roads, and irrigation systems. Detractors, alarmed by her growing influence, colluded to undermine her political power and remove her from office. Nevertheless, her influence among the people remained. Chaggibai exemplifies how women from low level castes are taking on more assertive roles and making a slow, faintly audible, but increasingly palpable, difference. Now, she was taking on Sonia's case.

In opposition to general custom, Sonia was offered refuge in the home of her grandmother-in-law, protecting her from her father's rage. The Women's Rights Union (born of Mahatma Gandhi's independence campaign) supported her as well. Perhaps in deference to the stir created and the unusual support

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for Sonia, the police arrested Devi Lal and his wife. The *panchayat* decided that Sonia's father, Devi Lal, and Sonia's husband were all to be banished from the community for life. Sonia herself was told to appear in the village square where, in view of all, she was allowed to hit her father and husband in the head with a shoe. In doing so, her honor was restored.

As this story begins, it is as if it springs from a different time. The horror is that it does not. The horror, that is, for us, educated American women who know so little of the Indian culture. How can we help but view the women of India from our own cultural eyes? Were not our mothers and grandmothers and even great-grandmothers far better off than these women? Did they not enjoy more freedom and choice and respect than these present-day Indian women? How, then, can we understand the struggle of poor Indian women or the minds of these Indian men?

What follows is a discussion of three issues generated by the article, shaped as they are by our own cultural lens: cultural perspectives defining the legality and ethics of an act; attitudes toward male/female sexuality; and changing cultural ethos as an impetus to legislation.

The Rape: How Culture Defines the Legality and Ethics of an Act

What we understand as rape, the unwilling sexual taking of another, may be contextual. While it may be an abhorrent thought to us at first, we need to consider the cultural context of the act to understand the intent of the men and the impact on the women. The ancestral blood that flows from the heart of India is the value placed on hierarchy and family. Unlike the highly honored individual rights and freedom upon which the United States was established, India places its value on social interdependence and cooperative effort (based on family, caste, religion, and clans). Such a system involves enormous attention and deference to rights and obligations, as well as to finely honed rules of etiquette.

Within the hierarchy of the family, wherein age and male gender have priority, the young daughter-in-law is subordinated to patrilineal patronage and has the lowest status in the family. Is she not, then, along with her dowry, the property of the senior male member of the household? Given the permeable boundaries of the extended family, its communal nature and lack of independent, singular functioning,

there is a sense that what is the son's is the father's. In such a light, the act of "rape" could be considered culturally acceptable, or at least, comprehensible.

Can an act be unlawful if condoned by the society in which it occurs? If it is unlawful, can the law against the act be fairly enforced if the attitudes held by the dominant group's culture ignore the law and affirm different standards? What value does statute have if the people do not acknowledge it? Other laws in India have been passed and ignored (such as the anti-dowry law), just as prohibition against alcohol was ignored in the United States.

Law is seen as a reflection of a society's values. Thus, statutes set right apart from wrong, defining values that are acceptable to the culture and those that are not. The law, then, is a statement about the culture's morality. However, if the majority of members of that culture ignore the law, one has to question whether the law truly reflects the morality of that culture.

Let us consider again Sonia's rape and whether there is some relationship between Indian and American morality. If we scratch our own cultural surface, perhaps we can understand the rape better. For example, consider our Appalachian subculture, in which incest is not uncommon and likely not to be considered rape. In the collective family of some Mormon clans, young girls submit sexually to elders, even if they are brides. Indeed, the current American population considers such behavior criminal, but these subcultures do not. Are they really different from the Indian culture of this article?

We have to consider, as well, date rape or the rape of a young woman by a college sports team, examples where we know well how difficult it is for the violated female to obtain justice. Domestic violence occurs in 1 of 10 American families. The statistics on sexual abuse are even higher. Our statutes are not preventing such acts from being perpetrated by the dominant members of society.

We suggest that there are various frameworks for the construction of morality, criteria upon which we rely in determining right from wrong. These moral frameworks effect change and influence our response to "Gandhi's Daughters." There are two morally questionable concepts here. The first is that which considers women as inferior to or less than men, as objects. The second is to view women as chattel, the property of the male, particularly of the male "in

charge." Neither of these moral stances is unique to India or, for that matter, the United States.

We can see the evolution in American society of how African slaves were treated, as "creatures" whom the dominant (white male) society could do with as they pleased. It was a morality fueled by a belief that the African was inferior to the European. Similarly, there was a time when women and African Americans were not considered qualified to vote or to hold a variety of prestigious positions. The laws changed because the morality changed.

Rape is immoral because it is built on weak premises. It is not only a matter of owning people, but of treating humans as less than human, precluding even the right to protect one's own body from invasion. It is a defiance of human dignity, precluding the right to decide what is and is not acceptable to enter one's own body. To go, perhaps, to the heart of creation, rape forces an amalgamation of one's most individual physical essence with the genes of one she might loathe.

Basing ownership of individuals on economic need and property rights in itself would seem as logical as the young bride being the property of the father-in-law in our example above. However, justifying such a premise by believing that Africans or females are less (human? civilized? smart? capable?) than Europeans or men is another denigration of morality. It is a moral framework that begs for restructuring.

As in the India of our focus, in these situations above, many believe(d) that what is or was being done is normal behavior: men acting in ways that are seen as their due, based on patriarchal values and perhaps socioeconomic ones as well. However, it is behavior based on an entitlement that needs justification. What is the moral foundation for entitlement that is based on the concept of humans as property? Even children, who are the responsibility of their parents or guardians, are not property.

What changes the tide of our Indian story is a woman. Indeed, she is not just any woman, but the mother of the perpetrator. As such, this story has a different tone from merely being an expression of the ethos of a particular society. What this mother did was to say that her son behaved unacceptably, even criminally. So she actively pursued justice for her grandson's wife and punishment of her son. This woman tells us by her actions that the culture in which these acts took place does not, in fact, support

such behavior; and the support she is able to garner for her position begins to make this single case an example that will reach and affect others. The principal heroine, the grandmother-in-law, announces that gender is thicker than blood when such an injustice must be redressed. Considering the long tradition of male dominance in the family, this is an extraordinary shift. The grandmother-in-law assumes the power base sufficient to confront the patrilineal traditions and, with the help of other women, change them. What makes her act so potent is that this woman reaches across tradition and family. Hers is a voice that is neither expected nor encouraged and therefore speaks all the more volubly.

Sexuality and Shame

Given the shame inflicted on the victim, as manifested by her father's expectation that she kill herself, we are again shocked and offended by the utter unfairness, the reversal of responsibility, and the convoluted attribution of shame. To our American minds, the father's betrayal and rejection of Sonia is a second rape of sorts. It is difficult for us consciousness-raised Americans to understand.

In this particular Asian culture, Indian women are taught to subordinate their own wishes to the needs of the husband's family as well as to control their own sexual impulses and desires. *Purdah* (veil custom) speaks to the decorum and modesty women are expected to demonstrate. *Purdah* restrains the Indian woman as much as prisons restrain the prisoner. Indian women practicing *Purdah* are hidden and isolated. They are neither seen nor heard. They are restricted in power, freedom, travel, and conversation. The practice is linked to male authority and family honor.

Women are not to be tempted by the outside world, particularly sexually. Marriages are arranged, often at birth; or the male's family may "shop" for a wife. While the male has limited choice, the female has none. And where men may be forgiven for illicit affairs or sexual liaisons with a person of a lower caste, women are not. The younger the age and higher the class, the greater the restriction. Disobeying these restrictions is serious indeed. Should a woman be said to bring shame upon a family, or even bad luck, her life could be at risk. In situations such as Sonia's, she is expected to commit suicide. Other cases may be made to look like suicide.

Given what appears to be such an unenlightened

view, we must again scratch our own cultural surface. When an American girl becomes pregnant, the stigma is hers alone, not her partner's. It is the young mother who has the responsibility for the child, and the child who bears the label of illegitimacy. Rarely is the father considered. In Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, it was Hester Prynne who carried the mark and ridicule of committing adultery. Indeed, when a woman has many lovers, she is still often considered promiscuous. Yet, in many American subcultures, her male counterpart is considered desirable, a "stud." In the American military, we are hard put to find equal treatment of male officers who have had sexual liaisons and female officers with the same behaviors who have been discharged. Even in the United States today, men enjoy more sexual expression without censure than women do. Men, indeed, have more power and approval of their sexuality than do women. Even when considering female sexual symbols, the women who appear to have sexual power over men, on closer examination, may reveal the reverse. For example, Marilyn Monroe, the quintessential object of sexual fantasy of American men, was all the more appealing for her vulnerability.

Perhaps as a society, Americans are more sophisticated in matters of gender roles than our Indian peers, but we are not different. In both cultures, there appears to be a different expectation of women and men when it comes to sexual matters. It could be that this is a biologically determined characteristic of humankind; or perhaps it is a part of our collective unconscious that limits us to this gender specific view of sexuality. It may also serve to optimize the perpetuity of one's genes. If it is an ethos that can change, consider how. To do so, it may be useful for us to look at India and see what we can learn about how such a deep and endemic cultural shift occurs. Let us examine what happened in this story that created the extraordinary outcome. What was it that spurred Sonia's grandmother-in-law to take the action she did?

Impetus to Change

Social change throughout the world, certainly in the United States and India, reflects a changing view of the role of women. In India, where Hindu women had not been able to inherit property, the laws have changed. Similarly, Women's Clubs have helped bring about better population control. And as evidenced in "Gandhi's Daughters," women (often ne-

glected in childhood or aborted *in utero*) have now become village leaders and elected officials. Women's groups have had their impact. They have raised the moral questions. The laws have changed. However, shifting one's moral stance is a complex act.

A demonstrated psychological phenomenon is that of superordinate goals bringing people together in a productive manner. In Sherif's² study, boys were placed on two different teams at camp. Competition between them in sports and other aspects of their lives was encouraged. They worked cooperatively with members of their own teams but were encouraged to view the other team as the enemy such that they behaved in the typical denigrating way toward opposing teams. However, when the sewage system failed, they all had to work cooperatively to repair it. When the goal was common to all and more important than winning the sporting event, all members worked together to achieve it. The phenomenon of superordinate goals explains why during war, otherwise fractious factions come together to defeat the enemy. In a more mundane example, squabbling siblings can suddenly work together effectively if raking the leaves means going to the movies. So, too, may the Indian tradition of hierarchy (family, clan, and caste) have become subordinated to gender equality.

There are also situations in which there is so little to lose that motivation to change comes from anyone who can inspire hope from that change. It is suggested here that the conditions imposed upon these Indian women were so severe that it did not take much urging from a few to gather sufficient momentum to create change. The Panchayat Act of 1992 both evolved from such momentum and has increased the momentum such that there is a true feminist movement in India. The existence of the Women's Rights Union gave Sonia's grandmother-in-law sufficient hope to fight the injustice done to Sonia, quite likely only the most recent of many such injustices in Sonia's life. Tapping this culture of interdependent and cooperative effort, in which women were once mired, women's groups now influence male leaders, politicians, and judges, as well as men at large.

Erik Erikson³ and Lawrence Kohlberg⁴ have each written about moral development. Gandhi and Martin Luther King acted on their beliefs of a morality at a higher plane, based on a framework beyond socioeconomic self-interest. From the view of these men,

there is a higher morality on which, when illuminated, those who were blinded can begin to focus. As the focus becomes clearer, actions follow. It takes just a few who can see to enlighten others. And the light does spread. So, perhaps, Chaggibai Bhil was the spark that lit the view for the women of Ghugra, and that view became bright enough to show Devi Lal's mother what she needed to do to spotlight the moral issues for others. Even those who might have remained in the dark to fulfill their own interests awakened to the need to shift social humiliation from Sonia to her husband and father.

We have not answered the question of whether male and female sexual differences require unique considerations that should be, therefore, legislated (by statute or ethos). We have, however, highlighted

how uneven sexual and gender conditions that become unacceptable to sufficient numbers in a population can create a movement, a momentum for change. We American daughters, while repelled by the treatment of women delineated in the article, join in the spirit and satisfaction of the changes being made by Gandhi's daughters. We imagine that he would indeed be proud.

References

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