

## Did Mahatma Gandhi sleep with virgins?

August 13, 2004

Dear Cecil:

In his book *The Sexual Teachings of the White Tigress: Secrets of the Female Taoist Masters*, Hsi Lai writes that Mahatma Gandhi "periodically slept between two twelve-year-old female virgins. He didn't do this for the purpose of actual sexual contact, but as an ancient practice of rejuvenating his male energy. . . . Taoists called this method 'using the ultimate yin to replenish the yang.'" Now, far be it from me to disparage anyone's best-intentioned efforts to have his yang replenished. Still, I confess that this Gandhi-virgin-sandwich yarn pushes the needle of my BS detector way into the red. Did Gandhi indeed kip with preteen jail-quail? If so, what was his source of supply?



— David English, Somerville, Massachusetts

Well, they weren't 12. They also weren't all virgins; so far as is known they worked solo rather than in pairs; and Gandhi claimed he wasn't trying to rejuvenate his manly energy but rather prove he had it under control. In all other respects, however, the tome you cite (whatsamatter, David, the bookstore was out of *The South Beach Diet*?) is 100 percent accurate: the leader of the movement to free India of the British yoke did sleep with young females--and what's more, both parties were often naked at the time. He was 77 when this odd practice came to light, and from what we know sleeping was all they did. However, when a renowned holy man of any age pulls a stunt like this, he takes the chance that it'll turn up in a book with a title like *The Sexual Teachings of the White Tigress*.

Mohandas Gandhi's sleeping arrangements attracted public attention during the winter of 1946-47, when he was trying to quell violence between Muslims and Hindus in the Noakhali district in what is now Bangladesh. It came out that Gandhi was bunking nightly with his 19-year-old grandniece, Manu. In part this was an effort to stay warm in the winter chill, but Gandhi soon acknowledged there was more to it: he was testing his vow of *brahmacharya*, or total chastity in thought and deed. If he could spend the night in a woman's embrace without feeling sexual stirrings, it would demonstrate that he had conquered his carnal impulses and become "God's eunuch." It turned out that Manu was not his first brahmacharya lab partner--he'd also recently gotten naked (partly, at least) with another young woman in his extended family, starting when she was 18.

Unschooling as you are in the mysteries of the East, David, you scoff--and to be frank, there were quite a few raised eyebrows in India. One of the most vocal critics was Nirmal Kumar Bose, a university lecturer who served as Gandhi's interpreter in Noakhali. While conceding that no hanky-panky had taken place (Gandhi and his entourage typically all slept in the same room) Bose protested that the master was exploiting the women, each of whom felt she had a special place in his affections and became "hysterical" if slighted. (Here I follow the account by author Ved Mehta in his 1976 *New Yorker* series on Gandhi and his followers.) Gandhi, far from being abashed, vigorously defended himself in meetings, letters, and articles, arguing that making a woman "the instrument of my lust" would be far more exploitative than what he actually did.

Remarkably, the critics eventually quieted down. Even Bose, who quit in protest and later discussed the issue in a book, *My Days With Gandhi*, remained an admirer. Gandhi continued to sleep with women until his assassination in 1948, and the matter is little remembered today. The esteem in which Gandhi was held no doubt partly accounts for the lack of repercussions, along with his advanced age. His notoriously eccentric views on sex may have been a factor too. Gandhi believed that sex for pleasure was

sinful (for that matter, he felt eating chocolate was sinful), that sexual attraction between men and women was unnatural, and that husband and wife should live together as brother and sister, having sex only for purposes of procreation. (I take most of this from a memoir by journalist William Shirer, another admirer.) He swore off sex at age 36, required a similar vow of his disciples, and publicly freaked when he had a nocturnal emission in 1936 at age 67. Many hearing him rationalize his unusual blanket substitute probably figured, eh, that's the mahatma for you. (For what it's worth, the kinkier takes on the story--e.g., that Gandhi was regularly massaged by naked women--have no basis in fact that I can discover.) Whether or not you buy the notion that he didn't get off on contact with his very young bedmates (or feel that that would make it any less creepy), it says something about this profoundly strange guy that you can hear his claim that naked sleepovers were tests of purity for both participants and go: You think?

— Cecil Adams

---

**Created by:** <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/2521/did-mahatma-gandhi-sleep-with-virgins>

**Click here for your Comment:** <http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/forumdisplay.php?f=1>

---