



# **A Glittering Arsenal: Bangles, Duty and Transgression in North India**

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A GLITTERING ARSENAL:  
BANGLES, DUTY AND TRANSGRESSION IN NORTH INDIA

A Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Cornell University  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

by  
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August 2010

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the north Indian taunt “*churiyaan pahan lo*” (you should wear bangles), tracing its usage from Rajput and Sikh tales to its employment by numerous nationalist women’s groups during Civil Disobedience (1930-31). Overall, I hope to prove that the foisting of bangles upon men—both verbally and physically—is a more complex act than is often assumed in secondary literature. Rather than a simple emblem of femininity used to publicly question the masculine qualities of recipients, bangles are often recognized as representing women’s traditional marital duties. As such, they can be presented on a man’s failure to complete his own responsibilities—particularly if these duties are martial in nature—with the taunt’s central idea being that if the recipient cannot perform his own duties, then he should perhaps perform women’s domestic duties instead. Underlying the act is the threat of the reversal of gender roles, though this threat is revealed to be primarily rhetorical in the case of Civil Disobedience bangle taunting.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kelly Sylvia Basner first began to study South Asian history and culture in her sophomore year at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In January of 2004, Kelly traveled to India with the abroad course “Alankara: Arts in India,” led by Professor Ranjanaa Devi of the UMass Asian Arts & Culture Program. Offered by the UMass Dance Department, this class took a handful of students through both north and south India to explore various styles of architecture, folk art, and classical dance. This brief introduction to the subcontinent redirected Kelly’s studies and led to her undergraduate thesis, which compared colonial American textile boycotts of British cloth—which protested Townshend Act regulations—with boycotts of foreign cloth in late colonial India and the concurrent promotion of *khadi* (homespun).

After graduation and a brief stint in scholarly publishing, Kelly moved to India in 2008 to study Hindi and Urdu, to renew old friendships, and also to continue exploring South Asia through travel. Upon completion of her Master of Arts, Kelly hopes to return to India to pick up where she left off.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This paper owes much of its shape to Professor Kathryn March, whose thoughtful guidance helped me to develop my ideas, follow my interests and examine potential research leads. Consultations with Professor Dan Gold brought further focus to this work. Furthermore, Professor Gold's overall direction of my Masters career has helped to ensure that my time at Cornell was both productively and enjoyably spent. I would like to thank both professors for their considerate attention.

I am also grateful to my family for their patient, unflagging support of my work.

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

**1.1 THE BANGLE LEAGUE**

“It is understood that a number of ladies headed by Shrimati Satyavati went round the principal cloth markets (*Katras*) of Chandni Chowk with a banner in their hands, which bore an emblem of a *churi* [bangle] and on which was inscribed the ‘Bangles’ League’ and entreated people to discard foreign cloth and offered *churis* to the ‘Defaulters’ but no one so far have dared to accept that ‘present’.”

*Hindustan Times*, 13 April 1930

In April 1930, Delhi newspapers began reporting on a new women’s group operating within the city. The group shared goals with many coeval women’s organizations, focusing its energies on picketing foreign cloth shops and decreasing the Delhi trade in *videshi* (foreign) textiles. At first glance, the new group would have seemed almost indistinguishable from surrounding organizations; indistinguishable, that is, until a male Delhiite clad in foreign cloth appeared, at which point the unique character of the new group would quickly become apparent.

Appropriately called the Bangle League and formed in the heat of the Civil Disobedience movement (1930-31), this group pressured local men to leave off wearing foreign cloth by “presenting *churis* (Bangles) to those who use[d] foreign cloth thus indicating the former’s sense of contempt” and “implying that if [a defaulter] had not the courage to use Swadeshi [homespun] cloth he had better put on the presented bangle (*churi*) and sit in his home like a woman” (*Hindustan Times*, 13 April 1930). The Bangle League represents perhaps the first time that a political group was organized specifically to enact and perform the north Indian taunt “*churiyaan pahan lo*” (you should wear bangles). However, the taunt itself was employed for at least a century before the formation of the group, and since Civil Disobedience has

been performed both verbally and physically on scores of men, including politicians, army generals, bureaucrats, police officers and even cricket players.<sup>1</sup>

This extended history of usage does not ensure a better understanding of the taunt itself, and as will be demonstrated in Chapter 2, “Bangles and Duty,” each scholar mentioning the tactic forwards a slightly different interpretation of the underlying message. However, because an incident of bangle taunting is typically considered a fragment of a larger story—rather than a story in itself—light commentary linking femininity and cowardice has often passed for explanation of such incidents. This paper aims to fill in this weak space of scholarship, looking at the ways in which the tactic has been remembered in stories and songs (mainly in Rajput and Sikh materials), and then relating the messages of these materials to the banging incidents of Civil Disobedience in Delhi and the United Provinces, which are among the most organized executions of the taunt in Indian history.<sup>2</sup>

In particular, this paper will examine gendered concepts of duty in relation to the bangle, hoping to prove that rather than a simple mark of femininity, the bangle is commonly used to signify women’s marital responsibilities; as such, it can be foisted upon a man to indicate his failure in his public duties, and to provoke him to rectify his behavior.<sup>3</sup> The bangle’s connection to gendered responsibilities leads to the real

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<sup>1</sup> To investigate the usage of this taunt since Civil Disobedience, a few works of interest are Nandita Gandhi’s account of the Anti Price Rise movement, *When the Rolling Pins Hit the Streets* (1996), which mentions public bangle taunting in early 1970s Maharashtra; Radha Kumar’s *The History of Doing* (1993), which likewise notes usage of the taunt in its examination of Indian women’s participation in modern protest movements; and Ali Asghar Engineer’s *The Gujarat Carnage* (2003), which in its chilling account of the violence of Gujarat in the spring of 2002 discusses the anonymous posting of bangles to peaceful neighborhoods in attempts to mobilize these neighborhoods and incite violence. Coverage of the tactic as used before Civil Disobedience is discussed in the third chapter of this paper, “Bangles and War.”

<sup>2</sup> Participants in the bangle leagues were primarily middle-class Hindu housewives of these two regions. The extent of the participation of women from other classes, religions, and regions is unclear. However, it is somewhat unlikely that large numbers of Muslim women participated, as the founder of the largest league, Satyavati Devi, is known to have given anti-Muslim speeches in the 1920s (Gupta 2001, 336).

<sup>3</sup> This paper benefits from March (1983)’s characterizations of gender as “a complex of ideas, beliefs, abstractions, images, imaginings and even fantasies—not people.” March continues that “each part [in a

threat that underlies many bangle taunts: possibilities of role-reversal. Ultimately, however, Civil Disobedience banging reveals this threat to be primarily rhetorical.

Before examining taunt-related uses of bangles, however, it would be helpful to take a quick look at the normal presence of the object in South Asian life.

## 1.2 BANGLES ARE “LIKE RICE”

A Banarsi bangle-seller asserts to Pravina Shukla in *Grace of Four Moons* that “a woman who is otherwise ornamented but wears no bangles presents a worthless—*bekar*—look” (Shukla 2008, 189). Though the statement is in part product promotion by the vendor, it nonetheless expresses an opinion that is widely shared across much of South Asia. As Shukla notes, jewelry is frequently viewed as the “central component” of adornment (2008, 113), and bangles in particular seem to have a strong hold over the public imagination; one writer even reports that “the demand for glass bangles in India is similar to the demand for rice in that, like rice, they are necessities” (Gregory 1997, 191).

The necessity of adornment is no recent phenomenon; Vidya Dehejia, in her work *The Body Adorned*, provides a telling quote from the seventeenth-century poet Keshavdas: “A woman may be noble, she may have good features. She may have a nice complexion, be filled with love, be shapely. But without ornaments, my friend, she is not beautiful” (2009, 38). Indeed, bangles in particular stretch back to the farthest reaches of South Asian history, as evidenced by archeological collections of 9,000 year-old shell bangles recovered in Mehrgarh, Pakistan. They also adorned the

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gendered system] defines all the other parts in a whole that is greater than their sum.” In contrast, sexual difference “operates in social reality where real people make real choices” (1983, 730). With this distinction in mind, this paper notes the inclusion of paradoxical conceptions of ideal womanly behavior in popular north Indian understandings of gender, juxtaposing these ideas with the real-life actions of Bangle League members in hopes of better understanding how these seemingly contradictory ideas might have informed action.

people of the Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1900 BCE), and modern Harappan dig sites are speckled with fragments of shell, gold, bronze, terra cotta, alabaster and faience bangles (Claus 2003, 51). Not only appearing as artifacts, bangles are referenced sculpturally in a number of early South Asian creations ranging from the celebrated bronze “dancing girl” of Mohenjodaro (2500-1500 BCE) who—though nude—wears a respectable twenty-nine bangles (Varadpande 2006, 67), to the steatite *Siva-Pasupati* seal of the same city and period, which depicts “Siva, the lord of animals” laden with a swarm of bangles (Insoll 2001, 40). A motley group of texts similarly reference the ornaments, from the works of Kalidasa (Kalidasa 1993, 26) to the Puranas (Varadpande 2006, 130). It would seem that bangles are as old as India itself.

### **1.3 BANGLES AS IDENTIFIERS**

Looking back through the myriad references to bangles in South Asian aesthetic history it becomes quickly apparent that the ornament is uniquely flexible in its meanings, and has been worn by all sections of society. Men’s bangles, for example, have been historically associated with warfare, symbolizing protection of a patron goddess and, on a more pragmatic level, protection of the wrist. References to war bangles surface in many martial ballads, such as the following piece collected in 1930s Rajasthan and sung in the voice of a wife towards her husband: “Wear the bracelet and go fight/The war-drum is calling you” (Satyarthi 1951, 41). The *kada* is an iron bangle that has similar martial associations and, as one of the five compulsory markers of Sikhs, has been worn by scores of men (and women) since the founding of the *panth*. Not surprisingly, this particular bangle is typically recognized as an “indication of courage or a ‘steel fist’” (Sethi 1972, 20), and takes this meaning in popular culture; for example, upon hearing Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf’s

taunt: “We in Pakistan have not worn bangles and we can fight India on our own” (*The Tribune*, 23 October 2001) in late 2001, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee retorted: “In Punjab where bangles are popular, people also wear ‘kada’” (*The Tribune*, 1 November 2001).

Even where their use is restricted to women, bangles continue to carry a dizzying variety of messages. For example, iron and conch shell bangles have typically been associated with Bengali women, ivory bangles with Rajput women, and ivory, coconut and silver bangles with Gujarati women. Some bangles might also have in-group and out-group meanings; for example, the significance of the iron bangle—an indication of marital bliss—is more or less contained within the Bengali community, whereas red and white lacquer bangles have been used to communicate the same message to non-Bengalis (Shukla 2009, 459). Regional identity can thus be encoded within the color, texture and material of the ornament.

The type or color of the bangle worn can also take on meanings related to the various life-cycle roles of women. Green bangles are in many places associated with fertility and the general married state, whereas red bangles often indicate a recent marriage. A famous poem by freedom fighter Sarojini Naidu describes the red of a bride’s bangles as being:

Like the flame of her marriage-fire,  
Or rich with the hue of her heart’s desire,  
Tinkling, luminous, tender and clear,  
Like her bridal laughter and bridal tear (1916, 65).

In the poem, the bangle-seller characterizes his wares as “Lustrous tokens of radiant lives/ For happy daughters and happy wives” (1916, 64).

## 1.4 MOTHERS AND WIVES

As noted above, bangles are frequently associated with women's life-cycle roles. In fact, the sounds made by bangles can call up images of either mothers or wives, depending on the listener. As Shukla explains,

almost everybody's mother has her own distinctive bangle sound...the difference in sounds mothers create depend on caste, region, age, finances, and personal preference. Bangles make sweet sounds when the mother is rocking an infant, caressing a sick child to sleep...those sounds are all memories of the joy and comforts of childhood (Shukla 2009, 245).

Poet Agha Shahid Ali notes this enchanting connection in his poem "A Dream of Glass Bangles":

...on my mother's arms were bangles  
Like waves of frozen rivers  
and at night  
after the prayers  
as she went down to her room  
I heard the faint sound of ice...(Ali 1987, 7).

When the speaker's father passes on, he then hears "a widow smashing the rivers/ on her arms" (1987, 7).

The sounds of bangles are also associated with women's actions as wives, and can be used to intimate sexual relations. For example, Ann Grodzins Gold notes this association in a Rajasthani women's song in which intimacy is represented by lacquer bangles clinking together on the pillow (Gold 1994, 54). Indeed, some of the most powerful sexual images play with this idea: in a deeply sensuous scene of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* (ca. CE 1205), Radha's angry vision of Krishna having relations with another woman involves his sliding bangles onto her wrists:

The dark sapphire bangle he slips over each lotus-petal hand  
Encircles her arm's cool pale supple stalk like a swarm of bees.  
In woods behind a sandbank on the Jumna river,  
Mura's foe makes love in triumph now (Miller 1977, 101).

The description of the bangles as a “swarm of bees” emphasizes their sensual, aural quality. Thus, when Krishna and Radha are reunited, Radha demands, “Fix rows of bangles on my hands” (Miller 1977, 125). The lavish visual quality of the bangle further adds to its capabilities of arousal.

The link between bangles and love-making is just one point in a constellation of conjugal ideas associated with the ornament. Bangles are considered a compulsory marital symbol, and glass bangles in particular are a sign of *suhaag*, or marital auspiciousness. Along with *sindoor*, *nath*, and *mangalsutra*<sup>4</sup>, bangles indicate the married state and the husband’s continuing life, and are consequently used in many poems and songs as a stand-in for these things. The Rajput war ballads discussed above make heavy use of this trope: in discussing both her hopes for her husband’s success in warfare as well as her resignation to the possibility of widowhood, the speaker states: “Looking at the war-bracelet on his arm;/ Bangles from my arm will soon be removed,/ But only when many a woman’s bangles are gone” (Satyarthi 1951, 72).

Bangles do not simply represent but also actively protect the state of marriage, a fact that Shukla notes in discussing a mother-in-law’s concern with keeping her *bahu*’s (daughter-in-law’s) wrists crowded with bangles. She notes that one respondent explains the inauspiciousness of going without *suhaag* ornaments as an unwelcome premonition for the mother-in-law of her son’s demise: “since widows are plain and unornamented, seeing your daughter-in-law without sindur or bindi—in the

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<sup>4</sup> *Sindoor* is a vermilion powder that is applied to the part in a women’s hair by her husband. A *nath* is a women’s nose ring, worn typically in the left nostril in north India and in the right nostril in the south. *Mangalsutra* is a necklace usually consisting of a gold ornament threaded onto a yellow cord. Together with bangles, these three items are commonly used to signify a (typically Hindu) woman’s married state. Also like bangles, their symbolism can be used strategically to construct messages: for example, in recent years the Bharatiya Janata Party has come under fire for distributing *mangalsutra* to women voters in Gujarat to symbolize a deep commitment between the voters and the party (*Times of India*, 15 April 2009).

manner of a widow—provides you with an uncomfortable premonition of a mother’s worst nightmare: the death of her son” (Shukla 2008, 311).<sup>5</sup> At times, this protective role has been taken slightly more literally: William Crooke notes in his early work *Religion & Folklore of Modern India* that “Koli women on the Bombay coast wear glass bangles only on the left wrist, because on their wedding day the right-arm bangles are taken off and thrown into the sea to win its favour for their husbands” (Crooke 1926, 56). Protection of and service to one’s husband is the most important duty of the wifely ideal, the *pativrata*,<sup>6</sup> and the bangle is a vivid, jingling reminder of these responsibilities.

Their intense associations with marriage mean that bangles, among other ornaments, must be forsaken by women at the onset of widowhood. This has led to the ritual breaking of the bangles, in which *rudalis* (hired mourners) strip a woman harshly of her ornaments after her husband’s death. On a symbolic level, the widow has failed her protective duty as a *pativrata* and so the bangle—a representation of this protection—is no longer deemed necessary. On a more practical level, it is assumed and demanded that the widow no longer seeks male attention, and so disposal of the bangles is necessary. Needless to say, there are and always have been widows who have broken this stricture.<sup>7</sup>

In direct contrast to the widow, a wife who committed *sati* in earlier periods could wear her *suhaag* ornaments to the end. Through her sacrifice she had completed her duties as a *pativrata*, and the bangles indicated a continuance of the marriage after death. Startling visual evidence of this phenomenon comes from the sati stones

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<sup>5</sup> Concerns over the continuation of the marriage (as indicated in bangle-covered wrists) can further be related to concerns about the continuation of the family line.

<sup>6</sup> As Lindsay Harlan notes in her 1992 text *Religion and Rajput Women*, *pativrata* literally translates to “one who has taken a vow (*vrata*) to [protect] her husband (*pati*)” (45).

<sup>7</sup> There are also many places in which widows forsake glass bangles, but continue to wear gold bangles (which are less closely associated with marriage and relate more to personal security and status).

scattered across Rajasthan and Maharashtra, many of which are bas reliefs of a single upraised arm loaded with bangles (Feldhaus 1996, 179).

## 1.5 NEGOTIATING ROLES

The bangle thus carries the weight of conjugal responsibility and custom, as well as the sensuousness and delight of arousal and physical intimacy. In this way, the tiny, innocuous ornament becomes the physical point of intersection for a wife's beauty and duty. Its particular combination of meanings makes the bangle a unique battleground on which conjugal issues can be negotiated metaphorically. It is a symbol that most women have direct control over and can easily wield, making it extremely useful. For example, some women will intentionally break their bangles to visually express rage, as noted by a colonial observer: "An angry woman will sometimes smash all her loved bangles before her husband's face. Such an act is as much as saying 'I would I were a widow,'" (Padfield 1908, 271). In a more recent example, from Gagan Gill's well-known poem "Ek iccha churiyon mein" (A Desire in the Bangles), a young girl imagines the punishment of her unfaithful husband—who is caught "kisi dusri deh mein," in some other body—with similar imagery:

...sazaa  
kisi aanevaale kal  
voh us aadmi ko degi  
jab toregi apni churiyaan...

(...punishment  
at some coming time  
she will give to that man  
when she will break her bangles...)

In other words, her husband's punishment will be his death, at which point his wife will break her bangles "chaukhat par" (on the threshold) as a widow.

Breaking bangles can also be styled as an emancipatory action. Due to their association with marital duties and compulsory devotion, bangles are sometimes represented as shackles. Thus to break bangles is to metaphorically break free of these duties and traditions. Hanifa Deen, author of the book *Broken Bangles* (1998), explains the title of her book much in this way:

[Bangles] dazzle, they distract—and they bind... The more I thought about bangles, the more fascinated I became, but the images flooding my mind were not traditional: they were of rebellion and dissent, I imagined a new freedom where a woman metaphorically ‘breaks her bangles’, stepping out of the circle of protection provided by family, society and the silent laws of tradition to free herself from customs that oppress and deaden (Deen 1998, xii).

But whether they are empowering, constrictive, arousing, comforting, or protective, bangles are, after all, simply bangles. It is important to keep the object in perspective when wading through the intricate messages sometimes (but by no means always) conveyed through them; a bangle-seller puts it plainly in the novel *Shantaram*: “A bangle is beauty, and beauty is a bangle!” (Roberts 2004, 228).

## CHAPTER 2

### BANGLES AND DUTY

#### 2.1 SCHOLARLY UNDERSTANDINGS OF BANGLE GIFTING

In Suruchi Thapar-Björkert's *Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices, 1930-42*, Civil Disobedience volunteer Satya Saxena describes her memories of banging men during the movement as follows: "We used to put bangles in envelopes and put it in the post to Indians loyal to the British. Once in the Mall road in Kanpur we went to the house of T.D. Kochar, a senior executive officer, and forced him to wear bangles. He felt shy and wore them" (2006, 112). As noted in the introduction, this period found groups of women organizing into leagues and offering the ornament to men to pressure them into taking action against the British Empire. A tactic that has been employed in a variety of contexts in modern India, banging is typically understood as a method of shaming men into action by accusing them of cowardice and effeminacy. For example, noting the banging of UP officials by a student group protesting governmental amnesty to notorious bandit/folk hero Phoolan Devi, author Rajeswari Sunder Rajan explains that "bangles are a symbol of womanhood, and they are offered to men as an insult to their manhood" (Rajan 2003, 227). Meghan Cope similarly discusses banging as was used in the Anti-Price Rise Movement of the early 1970s, noting that "the method of shaming public officials and merchants was to give them symbols of femininity." Cope goes on to ask, "did the women have a sense of irony in offering bangles to powerful men to emasculate them (i.e. make them more feminine), or was it a baser gendered insult?" (2004, 80).

This type of explanation is convenient shorthand; it is perhaps a piece of the story—and is momentarily useful to various scholars' narrative—but on its own is

inadequate for explaining the consistent use and occasional effectiveness of this practice of protest. As previously noted, the bangle is no simple, univocal symbol of femininity; nor is gender in north India an unproblematic division of the active, courageous male and the passive, timid female.<sup>8</sup> Rather than a flat message, then, the action of bangling calls to the forefront a battery of ideas and messages about gender, conjugality, and most importantly, responsibility.

This section of the paper will examine north Indian songs, taunts, and stories to begin unpacking the messages conveyed through this tactic. Stories and legends—identified by Kirin Narayan as “an expression of deep-rooted cultural themes” (1989, 100)—will be particularly useful in exploring how and why this apparently benign ornament could communicate such penetrating gendered messages.<sup>9</sup>

## **2.2 HADI RANI**

Bangling has been present in the historical record for at least two centuries, though some scholars would locate its origins much earlier in Indian history; for instance, archaeologist Hasmukh Dhirajlal Sankalia places the tactic with medieval Rajputs who, for any “cowardly conduct in war [would be] presented with a pair of bangles” (Sankalia 1977, 228). Early records are somewhat sketchy regarding this topic, however, and even in modern histories, the method typically shows up as a

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<sup>8</sup> As March (1983) notes, such simplistic binaries ignore the deep and continuous interaction between the sexes that has shaped ideas of gender, by which the sexes “confront the many ways in which they are, and are not, the same” (743). Maleness “becomes distinctive as men’s relations to women are defined; men see their reflection in female eyes. Femaleness, conversely and simultaneously, emerges as the cultural gaze shifts in the opposite direction” (1983, 739).

<sup>9</sup> Laura Ahearn notes that it is nearly impossible to pin down an exact interpretation of a speech act due to the complex mix of influences that go into, happen within, and come out from the act, and that all steps of the speech act—from its delivery to its reception—necessitate a slightly different understanding of the act (2001). Such can also be said of physical and verbal taunts. This essay will endeavor to expand on one particular interpretation, while keeping in mind the fact that there is a range of interpretations that could be usefully applied in understanding this tactic.

footnote when noted at all. Thankfully, a number of stories and songs which remember banging have survived into present times. These sources provide a lucky glimpse into foundational understandings of the tactic.

One of the most famous examples of a story utilizing this tactic is the Rajput tale of Hadi Rani, which in recent years has been analyzed by a small army of anthropologists. Ann Grodzins Gold provides a critical account of the tale in her piece “Gender, Violence and Power: Rajasthani Stories of *Shakti*” (1994). Gold grounds her reading in several modern Rajasthani publications, including a laudatory version set in verse by poet Nathu Singh Mahiyariya and a book of romances by Shamsuddin. I have used both of these sources in my analysis, supplemented with the poem “Senani,” a version of the story that was popularized by the Rajasthani Deputy Secretary of Education in a book of Indian military traditions (Das 1984, 44).

The tale begins with the birth of Hadi, a beloved Rajput daughter who is raised like a son by her doting father. As she enters maturity, the radiant Hadi is wedded to Chudawat Sardar, the “handsome, brave captain of the Rana of Udaipur” (Shamsuddin 1967, 18). Soon after their marriage, however, Chudawat receives word of a Mughal invasion targeting a neighboring kingdom. According to Rajput codes of honorable conduct, Chudawat should immediately mobilize his troops and enter the fray. However, enamored with his young bride and desirous of more time with her, Chudawat delays his departure. The description of this moment found in “Senani” is particularly rich; the husband says: “I shall not go to war, dear queen, I shall remain before your eyes and sing the lore of love” (Das 1984, 44). But Hadi cannot brook her husband’s procrastination, even if his delay is driven by his love for her. She contradicts his message—which had set his departure for the next morning—by instructing the messenger to ““Tell Ranaji that Chudawat will start immediately; tell him he has Hadi’s word for it”” (Shamsuddin 1967, 23).

Normally, this public contradiction would be seen as going against the deference that Hadi owes Chudawat as a *pativrata*. Indeed, an infuriated and distressed Chudawat asks Hadi “What does this mean...you don’t want me?” In response, Hadi claims Chudawat’s procrastination as her own fault: “Help me, my Lord,’ she says, “don’t let me commit this unforgivable sin....Generations to come will spit on my name if I detain you at this moment—help me act like a true Rajput.” When Chudawat continues to delay, Hadi blinks back tears and furiously bursts out at her husband: “wear my bangles, and give me your sword, and sit secure in the circle of these four walls; and don’t ever call yourself a Rajput” (Shamsuddin 1967, 23-24). “Senani” records a similar disgust, with the *kshatrani* (warrior lady) mocking: “My lord, from today, you do not go to the field at all; tell me where the sword is, I will go fight, you sit at home with bangles round your wrist” (Das 1984, 44).

Chudawat makes a show of preparing for departure, but further procrastination ensues as he demands a token of his wife’s loyalty before leaving for battle. Hadi is infuriated by the insinuations behind the demand, asserting that “nobody, not even her own husband, dare doubt her ‘Satitva’,” or, her fidelity and devotion. In response to this insult cum dilatory tactic, Hadi decides to prove to her husband that “she [is] a true Rajput” (Shamsuddin 1967, 25) She decapitates herself, having prearranged for her head to be delivered to her husband. Sight of the head—carefully veiled to maintain *purdah*, as Mahiyariya’s version notes—indeed spurs Chudawat on to war. Interestingly, Mahiyariya’s version goes on to depict *svarg* (heaven), where Hadi calls to her husband, “Ab to aakar mere vivaah-kankan kholo! Yeh aapki Haadi, jiske hath mein vivaah-kankan bandhe hain, svarg mein bethi aapki pratiksha kar rahi hai” (Now come to heaven and open my marriage bracelets! This is your Hadi, in whose hands the marriage bracelets are closed, sitting in heaven waiting for you) (1969, 13). He has finally performed his martial duties, and she is ready to reunite with him. This

surprising sequence of events can help us begin to sift through the ideas surrounding bangling and “bangle taunts.”

### 2.3 MEN AND RESPONSIBILITY

One of the most striking features of the Hadi Rani story is the manner by which the story problematizes dominant understandings of conjugal roles. Rather than placidly accepting her husband’s decisions, Hadi challenges Chudawat, mocking and taunting him in an urge to set him on the correct path. In fact, this seems to be a feature of many taunt stories, in which the wise, steadfast wife ridicules her husband to help him find his correct path; Lindsay Harlan’s *The Goddesses’ Henchmen* contains a useful collection of such stories from modern-day Udaipur. One particularly startling tale ends in a cowardly husband’s suicide—prompted by his wife’s taunting—which allows him to restore his honor.

This pattern also finds footing outside of stories, and early, riveting traces of this style of interaction are found in a Hindustani-English dictionary prepared by S.W. Fallon in the late nineteenth-century. The dictionary illustrates each entry with examples of common usage; thus, under the entry for bangles, readers find the following example: “Saiyān, churiyān pahan le, kar le janānā bhek. Apnā bānā mohe de, tu kharā tamāsā dekh” (“Put on my bangles, spouse, and don a woman’s dress. Give me your garments, male, look on the game scatheless”) (1879, 212). Again, the taunt is in the voice of a wife addressing a husband, and the message clearly resonates with that of Hadi. Another taunt takes on the tone of the chiding wife: “Tum kar doge to kyā tumhāri churiyān phut jaengin?” (“Will your bangles break if you do it?”) (1879, 548).

As Harlan notes in the above-mentioned work, the act of a wife taunting her husband is “obviously counter-hierarchical” (2003, 97), and contradicts most

prescriptions on proper conjugal behavior. However, Hadi and similar wives are exalted for their behavior. Mahiyariya's version of the story is particularly notable for this approbation, calling Hadi "vir patni" (strong/brave wife), "viranganā" (a brave woman/heroine), and "singhini" (lioness) (1969, 55). The question arises as to how a behavior that is normally prohibited could find such warm praise in these particular circumstances.

The answer seems to lie in the man's failure to live up to his responsibilities. Hadi delivers this accusation in ringing tones: as a Rajput warrior, Chudawat's martial duties should always take precedence. The insult, "and never call yourself a Rajput" illustrates the distance between Chudawat's actual behavior and his expected behavior as a Rajput warrior. This interpretation fits well with Louis Fenech's work on taunts in his essay "The Taunt in Popular Sikh Martyrologies." Fenech notes that taunts can be divided into those meant to insult, and those meant to provoke to action. In the large body of Sikh martyrologies, the taunt is *always* used in the latter sense, utilizing the guilt felt by the shirker to provoke him to "make amends" (1996, 181). As Fenech explains, "the taunt brings the protagonist face to face with [his] guilt. Simply put, the taunt points to a deficiency and provokes a resolution" (1996, 180).

The particular event that Fenech uses to illustrate this point is the story of the *chali mukte*, the forty liberated ones. In this story, a group of exhausted and hungry Sikh warriors abandon Guru Gobind Singh during the Battle of Anandpur. The "women-folk" of the warriors, disgusted by the desertion, press glass bangles upon the men on their return (a tactic called *churian paunian* in Punjabi); furthermore, they "command the men to begin cooking and cleaning" (1996, 183). The taunting has its intended effect, and the men return to the Guru to fight to the death. As Fenech notes, this episode inspires the Guru to bless the men as the "forty liberated ones" (1996,

183-184). As a result of the women's strident taunts, the men have overcome their disgrace and fulfilled their duties.

Failures of responsibility seem to be at the heart of most banging incidents. In the cases of Chudawat and the *chali mukte*, these responsibilities are martial; however, contemporary banging typically focuses on politicians or public officials who are seen as failing in their occupational duties (where ideas of "cowardice" and "effeminacy" are much less applicable). For example, *The Hindu* reports that in June 2009 a group of fifty Congress Party women led by district leader Tripti Awasthi accosted electricity department officials in Lakhimpur Kheri, near Lucknow. The women confronted executive engineer R.S.Gautam, "forcing him and other officials there to wear bangles, police said." The group was reportedly protesting the area's "erratic power supply" and "frequent power cuts" (*The Hindu*, 6 June 2009). Only weeks later, *The Tribune* described an almost identical event in Abohar, Punjab in which "scores of women, led by the Municipal Councillor Asha Walia, reportedly forced the superintending engineer (SE) of the Electricity Board to wear bangles since he expressed helplessness in streamlining the electricity supply." To gain control of the situation, the police "physically pushed the protesting women out of the office of the SE" (*The Tribune*, 22 June 2009). Such incidents occur from time to time, and typically center on quotidian issues like bureaucratic failures and cricket losses.

#### **2.4 WOMEN AND RESPONSIBILITY**

In the above stories, a male breach of duty provides women with the opportunity to sidestep normal behavioral prescriptions in order to shepherd the offending men back to their responsibilities. In many circulating tales, the featured woman and man are identified as husband and wife; in fact, though modern incidents are almost always between unmarried, unrelated women and men, the tactic

nevertheless seems to be structured on a conjugal understanding of duties. This dynamic can perhaps best be understood by examining the object that is wielded in the tactic.

The chosen symbol in this type of taunt is the bangle. As noted in the introduction, the bangle is a conspicuous marker of marriage in much of South Asia, and is considered compulsory adornment for large swathes of the married female population. The ornament is regularly associated with the well-being of the wearer's husband, and the wife's donning of bangles is often thought to protect the longevity of her husband (Lamb 2000, 224). This practice is simply a sliver of a much larger behavioral system which the *pativrata* is expected to follow in order to show devotion to her husband. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, bangles—glass bangles in particular—have been identified by many as a potent symbol of the wifely duties that this system of thought entails, including the serving and faithful caretaking of the husband. Thus, while representing the auspiciousness of a still-living husband, they also fetter women to their devotional responsibilities to their husbands, and have consequently become a symbol of subordination to many women. Gold notes this idea as spanning the range of ornaments: “female adornment is an explicitly acknowledged form of restriction, signifying women's submission to men” (1994, 37); however, bangles seem to be particularly suitable to this association, in part for their physical characteristics. Bangles are not infrequently equated to shackles, and a spate of new materials explicitly make this connection, including Hanifa Deen's popular book *Broken Bangles*, political cartoons by Suresh Sawant, and poetry by Tasalima Nasarina. Thus, while they often signify marital joys and personal expressiveness, bangles are also harnessed to systems of asymmetrical marital relations and devotional wifely duties.

To give the bangle, then, is to pin these multifaceted associations on the recipient. It is an elegant twist: the bangle—a potent symbol of wifely duties and

submission—is presented to a man upon his failure to perform his own duties. It is no wonder, then, that the *chali mukte*'s “women-folk” force the deserters to perform “womanly” chores like cooking and cleaning, or that Civil Disobedience songs featuring bangle taunts often contain verses such as “Leave the task of making *chappatis* to the men” (Thapar-Björkert 2006, 112). These duties, though required of women, are humiliating for most men.<sup>10</sup>

The above stories use the bangle not as a symbol of women themselves as much as a symbol of women's domestic roles. When men fail in their public responsibilities, the prescriptive bounds of womanly behavior shift; in such cases, a wife's aggressive taunting of her husband can be classified as the proper behavior of a devoted *pativrat* as long as the taunting is used to direct the husband towards the correct path. As a potent symbol of women's traditional, subservient duties, the bangle can be conveniently employed in this taunting to reinforce a wife's guiding message.

## **2.5 SHAKTI AND ROLE REVERSAL**

To recognize bangles as a symbol of women's roles, rather than simply of women themselves, raises an interesting question: if a man fails in his duties, could a woman then leave her duties to fulfill those of the man? Such possibilities are openly expressed in many taunts; the insult from Fallon's dictionary is a particularly clear example, with the wife making an outright threat of role-reversal by commanding her husband to “Give me your garments” and “look on the game scatheless [sic].” This potential inversion calls on the idea of a potent but normally dormant power residing in everyday women. Though simple connections between cowardice and femininity

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that bangles are also tied to ideas of frivolity and stereotypes of feminine preoccupation with fashion, beauty, and other “trivial” concerns. This association undoubtedly adds to the humiliation that many men experience when presented with bangles.

are sometimes made in South Asian media, the concept of a concentrated, ever-present women's power is recognized in an overwhelming body of stories, films, and other cultural models, and perhaps gives a compelling and threatening edge to the act of banging.

Hadi Rani is a good place to begin examining women's forms of power. Hadi—though female—is by no means timid, passive or inactive. Indeed, Hadi's fearless action counterpoised against her husband's dithering inaction—both in the moments of taunting and self-decapitation—belies any assumed connection between cowardice and womanhood. In fact, the situation is quite the opposite: in these moments, it is Hadi's firm character that exemplifies strength, force and discipline, and that eventually guides her husband to fulfill his martial duties.

As Ashis Nandy points out in his essay “Woman Versus Womanliness in India: An Essay in Cultural and Political Psychology,” in India:

...competition, aggression, power, activism, and intrusiveness are not so clearly associated with masculinity. In fact, in mythology and folklore, from which norms often come for traditionally undefined social situations, many of these qualities are frequently associated with women (1980, 42).<sup>11</sup>

This latent female power is frequently located within the dazzling spectrum of high-voltage goddesses featured in various Hindu traditions, particularly in the simultaneously fierce and all-nurturing forms of Durga and Kali. However, these traits

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<sup>11</sup> Nandy goes on to suggest that the location of power and aggression in women can be unsettling for men, as the “fantasy of a castrating, phallic woman is always around the corner” (Nandy 42). Such ideas are continued by Mitter (1991), who through mythic representations of women as both “devoted, self-disciplined (chaste), and ready to sacrifice (for men)” on the one hand and “sexual, anarchic, destructive, and bloody” on the other, supports Nandy's positing of a profound cultural ambivalence regarding womanhood and feminine power. As a result, the surging potential power of women—though celebrated or feared in fierce goddesses—must be controlled and channeled in both mortal women and to an extent in consort goddesses such as Parvati and Lakshmi. Mitter records that as *shakti* is “channeled, contained, and made responsive to the male,” the “threatening sexual energy of the female [can be] tempered and deflected into service...The power of *shakti* can be beneficial, ‘auspicious,’ safe, only when ritually contained—like the reactor's radioactive core in its massive concrete sheath” (102). However, women must willingly “submit their powers” (as well as ensure that other women do so), suggesting that if needed, every woman is “assumed potentially capable of calling upon such power” (Ibid).

are not restricted to goddesses, and Gold has identified *shakti* (the primal, creative and specifically female form of energy) as an undercurrent accessible to mortal women as well as *devis* (goddesses) (1994, 28). Her work suggests that mortal women can potentially draw on a store of great power through identification with *devis*. Noting psychoanalyst Alan Roland's assertion that, of his upper-caste, Delhi-based clientele, "women especially, traditionally experience everyday relationships within the framework of myths," and further, that these myths are not used symbolically but metonymically—"continuous with everyday reality rather than a representation of it" (1994, 28)—Gold goes on to illustrate cases which vivify for audiences the identification that some Rajasthani women find with *devis*. Interestingly, the essay also tells the tale of Hadi Rani whom, she notes, ends her life "with the words 'Victory to the Goddess!' on her lips" (1994: 36), thus hinting that Hadi herself draws on this divine strength.

These stories undermine explanations of bangle gifting that rely on conceptions of feminine cowardice, for in the Hadi verses, it is the woman who holds honorably firm. Gold's work with Rajasthani women further reinforces the fact that it is not only legendary women who can take on such positions of strength and dominance; rather, mortal women too would seem to have access to *shakti* and all of the creative and destructive capabilities that this force entails. Thus, the idea of a reversal of gender responsibilities is no idle threat.

In this section I have tried to show that the bangle is an object encoded with messages of duty. When a man fails in his public duties, a woman might best support him by taunting him with the bangle—the emblem of a wife's devotional responsibilities—to remind him of his responsibilities. Implicit in this action is a threat

of role reversal, which if actually accomplished would threaten the collapse of the moral and social order that is structured by the *pativrata* system.

The firmness and strength of women is thus both potentially threatening and also a useful source of strength to men. As Harlan points out: “the story of Hadi Rani...locates the ‘secret’ of Rajput honor in women” (2003, 97). Harlan also notes that “the story provides an illustration of women motivating, and indeed having to motivate, men to be brave” (2003, 97). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that this tactic has close associations with war. The connections between bangling and war will be further explored in the third chapter of this paper.

## CHAPTER 3

### BANGLES AND WAR

#### 3.1 BANGLE GIFTING IN TIMES OF WAR

As might be deduced from the stories of Hadi Rani, Senani and the *chali mukte*, banging has deep connections with warfare. This relationship is confirmed in a wide variety of historical writings about South Asia, with the majority of early banging incidents revolving around martial encouragement and the push to battle. As taunts are remembered anecdotally, it is difficult to know if these incidents are myth, fact, or a creative combination. However, their presence in the records reveals an awareness of the wartime utility of this tactic in the public consciousness.

The historiography surrounding the 1857 War (formerly known as the “Sepoy Mutiny”) demonstrates this connection well. Both Indian historians and scholars abroad note a smattering of banging incidents throughout the conflict, particularly in iconic moments of the war. In fact, the tactic is often placed at the beginning of the clash, in Meerut. In early May 1857 a hundred *sepoys* were court-martialed for their refusal to use newly-issued cartridges, which were rumored to be greased with cow and pig fat. Historian Clare Anderson’s account of May 10 runs as follows:

That afternoon fighting broke out in the Meerut lines, and a group of armed troopers from the prisoners’ regiment rode up to the jail to release their fellow men. Kaye suggested that they had been taunted by the townspeople who had called them cowards for allowing their comrades to wear ‘anklets of iron’ while they did nothing. The *sowars* too later spoke of the ‘great commotion’ in Meerut bazaar. The bazaar women mocked and jeered, challenging and emasculating the men with the words ‘Give us your arms: we shall fight and liberate the brave officers who have been confined to gaol. You can keep inside the home and put on bangles’ (Anderson 2007, 56).

A shorter version reads: "...it is said, the women of the town booed and denounced them for their cowardice and asked them to wear bangles and sit at home. The next day, on May 10, 1857, the sepoys lost self control and rose in open revolt" (Kashyap 1973, 9).

Rulers who did not immediately join the fray also became prime targets of bangle taunts. The Nizam of Hyderabad Afzal-ud-Doula is commonly mentioned as a recipient of bangles during the war due to his hesitation to join the rebellion. Sarojini Regani notes that as the Nizam wavered, placards were pasted outside the chief mosque of the city which read: "The aid of the Almighty and his Prophet is present with Afzul-Ood-Doula Bahadur who should not fear or be apprehensive. If fearful he should wear bangles and sit at home" (Regani 1986, 302). According to Omar Khalidi, a command to join the sepoys or "wear bangles and sit at home" that was directed at the Nizam was further repeated in a Friday *khutba* (sermon) soon after the war broke out (Khalidi 2006, 70).

Writers contemporary to the conflict similarly note the tactic. For example, J.W. Kaye's 1875 *History of the Sepoy War in India* places banging in Meerut. George Dodd's 1859 *History of the Indian Revolt and of the Expeditions to Persia, China, and Japan* also mentions the tactic, documenting an incident in which a widowed queen of Oude (modern day Uttar Pradesh) bangles each of her generals, "scoffingly telling him to wear these trinkets, and become a woman, unless he could vanquish and drive out the Feringhees [foreigners]" (Dodd 1859, 610).

Such examples abound in the literature, and are often listed as an immediate spark before a show of martial courage. However, the tactic has also been useful in movements that adopt the structures and rituals of war. Civil Disobedience is a brilliant example of this: though it was not a war, it utilized many of the tactics of war to give participants a proper model of sacrifice, discipline, and courage.

### 3.2 CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND THE TACTICS OF “WAR”

Civil Disobedience was not a war—at least, not in the strict sense of the term. It was a tactic described by Mahatma Gandhi as a “civil breach of unmoral statutory enactments” (Gandhi 1951, 3). It was launched as a mass movement in 1930 after the British government failed to recognize and enact the Nehru Report, a Congress Party resolution penned by famed nationalist Motilal Nehru. Written in December of 1928, the Nehru Report gave the British government a year to concede dominion status to India, threatening mass civil disobedience if the deadline was not met. The deadline passed with no action, and the Civil Disobedience movement was set into motion in March of 1930. Planned activities of the movement included:

- (1) Breaking of the Salt Law.
- (2) Boycott of foreign cloth.
- (3) Non-payment of land revenue and rent in specified areas.
- (4) Breach of the forest laws.
- (5) Boycott of British goods, banks, shipping, insurance and other concerns.
- (6) Boycott of liquor and opium (The India League 1934, 77).

Though these activities would seem in no way martial, Gandhi conceived of the movement as a non-violent war. The movement would carry the discipline and courage associated with war, but not the violence: these positive attributes were considered separable from the normal violence of war, and could be effectively appropriated into *satyagraha* (truth-struggle, encompassing Gandhian methods of non-violence). Driven by this idea, Gandhi discussed at length the idea of a Peace Army or Satyagrahi Army: “An army of non-violence exposes itself to all the risks that an army of violence does. Only the latter expects to retaliate even when it is not the aggressor. An army of non-violence runs risks without the wish to retaliate” (Gandhi 1986, 479). As Gandhi emphasized, the coming conflict would not be bloodless, for *satyagrahis* would indeed have to endure violence and shed their blood for the cause. The

difference, then, would lie in the *satyagrahis* refusal to retaliate. In all other aspects, however, the *satyagrahi* soldier would be similar to ordinary soldiers, as Gandhi illustrates:

...Tennyson wrote those immortal lines—“Theirs not to reason why, theirs not to make reply, theirs but to do and die.”....both in Satyagraha and military warfare the position of the soldier is very nearly the same. He knows no rest, no certainty of movements, the only certainty for him is to face heavy odds and even death. His promise to be under discipline and obey the general’s command applies even during the period of suspension of hostilities (Gandhi 1951, 98).

Framing *satyagraha* and Civil Disobedience in this way had several advantages. It answered critics who felt that non-violence and Gandhian practice showed “cowardice and lack of manly pride,” (Mehta 2006, 38) such as the controversial Hindu nationalist Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. It was also a useful way to frame a complex tactic for easier public comprehension, and furthermore, allowed for the advantageous use of a number of poignant terms, structures and rituals that are normally associated with war.

This framing became particularly salient in the language used by both Congress leaders and sympathetic newspapers of the time. For example, in the lead up to Civil Disobedience, Motilal Nehru reported to a *Hindustan Times* reporter that “Soldiers of the country must lose no time, in preparing themselves for the coming fight for freedom.” Calling for the unquestioned loyalty of military forces, he went on to assert that “the soldier’s duty was to do and die and those who were prepared to join the coming struggle as soldiers should not bother about the details of the programme. They should simply place themselves at the command of Mahatma Gandhi, the dictator of India” (*Hindustan Times*, 24 February 1930). A poem published in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* takes similar tones:

The Bugle of War has sounded clear,  
Each son of Hind, his part must play;

The Beacon Light is blazing far,  
None in homes, must now stay.  
Destiny's Day is drawing near,  
Fortunes call comes once in a way,  
The brave that hear will heroes be,  
Cowards that lag will creep in shame...  
The aged now with the young must part,  
The young to the fields of battle depart;  
Every village must the drum beat loud,  
Carrying the war-cry above the cloud (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 7 April 1930).

Not surprisingly, discussions between Civil Disobedience leaders and the British government were framed as peace talks, and Gandhi's demands as "Terms For Peace" (*The Leader*, 23 May 1930).

However, it was not only terminology that framed events. Several war-related structures and rituals were employed in the course of Civil Disobedience, including the creation of "war councils," as well as the public performance of send-off ceremonies. One such send-off celebration was covered in great detail by local papers:

From early morning people began to flock to the Queen's Gardens to witness the National Flag hoisting ceremony and the impressive send-off that was given to the first *jatha*. The whole ceremony was marked with solemnity, mothers and sisters embracing their dear and near ones, who were to 'proceed' to the 'battlefield' to wage a 'non-violent war' against the Government. The scene was so inspiring that it filled the hearts of everybody present there with patriotic fervor and immense enthusiasm (*Hindustan Times*, 9 April 1930).

These structures and rituals surfaced as a way to encourage and frame the mobilization of *satyagrahis*. Furthermore, they called on a very common and useful war tactic: the appropriation of family loyalties into the service of the larger community.

### **3.3 FAMILY, NATION AND THE CALL TO ACTION**

One of the greatest challenges in the creation of an army is the mobilization of the general population. Though the professional soldier is obliged to join the battle,

such participation is typically voluntary for ordinary modern-day citizens. Thus, to recruit the general public, leaders must find a way to make action seem urgent, necessary and meaningful to the private lives of potential volunteers.

One of the most effective manners of accomplishing this transformation is by absorbing family loyalties into the service of community; in this way, a soldier could be encouraged to protect the community just as he or she might protect his or her own household. This was a very common tactic during the Civil Disobedience movement, when kinship terms were liberally employed to encourage community loyalties with the force of family loyalties. The success of this tactic would be of no surprise to anyone who has spent any time in the Subcontinent, where strangers can instantly become (fictive) kin.

For example, an idea that was repeated time and time again (and since, has been written about time and time again) is the use of the idea of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India).<sup>12</sup> Men and women were frequently addressed as sons and daughters of *Bharat Mata* in songs, speeches, poetry, and pamphlets. A song by Chimanlal P. Bhatt ran:

Let the freedom of Mother India be my immortal hope...  
India is mine, I am of India. It is an unbreakable love-tie.  
Let the service of Mother India be my earnest desire.  
Why, Mother, there is a constant flow of tears in your eyes?  
Let there be the sacrifice of thirty crore [three hundred million] souls for  
removing thy bondage.  
Arise brothers, let us walk together to climb the minarets of  
freedom...(Sharma 1998, 61)

However effectively kinship language might absorb the loyalties of a volunteer, however, a living family continued to exist with present needs of its own. It was

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<sup>12</sup> Bharat Mata has not only been framed as the mother of India, but the patron national goddess as well. Thus, devotion to Bharat Mata has also often been cast in religious (or pseudo-religious) terms. See Ramaswamy (2010) for a comprehensive study of the use of Bharat Mata imagery in twentieth century India.

important (though not always necessary, it might be noted) that the household support the volunteer's public participation in Civil Disobedience, which at its most extreme risked confrontations with police, arrest, and in several cases, death. Thus, one of the greatest dangers in warfare is that the soldier will be "held back" by the loyalties of family and family life. This threat is exemplified in the actions of Chudawat, who—though normally known for his bravery—wants to stay with his young bride rather than ride to war when called to the aid of a neighboring kingdom. Therefore, the duty of the remaining family members is to sacrifice their own needs in favor of those of the nation, and to encourage or even push the soldier out to war. Hadi takes on this responsibility with vigor; a collection of "Rajput songs" released in the 1930s reflect a similar distribution of duties, in which wives and mothers must force their sons and husbands to fulfill their martial duties:

Go to the battle-field, my lord,  
Do not be a coward;  
Shame will come for you, reproach for me,  
None will call it a thing of honour...  
Don't you come back running, my lord,  
If you run, disgrace to me;  
My female friends will clap their hands,  
They will turn their faces from me....  
Every pain I will endure, O female friend,  
But two things burn me:  
Son who shames my milk,  
Husband who shames my bangles (Satyarthi 1951, 68).

In this case, the husband shirking his martial duties is not only shaming himself, but the marriage itself (represented by the bangles). The featured wife and mother, in contrast, displays her sacrifice and willingness to fulfill the abovementioned demands.

When a volunteer hesitated, it was the duty of wives and mother to push them out of the door (though the wives and mothers themselves were often simultaneously

engaged in nationalist activities).<sup>13</sup> This was frequently cast in newspapers and propaganda pamphlets as women's sacrifice to the nation. A good example of this is Mariam Bibi:

...the old mother of Mr. Siddiqi, one of the satyagrahis convicted on Bombay[, who] on hearing of her son's conviction, said: "I was very anxious that my son should be arrested. If I had 100 sons more I would have given them for national battle....Now I can go to my grave quite peacefully and calmly" (*Hindustan Times*, 13 April 1930).

This method of encouraging/pushing "soldiers" to the battlefield is particularly important for our understanding of banging in Civil Disobedience, because it recognizes women's influence in men's mobilization. And it should be recalled that in the Civil Disobedience movement, wearing *khadi* (homespun) was one of the "war" programs itself, and therefore required similar encouragement.

### 3.4 WHITE FEATHERS, BANGLES AND ROLE REVERSALS

In April, 1930, during a "National Week," speech, *Hindustan Times* editor J.N. Sahni incited the women of Delhi to form a *churi* (bangle) league. The purpose of the league would be to pressure men wearing western clothes to switch to *khadi* (homespun), and to pressure shops selling foreign cloth to cancel their orders and destroy (or at least seal off) their wares. The speaker suggested as a model for the movement a recruitment tactic used in England in the First World War:

...it is understood that Mr. Sahni's suggestion would be translated into practice from to-morrow in Delhi and would take the shape of an all-India movement.

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<sup>13</sup> Gandhi, in fact, seems to try to shame women into pushing their husbands out to "battle" in several of his speeches. During Non-Cooperation, in an article for *Navajivan*, Gandhi explains General Dyer's "reign of terror" in 1919 Amritsar as partly attributable to the fact that women of the time did not know to push their men out to fight: "Had the women been aware that it was the primary duty of the people to free themselves from the tyranny of this man, they would have filled with courage their husbands and sons, made them shake off their cowardice and defend their self-respect. But in the present age, the women keep aloof from the things which really matter for the nation's welfare and, hence, we get little help from them" (Gandhi 1988, 49).

He suggested that following the precedent of the “White Feather League” which was established in England during the Great War to prod unwilling people to go to the battle-field by means of admonitions through the fair six [sic] a similar league consisting of ladies should be established everywhere in India (*Hindustan Times*, 12 April 1930).

The White Feather League (also known as the White Feather Brigade), brought together by the British government, recruited a small group of beautiful young women to pin white feathers (a popular symbol of cowardice) to the jackets of men in civilian clothes as a taunt to drive the men to join the armed forces. The movement is described by a contemporary as such:

In England men who fail to offer themselves for war service without the best of reasons are known as “slacker.” When they appear in public they are very apt to be stopped by a young woman and decorated with a white feather, with some such explanation as this, “You look rather nice, but you’d look better in khaki” (Lena 1918, 405).

Indeed, the uniform recognized service in the United Kingdom. However, in India, wearing the uniform was *part* of service. The Bangle League’s object would be:

to present a bangle (*churi*) to every man who wore foreign cloth thus signifying that if the man so wearing foreign cloth was not brave enough to discard its use, he had better accept that bangle (*churi*), put it on and sit in his home like women. The society will perhaps come to be known as the Indian Bangle League (*Hindustan Times*, 12 April 1930).

Wearing *khadi* was a way to engage in the battle, whereas those in *videshi* cloth were suggested to “sit at home like women.” Women were encouraged to press men to wear *khadi* using tactics that typically pushed men to battle. Men’s duty was to participate, and if they failed in their duty, they would be letting down the motherland and would deserve a banging by the women.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Women were also encouraged to wear *khadi* at this time, but for the most part, the tactics used were very different. The one thing that did bond the campaigns for men’s and woman’s usage of *khadi* was shame; in an early speech to women in Dakor, Gandhi asserted: “To the women of the past, virtue was

There were significant differences between the White Feather League and the Bangles League beyond the *khadi*/khaki divide. The first, of course, was the object used. The white feather as a symbol of cowardice was popularized by the novel *The Four Feathers* (1902), by A.E.W. Mason. The symbol managed to catch the imagination of the British public, but while the extra-textual capabilities of this symbol were explored in the Great War, the white feather remained primarily a literary symbol. Excepting vague associations with delicacy, softness and beauty, the item had no apparent connection with the women gifting them. The bangle, on the other hand, was quite explicitly connected with women, particularly women in their wifely duties. Its usage would carry a myriad of messages that were deeply rooted in South Asian culture.

The other major difference was the threat that lay beneath the taunt. The white feather's threat was clear: it challenged the manliness, courage, and national commitment of recipients. It also contained a sexual threat: beautiful young women were very specifically chosen to distribute the feathers, because within their act was the threat of sexual rejection. If a man was not virile enough to fight, perhaps he also lacked sexual virility. This fear was explicitly utilized: the recipient could "redeem" himself by joining up, and then returning his feather to the giver in return for a kiss (Gullace 1997, 197). This sexual threat was perhaps present in some bangling—particularly in stories of conjugal bangling—but the major threat that loomed behind the gifting of bangles was role-reversal.<sup>15</sup>

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beauty. Wearing of foreign cloth makes a woman ugly. There is a touch of the harlot in a woman seeking loveliness by fine dressing" (Gandhi 1988, 53).

<sup>15</sup> The threat of role-reversal was not present in all acts of bangling: bangling of men by men certainly does not hold this subtext. Rather, it is likely a taunt meant to question a man's ability to perform his gender and to threaten his exclusion from the gender upon failure. Salman Rushdie beautifully enacts this in his novel *Shalimar the Clown*:

The act of giving the white feather threatened men's identities, but it by no means threatened gender role-reversals. There was no implicit menace of women taking on the roles of failed men. The gift of bangles by women, however, is itself an act of strength. There is an exertion of power that is being intentionally exhibited as the women make judgments of a man's performance of his duties and diagnose failures of duty. Strength is then contrasted with weakness: even before beheading herself, Hadi Rani shows a fortitude that her husband is measured against, and indeed, men's poor performance is not infrequently counterpoised against the impressive performance of women. This is amplified by the fact that the women participating in bangling (mostly middle-class women from the United Provinces and Delhi) were often involved in much larger programs of picketing and protest; due to these very public nationalist activities, they frequently courted harassment and arrest. As a result, they could approach foreign-cloth wearers from a moral high ground.

Within this measurement of men's performance and display of women's strength is the subtext that if men cannot perform their duties (i.e. serve the nation properly), perhaps women could and should. In fact, this idea surfaced frequently in women's songs that exhibited bangle taunts. One particular song, translated by Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, ends its verses as such:

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His father was in fact the Rajput of the old school that his son aspired to be, and his birthday gift to Hammirdev was a set of two dozen golden bangles. Ladies' bangles? Hammir Kachhwaha was confused. "Why, sir?" he asked, and the older man snorted, jingling the bangles on a finger. "If a Rajput warrior is still alive on his thirtieth birthday," grunted Nagabhat Suryavans Kachhwaha in tones of disgust, "we give him women's bangles to express our disappointment and surprise. Wear them until you prove they aren't deserved." "By dying, you mean," his son sought clarification. "To win favor in your eyes I have to get myself killed." His father shrugged. "Obviously," he said, neglecting to discuss why there were no bangles on his own arms, and spat copious betel juice into a handy spittoon (Rushdie 2005, 118).

Until the man can perform his Rajput maleness correctly (by dying), he must perform femaleness. It should be further noted that when men bangle men, the symbol can in fact take on much shallower associations with femininity and cowardice than when women bangle men.

Let's picket together  
The men have worn bangles  
So let them sit at home, day and night  
But you should be pleased to wear *hathkadi*  
Let's go to the jail together (1998, 595).

This is very clearly an indictment of men's performance that is being used to inspire women to "battle." This type of message goes even beyond Hadi Rani in that the women are to prepared to enter the actual fray; furthermore, they are posed as fearless, seeking to replace their bangles with *hathkadi* (handcuffs). Another song starts:

Hey! Womankind, leave your comfortable homes,  
Give your bangles to the menfolk,  
Leave your veils behind,  
Come out in the streets and bazaars,  
Leave the task of making *chappatis* to the men,  
Let us go out and make salt (2006, 112).

Again, the men are pushed into women's roles, while the women take to the public arena to perform the duties of freeing the nation. These types of statements made for punchy recruitment slogans. However, the degree to which participating women actually conceived of their behavior as role reversal will be explored in the next section.

## CHAPTER 4

### TRANSGRESSION AND PROPRIETY

#### 4.1 BANGLE GIFTING CATCHES ON

A provocative ritual of motivation, banging caught the imagination of not a few Civil Disobedience volunteers. Official and unofficial groups formed in a number of cities, including Lucknow, Kanpur, and Dehra Dun, with a particularly fiery headliner group coming together in Delhi. This last group—led by the “Joan of Arc of Delhi” Satyavati Devi<sup>16</sup>—went so far as to create a large banner printed with a giant image of a bangle, which it carried in procession. These groups typically followed the normal Congress-prescribed program of picketing foreign cloth shops, but at the same time threatened foreign-cloth consumers with a glittering arsenal of cheap glass bangles.<sup>17</sup>

As a result of the burgeoning movement, large numbers of men found themselves caught in an ornament ambush. Even famed *krantikari* (revolutionary)

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<sup>16</sup> The nickname comes from Jayant Vachaspati’s 1977 collection of essays on Devi, *Dilli ki Joan of Arc*. It is possible that the name was coined by J.N. Sahni of the *Hindustan Times*, who contributed an essay entitled “Delhi’s Joan of Arc—Bahen Satyavati,” and is considered the father of the Delhi Bangles League.

<sup>17</sup> The strategic use of women’s militancy in Civil Disobedience (and in banging incidents in general) might be fruitfully compared to notable incidents of female militancy in other parts of the world in this period. For example, the 1929 Igbo Women’s War of Nigeria provides an example in which a large number of women gathered to use culturally recognized methods of protest—such as “sitting” on one’s adversary (bringing public attention and pressure onto an adversary by surrounding his home and singing his misdeeds, damaging his compound, etc)—to protest an injustice; in this case, the women targeted Warrant chiefs—who were attempting to impose new taxes on women—forcing them into resignation. Though in both cases women used established methods of protests, there are a few instructive differences between the two. In banging incidents—as this chapter will show—women’s militancy was used to influence men’s behavior rather than to provoke direct change; in the Nigerian case, protests eventually led to direct, brutal clashes between the women and British colonial forces. However, some similarities do connect the two: for example, banging incidents frequently consisted of self-organized groups of women acting collectively, a striking feature of the Igbo incidents. Furthermore, as Van Allen records, the songs used in “sitting on” an adversary often “called [the target’s] manhood into question” (1972, 170); this message has clear echoes in bangle gifting, though the gendered messages in banging probably reflects a more layered message about gendered responsibility (as was demonstrated in the second chapter).

Chandra Shekhar Azad was targeted, finding himself cornered by three bracelet-wielding women; his biography recounts the event as follows:

Once Azad was going to some place near clock-tower in Chandhi Chowk, Delhi. On the way he was stopped by a few girls who said, “Either serve the country or wear bangles and sit at home.” Azad put his hand forth, and said, “I cannot serve the country. If you feel like it, put bangles on my hand.” Then all the girls, one by one, tried to put bangles on his wrist. But none could force the bangles on his wrist. Defeated, they said, *Bazar* doesn’t have bangles bigger than these. So, fine, go and serve the country.” Smiling Azad moved ahead (Rana 2004, 109).

Azad was able to escape the banglers. Not all men were so lucky: some women mailed the offending item to their targets to ensure that it was received (see page 11).

A creative and attention-grabbing method of activism, banging raises a number of important questions about gender relations in Civil Disobedience. Of these, perhaps the most important issue to address is the extent to which women felt (temporarily) empowered by enacting the practice, and consequently, whether those feelings of empowerment were at all expressed as role-reversal.

#### **4.2 SPATIAL TAKEOVERS AND PUBLIC AGGRESSION**

As might be expected, the prospect of role reversal underlying banging and related taunts not only posed a threat to men, but also functioned as a potential recruitment tool for women. The songs printed above vividly describe the possibilities of women’s activism, framing it as role reversal; the first admonishes: “The men have worn bangles/ So let them sit at home, day and night.” The second takes a similar tone: “Give your bangles to the menfolk.../ Leave the task of making *chappatis* to the men.” Having declared that the men have not fulfilled their duties to the nation, the songs then direct women to public spaces to take the lead in nationalist agitation, advising them to leave behind their “veils,” give their bangles “to the menfolk” and

instead, be “pleased to wear *hathkadi*,” or, handcuffs.<sup>18</sup> The rationale of the songs is straightforward: the men have had their chance to bring the nation out of bondage; it is time for the women to move to the forefront of the nationalist movement.

Underscoring the concept of role reversal was the fact that a response to these recruitment messages necessitated a number of actions that transgressed gender norms of the early twentieth-century Indo-Gangetic plain. The first, and in some ways most dramatic, of the transgressions was the move into the public space that was required for women’s picketing and banging. Though the first song asks “womankind” to “Come out in the streets and bazaars,” Thapar-Björkert outlines some of the difficulties of fulfilling this request, reminding readers that the “Hindi-speaking heartland” was notable for high levels of female illiteracy and *pardah* (2006, 21). A contemporary notice from *The Leader* discussing a women’s meeting in nearby Bihar emphasizes the restrictive social practices that needed be (temporarily) overcome for women’s public activism: “These two meetings and the decision [to picket foreign cloth shops] were unique in themselves in view of the fact that for the first time in the annals of this *pardah*-ridden province ladies in their hundreds met in public and decided to throw their energies into the maelstrom of a political campaign” (*The*

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<sup>18</sup> The items that women volunteers were forcing upon mis-clad men, glass bangles, were also an item that politically-involved women were being asked to discard en masse. This is because the bangles of North India were, at this time, largely imported from Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Austria, and Japan. Women were thus asked to give up glass bangles in favor of less popular but wholly *swadeshi* materials:

... We have plenty of home-made goods,  
Why get fascinated by foreign brands.  
Oh mothers, throw away glass-bangles  
When we have conchshells all around (Sharma 1998, 58).

They were also generally asked to wear fewer bangles, in a show of wartime sacrifice. On several occasions, for example, Kasturba Gandhi asked women “not to put too many bangles of their hands” (*Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 19 April 1930). Glass bangles thus gained much of the notoriety of foreign cloth, and not infrequently entered foreign-product bonfires, along with *videshi* cloth (Mukharji 1989, 50). That women were forcing these somewhat vilified products onto the wrists of men could perhaps be understood as symbolically relocating the shame of foreign adornment with men, while they embraced the *swadeshi* bangles of the motherland and, occasionally, *hathkadi* (handcuffs). Numerous arrests of “lady volunteers” during public agitation caused this verse to become reenacted quite literally.

*Leader*, 23 May 1930). The Delhi Bangle League held similar rallies, labeling one meeting that was particularly successful in drawing women out of their homes a “*purdah* meeting” (*The Leader*, 14 April 1930). Thus, picketing and the bangle leagues were a significant part of women’s emergence en masse into the public sphere.

A good example of the very public nature of picketing and banging comes from Lucknow which, on December 16, 1930, celebrated “Bracelet Day.” On that day, at the behest of the Lucknow Congress Committee:

Lady volunteers in batches marched through the different quarters of the city, got pledges signed by house occupants not to use or buy foreign cloth for the next two years and whenever they came across a man clad in foreign material, they detained him to present him with a pair of bangles.

Not only did they traverse the city, but the volunteers “passed through Hazratganj, Lucknow, the forbidden area.” It is evident that the women of the procession not only entered the public space, but in this case, perhaps dominated it. In Delhi, there is an even clearer example of this phenomenon:

It will be recalled that for the last three days [Srimati Satyavati Devi] had been leading a procession of ladies through the main streets of the city in defiance of an order under sec. 144, Cr, P.C., against assemblies of more than five persons. Subsequently she had been holding meetings on the road under the clock tower in the Chandni Chowk. Last evening the crowds at the meeting swelled to over 5,000, blocking all vehicular traffic and tram cars (*Hindustan Times*, 26 May 1930).

Presided over by Devi, this meeting called together 1,000 times the number of people legally allowed to assemble (under penal code sec. 144). Even if this estimate were ten times the actual crowd number, the figures would nevertheless be impressive.

In fact, though women were asked to picket by Gandhi because he expected them to make an “effective appeal to the heart” of men (*Young India*, 10 April 1930), many descriptions of women’s banging and picketing reveal a theme of confident

assertion and not infrequently, aggressive tactics. A journalist for the *Hindustan Times* reports one case in which “vigorous picketing [sic] by members of the Bangles League was carried on.” He notes that “One lady sat at each shop, with the result that no sensible man dared to purchase foreign cloth in the face of such efficient picketing....if things go on like this for some time it can safely be said that there will be a dead stop to the sale of foreign cloth in Delhi” (*The Leader*, 16 April 1930). They not only worked to forcefully change the consumer habits of men, but also took it upon themselves to protect their fellow male activists; one article in *The Leader* announcing “DELHI LADIES’ RESOLVE: Section 144 Defied: Cordon to Protect Men” described another meeting held by Devi in which the women volunteers formed a cordon to protect the presumably mixed crowd from possible police interference (*Hindustan Times*, 28 May 1930).

Furthermore, the women of these groups did not demure from challenging figures of authority in their public activism. Eminent politicians received packets of bangles in the mail, as Thapar-Björkert’s interview with Satya Saxena (at the beginning of the first section) notes. Lawyers and bureaucrats were harassed; advocate and Delhi University treasurer Rai Bahadur Ramkishore was particularly defiant, and was consequently served an “ultimatum to take to Khaddar,” on failure of which his offices were besieged by lady volunteers and one of his clients beaten by the crowd (*The Leader*, 18 December 1930). Police officers were also targeted by the groups. Historian S.R. Bakshi notes an interesting case in which:

a great sensation was created when a police officer, who was determined to buy foreign cloth disdainfully broke the bangles offered by women picketers and tried to enter the shop, was immediately offered a knife by a lady picketer with a request to slay her before entering the shop. [The] Police officer tried to threaten her but that lady picketer stood there for a couple of hours blocking his way without any fear. Bewildered at the courage of the lady picketer the police officer left promising never to purchase foreign cloth (1989, 122-123).

However, it was not only figures connected to the colonial regime that were targeted, but also traditional figures of authority. For example, the temple *pujaris* of Ferozabad were pressured to dress temple *murtis* (sculptural figures) in *khadi* (Thapar-Björkert 2006, 111).

In their (temporary) takeovers of public spaces and their challenges to both traditional and official authorities, participating women would seem to be attempting to disrupt the normal spatial and social order. All of these incidents are clear, if momentary, assertions of power, confidence and insubordination. But the question remains as to whether or not participants viewed these transgressive activities as role reversal.

#### **4.3 RESPECTABILITY AND RAJPUTNIS**

In fact, though the above recruitment songs juxtapose the failures of men with the possibilities of women's action, there is little reason to believe that women volunteers understood their actions in masculine terms. Rather, as noted in the first section of this paper, it is possible that women were not adopting a masculine power but instead, channeling a power normally dormant within women; another song catalogued by Thapar-Björkert illustrates the fact that, in action,

She who was called weak (*abala*) till now  
Has shown the world she is brave (*sabala*)  
The woman of India is now set to liberate her own country  
She is moving ahead of men  
And is busy in the service of her nation  
Soft (*Komal*), a girl with good qualities (*Sukumari*), and radiant like the  
moon (*Chandramukhi*)  
Has turned to a raging blood thirsty goddess (*Bhikala Chandi*)...(2006, 158).

In this song, the writer moves ahead of men—an encouraging idea—but certainly does not frame her strength in masculine terms. Instead, this “soft” and “weak” girl has

taken on the *shakti* of a “raging blood thirsty goddess.” This idea would seem to reflect Roland’s studies on myth models.

More importantly, though the songs frame public nationalist activism as a failed masculine duty (thus legitimizing women’s participation), there were many voices in the public dialogue calling for women’s public action as a legitimate and necessary component in the battle for freedom. Gandhi is foremost among these voices, but he is not alone. Newspapers were barraged with articles calling for “lady volunteers,” framing public participation as women’s duty *as well as* men’s. One typical article entitled “Every Family to Give One Volunteer” publicized “Miss [Mithuben] Petit’s Exhortation”: “...there should not be a single family in Gujarat that has not offered at least one lady volunteer in the swaraj struggle...still more women are required. Those women, therefore, that have not yet enlisted as volunteers should arrive at the Stri Swaraj Sangh, Patigar Ashram, Surat, with a fixed determination to continue as volunteers till the end of the fight for complete swaraj” (*The Leader*, 14 May 1930).

This idea was hotly contested, of course, and not a few articles took the tone of a letter submitted to *The Leader* by “A Hindu” which darkly opined that the “inclusion of women in a civil disobedience campaign of this sort cannot but have very serious social and moral repercussions on Indian society generally. To an average Indian, home is the proper sphere for the activities of womanhood.” The letter continues that women should indeed participate in nationalist activities, but only from the domestic sphere:

I am not averse to women joining the present movement provided their activities are limited to their own sphere. Let them work at the spinning wheel and supply us with khaddar, but for God’s sake let them not go about undefended and unprotected with all sorts of people at all hours of the day and night (*The Leader*, 28 April 1930).

Indeed, few women would want to be seen as “unseemly” and “unwomanly,” as other letters characterized women’s picketing. The need to separate out women’s public activities as a legitimate and respectable women’s duty was of great concern; particularly, as Geraldine Forbes points out, because preceding the picketers’ public debut, many of the women associated with public spaces were (or were assumed to be) prostitutes (2005, 39-40).

In view of their competing needs to be both courageous and politically effective on the one hand, and womanly and respectable on the other, many women sought behavioral models encapsulating these two seemingly conflicting ideas. Legends and stories were of particular use to participants, Kirin Narayan calling them “a ‘cognitive instrument,’ a means of making sense of the world” (1989, 100). Thus, while Gandhi promoted the self-sacrificing *pativrata* Sita as the exemplar for Indian women, stories highlighting fiercely brave *pativratas* were also called to ideological duty in this period, particularly stories featuring legendary *Rajputnis* (Rajput wives). These stories featured both mythologized heroines and anonymous wives who had committed *jauhar* (in which mass groups of women committed themselves to a large bonfire to escape the predations of invading enemy warriors). The ultra-heroic stereotypes of these women were extremely effective models because in circulating tales, the women exhibited unusual behaviors in the service of their proper, womanly duties. Harlan describes this phenomenon in modern-day Udaipur, noting:

That uppity women transgress the gender code on occasion and are celebrated for it by men and women alike can be used by women as charter for sundry challenges. The stories of counterhierarchical heroines such as Padmini, for example, have been deployed to legitimize transgressing *parda*. Various Rajput women who had previously adhered strictly to the rule of *parda* left their homes to “campaign” for their husbands and other male relatives who were fighting political battles. For them the examples of Padmini and other martial heroines have served as legitimizing and inspiring paradigms (2003, 101).

A Rajput princess who is said to have abandoned *purdah* to fool lusty Tartar king Alauddin and save her husband (soon afterwards committing *jauhar*), Padmini also became a model for the “lady volunteers” of Civil Disobedience, emerging as a symbol of “sacrifice and fearlessness” (Jain 2004, 149). R.C. Dutt’s popular novel *Pratap Singh* put forward similar behavioral models, seeking to “reinvigorate [Civil Disobedience era] women by focussing [sic] on the indomitable courage and fierce resistance of the Rajput princesses who form the main women characters of his novel” (Jain 2004, 149).

References to *viranganas* and *Rajputnis* show up in a number of women’s speeches and meetings in this period. A good example comes from “Mrs. Gandhi’s speech” at Jalalpure, at which a volunteer named Pushpaben “said like Rajputanis they should send their sons and husbands to the battlefield and themselves enter the field like the Rani of Jhansi. Mahatma Gandhi considered women the incarnation of Shakti and they should prove it” (*The Leader*, 9 May 1930). Geraldine Forbes notes another striking example of these ideas informing women’s political action in her descriptions of the costume of the *Desh Sevika Sangha*, a women’s volunteer corps set up by the women’s *swaraj* (self-rule) group *Rashtriya Stree Sangha* and led by Sarojini Naidu. The corp took a *swadeshi* oath, promising to both spin and wear *khadi*. Their outfits, saffron saris with white *cholis* (blouses) were “designed to evoke images of the brave Rajput women who sent their men to battle and then donned such saris before performing *jauhar* [suicide by fire] to avoid capture” (Forbes 2005, 45).

Indeed, the leader of the Delhi-based Bangle League and the “Joan of Arc of Delhi” adopted such language in songs that she wrote from jail, following her 1931 arrest. Devi urged women to:

Jump into the burning fire,  
And stand firm in the holy war,  
Do not retreat from the battle,

So says Sister Satyavatiji.  
In the battle you must die before men  
Don't be afraid of bullets or sticks,  
Move your head forward first  
So says sister Satyavatiji (Forbes 1996, 148-149).

Jumping into the burning fire would seem to be a clear reference to *jauhar*, and the values encapsulated in the song align easily with those of the *Rajputani*.

These models gain much of their power from the fact that many of the Rajput heroines embedded in these stories draw their strength from a combination of bravery and respectability, fearlessness and propriety; they are unquestioned *pativrats* who place great stock in maintaining proper, womanly behavior. However, the scope of proper, womanly behavior has shifted in Civil Disobedience; many simply interpreted this as a redirecting of the strength and bravery of Rajput women, as “Jump[ing] into the burning fire” indicated entering the battle. Another translation of Devi’s poem makes this connection more explicit, commanding women to “jump in the fire of Independence” (Maynard 1996, 215). It was a use of the same courage, but to fulfill the urgent, modified duties of women. Publicly fighting for the nationalist cause, in this case, could be seen as legitimate use of the dignified courage of *Rajputnis*. Ferocity would be channeled, propriety retained. One writer of the time echoes this sentiment in identifying the goal of the modern woman as to “marry the sword and the bangle together” (Thapar-Björkert 2006, 252).

Bangling is particularly amenable to this model because, while it is public activism, its main purpose is to encourage men to act (in this case, to join the *videshi* cloth boycott and don the soldier’s uniform, *khadi*). In a direct parallel to Hadi Rani, the women of Civil Disobedience were encouraged to demand courage from their menfolk, pushing them to fulfill their own duties. Though this encouragement sometimes bordered on strident aggression, it was at the same time a traditional duty

of the *pativrata*. Harlan explicates this connection between a woman's role as a *pativrata* and normally questionable behaviors such as conjugal taunting, noting that in stories exhibiting this paradox, "the demanding wife is the 'secret' of any honor her husband can eventually muster" (2003, 99). Aggression, militancy, and counter-hierarchical behavior can, in this model, become highly respected and praised womanly behavior.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Bangling was never a major aspect of women's participation in Civil Disobedience; however, it caught the imagination of women (and the attention of the public) in a number of north Indian cities. The nuanced messages represented in and enacted through these lovely ornaments reflected—and continue to reflect—nuanced ideas of gender, as well as complex interactions between the sexes. Indeed, though the forcing of bangles upon men could in some ways be seen as a reenactment and reaffirmation of conceptions of difference in gender roles—characterized by the public duties of men and domestic duties of women—the act also acknowledges comparable traits between the sexes, as well as overlapping abilities. After all, role reversal can only be threatening where it is understood to be possible.

Bangling is in fact only one practice among a variety of creative traditions of dialogue between the sexes in north India. Among these, dialogues in which women strategically highlight their roles as mothers, wives and sisters seem to be particularly effective for influencing and criticizing men, even where no relationship actually exists. This becomes apparent when reading Amrita Basu's discussions of Uma Bharati, the Hindu nationalist ideologue who fanned communalist flames in the lead up to the 1992 destruction of Babri Masjid. Basu explains that when Bharati tells Hindu men to act like courageous men (and in fact, to perform their masculine duties) by behaving as lions rather than frogs, the ascetic "assumes the tones of a wife chiding her negligent husband." She notes that this manner of delivering criticism shows that "women can assume activist roles without violating the norms of Hindu womanhood or ceasing to be dutiful wives and mothers" (Basu 1996, 74). The striking similarity in the framing of this criticism with the act of banging reveals that this style of criticism

exists in perhaps countless forms and informs gendered communication in numerous situations. The bangle is a convenient and widely recognized means of communicating criticism of this type, but is certainly not the only method available to women.

Of course, expectations between (and within) the sexes change and develop with shifting sociopolitical conditions. Ongoing dialogues and interactions cause ideas of gender characteristics and responsibilities to be continuously constructed, refined and revised. What remains constant, however, is the influence of each sex in the shaping of the other's self-conceptions. Thus, criticism leveled across the sexes has the potential to be deeply effective, even when conveyed through as innocuous an item as a small glass bangle.

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