

# **‘Mothers of the Indian Nation’: The Impact of Indian Women Nationalists on South African Women**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the India-South Africa relations in the context of historical political ties. The arrival of indentured and later ‘passenger’ Indians laid the foundations for India’s perennial presence in South Africa. Whilst the late nineteenth century was dominated by labour issues the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa which India supported. This paper examines the role of Indian women nationalists, how they shaped and defined the political consciousness of women in South Africa. Both countries followed a trajectorial path of colonial oppression and the struggle for independence. India by the early twentieth century had produced iconic and activist women such as Sarojini Naidu and Pandita Ramabai. Both Naidu and Ramabai challenged colonial and traditional notions of patriarchy and fought tirelessly for women’s emancipation. Their public discourses on women’s emancipation may have been perceived as ‘radical’ and ‘revolutionary’ given the traditional gender norms that governed Indian society. However, for women in India and South Africa they were inspirational heroines and role models. By exploring the influence of Indian women nationalists on South African women of Indian origin this paper adds to the debates on political and intellectual transoceanic links between India and South Africa. It also highlights the significance of the ‘homeland’ in the diaspora and how it can shape and define the political identities of immigrants.

**Keywords:** Sarojini Naidoo, Pandita Ramabai, India, South Africa, diaspora, women

## **Introduction**

In South African historiography transoceanic links between India and South Africa has begun to gain momentum (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2014). Scholars have begun to explore transoceanic connections between India and South Africa, recognising ‘the global alignments within which South Africa and India have been positioned’. As Isabel Hofmeyr and Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie have noted, ‘Linked from the seventeenth century by global flows of labour (first slavery and then indenture), the two regions have long been yoked together by the mechanisms of imperial modernity and anti- colonial resistance .... In a globalising world where most disciplines are taking a transnational turn, these questions have assumed a new urgency. How does one figure the shifting relationship of the national and the international? How does one understand different moments of globalisation? ... . How does contemporary globalisation relate to the transnationalism of European imperialism? .... A consideration of South Africa and India provides an opportunity to intervene in these debates by examining both previously obscured transnational histories’ (Cited in van der Spuy & Clowes 2012: 352).

In particular, the role of gender in transoceanic links between India and South Africa has illuminated the importance of women in the migration process, ‘Women played an important role in promoting culture and religion, but Hindu women also adapted to new dress forms, given Cape Town’s demographics. .... There are stories of agency, independence and freedom counterpoised by narratives of abandonment and separation. All these are relevant in a gendered understanding of migration – illuminating lives of women who did travel and of those who did not travel’ (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2014: 655). More recently the role of gender in the transoceanic links has sought to explore the role of Indian women nationalists on the political trajectories of South African women (van der Spuy & Clowes 2012). Spuy and Clowes have examined the relationship between Sarojini Naidu and well known Capetonian political activist, Cissie Gool. They argue that Naidu had an indelible influence on Gool encouraging her to challenge political patriarchy and seek her own political voice, ‘Sarojini Naidu’s personal, political relationship with Cissie Gool had been established in domestic spaces, and it was both there and in the public performance of her unassailable authority that Naidu made a difference’ (van der Spuy & Clowes

2012: 363). This paper adds to these current debates by examining the role of women nationalists in India and how they shaped and defined the political consciousness of women of Indian origin in South Africa. Both South Africa and India were colonised nations and in both countries women played an integral part of the liberation struggle. In India, women such as Sarojini Naidu and Pandita Ramabai, challenged colonial and traditional gender norms and became vociferous advocates of women's emancipation. Hence they became inspirational heroines not only in India but in the diaspora as well, including South Africa. During Sarojini Naidu's visit in South Africa in 1924 she inspired Indian politicians, traders, teachers, school-children, labourers, mothers and wives. Her support for Indian education, equality and non-racialism earned her the respect and admiration of the Indian community. In a farewell speech to Naidu, the Indian community described her as the 'soul of every Indian in South Africa' (*Indian Opinion*, 30 May 1924). According to Amod Bayat, Chairman of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), 'It was the happiest moment in the life of the Indian community of South Africa when you graciously accepted the Presidentship of the South African Indian Congress, and the work that has been done and is being done under you is epoch making in many respects. And the Indian community in the future will be all the better for it' (*Indian Opinion*, 30 May 1924).

I chose Sarojini Naidu and Pandita Ramabai because of their profound status and impact on women in India and South Africa. Both were wives and mothers who convincingly campaigned for women's emancipation and India's freedom. Naidu was referred to as 'The Nightingale of India' because of her poetry and oratory and her ability to inspire audiences. Her presence in South Africa enlightened women who viewed her as a role model, mother figure, and subsequently had an impact on their own political consciousness. While in South Africa in 1924, she campaigned for three months, urging men and women to fight for equality and freedom. Naidu referred to the plight facing Indian South Africans as temporary and added that these difficulties 'have no abiding place in the evolution of Africa' (*The Leader*, 19 July 1985). Naidu was an inspiration to women such as Ansuya Singh, Dr Goonam and many other women of Indian origin who grew up in this historical milieu (Govinden 2008: 277).

Pandita Ramabai, too, was a remarkable woman whose advocacy for women's emancipation and conversion to Christianity inspired fellow Christian Indians in South Africa. In this paper her impact is largely narrated

from the vantage point of well-known academic, Devarakshanam (Betty) Govinden. Govinden, in *Sister Outsiders*, succinctly captures Ramabai's impact on her family and on South African Indian women's writings, '...It is worth noting that Ramabai and Sarojini Naidu, were admired by both Indian men and women, as in my family, who still continued to live in and accept a traditionally sexist society and imperialist world' (Govinden 2008: 80). Govinden grew up in an apartheid society and raised in an Indian community that clearly adhered to traditional gender norms. Her experiences shaped both her political and academic identity. She studied at Salisbury Island, a '*tribal college*' or '*bush college*' for Indians which was a 'blight on our educational landscape' as the curriculum was 'narrow and doctrinaire'. Yet despite this, the Island provided Govinden, an opportunity to acquire higher education, 'my world was slowly broadening', it was here she developed a passion for English Literature, where she grew to 'love Shakespeare, Milton and Chaucer...' It also laid the foundations for Govinden's feminist identity. Her readings in post-colonial and postmodern theory helped her to read 'against the grain' of the 'insularity' of Island education which was to impact on her academic writings. She sought to document the marginalized and lost histories of women, bringing forth the missing voices and agency of the colonized within a feminist analysis. In so doing she created an awareness of exclusionary practices in women's writings in general and Indian women's writing in particular and the importance of highlighting difference and heterogeneity in women's experiences (Govinden 2011: 53-62; Hiralal 2013: 129-134). Govinden, like Ramabai, sought to raise gender awareness and displayed a firm belief in social justice and freedom. Whilst they came from different historical periods they shared a common ancestral 'homeland', India. Govinden states, 'There were many references to Sarojini Naidu in the family conversations and she acquired a legendary status for me as I was growing up. It is only now, however, that I am beginning to appreciate the full stature and greatness of these two women' (Govinden 2008: 79). By exploring the influence of women nationalists of India on South African women of Indian origin this paper adds to the current debates on historical transoceanic links between India and South Africa. It also highlights the significance of the 'homeland' and how it defines and shapes the political identities of immigrants in the diaspora.

## **Diasporic Consciousness and the ‘Homeland’**

The arrival of indentured Indians to Natal in 1860 and later ‘passenger’ Indians (also known as free Indians), laid the foundations for India’s pervasive link with South Africa. For Indian immigrants, migration also created a sense of dislocation, confusion, disempowerment and a sense of loss. The need to replicate their ‘homeland’ led to the creation of ‘India’s of the mind’ in South Africa (Rushdie 1991: 10). It gave rise to the building of temples, mosques, and the preservation and adaptation of their customs and rituals. Amongst ‘passenger’ Indians the Indian link was maintained through regular trips to India and caste related marriages. Hence there was a desire by these immigrants to reclaim their identity in the homeland, a yearning as Rushdie states, ‘[E]xiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt’ (Rushdie 1991: 10). This diasporic consciousness manifested itself in emotional and cultural ties with the motherland. James Clifford suggests that ‘Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension’ (Clifford 1994: 312). Some scholars have called for the significance of re-evaluating diasporic spaces, the ‘need for such inter-diaspora (rather than separatist) study re-plots our histories, explores new intersections and ‘contact zones’ and that the ‘diasporic space is particularly prone to cultural constructions vis-à-vis a ‘homeland’ (Grewal & Kaplan 1994: 7). At the turn of the century the Indian immigrants and their descendants were subjected to waves of discriminatory legislation which hindered their political, economic and social mobility. This oppressed environment created a sense of displacement and exclusion amongst the Indian community. For many Indians, India’s struggle icons, and key individuals served as inspirational heroes and heroines amidst their hardships. Thus Indian women in South Africa found a natural affinity with heroines on Indian soil, ‘There was clearly an explicit connection – an umbilical cord – that was being maintained between India and South Africa by their adulation of these women’ (Govinden n.d.).

## **Women’s Status in South Africa 1860-1950**

The impact of Sarojini Naidu and Pandita Ramabai on women of Indian origin in South Africa must be seen in the context of political and social

forces in India and South Africa. Both Naidu and Ramabai were vocal in their condemnation of patriarchy and British rule in India. At the time British colonial rule which not only advocated racial superiority of the coloniser but also further enforced patriarchy under the guise of 'modernity'. The 'Women's Question' was central to the colonial state and indigenous male elite and became the 'touchstone of the colonial-nationalist encounter, inscribed with the trope of modernity and the legitimization of political power' (Sen 2000: 3-7; Thapar 1993: 82). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Indian society was highly patriarchal. Traditional gender norms governed and defined women's political space. A group of enlightened social and religious reformers sought to improve the status of women's position in Indian society. They sought to eradicate the worst evils of Indian society such as the caste system, untouchability, *purdah* system (female seclusion), *sati* (Hindu practice of a widow throwing herself on to her husband's funeral pyre), child marriages, social inequalities and illiteracy. For reformers, women's emancipation was a 'prerequisite to national regeneration and an index of national achievement in the connected discourse of civilization, progress, modernity, and nationalism' (Sen 2000: 7). Pandita Ramabai by the late nineteenth century had publicly attacked many aspects of Hindu patriarchy. She wrote, 'Our only wonder is that a defenceless woman like Rukhmabai dared to raise her voice in the face of the powerful Hindu law, the mighty British Government, the 129,000,000 men, the 330,000,000 gods of the Hindus; all these have conspired together to crush her into nothingness. We cannot blame the English Government for not defending a helpless woman; it is only fulfilling its agreement made with the male population of India' (cited in Sen 2000: 11). Sarojini Naidu by the early twentieth century had not only achieved fame through her brilliant poetry but also for being the first woman to be elected as President of the Indian National Congress. Naidu and Ramabai's highly public profile had illustrated to the men and women in the diaspora that the realm of politics need not be male dominated and that 'gender need not stifle their political ambitions' (Van der Spuy and Clowes 2012: 348).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries South Africa shared similar gender norms and patriarchy defined the political space. Politics was largely male-dominated with men assuming leadership positions and women relegated to the domestic sphere. The main racially constructed disenfranchised political organisations such as the African National Congress

(ANC), NIC, and the African Peoples Organisation (APO) were male-centric. Women were only granted full membership to the ANC in 1943. The NIC too, privileged men; its constitution denied women the right to vote. Struggle activist Dr Goonam recalls her excitement in the 1940s at the organisation attempt to democratise the Congress, 'While I was prominent on the platform and there was a large turnout of women at the rally, we did not participate in the voting on that day because the NIC's constitution denied that right to women. At the very first meeting of the new executive, an urgent amendment was made to the archaic constitution, whereby women were given full membership on equal basis with men. I then paid my subscription fee of one shilling and went on a campaign to enlist women members to our Congress' (Goonam 1991: 101). There was no doubt that women such as Ramabai and Naidu had an impact on Goonam. In her autobiography, *Coolie Doctor*, Goonam alluded to the inspiration she acquired from women in India, 'Women in India are the vanguard of the freedom struggle and their achievements have been remarkable' (Goonam 1991: 102). Women in India at the time were actively involved in the nationalist struggle. This was most noticeable in the protest marches during the partition of Bengal in 1905, they supported Congress's programme of boycott of British goods (the Swadeshi Movement), and engaged in numerous rallies, sold *khadi*, picketed cloth and liquor shops and made salt. In South Africa patriarchal attitudes towards women shaped and defined women's political role, as 'many husbands were not happy with their wives' staying away from home and made it difficult for women to attend meetings' (Giesler 2006: 66). Hence, women within the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) took upon 'women's work' such as fund-raising and catering' (cited in Giesler 2006: 66). However, it would be wrong to assume that women did not actively participate in political campaigns. At the turn of the century Indian women's defiance of the marriage laws and the African women's protests of pass laws in the Orange Free State in 1913, is indicative of women's capacity to become a powerful political weapon in times of struggle. The remarkable and courageous efforts of Indian women in the Satyagraha campaign of 1913 certainly made Gandhi aware of the political power of women as participants in his non-violent struggle (Hiralal 2009). Similarly, Naidu and Ramabai, challenged traditional gender norms and showed that the political terrain needed to be democratised and that women could play as important a role as men in bringing about political change.

## **Sarojini Naidu**

Sarojini Naidu was born on February 13 1879 in Hyderabad, India, to a Bengali family of Kulin Brahmins. She was a great poet, nationalist leader and orator and played a pivotal role in India's freedom struggle. Her contribution to English poetry, her feisty advocacy for women's emancipation and their education, and India's freedom are legendary (*Indian Opinion* 22 February 1924). She studied for a while in England and later returned to India and 1898 married Dr Naidu, a non-Brahmin with whom she had four children. Whilst Naidu was an ardent poet it was politics that defined her stature. She was actively involved in politics after 1903 and her contemporaries, such as *Rabindranath Tagore*; Muhammad Ali *Jinnah*, Annie Besant, C. P. Ramaswami Aiyer, Gandhi and Jawaharlal *Nehru* admired her fiery and tenacious spirit. In India she worked tirelessly for Hindu-Muslim unity and travelled throughout the country and lectured on the welfare of youth, women's emancipation and nationalism. She was an ardent admirer of Gandhi and was elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1925. She was Gandhi's 'faithful lieutenant' when the Civil Disobedience Movement was launched in April 1919. She addressed crowds, quelled the riots and sold proscribed literature. She was jailed five times during the nationalist struggle (Kumar 2015: Chapter 1; *Modern Review* May 2024: 631).

Given her credentials, Naidu was the ideal Indian ambassador to South Africa to mediate over Indian grievances with the South African government. She subsequently arrived in South Africa in February 1924. She was invited to South Africa by the NIC and on arrival met and engaged in a series of political discussions with General Smuts, Patrick Duncan and all the opposition leaders of the South African Parliament. Her fearless eloquence captured the attention of many Europeans, although some viewed her disdainfully 'at first treating her with some suspicion and coldness, later on flocked everywhere to hear her' (*Modern Review* May 1924: 631). Her great oratory skills clearly articulated the Indian cause but equally important was her support for non-racialism, 'The greatest of all the benefits, which has been conferred by her visit, is probably that she put throughout the Indian cause completely in conjunction with that of the African native. She claimed no privileges for the Indian, which were not also claimed for the African. She struck boldly at the root of all the mischief, the Colour Bar itself' (*Modern*



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*Review*, May 1924: 631).

Well known columnist and historian IC Meer described Sarojini Naidu as 'India's greatest 'ambassador' to South Africa'. On her arrival to South Africa, Naidu visited several cities, including Durban, Pretoria and Cape Town. During her visit the South African Parliament was considering the Class Areas Bill introduced by the Interior Minister, Patrick Duncan, supported by General Smuts, the Prime Minister and leader of the South African Party. The Bill sought to introduce compulsory segregation of Indians in trade and residence. Sarojini was highly critical of the South African government. According to Meer, this 'sari-clad black woman' holding discussions with the Prime Minister and attending Parliament found many of the speeches in Parliament 'full of blind prejudice, selfishness and ignorance' (*The Leader*, 19 July 1985). Sarojini's visit coincided with the newly formed South African Indian Congress (SAIC) in 1923. She chaired a session at the SAIC conference and made recommendations that a Round Table Conference be held between the Governments of India and South Africa with participation by the SAIC 'for the adjustment of questions involving the rights, liberties and responsibilities of Indians domiciled and born in South Africa' (*The Leader*, 19 July 1985).

Sarojini made a huge impact on South African women. She believed that women could serve as catalysts for social change and could therefore play a pivotal role in the struggle for South Africa's freedom. In her speeches she encouraged women in South Africa to have a political voice, to engage in political leadership and deliberations,

Women were born to be strong and to unite the whole world in a common love and peace. India has always stood for peace in this world, and I want the day to come when in the history of a peaceful South Africa the historian will show that the Indian women of South Africa by their unselfishness and wisdom were able to bring unity between the white man, the brown man, the black man and the coloured man . . . ask yourselves what you can do to make South Africa better. Think of your duties rather than your privileges (Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu, n.d.: 407-11).

Naidu believed that women could also play a pivotal role towards non-racialism:

You ask for justice from the white man, but do you ever ask yourselves if you have been right and just to the African and coloured populations? ... If you have failed, there is no peace in this land ... you must mend your own faults. If you have not done your duty as citizens you must begin to do your duty at once ... Let us see how the Indian women of Africa can build up South Africa. Then we must not forget the suffering people. What can we do for these, whether they are Indian, African or coloured? ... Women must be kind ... You must not wait for the Government ... You must pay your debts to this land, and the best way is to have your children so educated that they will be noble citizens. You can pay your debts by lifting the status of the Native and the coloured people. You have another duty. You must say to your men, 'if you fight you are foolish.' We are going to live in peace. Men might be different race from race, but women cannot be different; a common motherhood makes them alike. I never hope to hear an Indian woman say, 'I am different from the white women, the coloured women, the Native women'. I do not care what your religion is, you are woman, and women were meant to lead the earth, and when women do that the world will become good. Do not think only of yourselves, but fight for your rights because you are women... (Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu, n.d: 407-11).

She arrived in Durban in March 1924 to a tumultuous reception and was overwhelmed by the love and affection showered upon her, 'she at times gave way to emotion and tears streamed down her cheeks' (*Indian Opinion*, 21 March 1924). The local white newspaper, the *Natal Mercury* reported on her visit:

... the Indians of Durban and district assembled to welcome to the town Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, the Indian poetess and political worker who is presently touring South Africa. The distinguished visitor arrived shortly before 2 pm ... In spite of [a crowd numbering perhaps 4000] there was no disorder when Mrs. Naidu was escorted from the special train in which she had travelled ... with about 200 compatriots .... The engine of the train bore the message, 'Welcome to Shrimrti Sarojni Devi,' and was decorated with foliage, while on the platform there was a guard of honour wearing pink turbans, and

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representatives of the Indian National Volunteer Guard. Outside the station the visitor entered a carriage drawn by a team of greys, and was escorted to Albert Park by the majority of those who had assembled to meet her ... Mrs. Naidu ... (*Natal Mercury*, 10 March 1924).

Naidu also addressed local women organisations such as the Indian Women's Association and had met women from the Gujarati Hindu community. Her sheer presence and political stature encouraged the Gujarati Hindu women to form a women's organization. This led to the formation of the Gujarati Mahila Mandal which held its first meeting on 2 November 1930 at the Surat Hindu Association Hall in central Durban (*Natal Mercury*, 10 March 1924; *Indian Opinion*, 14 November 1930; *Sunday Tribune Herald*, 18 August 1985). In her speeches to women Naidu highlighted the possibilities of encompassing the multiple roles of wife and mother and political autonomy. Naidu, also profoundly stressed the importance of education for girls. Education she believed was the key for women's emancipation, but warned that it was the responsibility of women to take the initiative:

[W]omanhood has many responsibilities, and one thing we should look after is the education of our children. ... we are going to start the schools ourselves, especially for our girls. We are not going to allow them to be ignorant. If our men will not provide schools we will do so... (*Indian Opinion*, 4 April 1924; *Natal Mercury*, 9 March 1924).

Naidu also visited Cape Town and lived with Abdul Hamid Gool and his wife, Cissie. Cissie Gool was a well-known political activist in the Cape in the 1930s and 1940s. She was often known as the 'Joan of Arc of District Six'. Cissie's active participation in politics began whilst at university. At the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1930 she organised a march to Parliament to protest against the Women's Enfranchisement Act which was introduced in the same year. Her maiden political speech was at this meeting where she protested against the granting of the vote to white women only. She was of the opinion that 'talk was not enough' but action was needed. Cissie subsequently led a march to Parliament and demanded to see General JBM Hertzog, then Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa. Cissie was a

strong-willed, independent and feisty woman influenced by the radical politics of the time. She was at loggerheads with her father's political philosophy which was more conciliatory, accommodationist involving dialogue, petitions and letters. Cissie believed in effecting change through a radical approach, through forceful actions of rallies and mass meetings (Srassroots April 1983). In the 1930s the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany paved the way for new political ideologies. In South Africa it gave rise to many Anti-Fascist clubs. Cissie was an outspoken critic of fascism and in 1935 was one of the founding members of the Anti-Fascist League which protested the growing threat of fascism in Europe. She was also actively involved in the formation of the National Liberation League (NLL) in December 1935, together with John Gomas, James La Guma and Goolam Gool. Cissie served as President of the NLL at its inception but resigned in 1937 and was re-elected in 1938. The NLL was anti-imperialist and worked towards non-racialism and unity among the working class. In 1938 both Cissie and her mother, Helen, were actively involved in the establishment of a League for the Enfranchisement of Non-European Women. She forged links with the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and ANC joining them in a civil disobedience campaign in 1936 (Srassroots April 1983). According to Spuy and Clowes Naidu was a 'role model for women, such as Gool' (2012: 343). Gool was highly critical of the media for their attacks on Naidu during her Cape Town visit in 1924:

In a letter to the *Cape Times*, marking this watershed moment in her life, Gool wrote:

Your virulent attack on Mrs. Naidu ... compels me, as a woman with whom Mrs. Naidu has stayed since her arrival in Cape Town and who has been to every one of her meetings without any exception, to give my impression of her speeches and the good work she has done during her visit here. You are absolutely wrong when you say that her 'motives underlying all her speeches are to raise prejudice and to damage relations of white and black in South Africa'. Let me, a non-European woman who has up to now remained silent but who has watched the trend of political affairs in South Africa, especially the relationship between white and black, give you my view of Mrs. Naidu's visit and her speeches (in van der Spuy & Clowes 2012: 343).

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On 22 May 1924, at the farewell meeting at the Durban Town Hall, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu referred to the plight facing Indian South Africans as temporary and added that these difficulties 'have no abiding place in the evolution of Africa' Naidu left South Africa on 25 May 1924. Historian Meer states:

When Sarojini Naidu arrived in South Africa she was accepted as a leader of the colonial world and she was greeted with the slogans 'Long live Gandhi, Long live *Khilafat* Movement and God is Great, *Allahu Akbar*.' These were significant slogans in 1924 when the Indian national liberation movement had achieved maximum unity and when Gandhi was addressing huge Muslim gatherings in support of *Khilafat*. In this national and international atmosphere Mrs. Naidu campaigned in South Africa for three months and *Indian Views* rightly observed that never in the history of South Africa had a visiting personality been shown so much love, affection and respect by the deprived people of this country, as had been done to Sarojini Naidu who charmed them with her oratory in both English and in Urdu (*The Leader* July 19, 1985).

Even after Naidu's departure from South Africa, she was fondly remembered and revered. When Naidu was arrested for her anti-nationalist struggle she received widespread support in South Africa. Sorabjee Rustomjee, a merchant at a well-attended meeting in Durban on 22 1930 stated, 'Not a week passes by without the imperial bureaucracy showing its nailed fist to one or more of our national leaders in India' (*The Leader*, November 15, 1985). Indian women too, were forthcoming in their support. A protest meeting was held at the Gandhi Library in Durban on 24 August 1942. Among the women present were Marie Naicker (wife of Monty Naicker), Mrs. Sushila Manilal Gandhi, Mrs. A.P. Singh, Mrs. D. Sundram, Miss K.M. Naidoo, Mrs. P. Desai, Miss Shanta Kalidas, Mrs. S. Dhupelia and Mrs Hajra Seedat. The meeting condemned the imprisonment of Kasturbai Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit and Mira Behn as 'an offence against womanhood' and called for their immediate release (*The Leader*, 27 March 1987).

Naidu visited South Africa for the second time in the early 1930s. She was part of the Second Round Table Conference which began on 12 January 1932. According to Meer:

the only person who did not seem to fit in with the White racists and the numerous ‘Sirs’ of the British was Sarojini Naidu, who had come to South Africa after spending a term of imprisonment at Poona for defying the might of the British Empire. She was the only voice of free India - the voice of the future India. It was hence natural that we were looking forward to hearing and reading her speeches. The crowded City Hall in Johannesburg on January 6, 1932, heard with rapt attention Sarojini, say to Indian South Africans that they must make their contribution to the common cause of South Africa and help to build up a new and great tradition in South Africa. Her speeches were like a fresh breeze both at Pretoria and at Kimberley. We did not approve, when Sastri at the Cape Town reception on January 12, 1932, at the City Hall said that the presence of Sarojini in the delegation required explanation and he hoped she would reveal the secret history of how she came to be part of it. Was she asked or did she ask, Sastri jokingly wanted to know. As we had expected Sarojini's reply came swiftly. ‘Mr. Sastri’, she said, ‘will be sorry that he demanded a public explanation. I only came here because my leader was not quite sure of the wisdom of the men of the East (laughter) - and insisted on being reinforced by the immemorial wisdom of the women of the East’ (*The Leader*, November 15, 1985).

It was this fiery spirit and tenacity that endeared her to men and women in the diaspora.

### **Pandita Ramabai**

For many Indian Christians in the diaspora Ramabai was an inspirational figure. Pandita represented a symbol of hope and courage. As a ‘colonial subject’, she became a ‘great transgressor’ of colonial discourse of oppression and imperialism and her strength of character was admired by both men and women afar. Govinden recalls the impact of Sarojini Naidu and Pandita Ramabai on the lives of her family:

My family was clearly identifying with the same social and religious space that Ramabai was claiming and occupying. I realise now that

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the fact that Ramabai's being seen as a great Indian Christian woman on the sub-continent would have accounted for the appeal she had among my grandparents and parents (Govinden, n.d, Personal Collection).

Govinden to some degree attributes her parents enlightened attitude towards her education to the influence of Ramabai, '... when I think of the way my mother and father, in spite of their straitened circumstances, believed in the necessity and value of my own education, at a time when it was still acceptable to keep girls 'behind', and how they accorded me opportunities for advancement, I cannot help feeling that women like Ramabai played some part in their nascent emancipation' (Govinden, n.d., Personal recollection). Ramabai efforts to retain some aspects of 'Indianness' whilst at the same time forging a Christian identity, endeared her to Christian Indians in the diaspora who themselves were faced with a similar situation. According to Govinden, 'Identifying with 'Ramabai' seems to be part of this effort to create a separate socio-religious space. Language and dress, cuisine and cultural practices were retained and fostered. As I think of it now, my grandmother dressed in a similar fashion to Ramabai, wearing only a high-necked, long-sleeved blouse with her sari; this was common among older Indian women at the time in South Africa' (Govinden, n.d, Personal Collection).

In recent years there has been a growing interest in Pandita Ramabai among feminist scholars and historians (Govinden 2008; Hansdak 2003; Kosambi 2000). Historical works have sought to acknowledge her contributions to gender issues and rightfully RE-claim her position in the Indian history (Hansdak 2003; Kosambi 2000). *Meera Kosambi's* study on Ramabai not only illuminates Ramabai's accomplishments but also her contributions to the discourses of 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism, nationalism, patriarchy. She provides a deeper insight into Pandita's complex personality and the social and political forces that shaped and defined her identity. Uma Chakravarti's (1998) study on Ramabai seeks to reclaim the voice and history of Pandita Ramabai. She argues that Pandita's scathing criticism of Brahminical patriarchy and her conversion to Christianity has largely been the reason for her marginalization in nationalist history (Chakravarti 1998). Pandita Ramabai was undoubtedly a woman ahead of her times. She has been described by scholars and historians as one of the 'makers of modern India'. A.B. Shah, argued that she was 'the greatest woman produced by modern

India and one of the greatest Indians in all history’ (Tharu & Lalita 1991: 243). She has also been described as ‘mother’ of the Indian nation. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita stated in *Women Writing in India*, Ramabai was ‘a legend in her own lifetime’ (Tharu & Lalita 1991: 243). Pandita Ramabai was born in 1858 to a learned family who belonged to the Brahmin caste. She was encouraged by her parents to acquire an education. She lost her parents and siblings at a young age but despite this personal setback, she continued with her travels around India and abroad, which played a critical role in the formation of her political and feminine consciousness (Burton 1998: 3-4). Her mastery of the Sanskrit language, so impressed her peers that she was bestowed the title of ‘Pandita’ (learned woman) and ‘Saraswati’ (the Hindu goddess of learning). She later married a man of her choice who belonged to the ‘Shudra’ caste (lower caste), almost as a matter of protest against what she viewed as hypocrisy in the changing social landscape in India. This raised eyebrows among many within her social circles. At the time of her marriage Ramabai was disillusioned with Hinduism and its practices, especially on child marriages, the dowry system and argued that collectively they contributed to women’s inferior status. Unfortunately her husband died soon after their marriage and she was left with an infant daughter, Manorama. During her travels Ramabai became more sensitised and concientised on women’s inferior status, particularly of widows. She engaged in various debates and public discussions to fight for gender equality. She became very vocal of indigenous and colonial notions of patriarchy and their attempts to ‘domesticate’ Indian women. At the age of 25 while studying in England, she converted to Christianity in the Anglican tradition. At first she was warmly embraced by her new faith but eventually her questioning of fundamental Christian doctrines (Trinity, divinity of Christ) and her refusal to submit meekly to a male hierarchy inflicted with a colonial mentality (an Indian woman could teach Indian but not British students) turned her into a threat (Govinden, n.d. Personal Recollection). Ramabai also produced several notable works. Amongst them, *The Cry of Indian Women* was published in 1883; *The High Caste Indian Woman* in 1887; *The Peoples of the United States*, which was published in 1889 (Govinden n.d. Personal Collection).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has alluded to the importance of the South African-Indian histori-



cal links and how transoceanic histories can help us understand and unravel the importance of how political, cultural and religious identities are constructed and constantly evolving. Naidu and Ramabai were iconic and 'revolutionary' women who inspired a generation of women who were cloistered in traditional patriarchy. These women, to some extent provided the fodder for the nurturing and development of women's political identities in South Africa. Govinden has raised the importance of exploring this issue, 'More critical reflection is required on the construction of the 'Indian woman' in the context of the dominant ideologies of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism in both India and colonial Natal of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century' (Govinden, n.d., Personal Recollection). Contemporary discourses on India's bilateral relationships with African countries are too focussed on the material exchanges through trade and industry. These bilateral relationships rest upon a history that is yet to be adequately understood and covered in more research. Not enough is known about the substantive contribution that India has made in preparing people in a country such as South Africa to change mind-sets and break down insular boundaries in order to cut across gender, ethnic and racial prejudices. Both Britain and India were patriarchal to the point of making women not only secondary citizens but also reduced them to the status of *persona non grata*. The fact that they were denied opportunities in education, free and open political participation as well as voting rights were an indication of what hurdles they had to cross before due recognition was given to them. The lives of Sarojini Naidu and Pandita Ramabai provide abundant information about how the challenges that they faced served not only to enhance their personal profiles in politics but to challenge entrenched prejudices through universal messages that transcended the myopic boundaries of male dominated spaces.

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