Response to Judith Brown's 'Mahatma Gandhi: 1869 – 1948: Interrogating the Practice of Politics'

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Good Afternoon and thank you all for being here. Thank you, Professor Smit, and the ASRSA team, for giving us the opportunity to respond to Professor Brown's paper.

Thank you, Professor Brown, for your very interesting and informative paper outlined and focused on 'Interrogating the Practice of Politics', related to Gandhi's life. You have succinctly mapped out the contribution that Gandhi made to public life, here in South Africa and in India in terms of his politics, leadership, and influence.

In this very brief response, we would like to focus on Gandhi's politics in South Africa. Please note that this is a collective response by Dr. Betty Govinden and myself. Dr. Govinden sends her apology as she is away at another conference in Johannesburg at present.

Prof Brown, you have raised several issues in your paper and we would like to focus on primarily five of them.

1 The Need to Contextualize Gandhi

Gandhi's life and writings will always be written many times over, in the future, with scholars trying to unravel/ dissect and learn from his life and experiments with truth. Gandhi was undoubtedly complex. To understand Gandhi, we must perceive and understand the time within which he lived, in other words, contextualize his experiences, his thoughts, actions, his political thinking, and practice. By doing this, we may unearth more of the historical and human Gandhi, his trials and tribulations in a particular period in history.

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In so doing we need to also understand what factors shaped his views on race, gender and religion, and many other aspects of his life.

With regard to race, Gandhi has been severely criticized for some of his derogatory/ ugly phrases such as 'kaffirs' and assertions about Africans – especially before 1906 –, and for directing his concerns mainly to the Indian community. This is well documented (Desai & Vahed 2015). Some of these statements, made soon after his arrival in Natal, will now be deemed, racist and reprehensible. It is not surprising that in 2016 there was agitation at the University of Legon in Ghana for the removal of a Gandhi statue. Yet these statements must be contextualized. This was a young Gandhi, who upon his arrival had little contact with Africans and was unfamiliar with their culture. Gandhi was well aware of the racial prejudice against non-whites. He wrote in the *Time of Natal*, on October 25, 1894,

> The Indians do not regret that capable natives can exercise the franchise. They would regret if it were otherwise. They, however, assert that they too, if capable, should have the right. You, in your wisdom, would not allow the Indian or the native the precious privilege under any circumstances, because they have a dark skin (*The Wire* 18 October 2016).

Decades later, Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first democratically elected President was mindful of Gandhi's derogatory statements against Africans, and noted in 1995,

> Gandhi must be forgiven those prejudices and judged in the context of the time and circumstances. We are looking here at the young Gandhi, still to become Mahatma, when he was without any human prejudice save that in favour of truth and justice (*The Wire* 18 October 2016).

Gandhi is also criticized for having had minimal interactions with African leaders of South Africa such as Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, and John Langalibalele Dube. Collectively then was Gandhi a racist? Race and racism are an important part of our histories in South Africa and on the Continent. We have grown up with a sad history of the way different race groups in South Africa are treated. The important thing to remember is

that Gandhi, coming from India and England, saw himself as claiming his rights as one who belonged to the British Empire. Initially, he focussed on the 'passenger' Indians-those who arrived unencumbered by contractual obligations- and then on the lives of the indentured. We need to remember that in these early years of 'frontier politics', there were different and separate political formations, fighting for different causes and interests. There were also Chinese indentured labourers in South Africa. But Gandhi evolved over time, both in his political ideology and his engagement with the races. Before he left South Africa, Gandhi was speaking for the rights of Africans in the country, and he continued to do so when he returned to India.

Gandhi declared in an address to the YMCA in 1908:

> South Africa would probably be a howling wilderness without the Africans … (*The Wire* 18 October 2016)
>
> If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity that all the different races commingle and produce a civilisation that perhaps the world has not yet seen (*The Wire* 18 October 2016)

Gandhi also praised Dube, an African 'of whom one should know' (*The Wire* 18 October 2016). He also comended John Tengo Jabavu for his fundraising efforts of £50,000 pounds from Africans for establishing a college for Africans (*Indian Opinion* 17 March 1906). Gandhi also supported the South African Native National Congress (later renamed the African National Congress) established in 1912. According to ES Reddy, a veteran anti-apartheid campaigner, 'He [Gandhi] never sought to impose his leadership over the African people, the sons of the soil, but presented them with the example of satyagraha as a means of deliverance from oppression (*The Wire* 18 October 2016).

Some scholars have argued that the relationship between Gandhi and his African contemporaries was superficial, that 'Gandhi had little interest in or concern with the social, economic and political circumstances of Africans in South Africa, and that he made no effort to reach out to other oppressed groups' (Desai & Vahed 2015:305). Others like Heather Hughes, a biographer of Dube, argue that the portrayal of camaraderie between Gandhi and Dube is 'born out of political expediency' and Lelyveld also states that 'such

sanctification of their imagined alliance rests on little more than the political convenience of the moment and a wispy oral tradition' (Hughes 2011: 209; Lelyveld 2011:65).

It is necessary to emphasize that, by the time Gandhi arrived in South Africa, the Africans had already inserted themselves into colonial history, and were actively shaping its course and re-making it, regardless of whoever supported or recognized it. African resistance was in motion long before Gandhi appeared on the scene (*Post* 16 September 2015). One needs to remember that the times produced highly competent and influential Black leaders in their own right.

We need to realize that the Gandhi of the first decade of the 20th Century, with his Aryanism, Orientalism, notions of civilizational hierarchy, and his adherence to separate strategies of resistance at this time, is quite different from the Gandhi of later decades, who mounted the QUIT INDIA and NON-CO-OPERATION MOVEMENTS against Great Britain. James D. Hunt, in *Gandhi and the Black People of South Africa,* states that the reality of Gandhi was that 'Gandhi began as a perfectly ordinary intelligent lawyer trying to establish a career. In time, he transformed himself into something else. It is that transformation which should interest us' (Hunt 2005: 88). Paul Landau (2017) has argued that whilst Gandhi made derogatory statements about the African community, he did not go on to elaborate on a racist ideology. Gandhi might be a much debated, even disliked personality in post-apartheid South Africa, amongst some, what is undeniable, he has always been part of the popular discourse of the country. Thus, criticism against Gandhi as being racist is due to a very selective rendering of his life and the statements that he made, and a poor understanding of the context of the times in which he lived.

2 Gandhi and the Gender Politics of *Satyagraha* in both South Africa and India

Gandhi has also been criticized for his views on women. Once again this must be seen in context. There was to some extent, an evolution in Gandhi's thoughts and writings regarding women. Gandhi's writings did not seek or attempt to overhaul the patriarchal order of the domestic sphere. In his early writings and speeches, Gandhi noted that women's natural space was the home. Gandhi was aware of the gender dynamics of Indian society, maintaining the gender status quo, and not infringing on Indian masculinities. However, the Satyagraha

campaigns in Natal and the Transvaal between 1907- and 1911, to some extent changed his attitudes toward women's political activism. In South Africa, during the first Satyagraha campaign women were denied the opportunity to participate. Gandhi and the Indian community were very much influenced by masculinized politics. During the campaign of 1913, there was a radical shift in attitudes as women were encouraged to participate, given the severity of the Searle judgment and its derogatory implications on Hindu and Muslim marriages. Gandhi's gender politics and the ideology of Satyagraha, in particular, the incorporation of women arguably, provided the impetus for women to play an important role in mass mobilization and nationalistic politics. The South African experience alerted Gandhi to the significance of women in mass struggles, and their potential as satyagrahis, a 'powerful instrument of political action' (Hiralal 2021:48)

In India during the nationalist struggle, Gandhi provided an alternative political space -the home- to compensate. The home was emphasized as a political space in which women could be active. This was noticeable in the swadeshi (self-made) movement which worked to integrate women's dharma (religious duty). In so doing Gandhi simultaneously reimagined home in the context of political activism. In South Africa, Govinden has noted how it was the 'encompassing of feminine values in the public space in passive resistance – that gave Indian women's activism in South Africa ready acceptability and approval in the Indian community. One must not dismiss the importance of the semiotics of dress … [women] clad in saris while participating in the mass marches, would have contributed in no small measure to the acceptance of Indian women who "transgressed" into the public space' (Govinden 2005:88). Was Gandhi not then juggling a compromise between the need for female agency and an embedded patriarchal system? We argue yes, he was trying to accommodate a patriarchal system but did succeed in his specific context at the time, in validating women into the public space.

3 Gandhi's Life was One of Experiments and Self-discovery

Professor Brown has alluded to Gandhi's position as an outsider in Indian politics. His time in Natal and the Transvaal had made profound changes in him. By the time he left South Africa, he was a different person in many aspects. Some may describe him as an experimenter – with ideas and practices, willing to learn from anyone whose own ideological struggles spoke to his own

concerns. He had discussions with progressive elites; he surrounded himself with Jews, Evangelical Christians, and radicals. In many ways, Gandhi became 'localized' during his stay in South Africa. While Gandhi's life and work may be described as 'experiments with truth' we should know that there were some *constants* that guided these 'experiments' – his ethics and morality.

4 Exploring Gandhi's Political Contribution to Indian Public Life, and the Far-Broader Public Environment

Clearly, Gandhi's political thoughts, ideas, and philosophy were shaped by the times he lived in, and the people he interacted with, which you have alluded to in your paper. Take, for example, the concept of *Satyagraha*, meaning 'Truth', and *agraha* meaning 'Firmness'. Gandhi embarked on Satyagraha campaigns between 1907 and 1913, to oppose discriminatory laws, and suffered the physical consequences of his actions. Through the actions and non-violent methods of the oppressed, the oppressor would realize the truth and change their ways. Some critics may question if Satyagraha was a viable strategy given its exclusiveness. For example, the Indians' Relief Act of 1914, following the 1913 Satyagraha campaign, was successful in so far as it removed the £3 tax and validated non-Christian marriages. Yet, there were still many Indian grievances that still existed such as the restrictions on inter-provincial movement, land rights, and related colonizing and later apartheid legislation.

Was Gandhi perhaps naïve to think that the status of the Indians would change as a result of the Indians' Relief Act? Was Gandhi a pragmatist? Were the concessions granted to Indians via the Smuts-Gandhi agreement, not echoes of narrow, conservative, identity politics echoing the Natal Indian Congress (NIC)? When Gandhi left South Africa, he certainly continued to have an influence on the political activists here and espoused Indo-African unity and struggles. In October 1931 in a speech at Oxford, he stated,

> … as there has been an awakening in India, even so there will be an awakening in South Africa with its vastly richer resources…. The mighty English look quite pygmies before the mighty races of Africa. They are noble savages after all, you will say. They are certainly noble, but no savages and in the course of a few years the Western nations may cease to find in Africa a dumping ground for their wares (*The Wire* 18 October 2016).

At Cambridge in November 1931 when referring to 'South African races' he declared, 'Our deliverance must mean their deliverance' (*The Wire* 18 October 2016). In an interview with Reverend S.S. Tema – a member of the ANC – on January 1, 1939, he stated, 'The Indians are a microscopic minority. They can never be a 'menace' to the white population. You, on the other hand, are the sons of the soil who are being robbed of your inheritance. You are bound to resist that. Yours is a far bigger issue. It ought not to be mixed up with that of the Indian. This does not preclude the establishment of the friendliest relations between the two races. The Indians can cooperate with you in a number of ways. They can help you by always acting on the square towards you.' (*The Wire* 18 October 2016).

He encouraged South African Indian activists such as Drs. Monty Naicker and Yusuf Dadoo, to steer towards non-racialism. Engaging with a South African Indian delegation in April 1946, he stated, 'Their slogan today is no longer merely "Asia for the Asiatics" or "Africa for the Africans", but the unity of all the exploited races of the earth. On India rests the burden of pointing the way to all the exploited races.' (*The Wire* 18 October 2016). In May 1947, he advised Naicker and Dadoo, to seek political co-operation 'among all the exploited races in South Africa can only result in mutual goodwill if it is wisely directed and based on truth and nonviolence' (*The Wire* 18 October 2016).

With regards to the NIC, it was born in the context of parochial, ethnic politics, but evolved into wider national politics. Albeit, it began in a tradition of defiance, and this intensified with the decades, as it broadened its scope of resistance, and 'defiance' and developed 'hydra-life' taking different forms and trajectories and tributaries (Boehmer 2008:65). Its gradual evolution from the 1950s into coalition politics, which culminated in the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the 1980s, is not a deviation from the broad Gandhian spirit of political resistance, even if the strategies were changing, and even if it overtook Gandhi's vision, and developed its own momentum. Equally significant, were those who came out of the Passive Resistance of the 1940s stable, like Billy Nair, who were compelled to take up the armed struggle. Billy Nair, with Mac Maharaj, who came from the Communist Party, were among those who were imprisoned on Robben Island, while others, like Phyllis Naidoo and George Ponnen, were forced into exile (Desai & Vahed 2010: xviii).

Conclusion

One should never diminish the impact of Gandhian *Satyagraha* on a century of resistance in South Africa – with all its twists and turns, its high or watershed moments, as well as its mutations and permutations. The lineage is undeniably there, no matter how much the waters are made to look muddy. With the domestication of the liberatory, historical moment that '1994' symbolized, we have also heard voices of disillusionment with the role and impact of *Satyagraha*. With cries for decolonization, at the present time, what is often forgotten is that Gandhi was at the very forefront of decolonial/anticolonial struggles, long before the era of post-colonial. Gandhi was indeed a complex figure, living in complex times, and yet formulating and actioning liberatory progressive plans and actions for the benefit of all. When we trace the trajectory of Gandhian values in South Africa, we do get a convoluted picture. The process of political resistance was an evolutionary one, and also underwent mutations at different historical moments. But what needs to be remembered is that, in the larger calculus of resistance, the legacy and lineage of resistance derived from the early 20th century endured. It endured in its oppositional spirit and import, even if the methods and means and strategies and the intensity changed at different historical moments, being governed, as they were, by different historical realities, imperatives, and a deepening consciousness of what oppositional solidarity to an increasingly intransigent apartheid regime meant and called for. These contradictions in Gandhi's life reflect how he evolved as an individual. In the words of Charles R DI Salvo, is 'the historical Gandhi, flawed like us all, an inspiring and interesting figure as he comes up from the muck? Isn't his human story an instructive story?' (Di Salvo 2016: 3).

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