

Ghandi in South Africa

The Making of a Political Reformer:

Gandhi in South Africa, 1893-1914,

By Surendra Bhana and Goolam Vahed

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Vasant Kaiwar

Department of History

Duke University

Durham, NC 27707-1910

Email: vkaiwar@duke.edu.

Bhana and Vahed have written a compact but immensely rich study of Gandhi's years in South Africa. As the title implies these were the formative years of Gandhi, the political *reformer*. Indeed, the authors quote Sushila Nayar to the effect that 'there was not a single new idea that he was inspired with after leaving South Africa'. He developed his ideas and techniques further in India but he had formulated them all in South Africa¹. As an example of the importance that Gandhi himself attached to his time in South Africa, they cite his statement that it was 'in South Africa that the Indian nation was being formed' and his claim that the Hindu-Muslim problem had been solved in South Africa (86). No doubt, for readers of Indian history, there is a sad irony to these words and Gandhi himself was haunted by his failure to forge Hindu-Muslim unity in a context where it was literally a matter of life and death. But just as one cannot hold Gandhi uniquely responsible for political successes in South Africa and India, so one cannot

¹ Sushila Nayar 1989. *Mahatma Gandhi: Satyagraha at Work* Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House p. 752, quoted in Bhana and Vahed (2005:149). In the text, number in parenthesis will refer to the latter book.

hold him solely responsible for the failures either. A biography of a great historical figure has its risks and Bhana and Vahed have done well to avoid those while still giving us a vivid picture of the South Africa that Gandhi lived and worked in, and a thoughtful, and thought-provoking study of the potentialities and limitations of Gandhi's ideas and strategies of mobilization.

It follows that Bhana and Vahed are not after some addition to the hagiographic literature on Gandhi, nor are they about to construct some sort of teleology of Gandhi's life, whereby the South African years were simply to lead to the greater glory of liberating India from British rule. The South African years are seen for what they are: a period in which Indian immigrants and settlers in Natal province of what later became the Union of South Africa tried to forge themselves into a community of political cohesion, capable of mounting limited if still significant initiatives to improve their situation in conditions of intense discrimination and racism. Thus, Bhana and Vahed wish to begin with the real-life constraints, the religious and cultural orientations of South Africa's Indian immigrants and settlers and the specific challenges that they faced as indentured labourers, post-indentured working-class settlers, merchants, professionals, preachers, and so on. Gandhi's entry into this situation in 1893 was not as a *deus ex machina* who walked in with solutions to complex problems, but as a young man with still somewhat romantic notions of the historic role of the British empire, of India's and South Africa's place in it and the potentialities it held for defining the place of India and Indians as partners in the imperial enterprise. The years Gandhi spent in South Africa were slowly but surely to peel away the layers of illusion, reveal the structural place of racism in empire particularly after 1902, and lead him from a somewhat cosmopolitan if highly conventional liberalism to a more indigenous style of ideas that still sought reform as a pre-emption of more radical solutions.

As such the argument of the book revolves around a triad of intersecting forces: *South Africa* itself as a crucial part of Britain's imperial reconstruction—thus implicitly South Africa's rising star alongside India's setting star, rhetoric notwithstanding—with the specific racialised political economy of Natal as an important subset of this reconstruction; *communal-racial relations*, whereby Indianness (or Africanness) were being constructed both as responses to white supremacist and racial doctrines in

Indianness and Africanness (as ethnic or proto-national identities) emerged against these deliberate manipulations of workplace and community relations and against the backdrop of the creation of demeaning stereotypes of both (46)².

Indeed, two issues here are of paramount importance: the extent to which European supremacy depended on this intentional accentuation and exorbitation of frictions caused by imperial expansion itself and the subaltern reproduction of these frictions by exploited and oppressed groups. If so, it would also explain the persistence of communalism within the Indian immigrant-settler populations themselves. For, as Bhana and Vahed point out, the multiplicity of religious organizations in South Africa not only reproduced their specific communal orientations as they became politicized but were by and large only able to come together for significant action occasionally either during high symbolic moments such as Gokhale's visit in 1912 or for specific short-lived movements to address the egregious overreach of the white governments, probably more to avoid social or political extinction rather than to enlarge the domain of challenges to imperial hegemony or white supremacy.

In the meantime, within colonial South Africa, as examples of the petty communalism that obtained among Indians, they point to colonial-born Hindus in Pietermaritzburg applying for trade licences in part because they resented Muslim traders in the city and the Indian Farmers Association in 1909 boycotting the Grey Street Mosque Indian market because Muslim traders dominated it (86). There was a good deal of name calling and sheer lack of common courtesy (85,144), barely balanced, it would seem by, individuals reaching across communal boundaries. This is not the place to debate whether the white rulers of South Africa deliberately set about creating communal categories and inflaming them for short-term advantages; Bhana and Vahed don't vouchsafe much information on this issue. There is some considerable evidence that the British colonialists did so in India just as they inflamed relations between Indians and Africans in South Africa.

² Wolf, Eric 1982. *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp.381ff., has a marvellous study of this, and goes some way to debunk the notion that political economy cannot supply a critical understand of identity issues.

Perhaps, imperial strategies were context driven and in South Africa there was no need deliberately to sharpen communal divisions; Indians themselves could be relied upon to do so arriving as they did from an intensely and increasingly polarised subcontinent. What this book does show through examples is the utter absurdity of ascriptive identity politics faced with the rather larger challenges of imperialism and colonialism.

Undoubtedly these were great challenges that political organizers would have to face, and the extent to which they were able to work to overcome these obstacles would in itself signify the range and depth of the political transformation they sought to bring about. This is where Bhana and Vahed throw down the gauntlet to the hagiographers of Gandhi. It is not the saintly Gandhi striding effortlessly over the historical landscape they seek to present us with. Rather it is the Gandhi who invoked 'Indianness' as a strategic necessity (151) while perhaps hoping to overcome communal and caste narrowness through the education provided by uniting for disciplined and ethical action. No doubt, he was hamstrung both by the introversion of the various religious and sectarian groups of Indian immigrants and settlers and the negative class consciousness of the middle-class components. In the aftermath of the *satyagraha* of 1913-1914, Gandhi was to admonish the latter not to succumb to provincialism, to get rid of ideas of high and low, and to stop calling indentured labourers 'colchas'. At the same time, he made his characteristic call to workers to get rid of dirty ways, drop addiction to alcohol and generally get respectable (131). This is the sort of thing that would infuriate Ambedkar later, and was the subject of parody in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*.

Bhana and Vahed note that Gandhi was indefatigable not only in insisting that India was a nation composed of many religious groups, a 'single nation of brothers' as he put it (148), that a composite nationalism was possible but also in publicly challenging those like Shankaranand who denigrated Islam (67). This was the principled thing to do and Gandhi never shied away from his insistence on 'interfaith harmony'. He seemed to view religion not so much in terms of its formal practices but as a kind of service to humanity (93). This is a very noble ideal indeed, and Gandhi should be remembered for it, but one wonders whether there was not also a privileging of the Hindu ethos as a kind of organic outgrowth of Indian civilisation which other religions could aspire to but never really in equal measure. Did

Gandhi see people as somehow already/always preconstituted by their faith, so that they could develop civil and spiritual connections with each other as representatives (in themselves) of their faith? In South Africa, where Indians were considered outsiders regardless of their faith, such an idea may not have caused problems. However, in India where Hinduism constituted a powerful strain within Indian nationalism and a Hindu xenology was developing that exoticised and excluded Muslims from the nation proper, such a position, however implicit and subtle, could be hugely more damaging in the symbolic and political domains.

Be that as it may, two issues that preoccupied Indians in South Africa in the early 1910s were the £3 tax on former indentured-labour immigrants and the non-recognition of Hindu and Muslim marriages contracted in India as a result of the Searle decision of March 1913. The *satyagraha* that Gandhi launched in 1913 reveals, according to Bhana and Vahed, Gandhi's 'creative use of opportunities as they arose' and his 'boldness and maturity as a leader' (112). This is something of a mixed compliment for, as they also show, Gandhi had come under some criticism for not taking up the tax issue earlier, qualifying it as 'the cause of the helpless and the dumb' (115). What had changed Gandhi's mind perhaps was the mass strike among indentured Indians in Natal and, of course, the Searle decision itself. Did Gandhi co-opt the energies of the strikers to push through an agenda that while benefiting the workers none the less also benefited middle-class immigrants? Was it also designed to activate Indians at home on behalf of their émigré compatriots? One cannot, despite the success of this movement, avoid the suspicion that Gandhi's movement—like the ones he was to launch in India later—was part of a strategy of containment and redirection. Bhana and Vahed show the energy and leadership that Indian workers had shown on their own behalf (125, 142). Was Gandhi effectively trying to channel this energy to bring Indian workers into line with the rather more conservative agenda of the Natal Indian Congress and the Natal Indian Association? Further, one might wonder to what extent the success of the *satyagraha* in having the tax repealed and the Searle decision reversed (129) also, ironically, institutionalized Indians in a subordinate position. Certainly the energy, conviction, and organizational brilliance put into the *satyagraha* of 1913-1914 showed Gandhi's ability to translate abstract concepts into concrete action even as that action itself

curtailed further possibilities. Perhaps this view is strengthened by Gandhi's own view that Indians should only 'eat' according to their capacity and await the opportunities of the future that would 'far exceed the present one' (130). In this context, the benefits of *padayatra*, slow motion by foot, in raising consciousness and building unity do need to be critically assessed. Bhana and Vahed are suggestive rather than explicit about the limitations of Gandhi's overall achievement even as they laud his organizational capacity. Perhaps this could be said of the results of his leadership in India as well.

Undoubtedly the most tragic legacy of Gandhi's time in South Africa was his attitude towards Africans. Gandhi sought at least a notional equality for Indians and Europeans, but felt no compulsion to demand the same for Africans. While *Indian Opinion* did publish on African issues from about 1910 onwards, Bhana and Vahed note that Africans and African life remained largely hidden to Gandhi. His autobiography, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, published as a book in 1928 fails to mention a single South African leader by name (152). Still, Bhana and Vahed caution against considering Gandhi a racist but it is unclear what to make of this assertion. After all, in response to critics who lambasted him for his reliance on whites like Polak, Kallenbach and Albert West, Gandhi insisted that 'personal qualities were superior to religious, ethnic and racial considerations' when judging individuals (149). But, apparently this was not a courtesy Gandhi was prepared to extend to Africans. Further, Bhana and Vahed themselves point out that the system of White domination required that Indians be treated as a 'separate entity' to discourage their 'uniting politically' with Africans (39). If this is so, Indianness is the middle term of a descending hierarchy of which Africanness was the bottom. Subaltern reproduction of elite categories, fragments of the master discourse so to speak, simply aided in cementing the structure of empire and later apartheid itself. One should not shy away from the implications of this sort of subaltern register of master-race political doctrines. That Gandhi should have walked into this trap is egregious to say the least.

One of the reasons for Gandhi's stated opposition to including Africans in his movement is that Africans had not yet reached a level where they could understand the rigours of *satyagraha*. One would have to doubt such a proposition: after all, non-violent (if not passive) resistance to vastly superior ruling-class force has often been a weapon of the weak, and as I

have shown elsewhere Gandhi was not always opposed to the principled exercise of force in defence of one's honour³. The philosophical principles of *satyagraha* may not have been immediately accessible to Africans, as any alien discourse based on unfamiliar categories would have been, but to suggest that this was an adequate reason for exclusion is shocking. The only conceivable reason would be that Indians—including Gandhi—almost preferred their subordinate position in empire (which would allow them to stay in South Africa with minimal civil rights) to uniting with Africans if it meant that they along with their imperial masters might at some point be asked to leave. This is a discomfiting conclusion to draw about someone who has become a demigod to millions and whom the ANC in a magnanimous gesture has decided to include as a progenitor of the struggle against apartheid – a richly ironic conclusion to a troubled period of history.

Bhana and Vahed write with the sure touch of accomplished historians, apparently unafraid to tackle controversial themes. Perhaps they will take up a more exhaustive study of Indian-African relations and Gandhi's instrumentalisation of Indianness in due course. If it achieves the quality and distinction of the present volume it will be a major addition to our stock of political knowledge.

³ Kaiwar, Vasant. 'Philosophy and Politics in the Hind Swaraj of Mohandas Gandhi', talk given at a symposium on the Ideas and Philosophies of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi: Contrasting with the Current Violent Ways of Conflict Resolution on April 1, 2005 at North Carolina Central University.