

Historical parallels and convergences between India and South Africa

Isabel Hofmeyr and Michelle Williams (eds), *South Africa and India: Shaping the Global South*

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The context of the volume of collected essays, *South Africa and India: Shaping the Global South*, is the increasing historiographical focus on the Indian Ocean and the migration of ideas and people across national boundaries. This falls within a growing recognition of the importance of the “Global South” in terms of its economic and political power. Two countries falling within this ambit are South Africa and India. Both countries share much in common historically – the movement of Indian indentured labour, the political activism of Gandhi and struggles for independence. In the present, too, they face common challenges, the most significant of which is the “deepening” of democracy. India – the largest democracy in the world – and South Africa – whose largely peaceful transition to democracy in 1994 has been much lauded – are still countries where economic power is held in the hands of the elites and most citizens are unable to participate effectively in the political power of the state that extends beyond the exercise of the franchise. The volume then is divided into two sections – one addressing the “Historical Connections” between South Africa and India and the other the “Socio-Political Comparisons”.

Historically, the figure of M.K. Gandhi looms large as one who literally personifies the connections between the two. Isabel Hofmeyr’s chapter uses Gandhi’s printing press as a means of interrogating the print culture that connected the various port cities of the Indian Ocean, allowing for the formation of a “cosmopolitan” identity. Gandhi’s newspaper *Indian Opinion* was the means by which he put into effect his political and social ideology. The newspaper advocated social reform and the labour involved in the actual printing of it which involved all at the Phoenix Settlement, regardless of social distinction, was a means of practicing social equality as well as inculcating the “discipline” of work (p 32). Gandhi also envisaged a cosmopolitan, invested reader and *Indian Opinion* printed articles dealing with both India and South Africa, advertised books published around the Indian Ocean and contained “travel writing” – the descriptions of various Indian Ocean ports by visiting luminaries (p 34). At the same time, Hofmeyr shows the limits of Gandhi’s vision of cosmopolitanism – the work of the Zulu women involved in the press was never acknowledged.

The limits of Gandhi’s vision of social and political equality are further explored in Pradip Datta’s chapter on the Anglo-Boer War and its reception in India. Gandhi’s participation in the war was designed to show his loyalty to Britain and marked the position of him – and South African Indians – as “imperial subjects” where they could claim a place of equality within the empire, if not the nation (pp 62–63). Gandhi’s view of civilisation was one

where he accepted British “material” superiority – if not “moral” superiority – and a demonstration of “civilisation” was necessary to be accorded equality (p 69). The Anglo-Boer War provided that opportunity. Simultaneously, he held onto the prevailing racial and class hierarchies evident under British imperialism which prevented the forging of alliances across racial and national boundaries. His view was however not the sole perception, and he was not always in control of the way in which the war was received in India.

Communication technology and the level of newspaper reportage in the early twentieth century meant that the Anglo-Boer War made a large impact on the consciousness of Indians on the subcontinent, dividing them in their support of the British. Their view of the Boers was an indecisive one – on the one hand both shared the experience of British imperialism against which the Boers were fighting. The harsh actions of the British during the war, especially the internment of Boer women and children in concentration camps, enhanced this sentiment. Yet, Boer discriminatory actions against Indians in South Africa meant that they were not solely figures of identification. Datta shows however that, while Indians questioned the portrayal of the Boers by the British as “uncivilised”, they did not do the same for derogatory stereotypes of Africans (p 80). The imperial subject then, while losing much of its impetus during the Anglo-Boer War, retains an insidious hold today in the perception of distinctions between nations considered to have varying degrees of “civilisation” despite the theoretical equality between them (p 81). This theme continues in Pamila Gupta’s discussion of the migration of Goans to the Portuguese colony of Mozambique where, as members of a colonised underclass in Goa in relation to the white Portuguese colonisers, they became an elite in East Africa due to the racial hierarchies prevalent in the early twentieth century. Their uncertain position mirrored that of the Indian elite represented by Gandhi – they were colonised elites who were nonetheless excluded from the higher echelons of colonial power.

Gandhi’s influence was not solely confined to the Indian elites however. Goolam Vahed’s chapter on the influence of Gandhian philosophy on the South African Indian political activist, Monty Naicker, demonstrates this. The rise of Monty Naicker and Yusuf Dadoo to leadership positions within the South African Indian Congress marked a new radical phase in Indian nationalist politics in South Africa. Initial resistance by the NIC, the ANC and the CPSA in South Africa, evident in the passive resistance campaign and the Defiance Campaign of 1952, were marked by the principles of non-violence. Gandhian philosophy shaped Monty Naicker’s political activism, despite their decreasing efficacy in mid-twentieth century South Africa leading to the move to the formation of MK and the use of violent resistance, considered to be a necessary evil, and a break with Gandhian protest politics.

According to Crain Soudien, however, Gandhi’s political and social philosophy still remains a viable alternative in the present by offering an alternative vision of modernity to the dominant Western one. Gandhi’s rejection of history “as teleological tale of progress” (p 134) and his

emphasis on “sacrifice and suffering” (p 133) in contrast to the aggressive nature of colonialism and thus, its resisters, offers a more ethical foundation for a modernity that recognises the complex relations between people and groups, one that is not simply based on force and violence but acknowledges alternative indigenous traditions and beliefs.

The post-colonial period in India and the post-apartheid period in South Africa which have so effectively embraced Enlightenment ideals are nevertheless faced with the challenge of creating full equality. Patrick Heller argues that in both countries, elites led the transition to democracy and retain their hold on political and economic power. While they enjoy popular support and have managed to forge a coherent nation from disparate groups, “effective democracy” has not been created (pp 158–159). Ordinary citizens, due to ineffective local government and a weakened civil society, have insufficient access to national government and political influence is largely exercised by those who hold power. Claire Benit-Gbaffou and Stephanie Tawa Lama-Rewal see a possible solution as coming from local government. Local government allows for the shift of power away from central authority and gives citizens a means of participating democratically that is deeper than simply voting for national government. Two different roles of local government are evident in India and South Africa – in India local government was a means of protecting minorities by reserving positions for women and the lower castes whereas in South Africa it was a means of transformation and representation of a previously disenfranchised majority. Yet there has been insufficient local participation due, in India, to a recalcitrant bureaucracy and, in South Africa, the perception of the role of local government as being merely agents of service delivery with ultimate authority stemming from the centralised national government. This lack of effective local government has meant that democratic participation has been confined to the elites.

Michelle Williams focuses on the efficacy of a strengthened civil society as advocated by the South African Communist Party and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in the southern Indian state of Kerala. Both parties have evolved a vision of social democracy different from the monolithic authoritarian state envisaged under Communism and embodied in the USSR. Unsurprisingly, this re-thinking of socialism has come about as the result of the fall of the USSR. Both argue for the devolution of the power of central government in the form of a strengthened civil society and local government to allow for the effective participation of subordinate classes.

The similarities between India and South Africa are further expounded in Phil Bonner’s chapter on migrant labour with each providing lessons for the other. The system of migrant labour existed in both countries yet, in India, it did not involve state repression and the apparatus of coercion and control as was the case in South Africa. Moreover in India family structures remained largely intact. Thus, Bonner argues for a new historiography where Indian migrant literature can take into account the impact of migrant labour on the urban youth and the family as well as migrant culture. Simultaneously, South African literature needs to consider the possible pre-

colonial history of migrant labour, detribalisation “and the purported social conditions of labour migrancy” (p 242).

These similarities highlight the question of South African “exceptionalism” that is further expounded upon by Jonathan Hyslop’s discussion on the steamship empire of the Indian Ocean world. Here, he draws parallels between the collective white identity of organised British sailors striving to protect their jobs against the incursions of African and Asian sailors and that of white miners in the South African gold mining industry. Yet Hyslop also highlights the agency of these black sailors which they were able to exercise despite the vast network of imperial domination within which they laboured.

South Africa and India: Shaping the Global South offers a fascinating look at the parallels between these two countries, drawing upon a vast array of examples, both historical and contemporary. The many convergences suggest the common contemporary challenges facing both countries. As such it is a volume that while highlighting historical ties, also offers a re-thinking of issues that are relevant today and a means of shaping the future. As Crain Soudien points out, the past is a construct which then leaves the future open to change.

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