Gandhi South African "Indian" Cultural and Religious Orientation

Surendra Bhana and Goolam Vahed, ***The Making of a Political Reformer: Gandhi in South Africa, 1893-1914***
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During October 1998 Professor Bhana informed me that he would be spending four to five months in South Africa researching the cultural and religious dimensions of the Indian experience up to 1914, insofar as they

relate to identity formation. This book is the fruit of this labour and reflects on the rigorous scholarship of University of Kansas based Professor Surendra Bhana and Associate Professor Goolam Vahed of the University of Kwazulu-Natal.

There have been numerous studies on Mahatma Gandhi and his South African experience, but the uniqueness of this book is that it is the first to explore how Gandhi utilised South African "Indian" cultural and religious orientation in the making of his social and political reformation during his stay in South Africa.

The authors explore how Gandhi redefined the cultural and religious orientation of his South African followers in political identity formation and mobilisation as a lever against local white domination, and more importantly, to win British protection for this Indian community as British subjects. These historians show how Gandhi's strategy involved "Indianness", denoting otherness and separateness from the indigenous African co-oppressed group, thereby maintaining the link with the British Empire as British subjects and the connection with India as Indian migrants to South Africa. This India(n) connection, read in conjunction with another book edited by Surendra Bhana and Kusum K. Bhoola, *Introducing South Africa or dialogue of two friends by an Indian, 1911* (Local History Museums and the Co-editors, Durban, 2005) provides a good understanding of the day-to-day cultural, social and political issues facing this community during Gandhi's stay in South Africa. This latter work is a 21-part dialogue between one Udayshankar, who had been in Durban for six years, and his school-friend Manharram, who had just arrived in Durban as a new immigrant. This dialogue appeared in Gujarati in the newsletter, *Indian Opinion*, of 1911.

The Gandhi study, comprising six chapters, focuses heavily on two newspaper sources. These are *Indian Opinion* and *African Chronicle*, as (according to Bhana and Vahed) South African archival sources do not contain much material on the culture and religion of Indians during that period.

Chapter 1, entitled "Gandhi, Africans and Indians in colonial Natal", illustrates how Natal's political economy shaped African and Indian attitudes towards each other. These communities were in conflict and competition, which was exploited by their white overseers. Gandhi's approach was based on "Indianness", creating alliances and cultivating the leadership of various Indian organisations across language, religious and caste divisions.

In Chapters 2 and 3, the Muslim and Hindu religious and cultural dimensions are examined, showing how Gandhi redefined and used it to suit his political objectives. His association with their religious and cultural bodies and organisations is discussed as well. To my delight, mention is made of my mother, Hawa Bemath (spelled Bomat in this study – p 75), residing in Amerspoort (now known as Amersfoort) and who made *khatam* (completion) of the Koran. My sister has mentioned that our mother completed recitation of the Koran at age five and her teacher had this mentioned in *Indian Opinion*. Professor Bhana informed me that according to his notes, this item was mentioned in Gujarati in the issue dated 2 July 1910, and that my mother completed the Koran Sharif "last Sunday", 26 June 1910. In nearby Volksrust lived my mother's uncle A.M. Badat. He rendered great service during the strike of 1913.

Chapter 4, "Gandhi and Community Resources, 1906-1912", pays attention to how Gandhi shaped the cultural and religious orientation to serve his political ends. According to the authors, Gandhi's reliance on these cultural and religious resources of Indians was not sufficient to bridge the divisions in his movement – divisions further aggravated by the blurring between cultural and political lines – though he continued to utilise these resources in embarking on a course of mass participation, which the authors narrate in Chapter 5, "The Satyagraha Campaign, 1913-1914". In this chapter, Bhana and Vahed examine how Gandhi placed the issue of the legality of Indian marriages, the £3 tax, and Indian immigration restrictions – issues at the heart of his Satyagraha campaign. The politically astute Gandhi used even the cultural symbols of the British Empire to advance his cause, for example by making the protectors of the Empire to stand up with his followers in singing *God save the King* at a political rally and showing loyalty as British subjects (see Richard Attenborough's film, *Gandhi*)! The authors elaborate on differing responses to Gandhi's campaign by individuals and organisations – some opposing it and others not (pp 131-132).

The concluding chapter outlines characteristics of migrants during their early formative years in South Africa, such as links with India, the promotion of traditional values, and identification with political movements on the Indian subcontinent, as elaborated in *Indian Opinion* and *African Chronicle*. These political lessons learned in trying to harness the ethnic, caste, religious and cultural make-up of the Indian community were used by Gandhi to achieve his political objective and ideals. He carried these ideas and political objectives, honed in South Africa, over to India and the struggle against British domination. The authors cover Gandhi's legacy to South Africa, the reason why he

promoted "Indianness" as a political strategy *vis-à-vis* the majority African group and "to him the best way to make a case for Indian rights" (p 151). They connect Gandhi to Nelson Mandela, the present-day concerns about Indian attitudes to other race groups and identity formation in a new democratic South Africa. Gandhi's legacy inspired successive generations of activists in South Africa in particular and Africa's struggle against colonialism in general.

The book contains a set of photographs of community leaders, mosques and temples of the period. It has appendices listing organisations, the Mehfil Saiful Islam Annual Report and the Trust Deed of Mehafil Eslam Mota-Varachha, as well as a useful bibliography and index. Bhana and Vahed are to be commended for this extensively researched book (as reflected in the detailed endnotes to each chapter). It is an interesting study as it can be viewed from varying perspectives, such as the study of the Indian diaspora in South Africa; of Gandhi and the emergence of Satyagraha; and studies of political mobilisation and leadership, according to historian Vinay Lal. It also provides insight into the cultural and religious practices of Muslims and Hindus during that period.

In *Power, Politics, and the African Condition – Collected Essays of Ali A. Mazrui*, edited by R.L. Ostergard and others (Africa World Press, 2004, p 18), Professor Ali A. Mazrui draws interesting parallels between Gandhi and Ayatollah Khomeini. Both leaders mobilised cultural and religious symbols to move the hearts of their compatriots against what they regarded as unjust systems. Mazrui argues that the thousands of unarmed people pouring into the streets of Teheran during the Iranian revolution "was also the most impressive case of passive resistance since Mahatma Gandhi inspired the masses of India to rebel against the British Raj".

Gandhi's legacy lives on in present-day South Africa and the relationship between culture and religion, for example in the erection of a three-legged cauldron in 2006 outside the Hamidia Mosque in Newtown. The cauldron is similar to the one that Gandhi and his 3 000 followers, including Muslims, Hindus and Christians, used to burn their identity documents in August 1908. This memorial is part of the Sunday Times Newspaper Heritage Project, marking the newspaper's centenary.

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