

M.H. NAZAR, GANĀHI AND THE INDIAN OPINION

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At the end of July 1977 Professor James Hunt of Shaw University discovered in the Sarvodaya Library at Phoenix Settlement, Natal, a notebook of letters written by Mansukhlal Hiralal Nazar (1862—1906). The original copies of the letters were retained while the carbon duplicates were sent to the correspondents. The 95 page notebook (page 21 is missing) consists of sixty-one letters written by Nazar between 20 September 1902 and 18 June 1903. Thirty-three of the letters were written in Gujarati and the balance in English. They show a good command of both the languages. The bulk of these letters, namely thirty-six, were written to Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869—1948).*

Their importance is to be measured both in terms of the position Nazar held and their contents. The author was jointly with R.K. Khan the secretary of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) founded in May 1894, and in this position he kept himself informed about all matters that concerned Indians in South Africa, and in which the NIC might play a role. Nazar was also the first editor of the *Indian Opinion*, and his letters after March 1903 are increasingly concerned with the editing and publishing of the weekly journal. This article will deal mainly with his role as editor for the period immediately before and after the issuance of the first number of the *Indian Opinion* on 4 June 1903.

Who was Mansukhlal Hiralal Nazar? Little is known about him. He is silent about his personal life in his own letters. Much of the information on hand is provided by the memorial written by Gandhi at the time of the editor's premature death on 20 January 1906. Nazar, Gandhi tells us, probably came from a long line of public servants. His ancestors must have served the Mogul emperors who ruled in India between the 16th and 18th centuries, as the name "Nazar" suggests. His father, Hiralal Nazar, was a civil engineer in the employ of the Western presidency in Bombay, and was considered important enough to be allowed to know the secret defences of the fortress at Bombay.¹

Although Nazar was endowed with considerable intelligence, he never quite felt committed enough to complete his studies. After passing his matriculation with distinction in a Bombay school, he entered the Elphinstone College, but left without completing his studies. Nazar studied medicine sometime thereafter for four years at the Grant Medical College, but again did not complete his studies. He displayed a "restless turn of mind", in Gandhi's words. During his university days he championed university reform. He founded the Undergraduate Association to this

*Letters addressed to Desai (one in Gujarati) Gandhi (eight in Gujarati and twenty-eight in English), Hajee Habib (one in Gujarati), Atmaram Maharaj (all eighteen in Gujarati), Mohanlal (four in Gujarati), and Gavri Shanker (one in Gujarati).

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end, and drafted numerous memorials on university reform for the government's consideration.²

Nazar's interest lay in political causes. He identified himself with the school of thought of Dadabhai Naoroji, a prominent Indian nationalist, which believed that India's freedom could come from a combination of internal reforms and external pressures. Education for Nazar, said Gandhi in his memorial, "was not to be used as a means for obtaining positions nor was it to be divorced from commerce". It was for this reason, in Gandhi's consideration, that Nazar and his brothers emigrated to England where they "threw themselves into commercial strife with great energy". Even in London, Nazar was "a politician first and everything else afterwards". Among the things he did there was his work as an unpaid journalist with the *Advocate of India*, which was to stand him in good stead in Natal.³

Nazar apparently did not do well in his commercial ventures. He decided to come to Natal leaving behind his kinsmen to operate Nazar Brothers of London. Almost from the time he landed in Durban he became involved in Natal politics. He arrived at a time when the agitation against Indian immigration in Natal was at its height. Nazar "rendered splendid help to the community during the Demonstration crisis" of 1896, Gandhi recorded in the Second Report of the NIC. Having thus shown his inclination and capacity for selfless public work, Nazar was chosen by the NIC as its delegate to watch Indian interests at the conference of colonial prime ministers scheduled to meet Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain in London in 1897. His work in London is gratefully recorded by the NIC secretary in his report: "Mr. Nazar went to England without any remuneration being paid for his services. The Congress was to pay his out-of-pocket expenses only. He remained in London in connection with his work beyond the expected time on the advice of the gentlemen whor. he was specially requested to consult in everything he did and whose advise he was to be guided by." He made important contacts in London.⁴

It is hardly surprising that Nazar should volunteer to serve in the Indian Ambulance Corps organised by Gandhi at the time of the Anglo-Boer War. Little is known about his means of livelihood. He ran a business concern at 14 Mercury Lane, Durban. The *Natal Almanac and Register* for 1903 to 1905 lists him as being a "solicitor". If he was one, it is strange that Gandhi's memorial tribute should say nothing about it. Whatever his business, it could hardly have been a flourishing one, if, as he wrote to Gandhi in May 1903, he had earned £2 for that month.⁵

This is the man who became the secretary of the NIC, and later also the first editor of the *Indian Opinion*. No details exist as to the circumstances in which he was appointed to these positions. But it is clear that he enjoyed Gandhi's confidence. "His most imperishable work", Gandhi wrote in his tribute to Nazar, "was all done behind the scenes, and it consisted in nourishing the tender plant of mutual understanding between the two communities in South Africa." Gandhi ranked him as a "politician of a very high order". He added further, "There was nothing of the agitator about him, and while he championed the cause of the Indians, he also pointed out their responsibilities."⁶

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. III (1898-1903), pp. 107-108.

5. *Indian Opinion*, 27-1-1906, Nazar to Gandhi (English), 22-5-1903; *Natal Almanac and Register*, 1903-1905.

6. *Indian Opinion*, 27-1-1906.

Nazar wrote letters to Gandhi and others in his dual capacities as NIC secretary and editor. The first thirty letters up to about the end of March 1903 are concerned with matters incidental to his duties as secretary of the political organisation. Much of it is routine business coordination with other persons, presumably also officials of the organisation. The letters deal with, among others, the following things: preparing a memorial to send to England to coincide with Gandhi's possible trip there (Gandhi was at this time in India); advising about the suitability of an organisation's name; requesting the sectional breakdown of an association; inquiring the whereabouts of persons whose permits he had obtained; chiding against unnecessary spending; sending and receiving newspaper cuttings, reports, gazettes, committee rules and notices of meetings; and pontificating about public officials' need to work harmoniously.⁷

The NIC secretary was a cautious man who gave very little away of himself. He was, one feels, deliberately cryptic when discussing delicate matters. In a letter marked "confidential", for instance, he did not identify the person who appears to have offended him, one who apparently did not give due weight to Nazar's seven years of public work. He promised to take up the matter when Gandhi returned, at which time there would be fireworks. A detailed account of such an incident would have given us a good picture of the workings of the NIC.⁸ Another example is his reference to "scheming all around" and the "disgusting" ways of "some of our honourable friends ...", without identifying the culprits.⁹ On another occasion he wrote about having led a deputation to Chamberlain, then in Pietermaritzburg, but gives absolutely no other details.¹⁰

Just how much initiative Nazar took in drafting memorials, and doing other important things, is not clear. In some matters he seemed to rely heavily on Gandhi, for example, his request to give him points of argument on Vryheid's refusal to grant Indians trading licences so that he might incorporate them in a letter to the Colonial Office.¹¹ In other matters, he made his points strongly. He urged Gandhi, to take one example, to go to London to present the Indian case soon after the Indian barrister returned to South Africa in December 1902.¹² On the matter of whether the medals, given by the British government for their service in the Indian Ambulance Corps should be accepted, Nazar advised that they should do so with the reminder that Indians were "more eager to be recognised as citizens of the Empire than to have such recognition as medals ..."¹³

Nazar's letters after April 1903 increasingly make references to the forthcoming publication of the *Indian Opinion*. Before the letters are discussed, it is necessary to

7. Nazar to Atmaram Maharaj (Gujarati), 20-9-1902; Nazar to Hajee Habib (Gujarati), 20-9-1902; Nazar to Mohanlal (Gujarati), 24-9-1902; Nazar to Atmaram Maharaj (Gujarati), 24-9-1902; Nazar to Mohanlal (Gujarati), 2-10-1902; Nazar to Atmaram Maharaj (Gujarati), 29-10-1902, 30-10-1902, 22-10-1903, 6-3-1903; Nazar to Mohanlal (Gujarati), 21-10-1902; Nazar to Gandhi (Gujarati), 26-2-1903, 13-3-1903.
8. Nazar to Atmaram Maharaj (Gujarati), 22-10-1902.
9. Nazar to Gandhi (English), 2-4-1903.
10. Nazar to Atmaram Maharaj (Gujarati), 31-12-1902; for petition to Chamberlain *vide Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. III (1898-1903), pp. 265-69.
11. Nazar to Gandhi (Gujarati), 13-3-1903, 23-3-1903; Nazar to Gandhi (English), 2-4-1903.
12. Nazar to Gandhi (Gujarati), 18-2-1903, 21-2-1903; Nazar to Atmaram Maharaj (Gujarati), 6-3-1903, 13-3-1903.
13. Nazar to Gandhi (English), 2-4-1903, (Gujarati), 7-5-1903.

give some background into the publication of this journal. It was launched by Madanjit Vyavaharik (popularly known as Madanjit), owner of the International Printing Press in consultation with Gandhi and Nazar. All of them no doubt recognised the need for such a newspaper. Gandhi had visited newspaper editors on his recent trip to India, and he recognised the fact that a local newspaper could readily make available information to them, and in that way enlist their support. He reflected upon the importance of the *Indian Opinion* in *Satyagraha in South Africa*: "I believe that a struggle which chiefly relies upon internal strength can be carried on without a newspaper, but it is also my experience that we could not perhaps have educated the local community, nor kept Indians all over the world in touch with the course of events in South Africa in any other way, with the same ease and success as through *Indian Opinion*, which therefore was certainly a most useful and potent weapon in our struggle."¹⁴

It is known that the paper was in financial difficulties from the beginning, and that Gandhi ended up paying a great deal of money out of his own pocket to see its continuance. He recalls having to remit at one stage £75 each month to help pay its running expenses. It is also known that Gandhi carried the burden of writing the editorial columns as Nazar, even as the official albeit non-salaried editor, did not dare, in Gandhi's words, to "venture to write on intricate South African problems" as long as Gandhi was there.¹⁵ What do Nazar's letters show?

The editor's letters between April and June 1903 reflect an understandable anxiety about the newspaper coming out on time given the limited resources at his disposal. There was the question about obtaining a press licence. True, this was Madanjit's job, but Nazar was sorely disappointed about the owner's managerial capabilities. Madanjit worked very hard, Nazar admitted, but "his notions of his responsibilities as a printer, (were) very crude and elastic".¹⁶

Nazar constantly worried about receiving relevant newspaper cuttings, reports, articles (mainly from Gandhi), and notes from correspondents. His difficulty of coordinating in the midst of many uncertainties is reflected in the number of times he wrongly projected the date of the first number: 13 May, 14 May, 27 May, 28 May. He did finally forecast the correct date of 4 June. Nazar had the added burden of reproducing the newspaper in four languages, and he was personally responsible for the translations in at least one, namely Gujarati. He believed that something of the spirit of the original articles had to go into the translated versions, and some of the translators were not very bright or over enthusiastic. There was "grumbling" among the hard-pressed staff, and "our folks" were not helping much "by prejudicing" the workers. He wrote to Gandhi on 19 May, "Unless the *whole* time is devoted to the work, evenings included, I don't see how the paper can be run. Where then will be the time to collect news etc.?"¹⁷

It is true that Nazar relied heavily on Gandhi for editorials and articles. On one

14. Bridgelal Pachai, *The History of the "Indian Opinion", 1903-1914* (Archives Year Book for South African History, 1961, p. 28); M.K.Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Publishing House, 1928, p. 142; M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1957, pp. 285-86; *Collected Works*, vol. III (1898-1903), p. XIII.

15. Gandhi, *Autobiography*, p. 285.

16. Nazar to Gandhi (English), 9-4-1903.

17. Nazar to Gandhi (Gujarati), 7-5-1903, 9-5-1903, 11-5-1903, (English), 14-5-1903, 16-5-1903, 19-5-1903, 28-5-1903, 12-5-1903, 26-5-1903, 22-5-1903.

occasion he suggested editorials on certain topics. Two days later he quickly added that the suggested editorials had to come "from you".¹⁸ He hardly made, it seems, a major decision without consulting Gandhi, and repeatedly urged him to supply him with articles so that he could build up a "reserve" for use in case of emergencies. Do all your writing on Sunday, he urged Gandhi then in the Transvaal, and mail them in time for him to receive the articles or editorials by Tuesday or Wednesday. Nazar apparently had great faith in Gandhi's familiarity with the issues of their struggle, his legal abilities, and the facility with which he drafted letters, memorials, editorials, and articles.¹⁹

But Nazar did not shrink from making useful suggestions on many things, which, as it turned out in numerous cases, were adopted. For instance, he suggested that the first number of the *Indian Opinion* be sent to friends in England and India together with a letter explaining the cause for which it was launched, and the support it enjoyed among the Indian leadership.²⁰ On another occasion, he suggested a way of maintaining inexpensively contact through Reuter with overseas friends, associations, and newspapers, among them: Sir M.M. Bhownaggee, M.P. for Bethnal Green, England, 1895—1906, Dadabhai Naoroji, Sir William Wedderburn, chairman of the Indian Parliamentary Committee, and lastly the East Indian Association.²¹ And on more than one occasion Nazar suggested editorials and articles on issues and events that were published in the journal's first number.²² Gandhi could hardly have disagreed with Nazar's eminently sensible suggestion that the first number should contain "every important event connected with the community".²³

One letter in particular shows the conviction with which he held his political views. The letter deals with his disappointment with the change in the British attitude towards the Indians since the end of the Anglo-Boer war. It was Nazar's feeling that Sir Alfred Milner, then High Commissioner for South Africa, and also the Governor of the two former Boer republics, was capitulating to segregationist tendencies in the Transvaal. Law 3 of 1885 passed by the South African Republic was regarded by the British as discriminatory before the war. Yet now, Milner insisted upon its enforcement. "Why NOW", Nazar asked, "do the dirty things you w(ould) not allow Kruger's Gov(ernment) to do? ..." He was sceptical about Milner's promise of "fair and honourable" treatment under the law, and the virtue of having a separate Asiatic Office to deal with Indian matters. In whose view was "fair and honourable" to be understood? he asked. And from what would the Asiatic Office protect the Indians? He answers, "From popular prejudice? ... From zulum (tyranny)? ... May it be from (the) weather, or monetary losses, or illness? or hand and mouth — stomach diseases? Very likely from funeral!"²⁴

Nazar continues in this vein in the matter of trading licences, "May we not hang our portrait on our back to receive fair treatment? How otherwise is the policeman to

18. Nazar to Gandhi (English), 16-5-1903, 18-5-1903.

19. Nazar to Gandhi (English), 16-5-1903, 28-5-1903.

20. Nazar to Gandhi (Gujarati), 9-5-1903.

21. Nazar to Gandhi (English), 14-5-1903.

22. Nazar to Gandhi (English), 18-5-1903, 16-5-1903, 3-6-1903. Compare with *Indian Opinion*, 4-6-1903.

23. Nazar to Gandhi (English), 22-5-1903.

24. Nazar to Gandhi (English), 29-5-1903.

know that you are the right person? On the portrait, give the name and add 'protected', 'entitled to fair treatment' according to *our* notions." Nazar promised "his Excellency" "a homely thrust or two." And, indeed, Milner features prominently in the second number of the *Indian Opinion*.²⁵

It was a satisfied newspaper editor who walked home to Sydenham, Durban, late on the night of 3rd June having missed the last car, happy in the knowledge that part of the paper was to be printed on the evening of the 4th and the balance on the 5th when the public would see the birth of a protest journal. It must be pointed out, however, that the appearance of the newspaper went unnoticed in the white-owned press.²⁶

The first number of the *Indian Opinion*, printed on 14 in. x 18 in. sheets reflected many of the topics and issues suggested by Nazar, and, although the editorials and leader articles were authored by Gandhi no doubt, the editor could justly be proud of his contribution.²⁷

The main editorial "Ourselves" explained that the source of the legal disabilities suffered by the British South African Indians was "the prejudice in the minds of the Colonists", the result of the misunderstood status of the Indian. His actual status was one that made him a "kin" to the colonists. India had always rendered great service to the Mother Country ever since "Providence brought loyal Hind under the flag of Britannia".²⁸ The strategy was to appeal to the nonracial and equalitarian basis of the British Empire, one which was in retrospect, however, unsuitable given the exigencies of the South African situation.

Having laid the argument for just and equal treatment, the journal went on to enumerate in the section, "The British Indian in South Africa," the legal disabilities suffered by 100 000 Indians colony by colony. In Natal: the Immigration Restriction Act, the Dealers' Licence Act, pass laws, restrictive educational facilities, threatened residential and business segregation, the disabilities of the indentured workers, among them the £3 poll tax. In the Cape: Immigration Act of 1903, the East London town council's prohibition of certain classes of Indians from using pavements, and the planned removal of Indians to locations. In the Transvaal: the threatened emasculation of the Indian business class, the Indians' relegation to locations; £3 registration fee, curfews after 9 p.m., and the prohibition of pavement-walking. In the Orange River Colony: the reduction of the Indian's status to that of a labourer.²⁹

The rest of the journal merely supplies concrete instances of the prejudices and discrimination spoken of in the leading editorials, and reports fully the protest meeting organised by Cape Town's British Indian League.³⁰

The first number of the journal, then, reflected the aims and aspirations of the Indian people. A case was presented, and a journal announced its intention of placing itself at the service of a community seeking justice and equality. It is, as B. Pachai states in his book, "The aims, objects and future course of the journal are largely

25. *Ibid.* On Milner's policy *vide* Bala Pillay, *British Indians in the Transvaal: Trade, Politics, and Imperial Relations. 1885-1886*, London, Longmans, 1976.

26. Nazar to Gandhi (English), 4-6-1903; Pachai, *The History of the "Indian Opinion", 1903-1914*, p. 30.

27. *Indian Opinion*, 4-6-1903.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

foreshadowed in the first editorial of the journal.”

*There are a further seven letters by Nazar between the 4 and 18 June, all of them addressed to Gandhi. The earlier reliance on Gandhi is all too clearly in evidence. Nazar was a much vexed man. He worked hard until later hours, and coped with the work as best he could with a small staff and inadequate facilities. On one occasion he was told to use the letter “A” sparingly as there were not too many of them in the case. His biggest worry was producing the paper in four languages. It is little wonder that the Hindi and Tamil sections were discontinued in 1905.³²

The newspaper’s managerial and financial difficulties, mentioned only briefly in the letters — Nazar said that the immediate prospects of the journal were like his own, uncertain — were to become severe enough for Gandhi to send friend and newspaper owner Albert West to manage the *Indian Opinion*. Gandhi came from Johannesburg to see things for himself — and he came armed with a philosophy inspired by a single reading of John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*. Henceforth, the newspaper was moved to the Phoenix Settlement, fourteen miles from Durban, where the staff did not only carry on with the production of the journal avowed to fight injustice, but experiment with the search for eternal truth. Nazar, however, preferred to do his work from the Durban branch of the *Indian Opinion*. What a pity that we do not have his later correspondence to tell us why he did not wish to join the settlement.³³

The sixty-one letters give something of the inner workings of the NIC and the *Indian Opinion*, the brick and mortar of which history is made. They do not, however, provide significantly new information that might alter or add to what is already known. But then, they do not constitute *all* the letters penned by Nazar. He refers to three letters he had written to Sir Bhowndagree. There is no trace of these letters or of all the other correspondence Nazar entered into before and after the period of his sixty-one letters. Access to them will give us useful information about matters not so well documented, for example, the financial side of the *Indian Opinion*. They will also throw light upon the nature of the man who preferred to work behind the scene, but who followed Gandhi and worked with him. And in this indirect way we will get to know better the man who went on to become a Mahatma.

31. Pachai, *The History of the “Indian Opinion”, 1903-1914*, p. 30.

32. Nazar to Gandhi (all in English), 6-6-1903, 8-6-1903, 11-6-1903, 12-6-1903, 15-6-1903, 16-6-1903, 18-6-1903, Pachai, *The History of the “Indian Opinion”, 1903-1914*, p. 28. Note that the question of franchise was not raised. Gandhi had no intention of challenging the whites their political monopoly.

33. Pachai, *The History of the “Indian Opinion”, 1903-1914*, pp. 30-31; Gandhi, *Autobiography*, pp. 285-86, 297-99, 304; Gandhi, *Sayagraha in South Africa*, pp. 142-143; H.S.L. Polak, H.N. Brailsford, and Lord Pethick-Lawrence, *Mahatma Gandhi*, Bombay, Jaico, 1962, pp. 50-51; *Indian Opinion*, 24-12-1904.