

Surendra Bhana and Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, *A Fire That Blazed in the Ocean – Gandhi and the poems of Satyagraha in South Africa, 1909 -1911*, Promilla & Co., Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia, 2011, pp 213.



The exemplary role of writers in providing a voice against colonial and apartheid oppression is well-known in South Africa. Here the traditions of protest and resistance poetry are established, with Soweto Poetry from the 1960's onwards encapsulating the literary-cultural imagination in a clear and unambiguous manner. This wide-ranging corpus of South African poetry, which continues into the present post-apartheid era, has been augmented and expanded in an unexpected way by the archival work of two academics residing in the United States – Surendra Bhana and Neelima Shukla-Bhatt –

who have recently published a new book entitled *A Fire That Blazed in the Ocean – Gandhi and the poems of Satyagraha in South Africa, 1909 -1911*.

The collection comprises selected poems, mainly composed in Gujarati, Hindi and Urdu during the first Satyagraha Campaign in South Africa. The poems all appeared in *The Indian Opinion*, the newspaper that was founded by Gandhi in 1903 and dispatched from his printing press at Phoenix, outside Durban. They have been meticulously translated by Bhana, a reputed scholar of Indian history in South Africa, and Shukla-Bhatt, who teaches South Asian studies at Wellesley College in the United States, and who is a Gujarati poet herself.

A Fire that Blazed in the Ocean – the apt title is taken from a poem by Mehtab – is a timely publication given the burgeoning interest in marginalized literatures in South Africa, especially those in vernacular and indigenous languages. It also contributes to the scant literary work on Gandhi, Satyagraha and Passive Resistance – a field that has been grossly neglected in general South African literary studies.¹ Past scholarship in South Africa on Gandhi has largely focused on historical, political and socio-cultural elements pertinent to Gandhi's life and philosophy. This new publication augments the corpus of Gandhian literary writings.

¹ D. Govinden, "The Mahatma: The Text and the Critic – In South Africa" in *Scrutiny*2, (2008).

Altogether, twenty-six South African and nine Indian poets are featured in the collection, including, surprisingly, a poem by Sir Walter Scott, also published in *The Indian Opinion*. The two main contributors are Sheik Mehtab, who originally came from India to South Africa, and Ambaram Mangali Thaker, who is sometimes referred to as Ambaram Maharaj.

With this publication one can appreciate once again the way Gandhi used *The Indian Opinion* to tacitly educate his readers on a wide range of issues. By publishing in Gujarati, Gandhi was seeking to target his local readership, as well as challenge the dominance of English, and “provincialise Europe”.² Bhana and Shukla-Bhatt rightly include the Gujarati scripts of the poems, as they occurred in *The Indian Opinion*, and this enhances the authenticity of the collection. They write with insight and sensitivity of their navigation during the translation process, pointing out that they “travelled through the landscapes of many individuals’ imagination” (pg 57).

By including the genre of poetry in *The Indian Opinion*, Gandhi was validating the role of literary expression – no less than strikes, marches, petitions, and protest meetings – as a valuable and viable strategy of anti-colonial resistance. He was tacitly emphasizing the political agency of literary writers and texts. The performative nature of the presentations, where the poetry is rendered in popular literary forms, such as *ghazals*, with singing and musical accompaniments, is noteworthy. Recited at public gatherings and protest meetings in support of Satyagraha, the poems would undoubtedly have had a rousing, lyrical effect, with the listeners poised to translate this, as the history of this period often indicated, into heroic action.

Gandhi was also, arguably, conveying the strength and impetus of the widespread, local, community-based work of Satyagraha. While inspired by Gandhi, Satyagraha grew into a mass movement, and was not the preserve of either a social or political elite. It was given depth and impetus by different individuals, among them the poet-satyagrahis, who acted as a collective. For Gandhi, tapping into the local was an important strategic option, and was to be mirrored in his Swadeshi Movement. In addition, this levelled society; moving

² Dipesh Chakrabathy, *Provincialising Europe – Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

away from class and caste distinctions. In their introduction to the collection, Bhana and Shukla-Bhatt correctly point out that:

Most poems address satyagraha both as a concept and a phenomenon. Read side by side with Gandhi's exposition of the topic in prose, they provide valuable cultural documentation on how ordinary people within the diaspora community integrated this innovative concept into their own worldview. It is essential to read the poems as participatory texts in an important non-violent resistance movement (pg 19).

Reading through the collection, one is struck by the vibrant political consciousness that pervades this period. The poems read as an honours list of activists, as they celebrate the daring feats of many local heroes. In some instances the poets refer to their own participation as satyagrahis. The poets assume the role of praise singers or *imbongis*, extolling these and other fearless satyagrahis; and, in doing so, they directly record the history of the times in their poems. This is evident in Jayshanker Govindji's eulogy of Cachalia in the poem "Service of One's Country".

A powerful sub-text running through the collection is the principle of non-sectarianism. The collection signals a broad expansiveness, a cultural and religious eclecticism, away from any tendency towards "miniaturization", to use Amartya Sen's conceptualization.³ Gandhi himself, in his many prose writings, was always opposed to a narrow chauvinism and encouraged a broad confluence (and congruence) of cultures and influences. Specifically, the poems inform and educate readers on the importance of unity between Muslim and Hindu, and draw from a deep knowledge of the rich religio-cultural heritage of both faith traditions. Seamlessly weaving mythological, historical, religious and political references from diverse sources, the poems dramatise a unity which is the bedrock on which political solidarity and action may be built. As Mehtab writes in his poem, "Where did Unity Disappear?"

*Disunity is like a bite of a scorpion,
Where there is unity
There is victory.
And the enemies shiver.*

At a time when increasing fundamentalisms of different kinds hold sway, and growing sectarian and ethnocentric identity politics gains ground, it is salutary to see how this generation of satyagrahis actively and single-mindedly cultivated a political identity beyond

³ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence – The illusion of Destiny*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 47-48.

doctrinaire and partisan alignments.

One can appreciate the way this first generation of satyagrahis handed over the torch of resistance to their successors. The “Cachalia” name, for example, would resonate in South Africa through the rest of the 20th Century. This new generation fought old and new battles with tenacity and, arguably, influenced the long haul of anti-colonial struggles in different ways across the world. We sometimes fail to appreciate fully the intense and vibrant political and cultural milieu of the early 20th century in South Africa, when oppositional public spaces were actively sought and created. This was also the time when John Dube and Pixley ka Isaka Seme (also from the same region in Natal as Gandhi), among others, played undaunted roles in the development of Black resistance. Of course, we need to see these initiatives against the parallel universe of the growing intransigence of the colonial and, later, apartheid, institutional apparatuses that were also establishing themselves. A number of the poems are addressed to the Dutch and British, and specifically mention Botha and Smuts and the “Union Parliament”.

In the present democratic dispensation in South Africa, there are many impulses at work in South Africa’s on-going transformation. We continue to grapple with the legacy of race and racism, where the residue of colonialism and apartheid persists. Even though the formal work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is over, there are many ways in which the past is retold and “remade”,⁴ in the persistent pursuit of justice and reconciliation. One of the many challenges in this “time of memory” is to constantly “counter official and documentary ‘black holes’”,⁵ as we re-script and re-map our collective history and remembrance with a greater sense of inclusivity than in the past. *A Fire That Blazed in the Ocean* contributes in no small way to the larger narrative of South Africa’s *Long Walk to Freedom*.

Dr. D. Govinden

University of KwaZulu-Natal

⁴ Sarah Nuttall, “Telling ‘Free’ Stories? Memory and Democracy in South African Autobiography Since 1994”, in *Negotiating the Past – The Making of Memory in South Africa*, eds. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 75.

⁵ Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, “Orality, Memory, and Social History in South Africa”, in *Negotiating the Past – The Making of Memory in South Africa*, eds. Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 90.