

## Review

Surendra Bhana and Goolam Vahed (2005)  
*The Making of a Political Reformer; Gandhi in South Africa, 1893-1914.* New Delhi: Manohar Press.

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In 2000, *Time* Magazine voted Mohandas Gandhi as the third most important individual to have lived in the twentieth century after Albert Einstein and Franklin Roosevelt. Until the arrival of Nelson Mandela on the scene, certainly he was the most important by a long way to have passed some part of his life in South Africa. Indubitably, moreover, Gandhi cut his political teeth in South Africa and developed his distinctive philosophical outlook at Phoenix and Tolstoy Farm. He even left part of his family here where descendants remain. Nonetheless, making the connection between Gandhi and South Africa, particularly the South Africa of dominant discourses such as the struggle against apartheid, is not so easy. Surendra Bhana and Goolam Vahed in this short volume join the ranks of those who attempt this task but without any very dramatic new evidence to present. Gandhism, so interesting again globally with the decline of belief in socialism as a philosophy of alternative politics, has never taken root here.

It would be nice to find that Gandhi had his feet planted firmly in the dust of the living South African community of his days, or more particularly the Indian communities, but this is simply not very true and it is least true of those aspects of Gandhi that are most distinctive and that were to make him most famous. Bhana and Vahed bring to the fore much information on the lives of Indians in turn of the twentieth century South Africa, particularly the history of their religious associations, but these connect only fitfully with Gandhi's sense of his own mission and his own concept of spirituality. His distinctive religious ideas made the most influential Hindu

contemporaries of his day very uneasy; still less did he absorb much from Muslims. The non-violent protest movement with which he has been associated was not very successful albeit inspirational. If there were some affinities with anti-apartheid resistance of the pre-1960 period, there was very little thereafter. As the late Maureen Swan noted, Gandhi's willingness to champion the 1913 strike of indentured workers, largely of South Indian origin, represented an important departure on his part and taught him something that he would use to effect in later years in India. In general, however, as he himself reiterated frequently, the struggles in South Africa were not about the overall oppression of people of colour or even of Indians in this country and were limited to the context of an immigrant minority from a British colony seeking relief from particular disabilities.

Surendra Bhana has previously written on how Gandhi perceived Africans; here this theme takes up many pages but adds relatively little beyond revealing Gandhi as a man of his time with much the same prejudices as were felt by his more liberal-minded and educated white contemporaries such as Olive Schreiner. The anxious focus here really stems from today's expectations and yet does not begin to treat the complex issue of African-Indian relations in South Africa satisfactorily.

Gandhi was the son of a Hindu chief minister in a Muslim princely state on the Kathiawar peninsula of what is today Gujarat state, India. He thus came from a cultural group and class that played a crucial role back into Mogul times. Steering through the complex social and cultural boundaries in India was nothing new to him nor was it 'unique'. However, as Bhana and Vahed say, in South Africa he had to learn to 'negotiate [sic] the narrowness he found among Indians who were absorbed with cultural and religious issues' in a rather parochial setting. One could perhaps argue that it was his reaction against that narrowness and his striving to overcome it that was South Africa's main unintended gift to the future Mahatma. Perhaps this book would be stronger if it had focussed directly and consistently on that theme. Swan did teach us how Gandhi dealt with the critical issue of class, equally important again in Indian nationalist politics. In steering us away from class and concentrating on religious identification, this book may represent something of a regression in Gandhian studies. Its chief merit lies in the glimpses it opens on Indian cultural life in Gandhi's time.