

The South African Gandhi: A critical historiographical review

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“Gandhi’s sojourn in South Africa...lasted for some 21 years, with, some brief interludes in India. It constituted one of the most glorious episodes in human history, as ordinary men and women, with rudimentary learning, and scant material resources became morally energised to confront evil under Gandhi’s quite unprecedented leadership”²

In her seminal work published in 1985, Maureen Swan correctly pointed out that the “general consensus of the existing literature is that the history of the South African Indians was made by Gandhi between 1894 and 1914.”³ This critique of popular South African historiography still holds today despite recent innovations by young historians beginning critical projects seeking to consider the history of South African Indians from views and experiences previously written out of elite⁴ history. ⁵ Within both popular and academic

¹ **This is a first draft of a paper at a very early stage into my research please do not cite.**

² Fatima Meer, (ed). *The South African Gandhi: An abstract of the speeches and writings of M.K. Gandhi 1893-1914* Madiba Publishers: Institute for Black Research, University of Natal, 1996

³ Maureen Swan. *Gandhi: The South Africa Experience*. Ravan Press: Johannesburg 1985

⁴ The term ‘elite’ has been used in this statement to signify *dominant* groups, foreign as well as indigenous. Ranajit Guha, (ed). *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Vol 1 Oxford University Press:Dehli, 1985 pg. 8

⁵ See Nafisa Essop Sheik. ‘Labouring under the Law: Gender and the legal Administration of Indian Immigrants under Indenture in Colonial Natal, 1860-1907.’ Thesis (BSocSC-Masters)- University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2005

Gandhian historiography in South Africa, Gandhi comes not only to signify the struggles of the Indian population of South Africa, but is also often used as a trope assumed to represent and appeal to all South African Indians. Recently this longstanding phenomenon has included political campaigns – consider Ela Gandhi’s words on election posters in formerly Indian areas: “*my grandfather would have voted ANC*”, to the many cultural and religious organisations that use the image of Gandhi to legitimate whatever they are promoting from Diwali celebrations, to various forms of chauvinist Hindu nationalisms. More narrowly in terms of academic South African historiography, still represents Gandhi and the Natal Indian Congress, as well as the Transvaal Indian Congress, as the most important historical figure and political movements among all South African Indians.

It is precisely the popularity of this academic elite historiography of Gandhi and the various political movements he was a part of, or which claim descent from him, that make up the contemporary object of this paper’s critique. It is important to further define the description of elite historiography in relation to this paper. This form of historiography has for many years not only presented Gandhi and his politics as the main or sometimes only narrative of South African Indian histories, it often in the face of contrary evidence sought to write out the histories of many people who either belonged to a lower class

Prinisha Badassy. ““And my blood became hot” Crimes of passion, Crimes of Reason: An Analysis of the Crimes against Masters and Mistresses by their Indian Domestic Servants, Natal 1880-1920. Thesis (BSocSC-Masters)- University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2005

or caste. Within these narratives of Gandhi and more generally South African Indians there is no space for the agency of poor people (mainly indentured Indians), people perceived to be of a lower caste and women.

The wealth of information on Gandhi and his time in South Africa is enormous. A useful review of all of this vast literature would not be possible in this short paper. Therefore I have decided to use a few important works that have been influential within South African historiography. These works have been chosen primarily due to the frequency with which they have been cited. However some attention is also given to authors who have mainly worked on Gandhi's time in South Africa.

The first group of texts that this paper interrogates mainly draw on materials compiled by Gandhi, articles published in newspapers (mainly the *Indian Opinion*) and narrative accounts of Gandhi's life and work. These texts usually have an introduction by a South African academic or politician, explaining the importance of Gandhi within South African history. An example of this is *The South African Gandhi: An abstract of the speeches and writings of M.K. Gandhi 1893-1914*. This book is edited by Fatima Meer in 1996. This introduction very clearly falls into the category of elite historiography attributing most of the political actions by South African Indians to Gandhi's agency. In the preface Gandhi's arrival in Natal is described by Justice Ismail Mohamed as a divine event. There was, Mohamed

writes, a “*celestial Leap when he entered the shore of Natal in May 1893*”⁶ This form of hagiographical account of history continues with phrases such as “*A universal man, timeless in impact...*”, or “*it is comforting to know that even a super-soul...*”⁷ being deployed by Lewis Skewyiya in the introduction. This hagiographical account of Gandhi is a very common instance of the tendency towards a hagiographical narration of important political figures within elite history.

Meer’s book is also typical of elite historiography in that although it is packaged as a book on Gandhi and his letters and speeches; most of the credit for any form of resistance to the colonial state is attributed to the elite merchant Indians. Guha, states in relation to Indian historiography:

These varieties of elitism share the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness- nationalism- which informed this process, were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements.⁸

⁶ Fatima Meer, (ed). *The South African Gandhi: An abstract of the speeches and writings of M.K. Gandhi 1893-1914* Madiba Publishers: Institute for Black Research, University of Natal, 1996 pg. 21

⁷ Fatima Meer, (ed). *The South African Gandhi: An abstract of the speeches and writings of M.K. Gandhi 1893-1914* Madiba Publishers: Institute for Black Research, University of Natal, 1996 pg. 19

⁸ Ranajit Guha, (ed). *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Vol 1 Oxford University Press:Dehli, 1985

In the above quote Guha is referring specifically to Indian historiography, however, this definition of elite historiography is also applicable to Meer's book. The reason being, that most of the editorial section in this book attributes the political agency of the period to the merchant Indian classes in South Africa. For instance in chapter four, *Pre Gandhian Indian Politics in Natal* states:

The Durban Committee initiated the struggle for Indians in South Africa and introduces a procedure which Gandhi followed, addressing petitions to the government and lobbying prominent British and Indian politicians.⁹

The attribution of political agency to the South African Indian elite continues and almost all of the examples of political resistance cited in this book are undertaken by and for elites. They include petitions to the state asking for merchants to be recognised as British citizens; other petitions including the licenses for new stores, requests for Indian businessmen to be allowed to remain in certain areas and protests at the hostile treatment of British Indians by the Office of the Protector of Indian Immigrants.¹⁰

⁹ Fatima Meer, (ed). *The South African Gandhi: An abstract of the speeches and writings of M.K. Gandhi 1893-1914* Madiba Publishers: Institute for Black Research, University of Natal, 1996 pg. 89

¹⁰ Fatima Meer, (ed). *The South African Gandhi: An abstract of the speeches and writings of M.K. Gandhi 1893-1914* Madiba Publishers: Institute for Black Research, University of Natal, 1996 pg. 91-102

Although Meer's book is clearly focused on particular segments of the South African Indian population, it begins by making claims about how Gandhi's political struggle was vital for all South African Indians.

Intellectually they were debilitated by manifest illiteracy only marginally interrupted by some very rudimentary education hopelessly inadequate to cope with the demands of the rapidly emerging technology with which the country sought to meet its increasingly sophisticated mining, agricultural and industrial needs. Militarily they had no access to any equipment or the most elementary skills to defend themselves. There was just simply no comparison between the material resources which they had access to and those which were commanded by their numerically superior adversaries with vast economic and military resources, widespread learning and scholarship and total political power.

And yet within the space of a few brief years Gandhi succeeded in wielding this community of relatively recent immigrants from a distant land..."¹¹

This editorial is consistent with a form of historical writing that argues that elite representation, either in the form an elite intelligentsia or leader, was needed to uplift the masses. This work specifically claims that indentured

¹¹ Fatima Meer, (ed). *The South African Gandhi: An abstract of the speeches and writings of M.K. Gandhi 1893-1914* Madiba Publishers: Institute for Black Research, University of Natal, 1996 pg. 23

Indians had no political agency; therefore a politics of representation was vital. A politics of representation, where an elite is uncritically taken to stand for the interests of the mass, is very common within this form of elite historiography, however the more important point of the above quote is the conflating of an extremely diverse group of people, in terms of caste, ethnicity and class, as one 'Indian' population. In this section of the book South African Indians are conflated¹² to the point where they are all taken to have been represented by the small elite led by Gandhi. Moreover it is made to seem that until Gandhi's arrival Indians in South Africa did not have any political agency and had no recourse or means to undertake any form of resistance. There is no discussion of the politics of the Indian poor and working class. However there is ample discussion about the role of the elite class (merchant Indians) in organising around their own political interests. In fact, there is even a claim put forward that it was the political activities of these merchant Indians that led to the politicization of Gandhi. In chapter 4 it is opined that "The traders who became Gandhi's first patrons were also his tutors."¹³

In relation to indentured Indians, Badassy and Sheik's work show very convincingly that many of the indentured workers were capable of laying a complaint and addressing other problems to the Indenture Protector Officer.

¹² See Goolam Vahed. 'Swami Shankeranand and the Consolidation of Hinduism,' in the *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 10:2 September, 1997, 1

¹³ Fatima Meer, (ed). *The South African Gandhi: An abstract of the speeches and writings of M.K. Gandhi 1893-1914* Madiba Publishers: Institute for Black Research, University of Natal, 1996 pg. 87

Both Badassy and Sheik's research uncovers a wealth of information about the lives of interpreters, domestic servants and women under indenture through an intensive engagement with various sources in the Colonial archive including the Protector of Indian Immigrants as well as newspapers and letters.¹⁴

Why then does this book begin by claiming that South African Indians did not have any political agency before Gandhi? In addition, why is there no differentiation between the different groups of Indians and the different forms of political agency that existed among the various groups of South African Indians? This contradiction is very common among texts dealing with Gandhi in South Africa.¹⁵ Although some of these texts do note class, caste and ethnic distinctions when describing the social aspects of South African Indians, or when illustrating the leading role of merchant class Indians within political campaigns, it is striking that when claims about Gandhi's political impact are discussed all Indians become conflated into one population.

¹⁴ Nafisa Essop Sheik. 'Labouring under the Law: Gender and the legal Administration of Indian Immigrants under Indenture in Colonial Natal, 1860-1907.' Thesis (BSocSC-Masters)- University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2005

¹⁵ Surendra Bhana and James D. Hunt, (ed) *Gandhi's Editor: The Letters of M.H. Nazar 1902-1903*. Promilla & Co: New Dehli, 1989
A.J. Arkin, K.P. Magyar & G.J. Pillay, (ed) *The Indian South Africans: A Contemporary Profile*. Owen Burgess Publishers: Pinetown 1989
Surendra Bhana, (ed) *Essays on Indenture Indians in Natal*. Peepal Tree Press: Leeds 1990
E.S. Reddy & Gopalkrishna Gandhi, (ed) *Gandhi and South Africa 1914-1948*. Navajivan Publishing House: Ahmedabad, 1993

Bhana and Pachai's *Documentary History of Indian South Africans*¹⁶ repeats this pattern despite the editors stated intentions and the presence of clearly contrary evidence within this text. The strength of this work lies in the fact that serious attempts are made to include documents more generally related to South African Indians rather than just relying on Gandhi's own archive and *Indian Opinion*. This makes this work more interesting than most and, indeed, the editors' claim that the inclusion of a wider variety of documents illustrates their intention of widening the understanding of the political agency of South African Indians. However, although this text contains statements from the editors acknowledging archival evidence of political activity outside of Gandhi's influence very little of this evidence is provided and the editor's commentaries at the beginning of each section do not reflect on the politics of this choice. For example in the section on *Constitutional and Political Issues* the editors do note the existence of a well developed politics of indentured and colonial born Indians, much of which is captured in the *African Chronicle*,¹⁷ but do not see fit to include any of this in the book. In addition there are not petitions by the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress that are presented in this section of the book that deal with the condition of indenture Indians.

¹⁶ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984

¹⁷ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 75.

In fact, out of 43 documents presented in this section only one is about an organisation that is not the Natal Indian Congress, the Transvaal Indian Congress or on Gandhi. This sole document is important because it provides evidence of at least one different political movement during the early part of the twentieth century not linked to Gandhi. The movement was The Natal Indian Patriotic Union and was made up mainly of non- trader colonial born Indians.

What is more interesting about this movement is that, unlike the Natal Indian Congress or the Transvaal Indian Congress both of which were oriented towards elite (merchant) interests, the resolutions of this movement were mainly related to issues of education. In fact only one of their six resolutions has anything to do with trade. This is in stark contrast to the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress which dealt mainly with issues around trade, commerce and property.¹⁸ The excerpt below is largely indicative of this type of petitions drawn up by:

The only hope of the Indian traders in Natal now lies in the relief that might be granted through the intervention of Her Majesty's Government. Your petitioners venture to claim in all parts of her Majesty's dominions the same privileges and rights that are enjoyed by Her Majesty's other subjects, in virtue of the Proclamation of 1858, and more especially in the Colony of Natal, in virtue of the following

¹⁸ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 105 to 107

statement in your predecessor's despatch with reference to previous memorials, viz, 'It is the desire of her Majesty's Government that the Queen's Indian subjects should be treated upon a footing of equality with all her Majesty's other subjects.' Moreover, your petitioners trust that Her Majesty's Government would be pleased to secure from the Colony of Natal which owes its present prosperity to the indentured Indians, a fair treatment for the free Indians in the Colony.¹⁹

Although the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses mainly dealt with issues affecting merchant Indians it did, however, introduce other Indians into its language during the first passive resistance campaign. The first objective of this campaign was to halt the process of registering for and then carrying passes which affected all Indians out of indenture, which meant merchant Indians, ex-indentured Indians and colonial born Indians. However the wording of the resolution is telling. Although it initially states that it is concerned with Indians and does not define which group of South African Indians it represents, it later goes on to state that one of the key grievances it has with the colonial state is its lack of distinction among "British Indian and other Asiatics."²⁰ Although this document does not overtly state that it is not addressing an issue affecting South African Indians generally it continues to

¹⁹ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg 37

²⁰ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 116

request the colonial government to make a distinction between British Indians²¹ and other Indians living within the colony. The underlining assumption is that if the state distinguished between different Indians then surely British Indians who are already citizens of the Britain will not have to register.²²

This distinction which the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses sought, from their inception, to entrench between merchant Indians and other Asiatics was further cemented when the issue around registering was temporarily resolved by Gandhi and Smuts on 28 January 1908. According to this agreement Indians living in South Africa had an option of voluntarily registering.

Two days later, Gandhi was taken from the prison in Johannesburg to meet General Smuts in Pretoria, where a compromise solution was agreed upon. The essence of the compromise was that the Indians would register voluntarily, after which the Government would repeal Act 2 of 1907 which made registration compulsory.²³

²¹ Merchant Indians claimed that they were citizens of the British government and should be recognized as such.

²² Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 117

²³ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 124

This compromise was reached after the first passive resistance campaign was undertaken by the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress. Gandhi faced severe criticism for this compromise and sought to explain himself. In this explanation that was published in the *Indian Opinion* Gandhi²⁴ discusses the details of the compromise. It is here that it is revealed that this compromise was for merchant Indians and that for the rest of the Indian population the passive resistance campaign had made no difference to their rights in relation to Act 2 of 1907. Gandhi had negotiated that educated and rich Indians would only have to voluntarily register and give their finger print impressions while this remained compulsory for poorer Indians:

Reader: It appears the educated and the rich have had their interests protected at the expense of the poor...

Gandhi: ...it is not true to say that the educated and the rich have got off easily. Educated persons and men of means and standing can be identified by the knowledge they possess and by their appearance. It is humiliating to them even to be asked to give finger-impressions. Looking at it thus, it does not appear wrong that illiterate persons who are not otherwise known should have to give their finger-impressions. On the contrary these would ensure the fullest protection for them. For instance, not everyone in Durban has to take out such

²⁴ Gandhi published this article in a form of a dialogue between a confused Indian who is criticizing the compromise and himself.

certificates. Not an illiterate person or one otherwise not known would come to grief by following their example.²⁵

However, despite the inclusion of this evidence the majority of Bhana and Pachai's text relies on the *Collected Works of Gandhi* and detailed documents of Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress. This is implicitly presented as being representative of political activity of South African Indian for most of the twentieth century.

Gandhi's comments in the above quote illustrate how the distinction between different groups of Indians arose when the political desires of the elite Indians were at stake. By making this distinction Gandhi and the Congress could gain particular rights on the backs of groups of Indians perceived to be inferior. Although political campaigning of the period, when successful, mainly benefited elite Indians the campaign and whatever gains, although minimal²⁶, are written about in this text as including all Indians in South Africa despite contrary evidence presented within this book. With astonishing disregard for their own evidence Bhana and Pachai even go so far as to state that:

²⁵ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 123

²⁶ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 150

The energies of South African Indians, mobilised in the 1890s against growing anti-Indianism in various parts of South Africa, were channelled into a concerted movement which aimed at eradicating the various disabilities from which Indians of all castes, classes, and creeds suffered.²⁷

In fact all the petitions cited in this book by members of either the Natal or Transvaal Indian Congresses have to do with issues of trade, commerce or property. There is no petition by the Natal or Transvaal Indian Congress in this book that makes a request on behalf of Indentured Indians for the alleviation of the terrible conditions they faced. There is only the rhetoric that appears, briefly, in single statement in the Congress resolution that indicates that the movement will seek to pressure the colonial state to improving the condition of Indentured Indians. This statement proved to be empty rhetoric as most of petitions by the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress, as well as the overt political mobilisation in passive resistance campaigns sought to address issues affecting elite Indians.²⁸

In addition further investigation that may complicate this narrative of Gandhi and the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress are ignored. For

²⁷ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 111

²⁸ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 135

example the impact of the Natal Indian Patriotic Union is not discussed in the editorial and any further leads into this movement are not investigated. Furthermore the resistance that arose from individuals as a result of Gandhi's compromise around registration is not taken very seriously. Firstly, the fact that Gandhi feels compelled to explain his actions in the *Indian Opinion* through a made-up dialogue responding to allegations questioning his intention and methods could be indicative of popular objections to this compromise – objections which may well have been made known to Gandhi.²⁹ Secondly, another more overt objection to this compromise, which took the form of a direct physical attack on Gandhi, is briefly referred to by Bhana and Pachai. It is not actually discussed but mentioned through a report on this incident in the *Indian Opinion* and through a letter written by Gandhi in response to this attack. This attack may prove to be significant on further investigation however it receives a brief mention via a report in the *Indian Opinion* that describes the attacker as a disgruntled man who did not fully understand the concept of Satyagraha and misunderstood the compromise. This man, Pathan Mir Al'am, was reported as reacting to the news of the compromise that Indians would have to voluntarily register in the Transvaal. This is a description of the events by Bhana and Pachai:

²⁹Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 123

Satyagraha required that the word of the adversary be trusted. However, the compromise was misunderstood, and a Pathan who had threatened to kill anyone who took lead in applying for registration considered it a betrayal. He severely beat Gandhi on 10 February, 1908.³⁰

Bhana and Pachai then go on to immediately state that they will use Gandhi's response in the *Indian Opinion*:

Gandhi himself related the story, which appeared originally in the Gujarati section of the *Indian Opinion* 222 February 1908. Incidentally, the Pathan (Mir Al'am) was Gandhi's client.³¹

This is followed by the response of Gandhi, which calls for forgiveness on behalf of the assaulter who was upset and uneducated, on the grounds that if the attacker was educated he would have attacked differently. Here I think Gandhi is referring to a very particular form of education, Satyagraha, which for Gandhi comes to stand for education in general.

I do not blame anyone for the assault. Those who attacked me would have at one time greeted me and welcomed me enthusiastically. When

³⁰ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 124

³¹ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 124

they assaulted me, it was in the belief that I had done them and the community harm. Some people thought I had sold the community by having agreed to [the system of] finger-impressions [in our compromise] with the Government. If that is what they thought, is it surprising that they attacked me? If they had some education, they would, instead of assaulting me, have adopted other means of venting their dislike of me.³²

Instead of exploring this document further the authors of this text are content with reporting it merely from the view of Gandhi. This methodological flaw seems to very common within South African historical writings dealing with Gandhi. As Swan notes:

superficiality has also, in many instances, derived from a too heavy reliance on Gandhi's historically inaccurate autobiographical writings, *Satyagraha in South Africa* and *The Story of My Experiments with truth*.³³

However Bhana and Pachai, unlike other works written within this same tradition³⁴, try to explain their lack of archival evidence for non-Gandhian

³² Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. 126

³³ Maureen Swan. *Gandhi: The South Africa Experience*. Ravan Press: Johannesburg 1985

³⁴ Bhikhu Parekh. *Gandhi: A very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press: oxford 1997

Indian politics as consequent to an objective limit in archival resources. They claim there is very little material on the early period of Indians in South Africa.³⁵ However even if we accept this claim this does not explain their continued limited focus on the political activity of Transvaal and Natal Indian Congress in later periods where there is an abundance of archival materials. The historical narrative Bhana and Pachai produce only reveals and discusses the political agency of the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress for most of the last century ignoring the various different, and often non-racial and working class driven forms of political resistance undertaken by Indians such as trade unions, dating back to the 1920s, student organisations and the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s.³⁶ Bhana and Pachai's narrative makes it seem that there were no other forms of political activity and is typical of elite historiography of which, as Guha states: "What is left out of this un-historical historiography is the politics of the people."³⁷

Fatima Meer, (ed). *The South African Gandhi: An abstract of the speeches and writings of M.K. Gandhi 1893-1914* Madiba Publishers: Institute for Black Research, University of Natal, 1996

A.J. Arkin, K.P. Magyar & G.J. Pillay, (ed) *The Indian South Africans: A Contemporary Profile*. Owen Burgess Publishers: Pinetown 1989

³⁵ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (ed) *A documentary history of Indian South Africans*. David Philip Publisher: Cape Town, 1984 pg. xi

³⁶ Vishnu Padayachee & S. Vawda. 'Indian Workers and Worker Action in Durban', 1935-45 South African Historical Journal, 40. 1999

³⁷ Ranajit Guha, (ed). *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Vol 1 Oxford University Press:Dehli, 1985 pg. 4

This form of narrow elite historical writings dealing with Gandhi's time in South Africa still has currency today, despite far more critical works carried out by Swan and Britton.³⁸ Swan, more so than Britton, provides a far more critical reading of Gandhi by situating him within the larger social context of the period. Through decentring the narrative somewhat to illustrate the strength of different South African Indians during this period Swan is able to de-legitimize the often deification of Gandhi. This is done through a close investigation of the roles of many of the different Indian merchants present in the colony.³⁹ By developing an understanding of the social milieu of this period; the different familial and business relationships, the social and cultural norms of these various men as well their education, Swan is able to show the influence they had over Gandhi. This work develops a far more human Gandhi, a Gandhi influenced and shaped by his surroundings, constantly grappling with political and ethical difficulties, rather than the narrative which presents him as arriving a fully fledged 'mahatma' ready to save South African Indians - a narrative that is so common among elite historiography.⁴⁰

Although Swan is able to develop a convincing critique of the centrality of Gandhi to Indian politics her work still mainly deals with the Indian elite. It

³⁸ Burnett Britton. *Gandhi Arrives in South Africa*. Greenleaf Book: Maine, 1999

³⁹ Maureen Swan. *Gandhi: The South Africa Experience*. Ravan Press: Johannesburg 1985

⁴⁰ Ranajit Guha, (ed). *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Vol 1 Oxford University Press:Dehli, 1985 pg. 2

is through engaging with the material needs of these elite Indians that Swan is able to show their agency in their political struggle. She mentions that this form of struggle did very little for indentured and ex-indentured Indians but she does not provide much discussion of the political agency of the Indians outside of the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress. In addition the book also mainly looks at the post-Gandhi politics of Indians through the Congress and does not take into consideration the different forms of politics that developed among South African Indians. She critiques the Congress for not casting its net wide enough to include non-merchant Indians, but this line of critique still assumes that the Congress has a monopoly on political agency.⁴¹

This inclusion of the larger political milieu when discussing Gandhi in South Africa is continued in works by Burnett Britton and Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie.⁴² Britton's extensive work on Gandhi published in 1999 is able, through an intense investigation of a vast range of archival material, to illustrate the impact that his time in South Africa had on his political development. This research claims that his time in South Africa and his engagement with different people here was vital in his development into the world figure that he later became.

⁴¹ Maureen Swan. *Gandhi: The South Africa Experience*. Ravan Press: Johannesburg 1985 pg. 273

⁴² Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, (ed) *Sita Memoirs of Sita Gandhi growing up at Phoenix and in the Shadow of the Mahatma*. South African History online: Pretoria, 2003
Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie. *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal*. Kwela Boks: Cape Town 2004

Britton's work is incredibly useful in terms of research into Gandhi due to the vast archival interrogation undertaken. She uses a wide variation of archival sources, rather than the heavy reliance on the *Collected Works of Gandhi* and Gandhi biographies typical of the elite historiography. Although there is a vast source of materials within this book, it is primarily a very detailed descriptive account of Gandhi's time in South Africa. It does not interrogate what impact Gandhi had on South Africa. Britton also does not situate the book within the larger historiography or tell us how this work differs to or relates to other books within this historiography.

Following in the tradition of broadening archival research, Uma-Dhupelia Mesthrie has written two important texts on the lives of people intimately linked to Gandhi. Dhupelia-Mesthrie like Britton and Swan, begin widen the area of research on Gandhi. These works are substantially different from the narrow elite forms of historical writings. Britton, Dhupelia-Mesthrie and Swan do not rely on the *Collected Works of Gandhi* or his biographies as the main source of evidence, rather they engage with a wider range of archival source. This tends to challenge the uncomplicated, over-arching impact of Gandhi that appears in elite forms of historical writing.

These works by Dhupelia-Mesthrie attempt to, like Swan and Britton, to understand certain aspects of Gandhi through the people he was linked to either through politics or familial relationships.

The first such work was edited by Dhupelia-Mesthrie and published in 2003 *Sita: memoirs of Sita Gandhi*.⁴³ It is an autobiography of Sita Gandhi, the grand-daughter of Gandhi and is a detailed account of a woman's life. Due to the nature of the book it is a very personal account of events in Sita's life. It provides a perspective into Gandhi and his family which is often absent in elite historiography – that of a woman. Sita's views on different events are very interesting, however this text does not substantially alter previous narratives of the role of Gandhi and his centrality in the lives of his family members and the politics of South African Indians. It does however shed some light on the daily living of members of Gandhi's family in the Phoenix settlement after his departure.⁴⁴

Dhupelia- Mesthrie's second book on Gandhi is a biography of Gandhi's son Manilal, *Gandhi's Prisoner? The life and Gandhi's son Manilal*.⁴⁵ This book is similar to the memoirs of Sita Gandhi in that it explores various aspects of

⁴³ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, (ed) *Sita Memoirs of Sita Gandhi growing up at Phoenix and in the Shadow of the Mahatma*. South African History online: Pretoria, 2003

⁴⁴ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, (ed) *Sita Memoirs of Sita Gandhi growing up at Phoenix and in the Shadow of the Mahatma*. South African History online: Pretoria, 2003

⁴⁵ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie. *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal*. Kwela Boks: Cape Town 2004

Gandhi and his family. The usefulness of this work lies in the author's access to various personal documents related to Gandhi that are not available publically. Dhupelia- Mesthrie is a great grand-daughter of Gandhi and as such is privy to documents within the family's personal archives.⁴⁶

This work is a careful examination of the personal relationships in the Gandhi family in South Africa especially the relationship between Manilal Gandhi and his father Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. It often concentrates on Gandhi's authoritarian orientation toward his children and focuses in particular on his relationship with Manilal.⁴⁷ This book gives the reader an important glimpse into the familial life of Gandhi and the various perceptions of family members towards Gandhi. Through interrogating the relationship between Gandhi and Manilal the book is able to illustrate the effect of Gandhi on his family and the way in which Manilal was able, to a certain extent, to break out politically once he returned to South Africa on his own. This brings up a lot of questions about the role of Gandhi in South Africa, Indian politics as well as the role of Natal Indian Congress. However due to the heavy emphasis on Gandhi's personal life the larger political questions about Gandhi's impact are only raised and not explored. This is one of the few works on Gandhi's time that is able to not only provide new material on

⁴⁶ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie. *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal*. Kwela Boks: Cape Town 2004 (see bibliography)

⁴⁷ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie. *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal*. Kwela Boks: Cape Town 2004 pg. 57 & 119

Gandhi's time in South Africa but, due to the focus on Gandhi's personal relationships, is able to shed further light into particular traits of Gandhi. Gandhi appears as authoritarian disciplinary who was not open to making allowances for his family members and kept them rigorously in check.

But what Manilal had wanted in Cape Town was to be unfettered- to have a day off so to speak, to be normal, to enjoy life. He loved his father and was willing to listen to him about most things, but this time it was hard to see why he could not have gone up Table Mountain. This time it was hard to see why his father did not trust him. How was he to build-up his 'self-confidence' when there were no significant or even small decisions he could make for himself? He had become a man whole in prison, but his father still saw a young life in delicate formation. The one wanted some freedom, the other held on out of protectiveness. Freed from prison, Manilal was still his father's prisoner.⁴⁸

These works carried out by Swan, Britton and Dhupelia- Mesthrie are important because they begin to diversify and complicate the narrative of Gandhi and because they look at different archival material. This far more rigorous investigation begins to break with elite forms of historiography in terms of methodology. It also seeks to add nuance and to complicate the

⁴⁸ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie. *Gandhi's Prisoner? The Life of Gandhi's Son Manilal*. Kwela Boks: Cape Town 2004 pg. 119

image of Gandhi as saint. The image of Gandhi as some sort of spiritual and mythical figure has been a central trope in many of the texts written about his time in South Africa.

It is important to interrogate why this saintly image of Gandhi was so dominant within South African historiography. To interrogate this historiography on Gandhi is to interrogate the political ideology out of which this historiography arises and which it seeks to promote. Concentration on Gandhi and the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress promotes not only Gandhi as one man but elites who were part of the development of these political projects. This, as mentioned previously, falls into an elite historiography but more than that I would like to tentatively claim that this form of uncomplicated history falls in to the tradition of the politics of Congress. An interrogation of Congress politics, both in South Africa and in India, show a politics that is firmly interested in advancing an elite project that presents itself as represents and educating the backward masses that cannot represent themselves. It has been well argued that in India the nationalist discourse, firmly aligned to a nationalist politics, has often sought to write up the history of political struggle as some sort of “spiritual biography of the Indian”⁴⁹. This is also true of the congress movement in South Africa. It also tends to concentrate on the intricacies of the

⁴⁹ Ranajit Guha, (ed). *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Vol 1 Oxford University Press:Dehli, 1985 pg. 2

negotiations between the Indian elite and the colonial state and then apartheid state. The historiography that supports this form of politics writes mainly about this elite politics without regard to evidence of various forms of popular South African Indian politics. This form of historiography develops a seamless history of struggle that begins with Gandhi and ends in victory - a victory achieved mainly by the Congress and its leader. The 2005 work *The Making of a Political Reformer: Gandhi in South Africa 1893-1914*, fits into this form of historiography. Although it does note certain contradictions in the politics of Gandhi and the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congress, it does not change its narrative about the overarching influence of Gandhi over South Africans. This book's conclusion goes so far as to make the astonishing claim that Gandhi's influence extends to all aspects of South African politics even incorporating politics movements such as the Black Conscious movement.⁵⁰

Gandhi inspired succeeding generations of South Africa activists seeking to end White rule. This legacy connects him to Nelson Mandela who led South Africa to non-racial democracy in the last decade of the twentieth century. In a sense Mandela, completed what Gandhi started in the first decade of that century.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Surendra Bhana & Goolam Vahed. *The Making of the Political Reformer: Gandhi in South Africa, 1893-1914*. Manohar Publishers & Distributors: 2005 pg. 149

⁵¹ Surendera Bhana & Goolam Vahed. *The Making of the Political Reformer: Gandhi in South Africa, 1893-1914*. Manohar Publishers & Distributors: 2005 pg. 149

This is hardly adequate. Partly because it perpetuated or entrenches the notion of Gandhi as this timelessly influential figure and it transforms South African history into a genealogy of elite men excluding all other forms of political agency.