

# Rethinking Gender and Agency in the Satyagraha Movement Of 1913

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**ABSTRACT:** *Through the biographical accounts of three Indian women, the paper is an evaluation of the women's agency in the Satyagraha movement of 1913 in Natal, South Africa. The fight was fought against oppressive measures that questioned the role of Indian women in South Africa and levied a £ 3 poll tax on ex-indentured workers. Well over 20,000 men and women took part in this war. Via profiling the lives of Mrs. Bai Fatima Sheikh Mehtab, Miss Valliamma Munuswami Mudliar and Mrs. Kasturba Gandhi, my goal here is not only to shed light on the various personal and physical challenges women have faced in the struggle, but also to represent the contribution of some Indian women to decision-making and public participation.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Gender, Agency, Resistance, Natal.*

## INTRODUCTION

Before the outbreak of the First World War, the 1913 Satyagraha campaign, also identified as the "1913 strike" (Swan 1984), was the largest mobilisation of Indians in South Africa. The movement was a reaction to certain oppressive measures placed in place by the colonial authorities against South African citizens of Indian descent. The £ 3 tax in 1895 was the first grievance. In 1860 [1], indentured Indians came to Natal as part of the organised labour system. Many declined to indenture at the end of their five-year term and found alternative means of maintaining an income. Many engaged in petty trading, while others took to hawking fresh produce. In the 1880's and 1890s, to ensure a chronic supply of indentured labor, the colonial authorities imposed a £25 poll tax, but was later reduced to £3, on all Indian adult males over the age of sixteen who failed to re-indenture.

For many ex-indentured labourers who were unable to afford the tax and were eventually forced to re-indenture, the poll tax proved irksome. The Hon. The Hon. The effect of the act was denounced by G. K. Gokhale, a member of the Viceroy's Legislative Council and a popular public leader in India: "This cruel imposition caused enormous suffering, led to the breaking up of families, and led men to crime and women to a life of shame." The second grievance, the non-recognition of Indian marriages, brought together Indian women's support [2]. A judgment passed by Justice Malcolm Searle, in the Cape Town Supreme Court in 1913, nullified all Indian marriages (except Christian marriages) even if they were conducted according to Hindu or Muslim rites. Indian women were outraged at the judgment as, 'the honour of Indian womanhood is affected' and were keen to 'offer passive resistance with the male members of the community'. The Searle judgment acted as a catalyst to women of Indian origin to mobilize and politicize the injustices they suffered through discrimination legislated against them.

My purpose in writing this paper is to make visible Indian women in the early part of the twentieth century, particularly their political involvement and contribution during the time under review. The position of Gandhi and the indentured workers has often been illuminated by studies on the

Satyagraha movement of 1913, concentrating almost entirely on the male contribution, thus marginalising the efforts of women. In their study of women's political experiences, recent publications about indentured Indians during this time are minimal. Two recent publications have rectified this conventional invisibility of women in historical research to some degree [3].

Both writers have sought to broaden their focus on the 1913 Satyagraha movement by engaging in a more inclusive discussion of women's experiences. Mongia's attempt at analyzing the 'gendered discourse of national honor' in the successful mobilization of Satyagraha to defend Indian marriages, adds an interesting gendered dimension of our understanding of the movement. Mongia examines the discourses related to the construction of marriage "as a predominantly 'women's issue' and with how such a construction, in turn, enabled an understanding of satyagraha as a defense of the honour of Indian women that was seen as coterminous with the honor of the Indian nation" [4]. My own paper titled "Our Plucky Sisters who have dared to Fight - Indian Women and the Satyagraha movement in South Africa" argued that the Searle judgment challenged the ideological constructions of "Indian womanhood" and served as a potent catalyst for Indian women's participation in the movement. Indian women were at the forefront of the struggle and made both an individual and collective effort to court arrest and challenge discriminatory legislation.

This paper goes one step further, in that it aims to examine and revisit some historical events through biographical accounts of three women, not only in recognising the struggle of women, but in pointing out the dangerous nature of the political path of women during this period. It aims to emphasise the active role of individual women in the movement, analysing and recording their different political experiences, and then extending and re-shaping our interpretation of the Satyagraha movement of 1913. In the war, Indian women played a pivotal role. They "wrote petitions, defied by-laws of hawking and trading, challenged the immigration laws by moving interprovincial without permits, heckled policemen and bellowed at laborers to cease work, kept morale high and endured imprisonment. By engaging in these activities women broke out of their traditional boundaries, coalesced massive support for the struggle" and challenged socially constructed gender roles .

For the sake of their cause and country, the spectacle of Indian women on target and of others seeking arrest and imprisonment is one that should stir the hearts and souls of Indians across South Africa and their motherland brothers and sisters. The end of the struggle could be said to be in sight when the daughters of India set such a brilliant example of strength and self-reliance. For the following reasons, the three females in this study were selected. Next, the views of women from various linguistic, religious and political histories are expressed. Ms Bai Fatima Sheikh Mehtab was a Muslim-speaking Gujarati [5]. Her husband, Sheikh Mehtab, was Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi's childhood friend and a teacher at school. Sheik Mehtab would take his students to the welcoming ceremonies to sing songs after the men and women resisters were released from prison. Miss Valliamma Mudliar, was a Tamil speaking Hindu. Through her father's political activity Valliamma was politically conscientised at an early age. Her father was active in the first Satyagraha campaign of 1907-1908. Valliamma's participation is indicative that the Satyagraha movement appealed to men and women, young and old, irrespective of age.

In addition, not only was Valliamma not affected by the Searle judgement or the £ 3 levy, but she battled for her "motherland's honour." Kasturba Gandhi was the wife of Mohandas Karamchand

Gandhi, who actively engaged in Natal and Transvaal politics, which certainly had an influence on Kasturba's involvement. Secondly, Bai Fatima and Kasturba, with the exception of Valliamma, were mothers of young boys [6]. As the women were arrested, the children were also nurtured by family and friends. Thirdly, in this research, each of the women demonstrated a stoic sense of devotion to the initiative, which in the midst of hardship highlighted their bravery and tenacity. For example, Bai Fatima Sheikh Mehtab refused adamantly to have her fingerprints taken by the police authorities at Volksrust, Valliamma refused an early release from prison despite her ailing health and Kasturba Gandhi challenged Gandhi's apprehension about her frail health and took the decision to participate in the campaign [7].

Ability to sources was one of the many barriers to writing this document. For the time under study, for instance, Indian Opinion, local Indian newspapers carefully reported the struggle on a weekly basis and provided information on some women. Moreover, some important accounts of women's involvement were also given by Gandhi in Satyagraha in South Africa. Attempts to obtain more information on the early life of Mrs. Bai Fatima Sheikh Mehtab, for example, were not entirely successful. Nevertheless, information about her through newspapers, personal letters and secondary sources shed light on her personal history as an Islamic woman and her position as a family individual.

### **MRS BAI FATIMA SHEIK MEHTAB**

Mrs. Bai Fatima Sheikh Mehtab was the wife of Sheikh Mehtab, a Muslim-speaking Gujarati resident of Durban. A study of Gandhi's early life indicates that Mehtab and Gandhi were childhood friends in Rajkot, Gujarat, and were neighbours. Given the lack of knowledge, it is difficult to determine their formative years in colonial Natal regarding the early lives of Mehtab and his wife. Indian Opinion, however, ran a poem competition on their hardships during the days of the Satyagraha movement [8]. Mehtab submitted an entry, but he did not succeed, even though his poem was published in the newspaper.

She was confronted, according to newspaper accounts, by the brave actions of Indian women in the settlements of Transvaal and Phoenix, who were vigorously resisting the authorities as early as September 1913. On October 8, 1913, Mr. Bai Fatima, accompanied by his seven-year-old son, his mother, Mrs. Hanifa Bibi, and his personal assistant, left Durban for Volksrust (the Natal-Transvaal border) to cross the Natal border without permission. The 1912 Immigration Restriction Act prohibited crossing between provinces without permits. Six days later, October 14, Bai Fatima and Hanifa Bibi were arrested, tried and sentenced in Volksrust to three months imprisonment with hard labor in Pietermaritzburg, while Mr Akoon was imprisoned at the Point in Durban. During Bai Fatima's arrest, she was called to give her finger prints for contravening the provincial immigration laws. Newspaper reports, (Indian Opinion 1913: November 26) recall the manner in which Mrs Bai Fatima Mehtab was treated [9].

The two women were honoured with garlands and bouquets of flowers upon their release. Outside the Pietermaritzburg jail, a huge crowd of traders, local community members and Satyagraha supporters waited to receive them. Among them were a number of women who formed the core group of women in the Satyagraha movement in Durban and the Transvaal. Mrs. Mehtab and Mrs. Hanifa Bibi, her mother, boarded a train for central Durban. They were taken to 110 Field Street on arrival, the home of Parsee Rustomjee, a wealthy Durban merchant. Here the women

received further accolades from local Indian organizations and women's groups. Amongst them were, the Zoroastrian Anjuman (represented by Rustomjee), the Transvaal Indian Women's Association, represented by Sonia Schlesin, and the Natal Indian Association (Indian Opinion January 1914).

## CONCLUSION

The three biographies reveal the various personal and physical challenges endured in the Satyagraha struggle by individual women. At the tender age of 16, Valliamma, a teen, eagerly volunteered and dedicated her life for a noble cause. For Valliamma, it is important to remember that the £ 3 tax or the Searle judgement did not affect her. She was fighting for the honour of the "motherland" of South Africa, her motherland. Gandhi paid tribute to the courageous efforts of Nagappaen and Valliamma and stated: "They had no idea of their Motherland (India); to them South Africa was their Motherland; that it was a sacred fight, a religious fight, a fight for truth" (The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi 1964: 487). Mrs Bai Fatima Mehtab was forcibly separated from her young son and imprisoned. Mrs Kasturba Gandhi also a mother, challenged her spouse into participation, and courted arrest. Participation in the struggle was not based on familial loyalty but a deep sense of commitment to equality and justice. Neither was the women afraid to court arrest nor suffer the consequences of their actions.

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