

Rethinking Gender and Agency in the Satyagraha Movement of 1913

Kalpana Hiralal

Department of History, University of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa
E-mail: hiralalk@ukzn.ac.za

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ABSTRACT The paper is an assessment of women's agency in the Satyagraha movement of 1913 in Natal, South Africa, through the biographical accounts of three Indian women.¹ The campaign was fought against discriminatory measures that challenged the status of Indian wives in South Africa and imposed a £3 poll tax on ex-indentured laborers. Well over 20 000 men and women participated in this struggle. By profiling the lives of Mrs Bai Fatima Sheikh Mehtab, Miss Valliamma Munuswami Mudliar and Mrs Kasturba Gandhi, my purpose here is not only to illuminate the multiple personal and physical challenges women endured in the struggle, but simultaneously reflect some Indian women's contribution to decision-making and public participation.

INTRODUCTION

The 1913 Satyagraha movement, also described as the "1913 strike" (Swan 1984), was the largest mobilization of Indians in South Africa prior to the outbreak of the First World War. The movement was a response to certain discriminatory measures instituted by the colonial authorities against people of Indian origin residing in South Africa. The first grievance was the £3 tax in 1895. Indentured Indians arrived as part of the organized laboring system to Natal in 1860. Many at the end of their five year term refused to indenture and sought alternate ways to sustain 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. The poll tax proved to be irksome for many ex-indentured laborers who could not afford the tax and were subsequently forced to re-indenture. The Hon. G. K. Gokhale, member of the Viceroy's Legislative Council and a prominent public leader in India surmised the impact of the act: "This cruel impost caused enormous suffering, resulted in breaking up families, and driving men to crime and women to a life of shame" (Joshi 1942: 55). The second grievance, the non-recognition of Indian marriages, rallied the support of Indian women. 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' (Hiralal 2009; *Indian Opinion*, May 1913). 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 (Hiralal 2009).

In writing this paper my aim is to make Indian women in the early part of the twentieth century visible, particularly their political participation and contribution for the period under examination. Studies on the Satyagraha campaign of 1913 have often illuminated the role of Gandhi and the indentured workers, focusing almost exclusively on the male contribution, thereby marginalizing women's efforts (Beall and North Coombes 1983; Swan 1984). Recent publications on indentured Indians during this period (Desai and Vahed 2007), are limited in their analysis around women's political experiences. This traditional invisibility of women in historical analysis, has to some extent been rectified by two recent publications (Mongia 2006; Hiralal 2009). 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 (Mongia 2006), 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 defence of the honour of Indian women that was seen as coterminous with the honour of the Indian nation” (Mongia 2006). 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 ideo-logical 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 (Hiralal 2009).

This paper goes one step further, in that via biographical accounts of three women, it attempts to analyze and revisit certain historical events, in not only acknowledging women’s struggle, but to point out the hazardous nature of women’s political journey during this period. It seeks to highlight individual women’s active role in the movement, examining and documenting their diverse political experiences and subsequently expanding and re-shaping our understanding of the 1913 Satyagraha movement. Indian women played a pivotal role in the struggle. They “wrote petitions, defied by-laws of hawking and trading, challenged the immigration laws by moving inter-provincially 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 (Hiralal 2009: 3). *Indian Opinion* (1913 October 29) in its editorial argued:

“The spectacle of Indian women in gaol and of others seeking arrest and imprisonment, for the sake of their cause and country is one that should stir the hearts and souls of Indians throughout South Africa and their brothers and sisters in the Motherland. When the daughters of India set so brilliant an example of fortitude and self-reliance, the end of the struggle may be said to be in sight.”

The three women in this study were chosen for the following reasons. Firstly, they reflect experiences of women from diverse linguistic, religious and political histories. Mrs Bai Fatima Sheikh Mehtab was a Gujarati speaking Muslim. Her husband, Sheikh Mehtab was a childhood

friend of Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi and a school teacher. When men and women resisters (*satyagrahis*) were released from prison, Sheikh Mehtab would take his students to the welcome ceremonies to sing songs. 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. Moreover, Valliamma was not only not affected by the Searle judgment or £3 tax, but she fought for the honor of her “motherland”. Kasturba Gandhi, was the wife of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who was actively involved in politics in Natal and the Transvaal, which undoubtedly impacted on Kasturba’s participation. Secondly, with the exception of Valliamma, Bai Fatima and Kasturba were mothers of young boys. The children were often nurtured by family and friends when the women were arrested. Thirdly, each of the women in this study displayed a stoic sense of commitment to the campaign, which highlighted their courage and tenacity in the midst of adversity. 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.

One of the many challenges writing this paper was the access to sources. Local Indian newspapers for the period under review, for example, *Indian Opinion*, meticulously documented the struggle on a weekly basis and provided information on certain women. In addition, Gandhi in *Satyagraha in South Africa* also provided some interesting accounts of women’s participation. Attempts at securing more information, for example, on the early life of Mrs Bai Fatima Sheikh Mehtab were not entirely successful. However information on her through newspapers, personal letters and secondary sources had shed light on her personal background as a woman of the Islamic faith and her position as a family person.

Mrs Bai Fatima Sheikh Mehtab

Mrs Bai Fatima Sheikh Mehtab was the wife of Sheikh Mehtab who was a Gujarati speaking

Muslim who resided in Durban. A perusal of Gandhi's early life suggests that Mehtab and Gandhi were childhood friends and were neighbors in Rajkot, Gujarat. Given the paucity of information, on the early lives of Mehtab and his wife, it is difficult to ascertain their formative years in colonial Natal. However, during the days of the Satyagraha movement, *Indian Opinion* ran a poem competition on their struggles. Mehtab, submitted an entry, but he was unsuccessful, although the newspaper published his poem.

Bai Fatima entered the struggle in October 1913. According to newspaper reports she was challenged by the courageous activities of the Indian women in the Transvaal and Phoenix settlement, who were actively challenging the authorities as early as September 1913. Bai Fatima, accompanied by her seven year old son, her mother, Mrs Hanifa Bibi and personal attendant, Mr Akoon left Durban on October 8, 1913 for Volksrust, (the border between Natal and the Transvaal), to cross the Natal border without permits. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1912 forbade interprovincial crossing 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:

"...the Sergeant ...desired the lady (Mrs Bai Fatima Mehtab) to give her finger impressions. This she declined to do so, whereupon the officer roughly addressed her, seized her by the arm and pushed her forward so that she almost fell."

This incident was condemned by the British Indian Association, an organization representing the Indians in the Transvaal. They vehemently opposed the manner in which Mrs Bai Fatima Mehtab was treated along with other prisoners of the Satyagraha movement. The Association demanded an immediate investigation on the incident. In response the District Commandant of Police at Wakkerstroom who made an inquiry into the matter responded as follows (*Indian Opinion* 1913 November 26):

"...that the Sergeant asked Mrs Mehtab to give her thumb impression, but she did not appear to understand what was wanted. The

Sergeant took hold of her wrist to take her thumb impression, but when she understood what was required; she pulled her hand away, and was not pushed as stated."

This incident clearly demonstrates two issues. Firstly, the maltreatment meted out to some women prisoners by police officers and secondly, the defiant attitude and actions of Indian women during the Satyagraha movement. During Bai Fatima's arrest, her young son was prevented from accompanying his mother and grandmother. The magistrate did not convict Bai Fatima's son but instead entrusted him in the care of Amod Badat, a prominent merchant residing in Volksrust, pending the arrival of his father from Durban. Badat in October 1913 wrote to Gandhi, at the Phoenix settlement, seeking advice on Mehtab's son. He wrote: "3 persons from Mehtab family including servant but without children have been sentenced to jail for 3 months. The Magistrate asks me to take back the boy. I have not done so, so far. Please let me know what I should do in that respect" (Letter courtesy of ES Reddy). Bai Fatima together with her mother, Mrs Hanifa Bibi spent almost three months incarcerated at the Pietermaritzburg prison. On January 12, 1914, at 7:30 am, Bai Fatima, and her mother were released from prison.

On their release the two women were honored with garlands and bouquets of flowers. A large crowd, comprising of merchants, local community members and Satyagraha supporters waited outside the Pietermaritzburg prison to receive them. Among them were a number of women who constituted the core group of female participants in the Satyagraha movement in Durban and the Transvaal.³ Mrs Mehtab and her mother Mrs Hanifa Bibi boarded a train for central Durban. On arrival they were taken to 110 Field Street, home of Parsee Rustomjee, a wealthy merchant in Durban. 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).

Miss Valliamma Munuswami Mudliar (1898-1914)

".. Valliamma's service is imperishable....the name of Valliamma will live in the history of South

African Satyagraha as long as India lives" (Gandhi 1961: 284).

Valliamma, is sometimes described as a "child martyr" because of her tragic death at the tender age of 16 during the campaign. She was born in Johannesburg in 1898 and was the eldest daughter of Mr Munuswami Mudliar and Mangalam Mudliar of Mooi Street, Dornfontein in Johannesburg. Her father was a fresh produce hawker and was active in the resistance movements. Both Valliamma's parents were actively involved in the 1913 Satyagraha struggle and were subsequently imprisoned. She attended the local government primary school in Dornfontein. As a young girl Valliamma was influenced by her parents' involvement in political activities. She accompanied her father to several political meetings, which were either chaired by Gandhi or Thambi Naidoo⁴, a prominent political activist. Against this background Valliamma was well aware of the hardships of the Indian community and heeded the call of the struggle.

On 29 October 1913, Valliamma, together with 10 other Indian women, mainly of Tamil and Telugu descent, in their early 20s and 30s, (six of whom had their infant children with them), left their residences in the Transvaal. Their aim was to defy the provincial immigration laws and risk arrest. They first departed for Vilgoen's Drift, in the Orange Free State, where Indians were barred from residing, trading or entering the province (Gandhi 1961). Hermann Kallenbach, a German sympathetic to the Indian struggle accompanied the women on their journey. At Vilgoen's Drift, the local authorities failed to arrest the women, who later decided to enter Vereeniging, a small town near Johannesburg. Here, they resorted to hawking fresh fruit and vegetables, without permits. Local Indian merchants, such as Mr Asvat Bharoochi and his wife, provided the women with accommodation, clothing and transport (Hiralal 2009).

Despite their attempts at defying municipal by-laws, they were not arrested. They later decided to cross the Natal border. At Volksrust they were detained temporarily by the authorities and later released (*Indian Opinion* October 1913, Hiralal 2009). The women then boarded a train to the Natal Midlands and arrived at the coal mining district of Newcastle. Here the local Indian population supported their efforts. They were provided with free boarding and lodging. For example Mrs D. Lazarus and her sister Miss

Thomas tended to the needs and comforts of the women resisters. In fact the house of Mrs Lazarus became a "dharmshala⁵ for satyagrahis. Food had to be cooked there for hundreds of indentured labourers" (Reddy and Gandhi 1993:12). The women satyagrahis aim was to mobilize the indentured workers and their families on the mines and plantations to support the struggle. Gandhi recalls their efforts in a telegram dated 21 October 1913 to Gokhale: "...some bravest women desperately courting arrest. Strike due largely their influence. They not having been arrested crossing border have been moving among labourers."⁶ (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi 1964: 244). Valliamma together with the women of her group, acted as 'advisers' and provided moral support and mentorship to strikers' families (Hiralal 2009; *Indian Opinion*, October 1913). They formed part of the leadership, and to coalesce support they accompanied several veteran passive resisters, among them Thambi Naidoo and Albert Christopher.⁷ They visited several mines in the areas, chatted with the wives of Indian laborers to canvass support, raised the issue of the £3 tax and its hardships on the Indian community and the non-recognition of Indian marriages (Hiralal 2009). Gandhi recalls their efforts: "...the mere presence of these women was like a lighted match-stick to dry fuel. Women who had never before slept except on soft beds and had seldom so much as opened their mouths, now delivered public speeches among the indentured labourers." (Reddy and Gandhi 1993: 12). In another instant Gandhi wrote "Their influence spread like wildfire. The pathetic story of the wrongs heaped up by the £3 tax touched the labourers....I was not prepared for this marvelous awakening..." (Gandhi 1961: 282). However, the presence of the women resisters on the mines became a nuisance to the authorities and they were subsequently arrested as "vagabonds". In a telegram dated 22 October 1913 Gandhi wrote to Gokhale: "Eleven⁸ women with six babies referred to (in) yesterdays cable sentenced three months hard labor as vagrants whilst speaking strikers Newcastle."⁹ (Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi 1964: 245). Valliamma was not included in the group of eleven women who were arrested. Nevertheless, the strike spread to many mines and later into the plantations along the coast, mobilizing 60 000 workers in the process. Within a few weeks the "Great March" of 2,221 men, women and children from Charlestown to Balfour, the confinement and

beatings of workers in mine compounds, the imprisonment of many activists, created an uproar in India. Subsequently the South African Government was forced to negotiate a settlement with Gandhi (Hiralal 2009).

Valliamma's father, Munuswami, could not participate in the last phase of the Satyagraha struggle because of ill-health. Valliamma and her mother re-crossed the border and were convicted at Volksrust on the 22nd December 1913. She was sentenced to three months imprisonment with hard labor in Pietermaritzburg. Her co-prisoner was Kasturba Gandhi, who also served a similar sentence. Valliamma during her incarceration fell ill and her condition in prison deteriorated. The prison authorities offered her an early release on medical grounds but she refused. On 11 January 1914, she was released from prison, after the provisional agreement between General Smuts and Gandhi. However, by then, her health had worsened. Gandhi (1961: 283-284) writing in *Satyagraha* in South Africa, recalls his last meeting with her:

"How can I forget her.....She was confined to bed when I met her". Valliamma, you do not repent of your having gone to jail? I asked. 'Repent? I am even now ready to go to jail again if I am arrested' said Valliamma. "But what if it results in your death?" I pursued. 'I do not mind it. Who would not love to die for one's motherland?' was the reply".

Indian Opinion (1914: July 29) recalls Gandhi's meeting with Valliamma:

"Gandhi recalled a scene when he left Durban and when he had paid a hurried visit with Mr Polak to see Valliamma...that was the most afflicting scene. She was just coming out. Her mother was there. Her mother, most loving and attentive, thought that she must hurry forward He felt guilty that there was any hurry at the time, but she was brought out. She was almost in swoon. They three carried her in the best manner they could. There was no feather mattress, no stretcher, in the room where she lay, simply the wooden floor; not that they were cruel to her, but their discipline was so rigorous and exacting that those who were in immediate charge, as Thambi Naidoo, would not think of having any other things or taking any other things. That was her lot ... inside and outside prison, that was her spirit, that was the spirit also he well remembered of the young lady by her side in the same condition, who had just been delivered of a child".

Valliamma arrived home in Johannesburg with her mother on 20th February 1914. She died two days later on 22nd February 1914. Her funeral took place at 2 p.m., barely a few hours after her death, and approximately 60 carriages and a large concourse on foot followed the body to the burial site in Johannesburg. Wreaths were sent by several Indian organizations and about 400 Indians were present at her graveside. In the aftermath of her death, in March 1914, several local Indian organizations paid tribute to her courage and bravery and her sterling contribution to the Satyagraha struggle. Amongst them were the Tamil Benefit Society in Johannesburg, the Germiston Indian Association, the Patidar Society, and the Indian Women's Association. The latter held a special meeting, comprising of 150 women, 25 of whom travelled especially from Germiston to Johannesburg to attend this special meeting. The British Indian Association in the presence of 400 people under the Chairmanship of Mr Ahmed Cachalia passed resolutions of condolence and appreciation. Mr Bhawani Dayal, also an activist in the struggle, recited a poem in her memory. The Hindu Women's Sabha of Durban passed a resolution expressing profound grief at the death of a "beloved sister, a loyal and devoted passive resister" (*Indian Opinion* March 1914). Valliamma also received a posthumous standing ovation during an anniversary celebration of the Durban Indian Women's Association (*Indian Opinion* March 1914).

In July 1914, just prior to his departure for London, Gandhi and Kasturba attended the unveiling of a memorial stone ceremony at Braamfontein cemetery, in honor of Valliamma and another teenager martyr, Sammy Nagappaen Padayachy. Nagappaen was sentenced to 10 days hard labor on 21st June 1909 during the first Satyagraha campaign. He died at the age of 20 on 6 July 1909 of pneumonia contracted in the Johannesburg – Pretoria road-camp prison. The ceremony was witnessed by several local dignitaries and supporters of the 1913 struggle (Pillay 2006; *Indian Opinion* July 1914). Amongst them were Rev Phillips, Mr M. K. Gandhi, Mrs Kasturba Gandhi, Mr Kallenbach, Mr and Mrs Polak, Miss Schlesin, Mr C.E. Nelson, Mr R. R. Smith and others. Mrs Phillips, wife of Rev C. Phillips paid tribute to the young martyrs (*Indian Opinion* 1914 : July 29):

"I esteem it a great honor to be permitted to unveil these monuments to-day. The two to whom

they are erected, Nagappan and Valiamma, bravely died in a brave fight. They counted not their lives dear unto themselves, but nobly testified by their sufferings that goodness is better than gold..... honor than ease, and truth than trade.It is because our sister and brother acted in this spirit that we have met to do honor to them to-day. They have not died in vain. By their sufferings and death they have helped to bring about the settlement in which we all rejoice to-day....They died for us and their patience, self-denial and devotion have become ours. These monuments you have raised should be the least part of the honor we do them. They should live again in lives made better by what they have endured”.

The memorial stones inscriptions were engraved in Tamil, English and Gujarati. The inscriptions on Valliamma’s memorial stone read:

In Loving Memory to our Sister

VALLIAMALMUNUSAMY

who died on the 22nd February, 1914,

Aged 17 years Of illness contracted in the Maritzburg gaol to which she went as a Passive Resister.

In memory of Valliamma, and her contribution to the struggle, the local Indian community in Johannesburg, set up a Trust, and a hall named in her honor was built in Suikerbos Street, Lenasia, a predominantly Indian township, located on the outskirts of Johannesburg. In India, a high school was built in Tamil Nadu called, The Valliamma’s High School. A village Valliamma Nagar in Thillayadu, in Tamil Nadu was named in her honor. In 1982 a co-operative Society Building, Tamil Nadu Handloom Weavers Co-operative Society (Co-Optex) in Madras was named “Thillaiyadi Valliammai Maligai”. The foundation stone for the five-story building was inaugurated by M.G Ramachandran, Chief Minister of State of Tamil Nadu. On 20th April 1997 a memorial ceremony was held at the Braamfontein Cemetery in Johannesburg, honoring the two young martyrs, Valliamma and Nagappaen. The gathering was addressed by the Indian High Commissioner to South Africa, Gopalkrishna Gandhi. Amongst those present were well known South African veteran political activists and politicians, such as Walter Sisulu, Mac Maharaj and then Johannesburg mayor Isaac Mofase. Gopalkrishna Gandhi paid tribute to Valliamma (Pillay 2006: 24):

“You were no longer a child, and not yet a woman and you had the will to dare, the will to

die.I am reminded particularly today of one person who was with you in the Maritzburg jail: Kasturba. Both of you were prisoners together and she too became a martyr. Coincidentally, she was to die on the very same date, February 22, exactly 30 years later in 1944. Both of you were Maritzburg co-prisoners and your deaths are not deaths, but proclamations of the indomitable spirit of Satyagraha.”

Valliamma’s great nephew, Kevin Moonsamy of Johannesburg stated (as quoted in Pillay 2006: 23):

“Finally she is being recognized for what she did. She put her life on the line for the future we now have.”

The martyrdom of Valliamma symbolizes the heroic role women played in the Satyagraha movement of 1913. Indeed, one of the greatest achievements of Gandhi in South Africa and later in India was to bring women into the political movement and into the resistance. Valliamma’s heroism is also symbolic of the role of the “common” people in the struggle. The fact remains that the heroism of the laborers, the women and the children born in South Africa was crucial. In August 1914, at a reception in London, Gandhi stated (Reddy and Gandhi 1993: 5):

“There were 20,000 strikers who left their tools and work because there was something in the air... These men and women are the salt of India; on them will be built the Indian nation that is to be. We are poor mortals before these heroes and heroines.”

Kasturba Gandhi (1869-1944)

Kasturba Kapadia Gandhi was born 11th April 1869 in Porbandar, in the State of Kathiawar in Gujarat, India. Her parents were Gokaldas and Vrajkunwerba Makanji who were merchants by profession. She did not receive any formal education, but as tradition dictated, groomed by her mother in the art of domestic chores. Engaged to Gandhi at the age of seven and married at 13, she was six months older than her spouse (Tarlo 1997). Kasturba and Gandhi were married in May 1882 and she immediately moved to her new marital home. Kasturba gave birth to Harilal in 1888 and Manilal in 1892. In April 1893 Gandhi sailed for South Africa, Kasturba joined him in November 1896, accompanied by her two children and Gandhi’s ten year old nephew. Kasturba was only 27 years old and her travel to colonial Natal, South Africa was her maiden voyage. Interesting,

Kasturba had never travelled outside the borders of her natal home. This was her first sea voyage outside India. Gandhi and Kasturba sailed on the *Courland*, but on arrival were prevented from disembarking. Their ship together with the *Naderi*, which also carried Indian passengers, was quarantined due to an outbreak of plague in Bombay. Durban port authorities claimed the two ships posed a health risk. This, however, was merely an excuse to delay the entry of free Indians entering the colony at a time when anti-Indian sentiment was rife. Colonial public opinion feared an "Asiatic Invasion" arriving and competing for labor in the colony (Hiralal 1992). Gandhi, realizing the seriousness of the situation advised Kasturba to disembark the ship with their children. Kasturba was adamant and refused, but later she found herself pushed onto the gangplank with no alternative but to hold on to little Manilal's hand and descend (Meer 1970). During her early years in Natal, Gandhi became Kasturba's tutor educating her about the political situation of the country. She in turn taught Gandhi about ahimsa, self-restraint and fearlessness. In the following 16 years Kasturba transformed herself from an orthodox, humble, unassuming wife and mother into a strong leader and social activist in her own right. During the first Satyagraha campaign of 1907-1908, Gandhi was busy engaged in political work, while Kasturba managed and supervised the settlement in Phoenix in Durban. During Gandhi's incarceration for two months in January 1908, Kasturba in solidarity with her husband, lived on a diet of unsalted, unsweetened, unflavored cornmeal mush or 'mealie pap' (Gandhi 1961). In the process Kasturba's health deteriorated. Gandhi, writing from Volksrust prison in 1908 was at pains about her health. He wrote (as quoted in Meer 1970):

"Beloved Kasturba,

Mr West had telegraphed today about your health. A great pain nibbles my heart. I am full of sorrow yet I cannot come and serve you. I have given myself to Satyagraha, and so may not pay the fine. If you keep a little courage, and discipline your diet, you will get better. But, if in keeping with my fate, you are parted from me during my lifetime, and in my absence, then do not consider this a misfortune. My love for you is so great that even if you were to die, you will ever be alive in my heart. Your soul is eternal. I will never marry again."

During the outbreak of the Zulu rebellion¹⁰ in Natal in 1906, Gandhi recruited a small stretcher bearer corps to assist the wounded. Kasturba was anxious about Gandhi's safety. Prabhudas, a family relative residing with the Gandhi family in Natal, recalls Kasturba's anxieties (as mentioned in Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2004: 68):

"When I read about the Zulu people's rebellion, the anxious face of Kasturba comes before my eyes."

During the 1913 Satyagraha campaign Kasturba was eager to participate in the struggle once she understood the contents and implications of the Searle judgment, which invalidated all Hindu and Muslim marriages. Kasturba was incensed and asked Gandhi: "Am I your wife or not? I am not your wife if this decision stands, and if I am not your wife, I am not a woman of any true womanhood in the estimation of my own sex, and my children are illegitimate.....Then I am not your wife, according to the laws of this country". Gandhi agreed and added 'their children were not their heirs'. Kasturba replied, "Let us go to India". Gandhi replied that this would be cowardly. Kasturba replied "Could I not then join the struggle and be imprisoned myself?" (Gandhi 1961: 280-281). In fact Gandhi initially approached the women at Tolstoy Farm to join the struggle. The women at Tolstoy Farm were of Tamil and Telugu descent and of indentured origin and had experienced hardships as laborers (Gandhi 1961; Hiralal 2009). Kasturba was initially disappointed that Gandhi did not confide in her about his plans of enlisting the support of the settlers on the Phoenix settlement. She confronted her husband and said (see Gandhi 1961: 280):

"I am sorry that you are not telling me about this. What defect is there in me which disqualifies me for jail? I also wish to take the path to which you are inviting the others."

Gandhi explained to Kasturba that she had to make an independent decision regarding her participation in the struggle. He was anxious about the state of her health and her ability to sustain a grueling struggle which meant the possibility of imprisonment. Gandhi (1961: 280) stated:

"If I asked you, you might be inclined to go just for the sake of complying with my request. And then if you began to tremble in the law court or were terrified by hardships in jail, I could not find fault with you, but how would it stand with me? How could I then harbor you or look the world in the face? It is fears like these which have prevented me from asking you to court jail."

Kasturba responded:

“You may have nothing to do with me, if being unable to stand jail I secure my release by an apology. If you can endure hardships and so can my boys, why cannot I? I am bound to join the struggle.....I am fully determined.”

Kasturba finally decided to join the struggle. She was among 16 individuals, including four women, who constituted the pioneer party that departed from Phoenix settlement in September 1913. They took the train from Central Station in Durban, proceeding to Volksrust “all travelling third class, taking with them only the most necessary things” (*Indian Opinion* September 1913). Parsee Rustomjee provided baskets of fresh fruit for the travelers on their journey. Their aim was to defy the immigration laws and cross the Transvaal border at Volksrust. The names of the four women were: Mrs. Kasturba Gandhi, Mrs. Jayakunvar Manilal Mrs. Kashi Chhaganlal Gandhi and Mrs. Santok Maganlal Gandhi. The pioneer party reached their destination, and were arrested in Volksrust and charged on 18th September 1913 under Section 4 of the Immigration Restriction Act of 1913, as ‘prohibited immigrants’ (*Indian Opinion*: October 1913; Gandhi 1961). However, the authorities at Volksrust had no accommodation at the police station for the arrested resisters. Subsequently, local Indian merchants among them Mr Valli Peerbhoy and his wife; A. M Badat, Mr S. M. Munshi and Mrs G. A. Bayat provided hospitality in the form of accommodation and food (Hiralal 2009; *Indian Opinion*, September 1913 and October 1913).

On the 23rd September 1913, Kasturba and members of her travelling party were sentenced to three months of hard labor at the Pietermaritzburg prison. Kasturba refused to pay the £5 fine and opted for imprisonment. Women were not given preferential treatment and faced many difficulties in prison. Prison food was ‘of the worst quality’. Staple food such as beans was ‘undercooked’ and at times ‘cockroaches and maggots found in food’ (Gandhi 1961: 283; *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*: 287). Kasturba helped the younger women to survive the hard conditions of prison life. She led them in prayers every evening and offered moral support to the younger women inmates. Kasturba was finally released in December 1913. Gandhi received a frail Kasturba outside the Pietermaritzburg prison. In June 1914 the Indian Relief Bill was passed resulting in the abolition of the £3 poll tax, recognition of Hindu

and Muslim marriages, and relaxation of immigration laws. On the 18th July 1914 Kasturba and her husband sailed for London.

In January 1915, Gandhi and Kasturba arrived in Bombay to a tumultuous welcome. Kasturba entrenched herself as the devoted partner and strong leader in the fight for India’s political emancipation from the British. Kasturba died while imprisoned in the Aga Khan Palace, in Poona, India, on March 22nd 1944. In a memorial letter, Hermann Kallenbach stated:

“In my memory is the date of the 22nd December 1913, when, with Babu (Gandhi) and others, we met Mrs Gandhi at Pietermaritzburg Gaol. She was liberated after a term of imprisonment. It was pathetic to see the small frail figure passing through the prison gates, having undergone so much suffering but carrying herself with so much self-respect and bearing.”

CONCLUSION

The three biographies reveal the multiple personal and physical challenges individual women endured in the Satyagraha struggle. Valliamma, a teenager, eagerly volunteered at the tender age of 16 and sacrificed her life for a noble cause. For Valliamma it is significant to note that she was not affected by the £3 tax or the Searle judgment. She was fighting for the honor of the “motherland”, *her motherland, South Africa*. Gandhi paying tribute to Nagappaen and Valliamma’s courageous efforts 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 were the women afraid to court arrest nor suffer the consequences of their actions. Gandhi wrote: “In this same struggle we may note, women who had never done any manual work before went around hawking and labored as washerwomen in jails” (Reddy and Gandhi 1993: 50). Imprisonment did not deter their efforts; on the contrary it strengthened their resolve. These examples,

demonstrates their courageous character and dispels the myth of the “passive” and “docile” Indian women in the Diaspora. As wives, mothers and daughters they challenged colonial and traditional patriarchy and exercised their agency to assert their gendered identities and create their own political space. Their participation and experiences in the struggle are indicative of the enduring significance of personal struggles of Indian women during this period. The three women in their personal capacity reflected the “indomitable spirit of Satyagraha”.

NOTES

- 1 Two of the three women were born in India and one in South Africa. Henceforth “Indian women” is used as a common term of reference not only of the three women discussed here but also of others.
- 2 In this paper I was successful in tracing the date of birth and death of Valliamma and Kasturba but was unsuccessful in providing this information with reference to Mrs Bai Fatima Sheikh Mehtab.
- 3 Among the individuals present were Amod Bhayat, the female supporters constituted members of the pioneer group, from the Phoenix settlement, including Mrs. Maganlal Gandhi and Mrs Jaikunwar Manilal, others included, Mrs. Govindoo, Miss Ada West, Miss Fatima, Mr. Maganlal Gandhi, Mrs. Padamsing, Mrs Jethan Bai, Mrs. S. Maharaj, Mrs. Ramgoolam, Mrs. Chinsammy Naidoo and Miss Kailas Moodley.
- 4 Govindasamy Kristnasamy Naidoo was born in 1875 in Mauritius. He came to South Africa in 1889 and settled in Johannesburg in 1892. He was fluent in four languages Tamil, Hindi, Telugu and Creole. He was well known as “Thambi”, and an admirer and supporter of Gandhi. He was at the forefront of the Satyagraha movement and imprisoned several times. Gandhi stated that “the name of Thambi Naidoo must ever remain as one of the front rank in the history of Satyagraha in South Africa” His wife Veeramal, was one of the group of 11 women from the Transvaal who courted arrest in the 1913 Satyagraha movement.
- 5 Dharmasala”- means house of benevolence and charity
- 6 Cited verbatim from telegram dated 21 October 1913. Source: Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. XII, p.244.
- 7 Albert Christopher, actively participated in the Satyagraha movement of 1913. He later became an advocate and took a lead in the formation of the South African Indian Congress. He was a prominent leader of the Indian community for many years.
- 8 The eleven women were: Mrs Bhavani Dayal Mrs Thambi Naidoo, Mrs N Pillay Mrs KM Pillay, Mrs AP Naidoo, Mrs PK Naidoo, Mrs KC Pillay Mrs NS Pillay, Mrs Ramalingam Miss M Pillay Miss MB Pillay.
- 9 Cited verbatim from telegram dated 22 October 1913. Source: Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. XII, p.245.
- 10 Also known as the Bambatha Uprising, a Zulu revolt against British rule and taxation in Natal, in 1906. The revolt was led by Bambatha Ka Mancinza, leader of the amaZondi tribe who lived in the Mpanza Valley, a district near Greytown in Kwazulu/Natal.

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