

**Report on the CoHaB IDC Interdisciplinary International Conference on  
A Mahatma in Waiting: The Diasporic Gandhi Re-visited on His 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary  
5-6 February 2019**

The CoHaB Indian Diaspora Centre, University of Mumbai, had organised an interdisciplinary international conference on *A Mahatma in Waiting: The Diasporic Gandhi Re-visited on His 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary* on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> February 2019 to commemorate the 150 years of the Mahatma's birth. CoHaB IDC had organised this conference primarily to celebrate the diasporic Gandhi's return to India from South Africa. The conference was held at the Kalina Campus of the University of Mumbai.

This conference thus sought to traverse the time and space in which Gandhi attained his life experiences and in which he practised and perfected his political and personal philosophies that contributed not just to his own growth, but to the evolution of India from a colony into an independent nation. His South African diaspora of 20 long years and the lessons he learnt there in the political and spiritual fields, shaped this man's later life and is hence crucial to an understanding of how a man became a Mahatma.

The conference was inaugurated on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2019 in the presence of His Excellency Ramavtar Goenka, Honorary Consul General of Kenya. CoHaB IDC was privileged and honoured to have His Excellency at the inaugural from a country that was influenced by Gandhi's ideologies. Mr. Pheroze Nowrojee, Lawyer, Author and Human Rights Advocate, Nairobi, Kenya delivered the Inaugural Address.

Also gracing us with his presence on both the days of the conference was Shri. Ramdas Bhatkal, Author, Classical Vocalist and Managing Director, Popular Prakashan Pvt. Ltd. Shri Bhatkal has written on Gandhi and Kasturba and edited Gandhi's works.



**(l-r): Mr. Pheroze Nowrojee Inaugural Speaker, Shri. Ramavtar Goenka, Honorary Consul General of Kenya Chief Guest, Professor Nilufer Bharucha, Director, CoHaB IDC**

All the presentations at the conference were made by invited keynote speakers from India and abroad who spoke on various aspects of Gandhi in Dispora.

The first keynote session, chaired by Professor Nilufer Bharucha (Director and Scientist-in-Charge, CoHaB IDC), had four papers presented by speakers from Kenya, South Africa and India. The first paper of the conference was presented by noted human rights lawyer and author from Kenya Mr. Pheroze Nowrojee. His paper was entitled 'Gandhi's Kenya Campaign for the Equal Treatment of Kenya Indians: 1919-1929.' Nowrojee discussed how Gandhi's political campaign in Kenya, 1919 - 1929 for the equal treatment of the Kenya Indians is an insufficiently acknowledged theatre of one of his manifold political operations. Nowrojee spoke about how the campaign was not a clutch of occasional forays but a sustained campaign over several years which, though it failed, generated outcomes which were decisive turning points in Indian and Kenyan history. He also discussed how the campaign impacted on the concept and demise of the British Empire. Nowrojee also pointed out how the Kenya campaign played a role in the personal transformation of Gandhi from a diasporic hero to a national leader and then to an international leader as, with Nehru, the architects and agents of global decolonization.



**Mr. Pheroze Nowrojee presenting his paper**

Nowrojee's paper was followed by a presentation by Ms. Kanya Padayachee, ECD Project Coordinator at the Gandhi Development Trust, South Africa. Her paper was entitled, 'Relevance of Gandhi in Africa Today.' Padayachee traced the historiography of Gandhi's twenty-one years in South Africa that encompassed his political and spiritual transformation leading to, *inter alia*, ideas on social reconstruction and passive resistance to oppressive forces. She also spoke about Gandhi's early years of subservience to British imperialism, his use of Indian exclusionary politics and his racist discrimination against African indigenous people. Padayachee further touched upon the recent events and reactions of some radical African leaders in South Africa referring to Gandhi as a tool of colonialism and accusing him of initiating Indians' racist attitude towards Black South Africans, the removal of Gandhi's statue from a Ghana university campus, and, most recently, opposition in Malawi to the erection of a Gandhi statue.



**Ms. Kanya Padayachee presenting her paper**

The third paper in the first keynote session was presented by Professor Vijaya Ramaswamy who has recently retired from the Centre of Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her paper detailed the story of Tamil migrants, their cultural re-creation of the world they had left behind in Tamil Nadu through the prism of the life of a woman satyagrahi –Tillaiyadi Valliyammai. Vijaya spoke of how Gandhi’s clarion call of Satyagraha literally the ‘force of truth’ exemplified his ideal of non-violent passive resistance. Vijaya elaborated on how Tillaiyadi Valliyammai’s ultimate sacrifice along with thousands of Satyagrahis typified the entangled time-scapes of the Tamil community in South Africa and Tamil involvement in the Gandhian Satyagraha in South Africa which began in 1902-3 and ended in the course of a few years leaving Gandhi with a strategy of non-violent non-cooperation that subsequently would prove crucial in Indian’s struggle for independence.



**Professor Vijaya Ramaswamy making her presentation**

Professor Sridhar Rajeswaran’s paper on ‘New Graffiti on a Bleeding Tombstone: Why Now?’ was the last presentation in the first keynote session. Sridhar is an Advisory Board Member of the CoHaB IDC. The paper traversed the times and spaces in which Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi attained his significant life experiences and in which he practiced and perfected his political and personal philosophies that contributed not just to his own growth but to the evolution of India, from a colony into an independent Nation-State. Sridhar spoke of how it was the South African space in which he lived for twenty years, the lessons he learnt there in the political and spiritual fields, and more importantly the prejudices he unlearned, that are crucial to an understanding of the transformation of a man to a Mahatma. His paper observed that as there is always a group of dedicated souls who practice and live what he preached and so is there also new art, pitiless at times, newer perspectives

from sustained scholarship, questioning the recordings of history, indicting him. Sridhar also raised the issue of timing of this questioning/indicting the Mahatma.



**Professor Sridhar Rajeswaran presenting his paper**

Professor Vibhuti Patel from the Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, began the second keynote session with her paper on 'Mahatma Gandhi and Empowerment of Women.' Vibhuti's paper elaborated on how women set aside their traditional roles, came out of seclusion and cast their purdah off to join Gandhi's call for civil disobedience. Her paper discussed how women entered the public domain along with men, and offered satyagraha, and still remained undaunted by police beatings and extreme hardships in prison. She spoke of how Gandhi's influence led illiterate tribal women from the forests to join the freedom movement.



**Professor Vibhuti Patel presenting her paper**

The last paper for the day was presented by Professor Mala Pandurang, Principal, Dr. BMN College, Mumbai, and Ms. Huda Sayyed, Intern at the Gandhi Studies Centre, Dr. BMN College, Mumbai. Their paper was entitled, "'The Good Wife': Kasturba and M.K Gandhi in South Africa.' Mala's paper focussed on the contribution of Kasturba Gandhi in both the domestic and public arena in the 21 years that the couple spent on the African continent. Her paper presented the evolving relationships

between Gandhiji and Kasturba. Mala spoke of how Kasturba uniquely contributed to the philosophy of non-violence and Satyagraha.



(l-r): Ms. Huda Sayyed, Dr.Mala Pandurang and Dr.ChaitraRedkar

The second keynote session was chaired by Dr. Chaitra Redkar from the Department Political Science, SNDT Women's University.

Day two of the conference began with the paper presentation by Dr.Siby Joseph, Institute of Gandhian Studies, Wardha. His paper entitled, 'Approach to Race and Racial Discrimination: An Analytical Study' revisited Gandhi's approach to race and racial discrimination during his fight for the dignity of people of Indian origin in South Africa. His presentation attempted to take into account all major writings as well as actions of Gandhi on these issues which cropped up in the course of his long and eventful life in South Africa.



Dr.Siby Joseph presenting his paper

Dr. Joseph's presentation was followed by Dr. Preeti Shirodkar, Mumbai Educational Trust, MET League of Colleges, Mumbai. Her paper was entitled, "Will The Real Gandhi Please Stand Up?": Reconnecting The Man and The Movement." Preeti attempted to reconnect the personal and the political Gandhi. Her paper discussed Gandhi's pillars of his strength and contribution — *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, which to an extent wrote Indian history, intertwining his story into it, no doubt unfolded

in India; but its seeds were sown, during his tenure in South Africa. Through text and context, the paper attempted to provide for their harmonious co-existence, in the man that was, is and will remain M.K. Gandhi.



**Dr. Preeti Shirodkar making her presentation**

This session was chaired by Dr. Aparajita Biswas, former Head, Centre for African Studies, University of Mumbai.



**(l-r): Dr. Aparajita Biswas and Dr. Siby Joseph**

The fourth keynote session began with the paper presentation by Dr. Renu Modi, Centre for African Studies, University of Mumbai and Dr. Meera Venkatachalam, Gandhi-Mandela Centre, Observer Research Foundation, Mumbai. Their paper entitled, 'Why Gandhi Fell in Africa: Destabilising Narratives of Empire, Decolonisation and Nationhood' discussed the reasons why Africans in particular, have taken objection to the deification of Gandhi, citing the blatantly 'racist' remarks with reference to Black Africans in his diaries and in records of his interactions with the authorities in South Africa during the early decades of the 1900s. Their paper discussed how Africa's internal problems could have been the reason of their reaction to Gandhi and not the man himself.



**Dr.RenuModi and Dr.MeeraVenkatachalam making their presentation**

The fourth keynote session, chaired by Mr. Pheroze Nowrojee, ended with a presentation by Dr. Nishikant Kolge, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. His paper was entitled, 'What the Contemporary Dalit Movement can learn from the Gandhi-Ambedkar Debate.' His paper tried to understand the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate from the Dalit perspective. His paper attempted to make some suggestions from this debate to resolve some of the problems currently faced by the Dalit movement in India.



**Dr. Nishikant Kolge presenting his paper**

The final session of the conference, chaired by Ms. Kanya Padayachee, had paper presentations from Romania and Mauritius. Dr. Roxana Marinescu, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, presented a paper entitled, 'Revisiting Gandhi from a Postcommunist Perspective.' Roxana attempted to revisit Gandhi's philosophical framework on his 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary and discussed how it is relevant to analyse the implications of such repositioning for the postcommunist context. Her paper discussed that Gandhi's fight against British rule and also against all the dominating structures in India of the time, through *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*, need to be re-positioned within a larger 21<sup>st</sup> century context, which now includes other forms of derived or semi-postcolonialism, such as the one in Central and Eastern Europe.



**Dr. Roxana Marinescu presenting her paper**

The final paper of the conference was presented by Dr. Sooshilla Gopaul, Open University, Mauritius. Her paper entitled, 'Gandhi's Influence on Mauritian Literature in English' attempted to observe the diasporic Gandhi through the concept of transfer. Gopaul gave examples of two Mauritian writers, Anand Mulloo and Raj Balkee whose writings were impacted by Gandhi.



**Dr. Sooshilla Gopaul presenting her paper**

The valedictory session ended the two-day conference on a high note. Shri Ramdas Bhatkal gave the Valedictory address where he spoke of his life experiences and influence of Gandhi on him as a person. He ended his speech with a melodious rendering of a *bhajan* composed by him. It was a great honour to be in the company of a man who lives by Gandhian values.

Professor Nilufer Bharucha and Professor Sridhar Rajeswaran, the Directors of the Conference, summed it up and spoke of how enriching it was and that the ideas discussed could be germinated into further research. They also said that the papers presented at the conference would be published as Volume 3 of CoHaB IDC's Diaspora Studies Series.



**(l-r): Professor Sridhar Rajeswaran, Shri. Ramdas Bhatkal and Professor Nilufer Bharucha**

Ms. Kirti Risbud, Research Associate, CoHaB IDC, offered the formal vote of thanks.



M.A.I and II students of the Department of English served as volunteers during the conference.



The conference ended with High Tea...

High Tea ...



