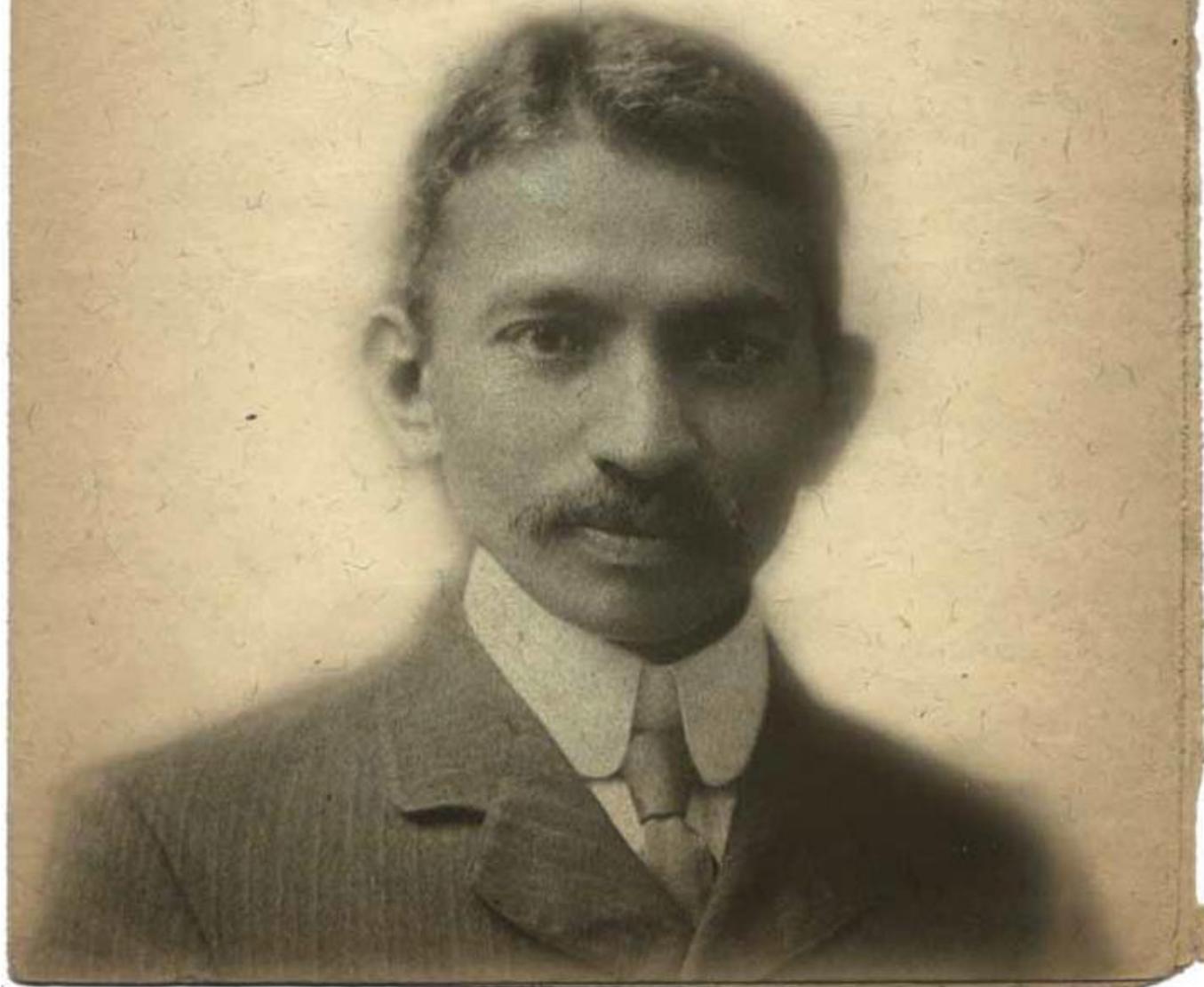


The Indian *opinion*

During his South Africa stay, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi started a multilingual journal aiming to 'advocate' the Indian cause

words | Ramachandra Guha





(Top left and bottom left) Mahatma Gandhi's nephews Chhaganlal and Maganlal (Right) Gandhi's key lieutenant, Thambi Naidoo, addressing a crowd near Durban during 1913 Satyagraha

In 1897-98, when he was based in Natal, Gandhi had thought of starting a newspaper focussing on the Indian question in South Africa. Now, in the summer of 1903, he reactivated the idea, and found two men willing to help him. The first, Mansukhlal Hiralal Nazar, was a widely travelled Gujarati who had studied medicine in Bombay and run a business in London before migrating to South Africa. The second, Madanjit Vyavaharik, was a former school teacher who owned a printing press in Grey Street in Durban. The press printed wedding cards, business cards, menus, account forms, memoranda, circulars, receipt books and so on, in Gujarati, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, Hebrew, Marathi, Sanscrit, French, Zulu, &c. To this already extensive list would now be added a weekly journal of opinion.

Gandhi's collaborators were based in Durban, the centre of Indian life in South Africa. Vyavaharik's task now was to raise money from

merchants and acquire type in the four languages the weekly would print in – English, Gujarati, Hindi and Tamil. Nazar's job was to plan each issue, arrange for articles and translations, edit copy, and see the magazine through the press.

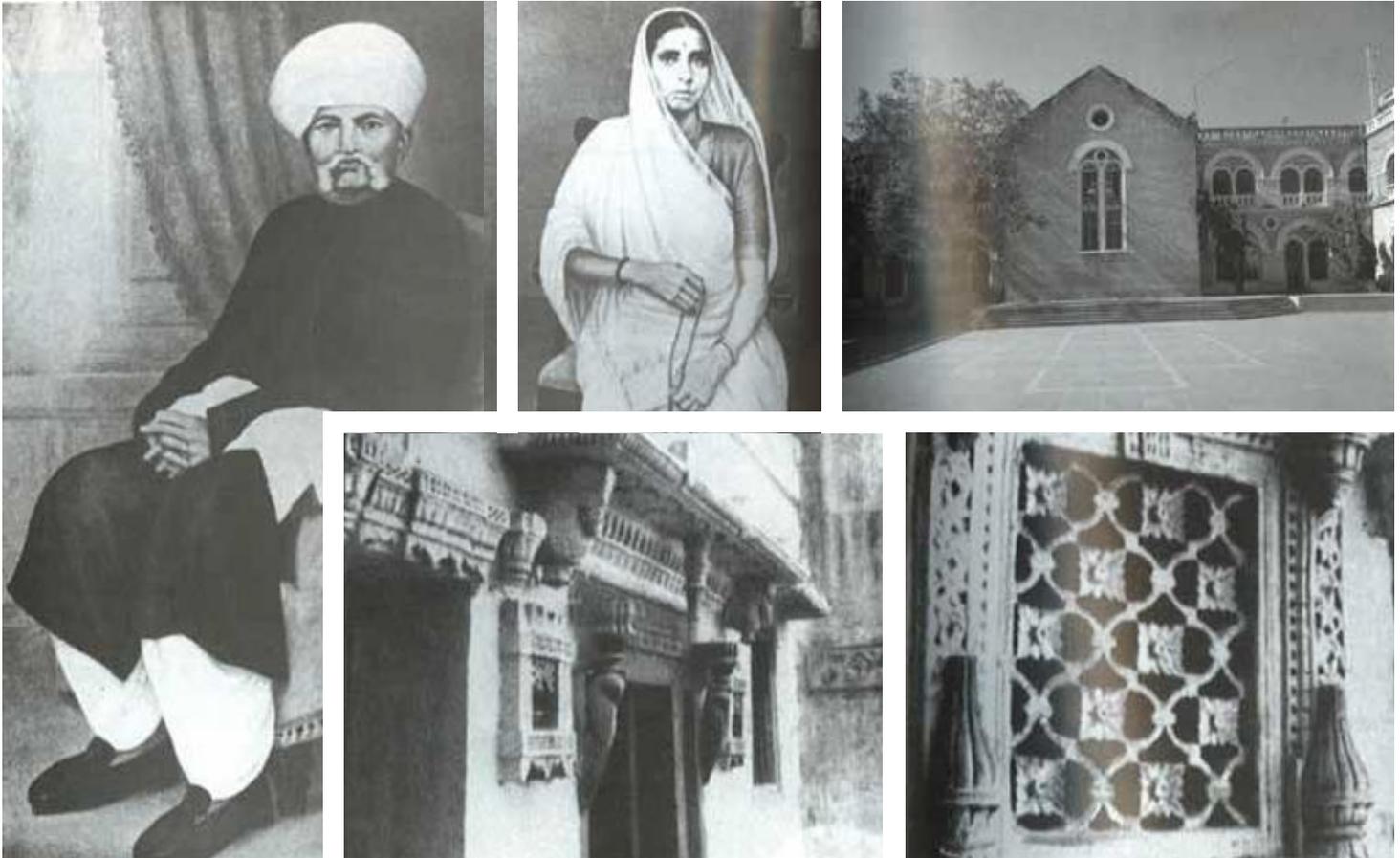
From Johannesburg, Gandhi would provide intellectual and moral direction, which included writing many articles himself.

In 1903 there were fourteen printing presses in Durban. All were owned and staffed by Whites – with the exception of the press run by Vyavaharik. The new, multilingual journal stood out against a mono-chromatic background of periodicals written, printed and read in English alone. The staff was suitably diverse – including a

Cape Coloured, a man from Mauritius, several Gujaratis and at least two Tamils.

The journal was named *Indian Opinion*. The first issue, appearing on 4 June 1903, announced itself as the voice of the Indian community, now 'a recognised factor in the body politic' of

**Mansukhlal
Hiralal Nazar
was the first
woman to help
Gandhi
re-activate
the idea of
newspaper in
South Africa
in 1903**



Clockwise from left: Gandhi's parents Karamchand Gandhi and Putli Bai; his school in Rajkot; (below) glimpses of Gandhi's home in Porbandar

South Africa. The 'prejudice' against them in 'the minds of the Colonists' was based on an 'unhappy forgetfulness of the great services India has always rendered to the Mother Country ever since Providence brought loyal Hind under the flag of Britannia'. An article in the same issue qualified this loyalism, noting that in South Africa, 'if an European commits a crime or a moral delinquency, it is the individual: if it is an Indian, it is the nation.'

In starting *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi was setting himself up as a knowledge-broker and bridge-builder. The journal would carry news of Indians in South Africa, of Indians in India, and general articles on 'all subjects – Social, Moral, and Intellectual'. It would 'advocate' the Indian cause, while giving Europeans 'an idea of Indian thought and aspiration'. Missing from this statement of the

journal's aims was any mention of the largest section of the population of South Africa – the Africans themselves.

Each issue of *Indian Opinion* ran to eight pages. A cover page listed the journal's title and the languages it was printed in. A series of advertisements followed. A shop in Durban drew attention to its Raleigh cycles of 'the rigid, rapid, reliable kind'; another shop alerted readers to its stocks of 'Oriental Jewellery'. General merchants in the towns of Natal placed insertions, as did specialized shops selling cigarettes and clothing. Other ads were issued by the paper itself; these

Each issue of *Indian Opinion* ran to eight pages. A cover page listed the languages it was printed in

asked for a 'good machine boy', for 'a first class Tamil compositor', and for someone who could read both Hindi and English.

Such was the first page; news and commentary in English followed. Later pages carried material



Clockwise from left: *Indian Opinion*, a journal founded by Mahatma Gandhi; politician Gopal Krishna Gokhale (left) with philanthropist Ratan Tata, Gandhi wearing white to mourn the death of Indian strikers killed in police firing, Gandhi's advisor Pranjivan Mehta, Durban merchant Parsee Rustomjee

in Gujarati and, at the end, in Hindi and Tamil. The annual subscription was 12 shillings and sixpence in Natal and 17 shillings elsewhere (payable in advance). Single copies sold at three pence each.

New laws in Natal or the Transvaal that affected Indians, news from the Motherland about protests, plagues and great patriots – these were reproduced in *Indian Opinion* in all the languages it printed in. Other articles were tailored to individual communities. The Tamil section covered festivals observed only in South India. It also focused rather more on schools for girls, since – at this stage – Tamils were more keen to educate their women than the Gujaratis.

The English and Gujarati sections of *Indian Opinion* both depended heavily on Gandhi's contributions

The English and Gujarati sections of *Indian Opinion* both depended heavily on Gandhi's contributions (often printed without a byline).

He wrote short notes and leaders on a variety of topics. The statements of mayors and governors were reproduced. Government dispatches and documents were summarised. Cases of harassment and discrimination were analysed.

As for Gandhi, his writings for this period are very heavily dominated by his public activities. Amidst hundreds of pages of editorials and reports for *Indian Opinion*, petitions

to officials and legislators, legal notes and letters to sympathisers in the United Kingdom and India, there are rare, brief, glimpses into his personal life.

Extracted from *Gandhi Before India* by Ramachandra Guha (Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books)