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## Fair feather friends

The Satajan wetlands of Assam glimmer with wings at dusk. The government won't declare it a bird sanctuary. But for some years now, the Ranganadi Prakriti Suraksha Samiti, a group formed by the local people, has protected the birds from poachers. They have also taught themselves to name the birds in order to guide visitors. The wetlands are an example of how some of the most heartening stories in bird conservation lie outside the official pale of parks and sanctuaries.

Not long ago, the Amur Falcons that pass through Nagaland on their long journey from Russia to South Africa were killed in thousands by local tribes. But a grisly video prompted the traditional falcon hunters to give up killing, in spite of substantial economic costs, and become active participants in a conservation programme. Then there is the hornbill, whose falling numbers have been revived by various community efforts in the Northeast and Kerala. In Arunachal Pradesh, the hunter-warrior Nyishi tribe, which used the hornbill's beak and casque for their headgear, has turned fiercely conservationist. Other materials have been found for the headgear and the local community is involved in locating, monitoring and protecting the nests, apart from organising jungle camps for visitors.

Community-based conservation grew in the 1980s, in reaction to older models which saw the protected area as a pristine space, shorn of human presence. In India, the imperative of conservation has often come into conflict with the lives and livelihood of local populations. As villagers were displaced by sanctuaries, conservation became an oppressive agenda imposed from above. But social and environmental priorities need not be at odds. Giving local populations stakes in conservation and greater agency in directing its course could be a more productive model. As the government's conservation project flounders in a thicket of rules or is overtaken by other priorities, India's best hope may lie in its communities.

## Keystone cops

Almost a year after Sunanda Pushkar's death in a Delhi hotel under mysterious circumstances, Delhi Police has registered an FIR against unknown persons for murder by an unknown poison administered in an unknown way. The sudden death of the 52-year-old wife of a Union minister — at the time, her husband, Shashi Tharoor, was minister of state for human resource development in the Manmohan Singh government — was bound to attract attention. But by filing a murder case nearly a year after the fact, when no new information has come to light, Delhi Police seems only to be making a spectacle of itself. It has failed to bring any modicum of clarity or closure to the high-profile case.

The police's forensic information set has not changed since January 2014, when, a few days after Pushkar's death, a three-member AIIMS medical panel conducted an autopsy and submitted its report to Delhi Police. According to the report, the death was unnatural and the cause was poisoning by an unknown substance. Subsequently, on the police's asking, the panel revisited the case and the viscera samples were also separately analysed by the Central Forensic Science Laboratory. The findings of these investigations were contained in a second report submitted in September 2014. But the conclusions were the same — unnatural death caused by an unknown poison. It was after a series of exchanges between the AIIMS panel and Delhi Police — the medical forensic conclusions remained the same — that ended in December that the FIR was filed. However, without further sleuthing, these findings alone cannot be linked to murder — suicide and accident remain plausible explanations. Does the police have any additional evidence that suggests Pushkar was murdered? If it does, why did it take so long to gather it? The onus is on Delhi Police to clear the air that is thickening with rumour, speculation and unsubstantiated allegations.

*Women in most countries have not achieved much, because they can't be liberated under the patriarchal, capitalist, imperialist and military system that determines the way we live now, and which is governed by power, not justice, by false democracy, not real freedom.*

- Nawal El Saadawi

Sudheendra Kulkarni

Why did Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a briefless lawyer from Bombay, have to go to distant South Africa in search of work on April 13, 1893? Why, even though his contract required him to stay for only one year, did he end up spending two decades there, returning to Bombay on January 9, 1915, exactly a century ago? The only satisfactory explanation, if we consider how South Africa transformed Gandhiji and steered him for the epic role he would subsequently play, not only in India's freedom struggle but also in the life of the modern world, is that destiny had willed it.

"Synchronicity" is renowned psychoanalyst Carl Jung's term for explaining why a pre-determined purpose or meaning impels an apparently chance event to occur, such as a person visiting a certain place as a coincidence and discovering later that it had a transformative impact on his life. Gandhiji's encounter with South Africa was an event of destiny-driven super-synchronicity.

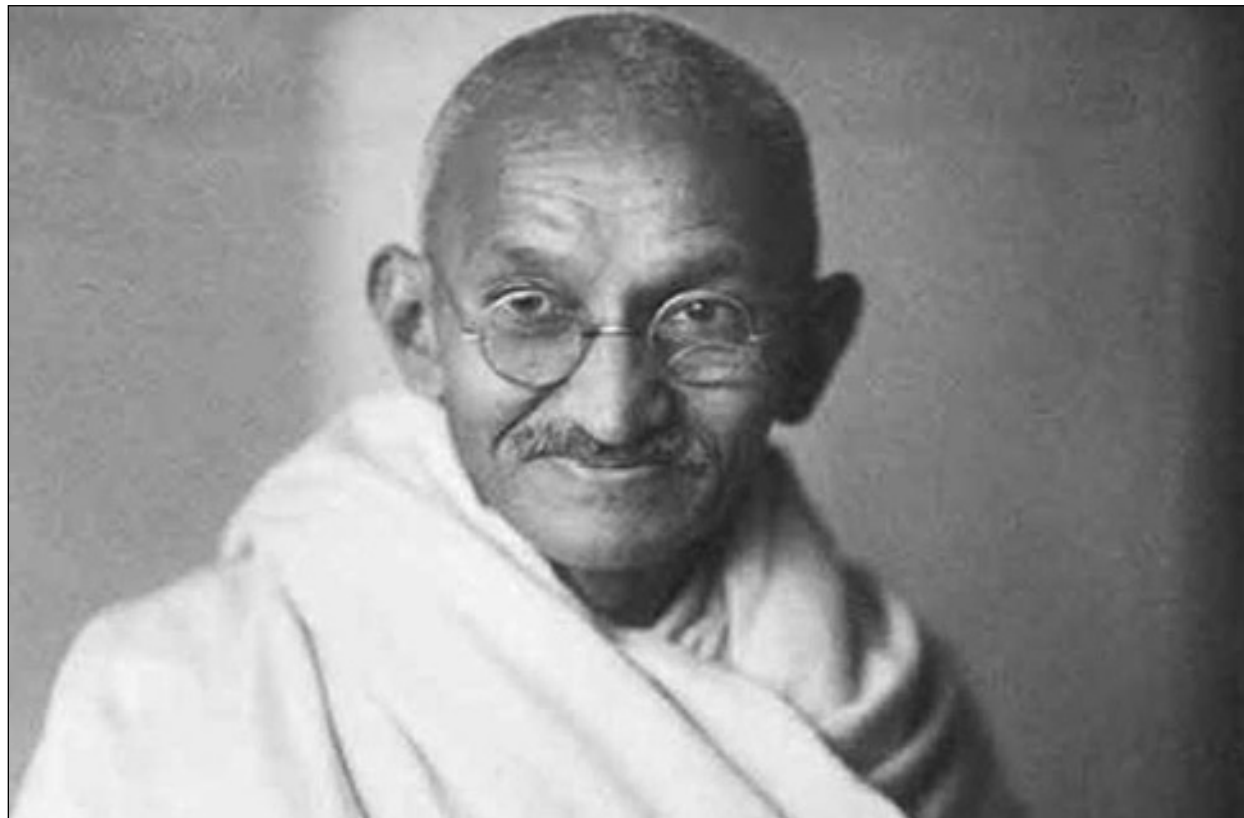
This transformation is best described by three eminent South Africans. Nelson Mandela said: "You gave us Mohandas Gandhi; we returned him to you as Mahatma Gandhi." Hassim Seedat, the great South African student of Gandhiji's life and literature, described it thus: "I am proud of the fact that the world's biggest diamond was found in our mines, but what we returned to you as Mahatma Gandhi was an incomparably more precious and polished diamond." Fatima Meer, Mandela's close associate in the anti-Apartheid movement and a renowned Gandhian scholar-activist, wrote in her book *Apprenticeship of a Mahatma: A Biography of M.K. Gandhi (1869-1914)*: "On the 18th of July, 1914, 21 years after his arrival,

Mohan accompanied by his family, left South Africa. He had come to the country as a young man of 23, a

both Mahatma Gandhi and Mohammad Ali Jinnah). In the first letter on November 8, 1909, Mehta wrote:

have been a far different land to what it is now and its history would have been altogether differently writ-

ty being spread by divisive forces today in the name of their respective religions.



semi-Englishman. His host, on meeting him, had wondered how he could afford to keep such an expensive-looking dandy.

His tastes had continued to be expensive for a while, but they had changed through the intermingling of thoughts and experiences. Now he left the country bearing all the signs of a man who would soon be recognised as a saint. As Christ became the Saviour, Muhammed the Prophet, Gautama the Buddha, the little boy frightened of the dark became the Mahatma and paid the price of all Mahatmas."

There was also an Indian who had seen this transformation in Gandhiji's life first-hand, in South Africa itself, and made prophetic observations. Pranjivan Mehta, his friend and benefactor, and one who played a catalyst's role in Gandhiji's authorship of *Hind Swaraj* (1909), wrote two historic letters to Gopal Krishna Gokhale (who, unbelievable though it may seem today, had mentored

"During my last trip to Europe I saw a great deal of Mr Gandhi. - From year to year (I have known him intimately for over 20 years.) I have found him getting... more and more selfless. He is now leading almost an ascetic sort of life — not the life of an ordinary ascetic that we usually see but that of a great Mahatma and the one idea that engrosses his mind is his motherland." (Emphasis in the original.)

We see here that it was Mehta and not Rabindranath Tagore who first described Gandhiji as a "Mahatma". In his second letter on August 28, 1912, nearly three years before Gandhiji returned to India, Mehta observed: "In my humble opinion, men like him [Gandhi] are born on very rare occasions and that in India alone. As far as I can see, it seems to me that India has not produced an equally far-seeing political prophet like him during the last five or six centuries and... if he was born in the 18th century, India would

ten."

How did South Africa change Gandhiji? In five seminal ways, each of which has a continuing relevance for India and the world today. As attested by Hind Swaraj and the numerous articles he wrote in his journal, *Indian Opinion*, it was in South Africa that he understood, and first articulated, the idea of India and also the true meaning of India's freedom. India, for him, had to be inclusive without a trace of discrimination of any kind. And swaraj, for him, meant a system of cooperative self-rule in which individuals, communities and the nation strove to create a new sustainable moral civilisation. Second, after overcoming a spiritual crisis in his life, he became deeply Hindu, while simultaneously becoming deeply secular, gaining profound understanding of and unshakable respect for all the world's religions. His ethics-based understanding and practice of faith was very different from the big-

Third, he embraced the credo of truth and fearless nonviolence, not as an expedient tactic of political struggle but as an indispensable condition to change the destiny of the human race. It was in South Africa, in 1906, that he discovered — with Islam and the Islamic concept of jihad making a significant contribution to this discovery — the concept of Satyagraha (insistence on truth) and began its practice in all his personal and political struggles. So intense was his willpower to adhere to truth that he had — and he alone could have had — the audacity to declare after his return to India, "I am a servant of Truth, not a servant of India." He often explicitly stated that he would disapprove if India deviated from the path of truth and nonviolence.

Fourth, while preparing Gandhiji for his leadership role in India's national liberation movement, life in South Africa made him a true-blooded global citizen, strengthening the principle

that he is among those Indian patriots who was also an internationalist. He devoured the noblest thoughts from foreign minds — Socrates, Plato, Ruskin, Tolstoy, Wallace, Thoreau, Carlyle, Emerson and many others. In particular, his correspondence with Tolstoy attests to Gandhiji's fascinating journey on the path of internationalism, which, in later decades, gained breadth unmatched by any other contemporary world leader.

There is widespread misconception, some of it deliberately spread by Gandhiji's prejudiced critics, that he was, while in South Africa, insensitive towards black people's own struggle against Apartheid. It is true that some of his earlier statements were coloured by negative notions about native Africans; however, he later developed a deep empathy for them. In 1908, he said that his dream for South Africa was of a free nation, in which "all the different races commingle and produce a civilisation that perhaps the world has not yet seen." Had he been racist, how could he have inspired Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King Jr and countless other champions of racial equality?

Last, it is in South Africa that Gandhiji redefined the idiom and practice of politics. Constructive social work; building a community of disciplined and selfless social servants; uniting Indians of all faiths, castes and linguistic communities in a common struggle for justice; care for the needy; empowerment of women; inexpensive ways of healing and healthcare; insistence on high standards of cleanliness and sanitation (something he enlarged into his own "Swachh Bharat" mission after his return to India); conquering the adversary with love — all these and other hallmarks of Gandhian praxis first took shape in the experimental crucible of his internship in South Africa.

(Courtesy : *The Indian Express*)

# Indian Activist Presses 14-Year Hunger Strike to Protest Abuses

Krishna Pokharel

IMPHAL, India—In a 14-year annual legal ritual, police have arrested, briefly released and then rearrested one of India's most prominent activists to stop her from committing suicide.

On Thursday, a local court is set to decide whether Irom Sharmila Chanu—who is on a hunger strike—should be charged again, or freed, said her lawyer. For now, Ms. Irom is being force fed under a law that bans suicide, while detained in a hospital here.

Ms. Irom, 42 years old, is protesting a security law designed to rein in terrorists and separatists. Laws like these are divisive in some of India's most politically sensitive regions, including Kashmir on the Pakistan border, because they give security officials special enforcement powers and protect them against civilian prosecution.

Ms. Irom says the law is abused, leading to killings, "disappearances," rape and other violent acts. "Innocent people are harassed daily," she said, on "mere suspicion of being revolutionary."

Her hunger strike—one of the longest-running anywhere, according to Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International—is notable in several respects.

Under India's antisuicide law, a person may not be held for longer than a year without

## Court to Decide Whether Irom Sharmila Chanu Should Be Charged Again Under Law Banning Suicide



a conviction. Ms. Irom's lawyer expressed optimism that this time she would be released and not rearrested.

In December, India's Home Ministry announced it is considering decriminalizing suicide—which would remove the rationale for Ms. Irom's detention. If that occurs, she could become one of the first prominent tests of the revised law.

In a recent interview here in Manipur State, Ms. Irom said she would be willing to die if the security law she is protesting isn't repealed. "If I have to die for a right cause, God will accept it," she said.

The law Ms. Irom is protesting, the Armed Forces

(Special Powers) Act, applies in seven of India's 36 states and territories, bordering on China, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan in the northeastern part of the country. A similar law applies in Jammu & Kashmir, the disputed state bordering Pakistan.

Under both versions of the law, if there is "reasonable suspicion" that a person is acting against the state, security forces are empowered to search properties without a warrant, and to arrest and to shoot.

India's northeastern states, sometimes referred to as the "seven sisters," are ethnically and linguistically distinct

from other parts of India. More than 5,500 people have died in terrorist violence in the region since 2005, according to New Delhi-based South Asia Terrorism Portal. Often the demands include greater political autonomy and, in some cases, independence from India.

On Dec. 21, a bomb at a bus station killed three people and injured five in Imphal, the capital of Manipur, one of the "seven sisters" states. No one claimed responsibility. A few days later, at least 63 people died in the neighboring state of Assam when an insurgent group attacked settlers work-

ing on tea plantations.

The Home Ministry spokesman said the federal government "isn't considering lifting of the law or changing it in the immediate future." He acknowledged "divergent views" regarding the law, saying the defense ministry wants to retain it while some state governments disagree.

International bodies including the United Nations have argued for a repeal of the law on human-rights grounds. A three-member panel appointed by India's Supreme Court said in a 2013 report that security forces acting under the law were committing human-rights violations.

Ms. Irom, a member of Manipur's Meitei ethnic majority, says her hunger strike was prompted by the death of 10 civilians, shot in November 2000 by the military after a bomb explosion. The government says the soldiers acted in self-defense. Last month, a Manipur high court rejected that argument and ordered the government to pay 500,000 rupees (\$7,900) apiece to the families of the dead.

Ms. Irom was arrested shortly after beginning her hunger strike. "She is doing all this for us," said

Chandrajini Devi, who lost her two sons in the November 2000 shootings.

Ms. Irom is force-fed through a tube in her nose. She says she resisted force-feeding at first but eventually gave in once she realized "I need to be patient and I need to endure."

Her protest has inspired others, says her friend Babloo Loitongbam, another activist. For instance, in one case after a woman was raped and murdered, allegedly by security personnel, a group of women stripped naked in public and displayed banners saying "Indian Army Rape Us," a highly unusual protest that he believes wouldn't have happened if it weren't for the publicity drawn by Ms. Irom's fast.

Ms. Irom says she looks forward to a normal life once the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act is repealed. A few years ago she became engaged to a 52-year-old British man, Desmond Coutinho, whom she first met, and fell in love with, through an exchange of letters. They both say they want to marry. "Until [the act] ends, we can't have a future together," Mr. Coutinho says. (Courtesy : *Wall Street Journal*)