

Gandhi's Song

Chapter 1

Born over four centuries and 300 kilometers apart, a single song fused the spirits of Narsinh Mehta and Mohandas Gandhi.

By the time Gandhi was born in 1869, Narsinh had already been a figure of great reverence in Gujarat for over four centuries. Regarded as Gujarat's "Adi Kavi" or pioneering poet, he not only invented the Gujarati poetic form but elevated it to the level of the highest musical and philosophical expression.

Although much of what Narsinh wrote as poetry, songs, ballads and verses was popularly known, his one particular creation, 'Vaishnav Jan To' (The Truly Righteous One) became widely feted, celebrated and embedded into the popular consciousness of the people of Gujarat. There was no way Gandhi could have been living in Porbandar, some 300 kilometers west of Narsinh's birthplace of Talaja, and not known about it. The bhajan had pervaded the air of Saurashtra region for centuries handed down the generations as a collective treasure that was never guarded but somehow always secure.

The idea of who a truly righteous person is without ensnaring its definition in religious dogma was something that was likely to have appealed to Gandhi. While there is not much on record from his very early life that may have drawn Gandhi to the song, it is clear that it was during his long years in South Africa that it really became a moral marker for him. Perhaps the earliest recorded reference to the song was sometime in 1907 when Gandhi had already been a resident of the country for close to 14 years. He was a very well-known figure not just to South Africa's Indian community but also far beyond to its English rulers at home and in England.

Gandhi's 1907 calendar reads like that of a seasoned political campaigner operating on an unusually broad canvas as someone who had already become a leader of extraordinary consequence. From pushing for civil rights for Indians to malaria relief for the larger Durban community and from being immersed in the activities of the Natal Indian Congress to opposing the discriminatory Asiatic Registration Act, he led a wide variety of campaigns. It was in that political, legal and cultural hubbub that he began to turn to 'Vaishnav Jan' as his moral compass. Narsinh may not have travelled much more than a few hundred kilometers in his life but one of his songs was now in the heart of a man who was at the heart of an increasingly significant political campaign over 7,000 kilometers away. The song became an important part of a collection of medieval and other poetry that Gandhi made a prescribed set of hymns to be sung in his commune at Phoenix.

'Vaishnav Jan' never really left Gandhi from his childhood but became it became truly intrinsic to his worldview in South Africa. After he returned to India in 1914, his

preoccupations became much larger as he went about planting himself into the country's independence movement against the colonial British rule.

There is no specific record of Gandhi making any particular public reference to the song for quite some time until he came to Ahmedabad to first establish an ashram in Kochrab village in 1915 and then finally on the banks of the Sabarmati river at its current location in 1917.

The anthology of medieval and other devotional songs, whose singing was the daily ritual of his ashram in Phoenix, South Africa, also became a part of the Sabarmati Ashram. It was sometime around 1920 when the song was set to a tune that became the fountainhead of dozens of other versions that have been sung for 95 years now. The original composition by an inmate of the Sabarmati Ashram is rendered austerely with a single-string instrument and a pair of Manjeera or small hand cymbals playing along. It has the feel of dawn breaking with the singer singing Narsinh's immortal words with a touch of stirring rusticity. It was this version that was heard throughout Gujarat and beyond for the better part of over four decades after 1920 even though its many reworked versions had also started gaining popularity.