H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Indulal Yagnik. *The Autobiography of Indulal Yagnik.* Translated by Devavrat N. Pathak, Howard Spodek, and John R. Wood. New Delhi: Manohar, 2011. Illustrations. 3 volume set. Volume 1: 583 pp.; Volume 2: 574 pp.; Volume 3: 665 pp. $229.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-81-7304-897-5.

Reviewed by Amrita Shodhan (Independent Scholar)
Published on H-Asia (November, 2012)
Commissioned by Sumit Guha

Memoirs of the Leading Light of a Forgotten Gujarat

This is a welcome translation of Indulal Yagnik's six-volume Gujarati *Atmakatha* (Autobiography) into English (compiled into three volumes in the English translation). Translated by Devavrat N. Pathak, Howard Spodek, and John R. Wood, it is a crucial addition to any library with claims to document India's twentieth-century politics. Yagnik's life spanned the main currents of Indian political life–from the Gandhian and peasant movements to the workers' and regional autonomy movements (in his case Gujarat based). He was born in 1892, and worked principally as a polemicist and political organizer. He resigned from Congress in 1924, and continued to remain active as a prolific writer and publisher not only in Gujarat but also on the national stage with the Kisan Sabha (Peasant Union) of the late 1930s, and then with the Mahagujarat Parishad (Greater Gujarat Assembly) until 1960. Throughout, he remained a free-thinking and beloved politician in Gujarat and continued to be elected to the parliament from Ahmedabad as an independent candidate until his death in 1972.

His life illuminates the career of many leading politicians of his time, in his close and sometimes oppositional interactions with and extended reflections about Mahatma Gandhi, Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru, Morarji Desai, and Swami Sahajanand Saraswati on the national level, as well as the educationist Bhaikaka (Bhailal Patel) and others on the Gujarat stage. His accounts of his disputes with them are never mean or petty, some are brushed off lightly and others described in a lively conversation. For example, in his description of his attempts to work with Congress on his own terms in the 1940s, he described writing to and meeting with Patel, "I did meet him, but there was no result, and therefore I gave up forever the idea of a connection to the Congress administration" (vol. 3, p. 224). For a stirring oppositional conversation, see his recollection of his discussion with the Sarabhai siblings (Ambalal, Anasuya, and Nirmalaben), as he refused their proposition to fund his publication *Yugadharma* (Ethics of the age) in 1924 (vol. 2, pp. 257-259).

Yagnik was inspired to write this political autobiography by a desire to provide an account of politics during the time in which he lived. He stated that his life story was linked to the political events of Gujarat and the world. "I would keep my sights fixed on the flowing stream of public life and on the sparkling jewels of individuals, small and big" (vol. 1, p. 67). In keeping with his political vision, he dedicated the book to the "bright and fragrant flower-like people" to whose story his life was to provide "a connecting thread" (vol. 1, p. 69). His autobiography offers a living metaphoric (*jwalant*) account of the politics of the time and its idioms, making for very colorful reading. For example, he reported many of his speeches on behalf of the Mahagujarat struggle almost verbatim. When referring to the bilingual state that the parliament had approved, he quoted himself, "I reminded everybody of the renewal of the dream of Mahagujarat of the Sardar in a meeting at Bardoli. I added that, according to the statement of a Maharashtrian journalist, Maharashtra has received two women, one is the charming lady moving in the fresh air of Chowpatty, Bombay, and the other a fair village woman of Gujarat–to do everybody's hard labour" (vol. 3, p. 538). As in this gendered vocabulary, there are plenty colorful phrases and discussions that can be interpreted to read his patriarchal perspective. However, when discussing Premleela Mehta (eldest daughter of his long-time friend and colleague Dr. Sumant Mehta), he showed a conscious understanding of the need for female emancipation and women's–particularly Premleela's–awareness of the slights and hurts that structure the female experience of inequality.

Besides politics, his autobiography also offers emotional expression, introspection, and frank observations about his personal life. Yagnik remained unmarried throughout his life though he had several female friends. He wrote about these unfulfilled engagements with extended mournful reflections. As Spodek notes, the autobiography provides a good source for a psychological investigation into leadership.

Pathak, Spodek, and Wood have translated *Atmakatha* very effectively. Their translation is faithful to its lyrical and metaphor-rich Gujarati and does not follow the conventional simplicity of English. The Gujarati, as may be expected, remains the more lyrical and readable text, but the English version is close enough to read like a translation and not a foreign speaking voice. This is important though at times disconcerting because of the unfamiliar constructions that result from the literal translation of some metaphors, such as "the stream of my internal life continued to flow" (vol. 1, p. 157).

Short essays by the translators provide an excellent introduction to this forgotten personality, bringing his life into focus. Spodek's chronology is useful and covers all the critical events in Yagnik's life. Pathak's essay opens with the most dramatic and significant aspects of Yagnik's career, while Spodek's longer essay describes his personality in greater detail, placing him in the context of Gandhi, Patel, and Desai. Yagnik took up political cudgels against all of them from the vantage point of the peasants and workers of Gujarat. This aspect of Gujarati politics is often obscured in the more popular narrative of Gujarat's conservatism which tends to ignore any significant subaltern movements. Yagnik's memoir throws light on this aspect of Gujarat politics in great detail and is a welcome addition to the literature for this reason as well. Spodek also contends that the book is a fine psychological study of an introverted, idealist romantic. Wood's essay provides a more pragmatic evaluation, assessing Yagnik's "successes and failures." He echoes the judgement of some of Yagnik's contemporaries–that Yagnik was an extremely important and successful mobilizer and "agitator" but not an effective institution builder.

Together the three essays reveal as much as they tempt one to read further. They describe him in romantic terms, indicating the breadth and diversity of Yagnik's engagements while also looking at his long-term legacy with a cool dispassionate eye, including his national and international obscurity, his lack of a successor, and the institutions with which he was affiliated. They attribute this absence of a tangible legacy to his passionate and *chanchal*, or volatile, spirit as well as his revolutionary and antiestablishment views throughout his career. Pathak, Spodek, and Wood point to his connections with politics and call attention to lesser-known or forgotten struggles, such as the Kisan Sabha of the 1930s. By cross-referencing the autobiographical text in detail in their essays, they guide readers through the three English-version volumes.

The aspects of Yagnik's career seen as his "failures" are linked to the peasant and workers' movements in Gujarat. The *Autobiography* provides many memories of these struggles. The kind of village level mobilization that he managed to achieve with Kisan Sabha activists, sometimes in opposition to the Gandhians and at other times in cooperation with them, was remarkable. Historian Ajay Skaria, in a review of Yagnik's politics, suggests that a careful examination of these accounts would provide a serious assessment of Gujarat's subaltern politics that scholars thus far have failed to recognize.[1] Yagnik's discussion of the peasant mobilization in Gujarat of the 1930s to the 1960s shows that he was crucially involved in linking it to mainstream politics. This integration and in a sense Yagnik's success might account for the conservatism of Gujarat's subaltern movement. While this review is no place to provide a final word on this judgement, the autobiography opens up a mine of recollection and reflection from which to begin research on this question. He provided the middle class with an acceptable face to working-class politics. Yagnik was the candidate of choice for the middle class as much as for the working class even without a political party association. He was successfully reelected from the Ahmedabad constituency to parliament four times from 1957 to 1971. I remember my mother mourning when Yagnik passed away–he had been a candidate for parliamentary elections for whom they could vote without any debate.

Yagnik has consistently been described as not having left an institutional legacy. However, his autobiography details numerous ventures that became independent of him in his lifetime and under his direction. These include his journals *Navjivan* and *Young India*, Kanhaiyalal M. Munshi's *Yugadharma*, a number of tribal and rural residential schools and agricultural centers (*ashrams*), and the women's hostel and center in Udwada. There are certainly a number of institutions that claim him as founder. Gujarat Vidyapeeth's vice chancellor in his foreword to this publication convincingly demonstrates that Yagnik was important in founding the Vidyapeeth, even though he was later distanced from it. The same may be the story of many tribal and rural schools and hostels that he founded. It is unclear how many of these institutions are still extant and in what form–tracing them in the vil-

lages of Gujarat to reassess Yagnik's legacy would form an interesting study in itself.

I first read the *Atmakatha* when researching the struggle for Mahagujarat. Recollecting the views of the leading politician and visionary for the movement, the autobiography was invaluable in detailing the movement. He described the activities of the Mahagujarat Janata Parishad in great detail–from the home of Ratilal Patel functioning as a home away from home for many student functionaries, as well as an office and headquarters, to the setting up the Mahagujarat Fund. A lot of the autobiography reads like a daily diary of activities (e.g., vol. 3, pp. 576-578).

Dhanwant Oza, Yagnik's long-time collaborator, edited the last volume of the Gujarati *Atmakatha* with an introduction. He helped Yagnik in his lifetime with the earlier volumes of the autobiography as well. Oza's introduction is usefully translated here, giving us a flavor of the whole process of its writing. The text was written in a burst, the first three volumes in two years from 1954 to 1956. The writing came to a halt as Yagnik became more involved in the Mahagujarat struggle. He began writing the latter three volumes in 1967, covering the period from 1924 to 1958. Yagnik died before he could finish the account of the Mahagujarat struggle and the latter years. Oza tried to account for the last fourteen years of his life on the basis of extracts from Yagnik's writings, diaries, and a brief chronology. While this chronology of the last fourteen years is included in the translation, the extracts from his writings are not. It would have been useful to know the provenance of these papers.

Two volumes of the original text are translated as two parts of one volume. Thus all six volumes of the Gujarati are available in three English-version volumes. The original front matter and appendices are all included. The photographs in the original, which depicted many of Yagnik's contemporaries–a young Gandhi and others, for example–have been dropped from the English volumes. The photographs in the translated texts focus more on Yagnik and provide some evocative images of Yagnik at different ages and in different situations. The quality of the photographs reproduced in the Gujarati volumes is much clearer. This translated publication should generate interest in the original Gujarati text as well and hopefully it will find a publisher as it has been out of print for a long while.

With the excellent introductions, this massive work–the original has six volumes with over 2,200 pages–has become more accessible. The translation makes an intimate Gujarat story accessible to a wider audience. With the growing prominence of Gujarat on the national and international stages, these volumes also provide matter of deep research interest. The *Autobiography of Indulal Yagnik* is highly recommended for any student of Indian politics and history as Yagnik's story casts the leaders and the center in an interesting light, or anyone interested in a wider study of peasant politics, rural organizing, or romantic leaders and their psychology.

Note

[1]. Ajay Skaria, "Homeless in Gujarat and India: On the Curious Love of Indulal Yagnik," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 38, no. 3 (2001): 271-297, esp. 297.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Amrita Shodhan. Review of Yagnik, Indulal, *The Autobiography of Indulal Yagnik*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33927

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.