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## Disobedient Bombay: A Photographic Record

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*A rare collection of images of colonial Bombay's "drama of disobedience" yields new insights into protests during the Civil Disobedience Movement.*

During the Civil Disobedience Movement in Bombay, an enigmatic figure, K.L. Nursey, took a series of photographs that captured the unfolding of the movement: of the city's streets during the salt satyagraha, at protests against foreign cloth shops, and of clashes with colonial authorities. The 'Nursey Album', long lost to the world, is now housed in the Alkazi Collection. A rare visual archive of some 245 photographs, the album not only highlights Bombay's specific, cosmopolitan urban topography but also illustrates how streets, markets, and public squares were transformed into stages for anticolonial performances.

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In *Photographing Civil Disobedience: Bombay 1930-31*, edited by Avrati Bhatnagar and Sumathi Ramaswamy, nine scholars critically engage with these images, and, by reading them alongside archival sources and newspaper reports, unpack the "drama of disobedience" captured on film nearly a century ago on the streets of *Urbs Prima in Indis*. These scholars handle these historical photographs to weave alternative narratives of the crowded streets of defiant, disobedient colonial Bombay during the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Moving away from traditional top-down histories of the anticolonial movement, the book shifts focus from prominent figures to an apparently ordinary "sea of common people" and documents their intense and daily defiance in Bombay during the agitation. These essays capture a range of historical and visual themes that go beyond existing scholarship on nationalist mobilisation, offering insights into the urban landscape of protests, the role of women activists, the politics of boycott and consumerism, and the history of swadeshi nationalism and colonial institutions, thereby providing a vivid account of Bombay's transformation into a city of disobedience, propelled by its ordinary disobedient residents.

Bombay's swadeshi was "an ever-evolving movement", Dinyar Patel argues in his contribution. Tracing its continuities and transformations since the 19th century, he provides a unique view into a layered, rich narrative of political protests, swadeshi, and economic nationalism in Bombay. Patel observes that Gandhi's rise was instrumental in shifting the idea of Bombay swadeshi from focusing on profit and patriotism to addressing Indian poverty, encouraging women's mass participation, and introducing new rituals of mass protest, such as boycotting foreign goods and bonfires of foreign clothes.

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The city and its residents transformed Gandhi's salt satyagraha into a true mass movement; the "contraband city" re forging, in the process, its connection with the sea. Sumathi Ramaswamy, however, illustrates the irony of middle-class male instructors, who hardly entered the kitchen, offering lessons to women who habitually undertook salt making. Focusing its enquiry on the gendered landscape of this movement, her essay offers an absorbing exposition of the visible role of sari-clad patriotic women in salt making and distribution. In addition to providing valuable insights into the conspicuous presence of female volunteers in the civic arena, Ramaswamy underscores the absence of portrayals of the household as a site of contraband salt production, where numerous women challenged legal boundaries in private domestic environments.

Equally important was Bombay's built environment and its distinctive, cosmopolitan urban landscape, which influenced the visual imagery and themes of the Civil Disobedience Movement, as Preeti Chopra's essay shows. Colonial official buildings, public squares, streets, and public transport were transformed into "street furniture," acting as stages for anticolonial collective performances in public political theatre. Paying attention to human subjects in these images, her essay insightfully reflects the colonial state's failure to control Bombay's disobedient inhabitants, who used and transformed the city's public spaces, seashores, and iconic south Bombay buildings into stages for nationalist performances. Highlighting the emergence of the Congress House in Girgaum as an alternative nerve centre of

nationalist politics, from which new 'itineraries of mass disobedience' were planned and carried out, the essay further traces the Congress's efforts to reterritorialise the city by blurring existing racial spatial divides.

Going to the cinema too was a factor that helped establish Bombay as a hub for mass politics. Debashree Mukherjee's essay sheds light on how film viewing trains a socially diverse film audience in a collective gaze and fosters a dialogue between the cinema hall and the street as forms of political spectatorship. The essay effectively links the street's collective politics to the emerging film culture, interpreting the urban crowd as "spectators" who act as both witnesses and catalysts for political change. Building on Jim Masselos's work, which highlights existing practices such as Ganpati or Muharram celebrations that supported public viewing, she shows how these new urban collectives in Bombay facilitated mass spectatorship, a key driver of popular politics in the city.

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The sensory aspects of anticolonial performances in public spaces merit equal attention. Focusing on the images of public gatherings, leaders standing on makeshift stages, and addressing large crowds through microphones, Kama Maclean's essay documents how noise emerges as both a powerful tactic and a tool, often intensified by oratorical infrastructure. She accurately highlights that the introduction of the microphone not only altered the nature and substance of anticolonial protests but also contested the British conception of urban order. These "noisy" photographs, as Maclean notes, allow us to "hear" protest songs, slogans, and the cracking of police lathis, serving as evidence that this evolving soundscape shaped anticolonial protests and resistance tactics.

Two essays, by Murali Ranganathan and by Abigail McGowan, delve into the movement's gendered aspects, emphasising women's visible presence in the public sphere. They analyse how women challenged domestic roles, moving from the private domain to lead processions, organise pickets, and occupy masculine and urban spaces. Ranganathan makes a compelling case for mapping suburban Congresswomen and protest sites within the larger historical narrative of the Civil Disobedience Movement. By decentering the spatial geography of the salt satyagraha, the essay offers a glimpse into how these peripheries emerged as centres of nationalist resistance. The essay shifts the focus from top-down Gandhian politics to grassroots activism, emphasising the contributions of often-overlooked activists such as Sakina Lukmani and Safiya Somji.

The picketing of department stores by women activists in both European and Indian markets underscored how intricately embedded anticolonial activism was in everyday life and consumer politics. McGowan's essay underlines this gendered nature of confrontation over the boycott of foreign goods in the city. This influence shaped consumer behaviour and organised public discourse in favour of boycott initiatives. This dissuasion of consumers, using tactics ranging from persuasion and physical obstruction to heckling, not only publicised the politics of shopping but also transformed colonial spaces into sites of anticolonial and gendered activism. McGowan's essay is crucial for understanding how the organised boycott of foreign goods transformed women into frontline activists and disrupted colonial commerce at a crucial juncture.

Aravati Bhatnagar shifts focus to the lower-ranked native police constable armed with a lathi. She encourages us to question the common view of anticolonial resistance as merely a conflict between the colonised natives and the European colonisers. Emphasising the significance of the native police constable's role in maintaining order, more so during nationalist actions, her essay introduces us to the complex relationship between the colonial authorities, "obedient native instrument" and the disobedient citizens, especially female nationalist protagonists. By highlighting the provisions for monthly special allowances aimed at motivating native constables and addressing their "moments of apprehension"-often caused by social boycott and rebuke, frequently from assertive and 'disobedient' women-the essay illustrates a complex crisis in social and gender relations that native constables had to endure in these moments of anticolonial contestations.

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A significant theme of the collection is its nuanced exploration of the gendered landscape of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The essays emphasise the vital role of *desh-sevikas* in turning the city's streets into spaces of gendered activism and resistance. However, this transformation is often treated in abstraction from other forms of women's political activism. For example, nearly a year before the Civil Disobedience Movement, during the 1928-29 millworkers' general strike, women workers played a decisive role in enforcing the strike. They actively picketed the mills, blocked strikebreakers, publicly challenged the police, and discouraged skilled and supervisory

men from entering the mills to enforce the strike. Their visibility on the streets also led to arrests for 'disorderly behaviour'. By transforming picketing into a widespread, gendered form of street activism, they placed women at the forefront of labour protests and even influenced Gandhian picket tactics. Referring to these simultaneously existing forms of women's involvement would have presented a more layered and complex history of women's involvement in popular politics.

Although the volume emphasises the roles of ordinary citizens and liminal activists in the anticolonial movement, I sometimes found it necessary to complicate even the nuanced relationship of prominent leaders with emerging mass urban protests. An example is Gandhi's evolving view of the boycott as a political strategy. At first, Gandhi opposed Hasrat Mohani's suggestion for a full boycott of British goods, calling it in a March 1920 issue of *Young India* as a "punishment that is conceived in a vindictive spirit". Only later, during the non-cooperation phase, did Gandhi begin to embrace collective protests such as picketing and boycotts in the civic sphere. Finally, while Bhatnagar's essay underscores how maintaining order constituted the core mandate of colonial policing and documents the shift from indirect control to a more intrusive and coercive approach in the interwar period, an engagement with earlier works by Rajnarayan Chandavarkar and Prashant Kidambi would have situated it within the existing literature on the history of policing in colonial Bombay.

Yet, approaching the colonial metropolis as a dynamic catalyst of nationalist campaigns, the book helps us rethink the spatial and social dimensions of anticolonial politics in urban settings, making it essential reading for scholars and enthusiasts of Indian history, visual culture, and urban and gender studies.

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