

Gandhi and Mass Action in South Africa: A Reassessment

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Abstract:

Gandhi remains the most intensely scrutinised persona in the history of Indians in colonial South Africa between 1893 and 1914, the year of his arrival and the year of his departure from South Africa. He has been described in extremes, from being a charismatic leader,¹ a representative of toilers,² to being a mascot of commercial elites,³ or a promoter of upper-class Indians.⁴ Gandhi had spent good number of years in South Africa fighting for justice against virulent racial discrimination, practised by Europeans, that denied to Indians their basic civic and human rights. Within a decade, he transformed the struggle of Indians by launching passive resistance, the non-violent Satyagraha, fighting hard to make the people aware of their rights for a better society. In South Africa, the Indian masses joined Gandhi to find political solutions against racial injustices in an entirely novel way – as warriors without arms and weapons. In the process, Gandhi got transformed from a barrister to a leader, a journey that meandered through several phases. This paper argues that Gandhi not only believed in his own capacity to fight against an unjust rule but he also believed in inculcating the capacity of common people to fight against an unjust rule. This he showed through his actions and the people got the courage to follow him.

When Gandhi reached South Africa in 1893 in connection with a lawsuit, it comprised of Natal and the Cape – the two British colonies, and the Transvaal and Orange Free State – the two Boer Republics. At the time, Indians predominantly lived in Natal, and, in reasonable numbers in the Transvaal, with a sprinkled and inconsequential population in the Cape and Orange Free State. Indians first arrived in Natal in 1860 as indentured labourers by ship vessels that sailed on storm-tossed high seas for months together. Between 1860 and 1911, thousands of Indian indentured labourers had entered Natal, their numbers reaching 1,521,84, with 1/3rd of them arriving in the last decade.⁵ At least 23% of this proportion also returned to India.⁶ Sent

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⁵ Surendra Bhana, *Indentured Indians in Natal, 1860-1902: A Study Based on Ship's Lists*, October :1987, pp. 21-22, https://scnc.ukzn.ac.za/doc/ship/bhana_indentured_indians_natal_study_based_ships_list.pdf

⁶ 'The Indian Community in SA', *The O'Malley Archives*, <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv02424/04lv03370/05lv03414.htm>

by recruiters in India, with the consent of the Natal and the British colonial governments, indentured Indians reached Natal on contract of five years with their employers. They became

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INTRODUCTION

“free” Indian, or ex-indentured, if they chose to remain in the colony after the expiry of their contract.⁷ In addition, approximately 91,798 “free” Indian immigrants, known as ‘Passengers’ who paid for their own passage, came to Natal between 1876 and 1902. In this category, many “free” Indian traders also entered Natal. Gandhi too came to South Africa as a ‘Passenger’.⁸ By that time “Natal born” Indians, numbering about 19,000 in 1904, were added to the Indian population.⁹ Gandhi’s entry coincided with years of heavy Indian immigration in Natal.

Scholars have studied Ships’ Lists of the ports of Madras and Calcutta in British India to show that heterogeneity was prominent among Natal Indians on the basis of places of origin, languages spoken, religions followed and maintenance of caste affiliations. At least two – thirds Indians in Natal originated from the Madras Presidency with Vizagapatam, Salem, Atur, Coimbatour etc as the main districts. Next in importance was United Provinces (Agra and Awadh) with Bustee, Gonda, Ghazeepore and Azimgarh supplying the main chunk of Indian emigrants. From Bengal Presidency, Bihar figured prominently with Patna, Gaya, Monghyr, Mozaffarpore, Chupra, etc., as the main areas sending emigrants.¹⁰ Majority Indians belonged to Hindu religion, with some Muslims and a sprinkling of Christians and Parsis among them.¹¹ Most spoke Tamil language, but a large number also spoke Telugu, Awadhi, Sindhi and Bihari dialects of Hindi, as also Bhojpuri, Gujarati and Hindustani.¹²

Agricultural labouring castes predominated among the indentured, though some came with special skills like cobblers, milkmen, shepherds and fishermen reflecting low socio – economic status of their homeland such as Padiachy, Vanniahs, Pariahs, Madiga, Dhobi, Chamars, Ahirs, among others.¹³ However, entry of higher caste Indians like the Chetty (trader), Baliya (trader and agriculturist), Thakoor, Rajput, Reddy, Pathan, Kurmi, Kevat, Jat, and Goala, dispelled the notion that only poor and low caste Indians came to South Africa.¹⁴

⁷ Bhana, *Indentured Indians in Natal*, p. 113; ‘Indian Community in SA’.

⁸ Bhana, *Indentured Indians in Natal*, p. 22; Goolam Vahed, ‘An Evil Thing’: Gandhi and Indian Indentured Labour in South Africa, 1893-1914’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, Issue 4, 2019, p. 2; Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (translated by Valji Govindji Desai), Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1928, reprint 1972, pp. 21 - 22.

⁹ ‘Indian Community in SA’.

¹⁰ Bhana, *Indentured Indians in Natal*, pp. 43-63.

¹¹ See, *ibid.*, Chapter 3.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, See Chapters 3 and 4.

Many Indians came as families, accompanied with women and children, but as a pattern most entered Natal as single young men.¹⁵

On the face of it, Indians were doing well in Natal being found in all major sectors of economy that demanded labour, and, also in sectors that required investment, like trade. Initially, the indentured were mostly employed in sugar, tea and coffee plantations with their employers being mixed farmers growing sugarcane with maize and wheat, but, from 1870s as sugar industry grew, the indenture system became consolidated on sugar plantations. In the 1890s when Gandhi arrived, the miller-cum-planter class was characteristically monopolistic.¹⁶ This made Gandhi observe, “withdraw the Indian from the sugar estate, and where would the main industry of the colony be?”¹⁷ By the 1890s, Indian indentured labour had drifted to industry, such as the coal mines, and the Natal Government Railroad which had reached the Transvaal border by 1895.¹⁸

By late 1890s the government municipalities, especially in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, hired a sizable number of indentured Indians in health and sanitation departments. Some of them were found employed in hospitals, private hubs, dockyards, and in such jobs as waiters in hotels and restaurants. Special servants also worked as interpreters, as clerks. Indians were also handling Masulah boats.¹⁹ A year before Gandhi reached South Africa, the 1892 report of the Proctor of Indian immigrants in Natal revealed that “Indians were employed throughout the length and breadth of the colony and very little is said against the importation of Asiatics.”²⁰ This was also echoed in Gandhi’s assessment of Natal’s Voter List,²¹ which showed that some free indentured Indians had risen to the status of traders, some of them owned plots of land.²² Besides, the Voters Roll showed free Indians flourishing as merchants, shopkeepers, and goldsmiths. They were also listed as clerks, accountants, salesman, gardeners, domestic cooks with some taking to farming. The Voter’s List also had a category of colonial born educated Indians.²³ There was also a floating Indian population, mostly traders travelling to and fro between Natal and India.

When Gandhi arrived in South Africa on a purely short - term professional visit, he was quite a novice.²⁴ The local newspapers described the young Gandhi as a “well dressed English barrister.”²⁵ Yet immediately upon his arrival, a chain of events happened that were to have lasting repercussions for the people of India in South Africa. Gandhi faced shocking incidents

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 23. ‘Indian Community in SA’.

¹⁶ Bhana, *Indentured Indians in Natal*, pp. 95-96.

¹⁷ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)*, Vol. 1, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1956-94, p. 172.

¹⁸ ‘Indian Community in SA’; Vahed, ‘An Evil Thing’, p. 19; Bhana, *Indentured Indians in Natal*, p. 97.

¹⁹ Bhana, *Indian Indentured Indians in Natal*, pp. 98-99.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99; ‘Indian Community in SA’.

²¹ *CWMG*, Vol. 1, pp. 275-276; *The Times of India (TOI)*, April 7, 1897.

²² ‘Indian Community in SA’; *CWMG*, Vol. 1, p. 275.

²³ *CWMG*, Vol. 1, p. 275; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 35-37.

²⁴ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 37.

²⁵ *CWMG*, Vol. 1, p. 57.

of being thrown out of train cars, to being assaulted and violently pushed off the footpaths, he experienced segregation from white European passengers on stagecoaches, faced impossibility of securing accommodation in hotels, and witnessed the anger of white magistrates in courts while being genuine in continuing to follow Indian courtroom's etiquettes in the South African courts.²⁶ Natal people seemed very hostile towards him even though he had exercised tremendous restraint. There were no easy explanations for what Gandhi had faced. After reaching Pretoria he was startled to find that the Natal newspapers which initially announced his arrival with well kempt appearance, soon declared him as an "Unwelcome Visitor".²⁷ Realising that newspaper reports about him were likely to do more harm, he earnestly wrote to the editor of the Natal Advertiser, explaining his position with a request to give space to his reply in the newspaper – "I am that unfortunate barrister-at-law who had arrived in Durban and who is now in Pretoria".²⁸ Indeed, Gandhi was unwelcomed in a colony where white English predominated, being very conscious that Indians were a subject race in the British Empire.

As Gandhi settled down as an advocate, he began to grapple with the problem through inputs from his employer and employer's partners, his employer's white South African counsels, and, the litigants who brought cases to him.²⁹ He soon understood that Indian indentured were at the receiving end of a savage, inhuman, system where white Europeans inflicted abuses on them as a regular habit – flogging, separation from families, stoppage of rations and no medical aid in sickness, and, no freedom to negotiate choice of employers, wages, category of work or termination of their contract. Generically called "coolies," Gandhi became conscious that their living conditions bordered on slavery, even their children could not escape it.³⁰ It was a refurbished, upgraded form of slavery.³¹ Based on his information, Gandhi conjured up an image of a difficult situation where indentured Indians had begun to describe their own selves as "coolies" because the Europeans used the contemptuous term very extensively. This was not all. Hundreds of Indian lawyers and traders were called "coolie lawyers" or "coolie traders" in a form of generic insult, though some Europeans were unable to perceive the usage as such, but majority whites used the term to convey deliberate contempt towards Indians.³²

The anti-Indian prejudice was so strong in the colony that it was an axiom with many Europeans to view Indians disadvantageous to white existence. The harsh reality was that "free" Indians and "free" traders too faced virulent attacks exposing a pervasive malaise in Natal society. The South African whites regularly used the print media to spread negative stereotypes about Indians – "The Indians have no sense of human decency", "They suffer from loathsome diseases", "They consider every woman their prey". Such headline specimens were

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-59; Chandra, *op cit.*, pp. 171-72.

²⁷ *CWMG*, Vol. 1, p. 57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁹ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 38-39.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³¹ 'Indian Community in SA'; *TOI*, April 7, 1897.

³² Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 36.

not rare but multi-fold.³³ Gandhi found that “free” traders, miscalled as Arabs, were the direct targets of white attacks and the newspapers derided them as cheaters, wily wretched, the real canker, parasites living in semi – barbaric life with disgraceful practices to bankrupt European traders.³⁴ Gandhi’s immediate concern was to question such opinionated perceptions. He couldn’t understand why all the outpouring of wrath on the Asiatic traders who were earning their bread by the sweat of their brow? Neither could he understand why their greater competency and superiority in commerce was being despised? He wrote to the editor of Natal Advertiser – “superior trading skills and fair competition should have encouraged others to raise as high in colonial Natal!”³⁵

In 1894, Gandhi became ready to depart for India after contemplating the impossibility of balancing the twin issues of looking after the firm’s case that employed him, and, taking up the question of Indians in South Africa at the same time.³⁶ But then at his farewell organised by his employer Dada Abdulla, Gandhi came to know about a news caption in Natal Mercury that the government was about to introduce a Bill to disenfranchise Indians. While guests were talking about the intentions of the government, Gandhi suggested to those present that Indians should strenuously resist this attack on their rights. The attendees seemed in agreement, but asked Gandhi to stay on to fight the battle.³⁷ This proved consequential. At once, a committee was set up to oversee the organisational efforts, with Sheth Haji Adam as its chairman.³⁸ The same night, Gandhi drew up a petition addressed to the Natal Legislative Assembly, and next day it was sent as a telegraphic message to the Natal government, the first of its kind to formally present the case of Indians. Although it failed to defeat the new Franchise Bill, the petition did succeed in getting the passage of the Bill delayed for two days.³⁹ Resultantly, Indians became favourably disposed towards Gandhi and soon “free” traders, volunteers and the descendants of ex – indentured Indians began to participate with alacrity in meetings. A signature campaign followed, and, within a month at least 10,000 signatures were successfully acquired which were appended to a Memorial crafted by Gandhi, with Indians as petitioners, and forwarded to Lord Ripon, the Secretary of State for colonies in England. The petition specified the pursuits of Indians in Natal, highlighting their eligibility as voters, and included a profound message that Natal’s new Franchise Bill was debarring Indians wrongfully.⁴⁰ Young Gandhi seemed capable of raising a voice for justice and equity and for correctional power. This marked the beginning for Gandhi’s indoctrination as a potential community leader.

Indians began to visit Gandhi regularly. But what affected him was that they hadn’t availed themselves of their legitimate rights. “All of them had had the same bitter

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 30; *CWMG*, Vol. 1, pp. 57-61.

³⁴ *CWMG*, Vol. 1, pp. 59-60.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁶ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 38-39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40; *TOI*, April 7, 1897; *TOI*, April 26, 1897.

³⁸ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 40.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *CWMG*, Vol. 1, pp. 147-156.

experiences...but they did not mind...being habituated.”⁴¹ It was like pocketing insults as one pockets cash. Perhaps they were busy earning honestly or probably it did not occur to anyone to enlist the support of Indians of different backgrounds.⁴² But then Gandhi found a peculiar situation as Indian traders tried to differentiate themselves from indentured labourers. Gandhi gave respect to traders but did not savour their opinion as it resonated with the distinctions that Natal whites made about Indians. The reality dawned on him that Indians of all backgrounds faced restrictions, discrimination and segregation.

The years from 1893 to 1897 were full of portent for the Indians with both Natal and the Transvaal governments placing restrictions after restrictions against them. Natal became a responsible government and thus felt itself empowered to control the entry of Indians in South Africa. Natal’s Legislative Council and the Legislative Assembly passed regressive laws against “Asiatic menace,” forcing indentured Indians to re-indenture or return to India for good, after the expiry of their contracts, failing to do so meant imposition of an annual poll tax of 3 pounds on them and their families. Alongside, “free” Indians were denied franchise.⁴³ Their movement too was restricted as Indians were required to obtain passes if they had to go from one place to another, especially at night. In addition, they were to register their marriages. It was clear that life was made very difficult for Indians, with an underlying intention to eventually expel them from the British colony.

The Transvaal government made identical laws. It was in 1881 that Indian traders and “free” labourers had first arrived in the Transvaal making a successful beginning by purchasing land, opening shops and finding work in the diamond mines. However, Gandhi observed that Europeans in this country had boundless hunger for riches, particularly after the finding of the Transvaal gold mines.⁴⁴ By 1885 the Transvaal had imposed a registration fee of 3 pounds on all Indians, withheld their right to purchase freehold land and even demarcated special locations, wards and streets for them to reside in. These were dirty places with no water supply, no electricity arrangement and no sanitary convenience to speak of.⁴⁵ Whites in the Transvaal believed that contact with Indians, and living near them, would defile their own selves. This affected Gandhi’s conscience and he was reminded of caste discrimination practise in India. In Gandhi’s view Indians in South Africa had become the “panchamas”.⁴⁶ The situation was difficult to fathom, becoming more alarming after an Indian delegation went to meet the Transvaal President Kruger for redressal, who made them wait in his courtyard, and gave them a reply that betrayed malice – “You must rest content with what rights we grant to you”.⁴⁷ The

⁴¹ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 39.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

⁴³ Vahed, ‘An Evil Thing’, fn. 6, p. 2; *TOI*, November 3, 1913.

⁴⁴ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 30; *TOI*, May 12, 1897.

⁴⁵ *TOI*, May 12, 1897; *TOI*, January 31, 1898; *TOI*, February 28, 1898; *TOI*, March 21, 1898; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 32.

⁴⁶ Sujay Biswas, ‘Gandhi’s Struggle Against Caste and Untouchability in South Africa, 1893-1914’, *South Asian Review*, Vol. 42, Issue 1, 2021, pp. 3-17.

⁴⁷ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 31.

position of Indians in South Africa was thus full of pernicious circumstances. Attention was drawn towards this with the beginning of Gandhi's political activism.

Gandhi put his determination to test by first concentrating on local newspapers which were busy denying Indians their identity. Through incessant writing in different newspapers – *Natal Advertiser*, *Natal Mercury*, *Natal Witness*, and *The Times of Natal* – Gandhi tried to portray his countrymen as a veritable blessing to the colony and seriously tried to educate white Europeans about the misunderstood Indian.⁴⁸ Gandhi wrote on many aspects to undo the falsity – who were the Indians, were they desirable as citizens in the colony, was their treatment based in accordance with the best British traditions or with the principles of justice and morality or were they to be viewed purely from material and selfish point of view.⁴⁹ He defended the indentured labourers' role as one receiving corporal punishment but still not giving evidence against their masters. He defended the trader as the one not able to speak English, and much maligned due to defective interpretation.⁵⁰ This was sublime Gandhi, but Gandhi also wrote with anger – “are they to be treated as scoundrels?”⁵¹ “So long as the skin is white it would not matter to you whether it conceals beneath it poison or nectar?”⁵² He even wrote with sarcasm – “if a room without a nice, rich carpet and ornamental hangings, a dinner table, (perhaps unvarnished), without an expensive table cloth, with no flowers to decorate it, with no wines spread, no pork or beef ad lib... be a semi-barbaric life ...then, indeed, the Indian trader must plead guilty to the charge and sooner the semi-barbarity is wiped out from the highest colonial civilization, the better!”⁵³ The more Gandhi wrote in the newspapers the more aware Indians became about his capacity to develop a common platform for Indians.

It was a time when Gandhi did not question the basis of British Imperialism, rather accepted it as given although he was conscious that England “wafts her sceptre” over India.⁵⁴ Still, Gandhi developed the argument that there was no invidious distinction between a white and an Indian British subject, they both being part of the same British Empire! This allowed Indians to become aware of their commonest right as British subjects and to appeal to the Imperial government for redressal of their grievances. The cue was picked up and, Gandhi received community support to carry on a veritable campaign making the Imperial authorities aware that Indians could express widespread feeling of dissatisfaction and disappointment against institutionalised racist discrimination. Gleaned with an auditor's eye, Gandhi wrote letters, petitions, memorials, representations, sent these with signatures of Indians, as well as his own, to all those who mattered in running the administration of the colony of Natal. Included in the list were the Natal Governor, the Natal Premier, Natal Legislators both of the Council and the Assembly, and the Speaker of the Natal Assembly.⁵⁵ Through Gandhi, Indians

⁴⁸ See, *CWMG*, Vol. 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-189.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

⁵⁵ *TOI*, May 6, 1897; *TOI*, May 24, 1897; See also, *CWMG*, Vol. 1; *CWMG*, Vol. 2; *CWMG*, Vol. 3.

also began to communicate with colonial authorities – the Secretary of State for colonies in London, Lord Ripon, W. Wedderburn, J. Chamberlain, and the Viceroy of India Lord Elgin.⁵⁶ Alongside, they approached the British Immigration Agent at Pretoria, the Transvaal, and even Her Majesty's commissioner in Cape Town.⁵⁷ As British subjects, Indians vociferously appealed to higher constitutional authorities that no bar against their political freedom and political privileges be allowed to be put in South Africa. Despite their strenuous efforts, however, England did not prove to be the deliverer for Indians. The official responses were not equibalanced in their favour and Indians remained pitted against British Imperialism. Nevertheless, Gandhi's campaign in South Africa began to have strong backing of the Indian community. This was no idle expression of opinion, but, a sincere one.

The case for Indians continued to be built up with the realisation that exclusionary laws would ruin hundreds of homes, may leave community members penniless, not just families, relatives, traders, and servants, but the entire Indian settler community. In Natal, their entire existence seemed at stake.⁵⁸ A time came when Gandhi was able to convince the Indian leaders and other community members to get organised politically. As a consequence, the temporary committee formed in early 1894 became a permanent political body and came to be called the Natal Indian Congress (NIC). Gandhi believed that the political body would allow Indians to speak with one voice.⁵⁹ When formed, the NIC had a structure with Abdoola Hajee Adam as the chairman, and 23 Vice-Presidents from all backgrounds – Muslims, Hindus, Parsees, and Christians, and with Gandhi as the Honorary Secretary.⁶⁰ The NIC focused on the conditions of indentured Indians in order to help alleviate their sufferings, to help the poor and the helpless in every possible way, and to work in general for the moral, political and social uplift of the Indians.⁶¹ Within 2 or 3 years, a large number of Indians from different parts of Natal had enrolled in it, though not all paid subscription for the mere asking. Some had to be persuaded.⁶² Aimed to fight discrimination against Indians, NIC worked all the year round and focused on providing equality to all.

Gandhi went to India in 1896 carrying the credentials from the NIC to present a truthful portrait about South African Indians.⁶³ In India, Gandhi addressed large gatherings in Bombay, Madras, Poona where he forcibly outlined the humiliating problems faced by Indians in South Africa, signalling their political degradation, and, economic ruin.⁶⁴ His cause attracted the press, people, national leaders alike, among whom Gopal Krishna Gokhale was so inspired that he later played a role in getting the indentured emigration stopped from India.⁶⁵ Gandhi also

⁵⁶ *CWMG*, Vol. 3; *TOI*, November 19, 1906; *TOI*, April 7, 1897.

⁵⁷ See, *CWMG*, Vol. 1; *CWMG*, Vol. 2.

⁵⁸ *CWMG*, Vol. 1, p. 204.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 42.

⁶¹ *CWMG*, Vol. 1, pp. 248-249.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 246; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 42.

⁶³ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 45; *CWMG*, Vol. 2, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁴ *CWMG*, Vol. 2, pp. v-vii, 38-48, 69-80, 92.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 80; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 46-48.

got a “Green Pamphlet” published about grievances of Indians which he wrote on voyage home from Natal. The Green Pamphlet became the most widely distributed propaganda material, making Indians conscious that Gandhi’s cause was worth fighting for.⁶⁶

Gandhi left for Natal in response to a telegraphic message asking him to return at once.⁶⁷ By that time, Reuter’s cablegram containing exaggerated summaries of Gandhi’s Indian speeches and the Green Pamphlet, had been made accessible to thousands of Europeans through local newspapers.⁶⁸ This ensured that when Gandhi reached Natal, a movement hostile to him was in the offing. This became starkly apparent when two steamers, S.S. Courland and S.S. Naderi owned by South African Indians, reached Natal carrying Gandhi and other Indian passengers. Whites claimed that Gandhi was “invading” Natal with hordes of Indians.⁶⁹ The Natal Government played its role by forcibly quarantining the two steamers for 23 days at a distance from Durban harbour. Eventually, the steamers were allowed to land, but then events of unprecedented scale happened. As the steamers reached Durban harbour, thousands of white Europeans gathered at the landing point, highly charged and agitating, to prevent the landing of Gandhi and Indians. The ship owners, “no cowards” in Gandhi’s eyes, steadfastly refused, becoming more determined to land in order to test their right to do so.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, the white colonists dispersed from the landing point, with assurances from their leaders, but continued to throng the streets of Durban. Later, when Gandhi was walking with his friend Mr. Laughton, the counsel of his employer Dada Abdulla, to reach his destination, some white youth noticed, recognised and identified Gandhi. As Gandhi proceeded, the young whites were joined by other Europeans. They succeeded in separating Mr. Laughton from Gandhi, then began to abuse him, throw stones at him, slapped him, kicked him, hurled stale fish at him and eventually threw down his turban.⁷¹ Gandhi almost gave up the hope of reaching his destination, alive. An alert wife of the city’s Superintendent of Police Mr. Alexander, saved him. As he reached his destination, thousands of white Europeans again gathered in a menacing mood, ready to burn down the house along with Gandhi. However, as destiny would have it, the dangerous eventuality was avoided as Mr. Alexander reached the location and helped Gandhi escape, disguised as a police constable.⁷² All this happened on 13 January 1897 and next day the newspapers carried the news expressing sympathy with the white standpoint but at the same time defended Gandhi.⁷³ The whole episode contributed to enhance Gandhi’s reputation. This meant that Indians would measure their own strength and confidence in Gandhi’s suffering for their cause. As for himself, he felt that “God was preparing me for the practice of Satyagraha”.⁷⁴

⁶⁶ *CWMG*, Vol. 2, pp. vi, 120.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. vii, 173.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 48.

⁶⁹ *TOI*, April 7, 1897; *TOI*, May 6, 1897; *CWMG*, Vol. 2, pp. 165, 171-172.

⁷⁰ *TOI*, May 6, 1897; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 51.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp 53-54; *CWMG*, Vol. 2, pp. 174-76.

⁷² Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 54-55; *CWMG*, Vol. 2, pp. 162-174.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 175-182; *TOI*, March 8, 1897.

⁷⁴ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 57.

Gandhi insightfully understood that Natal quickly fastened the label of exclusion against Indians. Four new bills were passed in 1897 which Indians considered as engines of oppression – the Quarantine Bill, the Immigration Restriction Bill, the Trade Licenses Bill and the Bill to protect uncovenanted Indians.⁷⁵ In all these, the Government dropped the police liability against wrongful arrest thus unduly protecting the police force. Gandhi fought many cases for Indians against the working of such demonising laws in the Natal's courts, winning many but also losing some,⁷⁶ but often successful in pointing out many irregularities in the functioning of the Government and the police mechanism. Most common of such cases involved the imposition of annual pound 3 poll tax.⁷⁷ Gandhi fought cases which ended securing justice to the indentured labourers particularly when pound 3 tax was falsely imposed – for example when the labourer took leave of absence to file a complaint against the owner or when a labourer was charged for absence from indentured estate at roll call on a Sunday.⁷⁸ Gandhi took up cases when the indentured labourers were falsely accused of destroying corn while hoeing fields or when they were sentenced without even witnesses deposing against them. In many cases Gandhi helped set aside hard labour punishment against the indentured.⁷⁹ There were cases when the Indian labourers were let off after Gandhi's forceful arguments in the Magistrate Court specially under the Vagrancy Law, despite the Natal Police not agreeing to the decision of the magistrate.⁸⁰ Even in cases where his arguments were rejected, Gandhi pursued through appeals to the higher Circuit Court and even to the Natal Supreme Court.⁸¹ Gandhi also fought cases involving just demands of Indian traders for retail licenses or against illegal imposition of fines seeking refunds or seeking changes in the immigration legislation.⁸² Gandhi's concentration on the welfare of the indentured Indians, the rich and the poor alike, made him a towering figure in the community.⁸³ In practice this meant increasing interactions of Indians with Gandhi and compatibility with each other. The process generated political consciousness that was more than just a fractional interest for Indians. This was not a simple mythological experience.

The Indian question hung in South Africa during the Boer war (1899-1902) fought between Imperial Britain and the Boer Republic of the Transvaal ostensibly on race antagonism that Britain's "own" subjects, the Uitlanders, faced from the Boers. It is said that the colonial secretary, Chamberlain, even used grievances of Indians as one of the grounds for fighting the war.⁸⁴ However, Britain's recourse to fight the race-feud was deceptive as Britain did not want

⁷⁵ *CWMG*, Vol. 2, pp. 260-271; Nauriya, 'Representing Indian Toilers in Natal', pp. 34-35.

⁷⁶ *CWMG*, Vol. 2, p. 234; Nauriya, 'Representing Indian Toilers in Natal', p. 35.

⁷⁷ *TOI*, March 20, 1899; See also, Nauriya, 'Representing Indian Toilers in Natal'.

⁷⁸ Nauriya, 'Representing Indian Toilers in Natal', p. 35.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 35; *CWMG*, Vol. 3, pp. 2-3.

⁸³ Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai, (eds.), *A Documentary History of Indian South Africans*, Stanford, The Hoover Institution Press, 1984, p. 8.

⁸⁴ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 64-65, 75; *TOI*, July 24, 1899; *TOI*, August 17, 1899; *TOI*, August 21, 1899.

the Transvaal swept away. More deep-rooted causes of imperialism were at work and the war was fought on suzerainty issue.⁸⁵ Little thought was likely to be given to the Indians. Yet when Natal Government approached Indian leaders, a non-combatant Indian Ambulance Corps of 1000 Dhoolie Stretcher-Bearers was promptly raised, including both the indentured and free Indians like Gandhi.⁸⁶ Most of the volunteers were plucky youth and they registered their names at Gandhi's office, ready to serve until the war got over.⁸⁷ It was exemplary that Indians did not nurse any grudges, there was no mistaking fervour in maintaining Imperial unity, including in Gandhi, who would decades later succeed in evicting Britain from its greatest Imperial possession, i.e., India.

The Volunteer Corps did arduous work, and at times very risky, with shells falling within hardly 100 yards from them while they marched for miles carrying stretchers with wounded soldiers, along with monthly rations and water carts on rugged roads and hilly regions, sleeping in the open without blankets, and at times without satisfying hunger and thirst.⁸⁸ The Natal Witness and Natal Mercury acknowledged the Indian Corps as very acceptable, with eloquent expression of the feeling of the Indian people.⁸⁹ Gandhi communicated to the Volunteer Corps – “as a memento of the assistance you gave me...I offer you the gift of my services which please accept ...I promise to take up without fee any legal work that I can do for you or for your friends...”⁹⁰ Thus evolved the vision of a leadership based on principles and values. It was in this scenario that Gandhi was seen as a man of different calibre, with community feeling confident in Gandhi. His leadership began to grow while Indians looked forward to a permanent change in their relations with the whites.⁹¹

There was, however, a sanguine side to these developments and their contribution in war did not solve the Indian question. On the contrary, inequality became more marked, and, more offensive as thousands of Indian refugees, along with European refugees, entered Natal after an exodus set in from the Transvaal and Upper Districts of Natal.⁹² Natal Indians hoped that Indian refugees being British subjects would be protected. Initially, this is just what happened also, and Gandhi remained enchanted with the term “British subjects” for Indians. The Natal Indian Congress too thanked Natal Government and the Mayor of Durban acknowledged this.⁹³ However, as Indian refugees continued to pour into Natal, the white officials began to demonstrate clear signs of favouring Europeans, who were allowed entry comfortably and without hindrances with Natal Relief Committees supporting them.⁹⁴ At the

⁸⁵ *TOI*, April 6, 1898; *TOI*, April 18, 1898; *TOI*, June 28, 1899; Ramchandra Guha, *Gandhi Before India*, London, Allen Lane, 2013, p. 138.

⁸⁶ *TOI*, June 9, 1900; *TOI*, June 16, 1900; *CWMG*, Vol. 3, pp. 163-169.

⁸⁷ *CWMG*, Vol. 3, pp. 153-154, 158; *TOI*, March 2, 1900; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 66-69.

⁸⁸ *TOI*, March 2 1900; *TOI*, May 18, 1900; *TOI*, June 9 1900; *TOI*, June 16, 1900; *CWMG*, Vol. 3, pp. 163-169.

⁸⁹ *TOI*, December 6, 1899; *TOI*, June 9, 1900.

⁹⁰ *CWMG*, Vol. 3, p. 176.

⁹¹ *TOI*, June 9, 1900.

⁹² *CWMG*, Vol. 3, pp. 150, 169; *TOI*, December 6, 1899.

⁹³ *CWMG*, Vol. 3, p. 133.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

same time whites began to clamour that Indians “must not come,” treating them as “despised strangers”.⁹⁵ Even the Shipping Companies did not venture to take Indian refugees because Natal’s Quarantine law strictly applied towards Indian passengers.⁹⁶ Natal’s deliberate neglect continued even after the war ended. It therefore became contingent on Natal’s Indian community to shoulder the maintenance of Indian refugees, this being a heart wrenching exercise.⁹⁷ Gandhi once again became active in carrying a constant campaign by making representations to the Town Council, the Permit Office, the Immigration Department, the office of the Protector of Immigrants, he wrote to the High Commissioner and the Colonial Office.⁹⁸ It was as if all requests and appeals fell on deaf ears. Serious restrictions continued to be imposed on Indian refugees and their resettlement remained a burning issue within the Indian community. This period was of intense activity as Gandhi began to personally appear in relevant offices, and the courts, to seek justice. Many a times he succeeded in exposing the indignant Natal white officials and their discriminatory tactics in issuing relevant documents to Indian refugees – embarkation passes, domiciled certificates, permits, and trader licenses. Yet nefarious ways continued to be used and officials demanded visitor fees or European language requirements to clear the cases of Indian refugees.⁹⁹

Between 1900 and 1905, barring one year (1901-02) when he was in India, Gandhi vigorously campaigned and protested, sometimes with vehemence, against the Natal and colonial governments’ inaction to help revert vexing restrictions against Indians. Still the situation remained volatile as the newly created Asiatic Department remained busy, with greater vigour, in enforcing the old Boer Laws against Indians in the Transvaal. The abuse of Traders’ Licenses Act, refusal to grant permits to open shops/ businesses, or grant of Asiatic passes to Indians and forcefully confining them to locations, now termed as bazaars in the Transvaal, refusal to grant them land ownership rights – all these matters gravely exercised Gandhi.¹⁰⁰ The Indian community remained much constrained as Natal moved further in similar direction, still worse, as it made exclusion hereditary by extending the pound 3 poll tax rule to the children of indentured labourers.¹⁰¹ It was at this time that Gandhi called for banning the indentured immigration to the colony of Natal, much against the wishes of plantation owners, mine owners and the railways.¹⁰² He remained in action mode continuing to send petitions, representations to authorities, writing in the press, giving interviews now and led deputations to the Colonial Secretary of State, Mr. Chamberlain.¹⁰³ He even floated a weekly

⁹⁵ *TOI*, November 14, 1899; *TOI*, January 1, 1900.

⁹⁶ *CWMG*, Vol. 3, pp. 140-141.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 143, 169, 175-176; *TOI*, June 9, 1900; *TOI*, June 3, 1901.

⁹⁸ See, *CWMG*, Vol. 3.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*; See also, Gandhi, *Satyagraha*.

¹⁰⁰ *CWMG*, Vol. 3, pp. 326-327, 389-392; *TOI*, August 5, 1901; *TOI*, July 19, 1905; *TOI*, November 10, 1906; *TOI*, November 24, 1906.

¹⁰¹ *CWMG*, Vol. 3, pp. ix, 301-303.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹⁰³ *TOI*, May 14, 1902; *TOI*, May 17, 1902; *TOI*, November 9, 1902; *TOI*, November 10, 1902; See also, *CWMG*, Vol. 3.

newspaper – *Indian Opinion*, to make such information available to Indians. Its content was printed in 4 different Indian languages so that Indians could be apprised of the attempts being made towards redressal of their grievances.¹⁰⁴ The *Indian Opinion* encouraged fellow feeling within the Indian community and linked Gandhi to them even more deeply.

In 1906, the history of Indians in South Africa took a new turn as Gandhi launched Satyagraha in that year in response to the Transvaal's Legislative Council passing the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance or what Gandhi called the Black Act.¹⁰⁵ Describing Satyagraha as the “Soul Force” born out of truth and love or non – violence, Satyagraha postulated the conquest of the adversary by suffering in one's own person.¹⁰⁶ Gandhi practised this methodology of protest for the first time in South Africa when passing of the Black Act proved the worst misgivings of Indians right. Indians in the Transvaal regularly faced anti – Indian restrictions practised through magisterial notices,¹⁰⁷ and the virulent activities of its White League.¹⁰⁸ However, the promulgation of the Black Act indicated that whites remained statutorily hostile towards Indians. The Act aimed to compulsorily register all Indians by submitting to physical examination, finger printing like criminals and requiring them to carry a registration certificate at all times, producing it on demand by any official, the police and in Courts, not exempting even women and children. Indians remained liable to be fined, imprisoned or deported to India if they failed to register. They were being compelled to leave the country in sheer disgust or accept serfdom. Gandhi's reaction was “I shuddered” when he first read the Ordinance,¹⁰⁹ and at once become aware that rights of Indians were pilfered most drastically. At this time, the realisation dawned on Gandhi that the Empire cannot escape responsibility, the Transvaal being a Crown colony. The deception made Gandhi very strong in his resolution that “we must look for assistance only to ourselves”.¹¹⁰ Gandhi immediately held meeting with leading Indians and explained them the consequences of the Black Act. Soon after, a mass meeting was organised on 11th September 1906, held in the Old Empire theatre of the Transvaal that was packed from floor to ceiling with Indians.¹¹¹ In this meeting Gandhi spoke in Hindi and Gujarati, with other leaders joining in Tamil and Telugu, explaining the implications of the Black Act for the Indian community. After the speeches ended, the Indians resolved to take the solemn pledge to resistance in the name of God, and passed the historic 4th

¹⁰⁴ CWMG, Vol. 3, p. vii; *Indian Opinion*, 1903-1914, (Natal, South Africa).

¹⁰⁵ *TOI*, May 25, 1907; *TOI*, November 20, 1907; *TOI*, December 20, 1907; Chandra, *op cit.*; Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher Bearer of Empire*, New Delhi, Navnyana, 2015; William Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001; C. G. Henning, *The Indentured Indian in Natal, 1860-1917*, New Delhi, Promilla and Co., 1993.

¹⁰⁶ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, Chapters XII, XIII; Guha, *op cit.*; Dennis Dalton, *Nonviolent Power in Action*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993.

¹⁰⁷ CWMG, Vol. 3, pp. 471-472;

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 392; *TOI*, April 6, 1903.

¹⁰⁹ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 91; *TOI*, November 10, 1906; *TOI*, December 20, 1907; *TOI*, January 25, 1908.

¹¹⁰ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 117.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

Resolution on Satyagraha, deciding to never submit to inhuman laws.¹¹² Gandhi cautiously made the mass gathering aware that the pledge was not to be taken in a fit of enthusiasm, fostering the idea of community's inner strength – “we may have to go to jail, bear insults, may have to go hungry, suffer extreme heat and cold, may have to do hard labour, may be flogged, fined heavily, with our property attached, we may be deported, fall ill or even die. If the entire community”, he carried on, “manfully stands the test, the victory will be near.”¹¹³ Gandhi was heard in perfect quiet, word by word, as he prepared the Indians to join Satyagraha.¹¹⁴ Its meaning was fully discussed in *Indian Opinion* – never use physical force, forbidden even in favourable circumstances.

The Satyagraha as passive resistance movement had to advance for Gandhi had exhausted all appropriate constitutional remedies through the local and colonial governments. He had been to London meeting Dadabhai Naraoji, Muncherji Bhowngree, the British Committee of Indian National Congress, but the results seemed to be of no avail.¹¹⁵ In all this, most important fact was that colonial state was exposed – showing friendliness to the Indians while secretly supporting the Transvaal Government, becoming starkly clear in 1907 as the Ordinance became law with Imperial assent. This contributed to reinforce awakening in Gandhi and the Indian community with the result that people began to attend mass public meetings, mostly sitting attentively on grounds, taking pledges of resistance while maintaining discipline.¹¹⁶ Satyagraha involved recruitment of volunteers of 12-18 years, who handed printed papers with details of the Black Act, dissuading those approaching permit offices. Picketers were placed at these offices, with some getting arrested for obstructing public traffic, but courts set them free declaring them innocent, which further exalted their spirit.¹¹⁷ There were some painful developments though, as few volunteers were reported to have privately threatened some Indians taking out permits, signalling “rift in the lute”¹¹⁸ – but such elements were immediately stamped out, while the majority remained vigilant. A Satyagraha Association was floated joined by numerous Indians, who also contributed to its fund.¹¹⁹ It was at this time that Phoenix Farm became the base to settle Satyagraha workers.¹²⁰ By late 1908, the movement was reaping advantage as its community backing remained the single most guarantee of victory. Yet, the Transvaal government remained adamant, its officials conveying to Gandhi time and again that Indian opposition has failed now that the law has been passed, the Indians must prove their loyalty, and love of peace, by submitting to it.¹²¹

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 100; *TOI*, December, 20, 1907.

¹¹⁴ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 101.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-20; *TOI*, November 10, 1906, *TOI*, December 18, 1906, *TOI*, January 25, 1908.

¹¹⁶ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 116, 121; *TOI*, December 20, 1907.

¹¹⁷ *TOI*, December 20, 1907; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 126.

¹¹⁸ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 125; *TOI*, December 20, 1907.

¹¹⁹ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 153.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122; *TOI*, December 20, 1907.

As Satyagrahis, the passive resisters continued to flood the prisons, including Gandhi, for disobeying the compulsory registration law. Gandhi's arrest was followed by a spontaneous black flag procession where many were flogged.¹²² Inside the prison, Gandhi and fellow Satyagrahis obeyed jail regulations, consistent with their self-respect, while cooking and sharing food.¹²³ The government, however, remained manipulative. With Gandhi in jail, General Smuts and the Transvaal government tried to reach a settlement with other community leaders, who firmly declined to deal "with Gandhi and our men in jail".¹²⁴ The negotiators like Mr. Alfred Cartwright then met Gandhi in jail to work out a settlement but Gandhi chose to first consult his fellow-prisoners, while taking the consent for granted of those outside the prison, as indicated by new prison arrivals.¹²⁵ Subsequently, Gandhi was taken to meet General Smuts where a compromise was proposed that Indians should register voluntarily after which General Smuts would repeal the Asiatic Act, asking Gandhi to not hold meetings or demonstrations.¹²⁶ To this Gandhi flatly refused, his release was followed by community meetings to confer on the compromise, believing in it himself that the community would gain by the compromise.¹²⁷ Majority accepted the settlement, barring a few who accused Gandhi of betrayal having sold the community for 15000 pounds. Gandhi was even assaulted and was badly lacerated.¹²⁸ It was obvious that Gandhi was on trial but Indians fulfilled part of their settlement in a very short time, yet, the local government played the community false by not repealing the Black Act, and instead passed two more concurrent acts under which fresh Indian arrivals and later applicants remained subject to the Black Act.¹²⁹

The Satyagraha continued but no one, including Gandhi, could tell how long the struggle would last. Gandhi campaigned through Indian Opinion by writing articles on "Foul Play", educating Indians to hold themselves in readiness for the next course of action which involved burning the registration certificates.¹³⁰ This signalled a change in the method of resistance and also a novelty in the community's conduct. Satyagrahis first sent an 'ultimatum' letter to General Smuts, and collected in thousands on the grounds of Hamidia Mosque, in Johannesburg, and went ahead to burn their certificates in a bonfire.¹³¹ This created even a greater stir, 13000 Indians had challenged the powerful Transvaal government! The whites were provided with a fresh handle for vilifying the community, they began to clamour for condign punishment for insolent Indians.¹³² The Indians remained fearless, firm and ready to go to prison.

¹²² See, Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, Chapter XX, pp. 134-142; *TOI*, January 6, 1908; *TOI*, January 13, 1908.

¹²³ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 138; *TOI*, January 13, 1908.

¹²⁴ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 142; *TOI*, January 13, 1908.

¹²⁵ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 142-144.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144; *TOI*, February 1, 1908.

¹²⁷ *TOI*, January 13, 1908; *TOI*, January 25, 1908; *TOI*, February 1, 1908; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 145.

¹²⁸ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 151-56.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 172-175; *TOI*, February 1, 1908.

¹³⁰ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 181.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184-187.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 184.

Satyagrahis further upset the calculations of the government when they decided to add in their plank the Transvaal Immigration Restriction Bill, passed alongside the Black Act, placing restrictions on Indians entering the Transvaal from other provinces. The community of Hindus, Musalmans, Parsis and Christians considered this addition as their duty,¹³³ as they wanted to facilitate entry of previously domiciled Indians into the Transvaal who had also received English education. This was possible only by working out a Satyagraha strategy, accordingly 'army' batches were created to move to the Transvaal frontier for entry from Natal, without certificates. When men in such batches reached the frontier, they were arrested, they disobeyed, were rearrested and then illegally deported to India without trial.¹³⁴ The batches that succeeded in re-entering the Transvaal, were sentenced to 3 months jail with hard labour, breaking stones, digging tanks, working as sweepers or as scavengers, facing harassment.¹³⁵ Gandhi too was made a prisoner, but unlike others was confined to a solitary cell, reserved for dangerous prisoners in Pretoria.¹³⁶ Now, everyone seemed to be on trial – the young lads, hawkers, educated Indians, children of indentured labourers and few indentured themselves. Day by day the trial grew more severe for Satyagrahis as the government became more and more violent in its approach, tried to break their morale by separating satyagrahi prisoners and putting them in road camps in biting cold, where few breathed their last.¹³⁷ Still, as adversity created new difficulties, the community stood unmoved, although the Satyagrahi numbers began to dip while Satyagraha became a protracted struggle.

The number of Satyagrahis remained small between 1909 and 1911 as some Indians became war weary, but, Gandhi and stalwart Satyagrahis remained confident that "great is Truth and it shall prevail".¹³⁸ Their resolve was of patience, courage and endurance. So, when the news came that South African British and the Boer were sending deputation to England, Indians decided to explore the avenue of settlement once again. By that time Gandhi was not in jail and he led a two-member deputation to England (1909) but the deputation failed as, both, colonial and South African governments were not ready to repeal any of the restrictive Acts against Indians. It seemed that the Colour Bar remained a matter of "principle" with both, General Smuts and General Botha.¹³⁹ The London Indian deputation did not bring good news upon return, yet, Gandhi remained steadfast, not ready to take defeat. The staunch Satyagrahis too continued to be inspired despite meagre funds, replenished with money sent over from India.¹⁴⁰ This was the time when the Tolstoy farm was brought centre – stage as a place of refuge for Satyagrahis and their families, hailing from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and North India. The Tolstoy Farm saw the ebb and flow of Satyagrahis as they went to jails or got

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 189; *TOI*, January 30, 1908.

¹³⁴ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 197-200.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-07.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-06.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 212. Ratanji Jamshedji Tata contributed 25,000 rupees to the Satyagraha Fund.

released from there.¹⁴¹ There was also Phoenix farm where Indians of different backgrounds were staying and bringing out Indian Opinion, but Phoenix was 300 miles away from Johannesburg. The confidence of Satyagrahis remained a great asset for Gandhi as the struggle pursued for eight long years, the fight itself remained a victory for Satyagrahis.¹⁴²

When Gokhale visited the Tolstoy Farm in 1912, before going to Natal, and, later to Pretoria where he met Union government ministers, the Satyagraha was at its lowest ebb. Gokhale after his meeting with ministers informed Gandhi, “You must return to India in a year...Everything has been settled...The Black Act will be repealed, the racial bar will be abolished”.¹⁴³ However, Gokhale’s visit stiffened the resolve of Satyagrahis, and Gandhi, as General Botha and his ministers expectedly broke the pledge given to Gokhale. In fact, the struggle had more rigour now as the pound 3 poll tax was placed on its plank.¹⁴⁴ With this Satyagraha orientation, the indentured labourers got roped in large numbers. Simultaneously, an event happened which none had anticipated. By the stroke of a pen the Cape Supreme Court de-solemnised the validity of Indian marriages except for those celebrated according to Christian rites, nullifying Hindu, Muslim and Zoroastrian rites, creating an insufferable situation. Indian women were no more recognised as wives and they also lost the right to inherit parental property.¹⁴⁵ An opportunity was thus afforded to Indian women to do their bit as sister Satyagrahis. Before their induction, however, Gandhi made them aware of such eventualities as exercising restraint in matter of food, dress, personal movements, and facing the possibility of going to jail with hard work like washing clothes or facing insults from jail warders etc.¹⁴⁶ The Indian women, joined by Kasturba, Gandhi’s wife, remained fearless. There was no sitting at ease after that and women became part of Satyagraha strategy. They entered the Transvaal without certificates or took to hawking there without licenses. In either case the police ignored and did not arrest them, despite them committing an offence. Later, women joined the batches of men Satyagrahis who entered the Transvaal from Natal, and were arrested, while women Satyagrahis entered Natal from the Transvaal, but the police did not arrest them.¹⁴⁷ It was around this time that women followed the planned secret mission of Satyagrahi strategy to proceed to Newcastle coal mines once they crossed over to Natal and contact indentured labourers to strike.¹⁴⁸ Their influence produced favourable result as the Newcastle coal mine indentured workers responded quickly by going on strike, perplexing the white coal – mine owners but pleasing the Satyagrahis, and Gandhi, who reacted by saying – “massive awakening”, and immediately set out to join the indentured labourers.¹⁴⁹ As expected, after the news of the strike spread, women Satyagrahis were arrested and kept in the same jail as other

¹⁴¹ See, Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, Chapters XXXIII, XXXIV, XXXV on Tolstoy Farm.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

¹⁴⁴ Nauriya, ‘Representing Indian Toilers in Natal’, pp. 34, 38, 40 and 47; *TOI*, November 3, 1913.

¹⁴⁵ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 251-252.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁴⁷ *TOI*, November 3, 1913; *TOI*, November 7, 1913.

¹⁴⁸ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 257-258.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; *TOI*, November 5, 1913.

Satyagrahis at Maritzburg. Gandhi gave a violent expression to this development, his “blood boiled” while the action stirred the hearts of Indians especially after Valliamma succumbed, within a few days of her release in 1914.¹⁵⁰

The stream of striking indentured labourers continued to emerge in successive batches, informing Gandhi how the owners cut off their light, water supply, threw them out of quarters and thrashed and flogged them.¹⁵¹ Gandhi promised to live and have food with them. But how was he to feed and house the ever - growing multitude pouring from all directions, displaying splendid firmness, some with children and wives and some with bundle of clothes upon their heads.¹⁵² As the accessions continued, the coal mine owners called Gandhi for a conference at Durban where Gandhi found the environment surcharged with heat and passion.¹⁵³ Gandhi justified the propriety of the strike and pointedly told the mine owners to fight the workers’ battle by asking the government to take off the pound 3 poll tax, treat them as ‘free’ men and educate Europeans in favour of all Indians.¹⁵⁴ Gandhi returned to Newcastle, and, decided to commence the “Long March” with a view to reach the Tolstoy Farm with the stream of labourers.¹⁵⁵ Before starting, he pictured before the indentured, risks and the uncertainty involved in ending the struggle, but the workers did not flinch. Ready to walk on foot, the marchers agreed to follow rules on the march, allowing themselves to be arrested if the police offered to arrest them. On the way, Indian traders helped the marchers with food and other provisions, so did community volunteers while Gandhi and his co-workers did the sweeping and scavenging.¹⁵⁶ The marchers displayed endurance as they proceeded. Gandhi wrote to the government that this was an effective protest and a demonstration of distress, and followed this up by personally talking to General Botha’s secretary who replied within half a minute that “General Smuts will have nothing to do with you. You may do just as you please.”¹⁵⁷ As the caravan progressed, the white Europeans responded by holding meetings where they offered threats to shoot the Indians, although some among them did not wish to lay violent hands upon innocent men, a view rather abashing the majority white colonists.¹⁵⁸ Government decided not to leave Gandhi in a state of freedom. He was arrested, released on bail, rearrested and again released by the court, but the marchers were neither disheartened nor frightened.¹⁵⁹ Gandhi, Satyagrahis and the striking indentured labourers remained confident of victory because their determination remained combined with non-violence.

Gandhi was eventually sentenced to 9 months, extended further by 3 months, as government deprived the marchers of his leadership. Gandhi’s two European lieutenants, Polak

¹⁵⁰ *TOI*, November 7, 1913; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 258.

¹⁵¹ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 260, 261; *TOI*, November 5, 1913; *TOI*, November 8, 1913.

¹⁵² Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 263-65.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 265-66.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 267-268.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 276-278.

and Kallenbach too were sentenced, three of them were initially imprisoned in Volksrust jail but Gandhi was subsequently shifted to faraway Bloemfontein jail where he was kept in an isolated cell, where no Indian could go and visit him.¹⁶⁰ Government also made arrangements to arrest the whole body of marchers, drawing special trains to deport them to Natal where they were prosecuted and sent to jail.¹⁶¹ But had the government kept thousands of indentured, and, free Indians in prisons, they would have directly played into the Indian hands. A new plan was therefore struck, the miners were forced to go underground against their will as the government wire netted the mine compounds and proclaimed these as outstations of Dundee and Newcastle jails with European staff as warders.¹⁶² Those who boldly refused were brutally whipped, kicked and abused, but most indentured labourers patiently put up with their tribulations. They continued to be detained in collieries as was reported from Balbidgeich.¹⁶³ A large number of strikers had also returned to sugar estates after Gandhi was arrested, but they again struck work even as government reinforced its police at Rand. A melee occurred when some of them had begun to destroy the property of the sugar estates.¹⁶⁴ Riots also occurred at Ladysmith.¹⁶⁵ At other places government used intimidation, for example, General Lukin, commanding the Cape Mounted Rifles, was reported to have stated that the Rifles would be reinforced further in case the strikers intended to march again.¹⁶⁶ At Verulam, a fracas between the Indians and the police took place where several were injured.¹⁶⁷ The Satyagrahis continued to convey Gandhi's message to his people urging them to remain peaceful.¹⁶⁸ Meanwhile, news came from Johannesburg that Indian traders had suspended their activities in sympathy with Gandhi.¹⁶⁹ No market produce arrived in stores.¹⁷⁰ By then Indians organised a crowded meeting in Johannesburg expressing gratitude to Gandhi, Polak and Kallenbach, their leaders, and also to the rank and file of passive resisters. They passed resolutions with a deep sense of despair, and dismay, at the growing seriousness of their position owing to the arrest of their leaders, and, called out to the government to release them for the purpose of negotiating a settlement.¹⁷¹ But, they remained pledged to the struggle.

The satyagraha continued despite government's actions, yet it seemed that the struggle was only at its beginning. The news came from Durban that harbour, the railways and the municipal corporation employees had joined the strike, hampering port works and suspending

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 283-285; *TOI*, November 8, 1913; *TOI*, November 13, 1913; *TOI*, November 17, 1913.

¹⁶¹ *TOI*, November 7, 1913; *TOI*, November 14, 1913.

¹⁶² Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 286.

¹⁶³ *TOI*, November 21, 1913.

¹⁶⁴ *TOI*, November 14, 1913; *TOI*, November 17, 1913; *TOI*, November 18, 1913.

¹⁶⁵ Swan, 'Natal Indian Strike', p. 257.

¹⁶⁶ *TOI*, November 14, 1913.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*; *TOI*, November 21, 1913.

¹⁷⁰ *TOI*, November 21, 1913.

¹⁷¹ *TOI*, November 14, 1913; *TOI*, November 18, 1913.

scavenging services,¹⁷² even as the chief magistrate warned the dock strikers that the government won't listen to them, so long as they remained on strike.¹⁷³ Indian harbour employees continued to be arrested. At Pietermaritzburg, Indian railway construction and wattle plantation workers continued to leave work as picketers led, avowedly, for getting arrested even as the government tried to break the spirit of the strikers.¹⁷⁴ The satyagrahis faced grave problems, most importantly to look after the families of hundreds of jailed Satyagrahis. They carried the undaunting task of administering relief to the families, with help from the Natal Indian Association of Durban, the British Indian Association of Johannesburg, the European co-workers of Gandhi, and the funds pouring in from India. Included in this were Gandhi's instructions from jail, sent from time to time to keep the vigorous agitation alive.¹⁷⁵

The government, however, continued to define its attitude and the local newspapers began to report by late November, 1913, that the indentured strike was collapsing as a number of Indians feared losing their employment to whites/ kaffirs.¹⁷⁶ However, this anticipation remained unfulfilled as large number of Indians continued to march in organised bands for the avowed purpose of defying the law and courting arrest in late November.¹⁷⁷ Also Indians continued to record their indignation through mass meetings, for example, in Johannesburg, where they declared that there can be no peace in the Indian population till their leaders were liberated.¹⁷⁸ The menacing outrages of the government faced by innocent Crown subjects continued to be exposed – assault, floggings in mines and public places at the hands of white officials though Indians were fighting with Satyagraha, a perfectly legitimate and constitutional weapon.¹⁷⁹ When they looked at the probabilities of their case, especially mines being proclaimed as jails or the government perpetrating insult to the honour of Indian women or sentencing Indian juveniles to corporal punishment or giving 'veto' power mine owners to mercilessly flog them for joining the strike,¹⁸⁰ South African Indians felt justified about their passive resistance than suffering grievous indignity.

The strong reverberations of Satyagraha ultimately left an indelible mark on the colonial government in England and the government instituted a commission in December 1913 to give recommendations for the future course of action after a deputation of leading Indians like Sir Mancherjee Bhownuggree met Lord Crewe, asking for the release of passive resisters and to end the racial bar in South Africa.¹⁸¹ Still, Lord Gladstone, Governor General of South Africa, wrote to colonial government rejecting allegations, of shooting, flogging and coercing Indians, as absolute falsification except for the one made by Dr. Lazarus, the chairman

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *TOI*, November 21 1913.

¹⁷⁴ *TOI*, November 24, 1913.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *TOI*, November 21, 1913.

¹⁷⁷ *TOI*, November 24, 1913.

¹⁷⁸ *TOI*, November 14, 1913.

¹⁷⁹ *TOI*, November 21, 1913.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

of the Newcastle Indians which Gladstone defined as general allegations.¹⁸² The Union government of South Africa too asserted that they have received no complaint of ill-treatment of Indians in Natal mines.¹⁸³ The Imperial government worked through the Union government, and, any other course of action was unthinkable for them. The government was not going to consult Satyagrahis or passive resisters. After the institution of the commission, however, it appeared that Satyagraha was about to close. The Union government of South Africa had not the power to keep thousands of innocent men, including Gandhi, in jail.¹⁸⁴ Thus, the question that occupied imprisoned Gandhi, the Satyagrahis and the Indian community was – what General Smuts would do? The wrong done to the Indians had to be redressed and a remedy provided.

General Smuts appointed a three members Commission to give recommendation about the Indian question in South Africa.¹⁸⁵ The South African Indians, however, pledged themselves to have nothing to do with the Commission so long as their certain demands were not granted by the government – (1) to release all Satyagraha prisoners, (2) to have at least one Indian representative on the Commission, and (3) to allow the leaders to visit indentured labourers in mines and factories.¹⁸⁶ The government accepted some demands by unconditionally releasing Gandhi, Polak and Kallenbach, the three in turn demanded release of all Satyagrahis. Gandhi warned the government relaunch of Satyagraha if Indian demands remained unacceptable.¹⁸⁷ A regular to and fro communication happened between Gandhi and General Smuts, who declined to appoint any more member on the Commission citing many reasons for the same.¹⁸⁸ Gandhi conferred with Indians. A resumption of Satyagraha meant that the leaders would be re-arrested, this was generally not favoured by the Indians. As for the settlement, some held that the charges against police/soldiers must be proved. On this Gandhi disagreed, reasoning that this would involve endless libel proceedings and would bring only barren satisfaction.¹⁸⁹ As a Satyagrahi, Gandhi felt bound to consider the position of his adversary so that favourable atmosphere for a settlement could be created. And, also as a Satyagrahi he opted to fight only for essentials – to have the obnoxious laws repealed. This won over the community members and they eventually agreed to endorse the agreement.¹⁹⁰

The report of the Commission was favourable to the Indians as it recommended compliance without delay with all the demands of the Indian community – Pound 3 tax repealed, Indian marriages recognised, entry of educated Indians allowed, also allowed was just administration of all laws affecting Indians, charges of harsh action against Indian strikers repudiated, allowed the issuance of domicile certificates without finger prints for Indians and

¹⁸² *TOI*, November 24, 1913; *TOI*, December 3, 1913.

¹⁸³ *TOI*, November 24, 1913.

¹⁸⁴ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 290; *TOI*, December 3, 1913.

¹⁸⁵ *TOI*, December 3, 1913; *TOI*, December 20, 1913.

¹⁸⁶ *TOI*, December 3, 1913; *TOI*, December 6, 1913; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 292.

¹⁸⁷ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 293; *TOI*, December 20, 1913; *TOI*, December 22, 1913; *TOI*, December 23, 1913.

¹⁸⁸ *TOI*, December 3, 1913; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 298.

¹⁸⁹ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 295-296.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 296-302.

release of all Satyagrahis. The government brought out the “Indians Relief Bill” but Indians wished Gandhi to go further. Gandhi pursued to have integrated Indian concerns in the Bill regarding Trade Licence Laws of different provinces, the Transvaal Townships Act, and allowance of full inter-provincial migration. With this, the eight years long Satyagraha came to an end and Gandhi sailed for India via England in July 1914 carrying with him memories of dedicated Indians who fought with him on the streets, in the courts, in protest marches for the cause of Satyagraha.

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