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'Coolie Indians', 'Black Kaffirs' and A Young Indian Barrister: A Nuanced Look at Gandhi's Politics in South Africa

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I

Mahatma Gandhi occupies a pinnacle as an organizer and inspirer of Indian political movement in South Africa.[1] He was commissioned to Pretoria by a great Indian businessman of Durban called Dada nuance Abdullah to fight a lawsuit on his behalf in 1893. Just on his arrival Gandhi was assaulted at the hands railway authorities of Pietermaritzburg. But completely ignoring his insult, he decided to stay in South Africa to give his Indian brethrens and sisters there a lead in their crusade against the white man's colour prejudice and anti-Indian policy. However, it would be sheer over-enthusiasm to say that 'it was in the waiting room of the Pietermaritzburg Railway Station ... that Gandhi conceived the idea of passive resistance or Satyagraha'.[2] No doubt Gandhi did a lot for the Indians in South Africa. But his reservations and the problems his policy bequeathed to them should not be overlooked either. It was Natal or Transvaal, which became the first political laboratory for testing the efficacy of his globally acclaimed strategy of 'non-violent Satyagraha'. That is why one of his biographers said that, 'What Gandhi did to South Africa was less important than what South Africa did to him.'[3] This essay attempts a critical yet realistic appraisal of Gandhi's role in politics and society of South Africa.

II

In the course of the first few days of his stay in South Africa Gandhi could easily realize that the entire Indian community there suffered in the estimation of the European settlers. This unequal treatment certainly injured his emotions as an Indian. Moreover, Gandhi himself came to be known not as an Indian barrister, but as a 'coolie barrister'. 'The original meaning of the word "coolie" was thus forgotten', admitted Gandhi in his autobiography, 'and it became a common appellation for all Indians.'[4] Dada Abdullah's case being over, Gandhi began to make

preparations for sailing back to India in June 1894. But destiny chose to do otherwise. At a farewell party Gandhi was attracted by a *Natal Mercury* article entitled 'Indian Franchise', which dwelt on a Natal Government Bill disenfranchising Asiatic settlers there. The perusal of the article made Gandhi extremely upset and angry. He immediately abandoned the plan of returning to India but resolved to stay on in Natal to prevent the pernicious bill from being enacted. He organized a strong opposition to it through a series of petitions. He prevented the Franchise Bill from being passed in its original form. Gandhi's leadership created a stir in the Indian community of Natal and taught them not to submit to injustice in a lying-down spirit but to protest against it unitedly.

In 1894 Gandhi had helped the Natal Indians set up the Natal Indian congress to fight against the anti-Indian legislation of the Natal Government. Its first president was Abdullah Haji Adam. As then defined, the objects of the Congress actually reflected the demands raised by Gandhi for the betterment of Indians: to promote concord and harmony between Indians and Europeans residing in the colony, to acquaint the English in South Africa and England and the people in India with the real state of things in Natal by writing in newspapers, publishing pamphlets and delivering lectures, to induce the Hindustanis, particularly the colonial-born Indians, to study Indian history and literature, to enquire into the conditions of the Indians and to take proper steps to remove their hardships and sufferings, to help the poor and the helpless in every reasonable way, and to do such work as would tend to improve the moral, social and political conditions of the Indians. Besides, Gandhi himself wrote two pamphlets to give publicity to the plight of the Indians in Natal and to the injustice done to them. In all his action, however, Gandhi was totally silent on the deplorable conditions of the Black Africans. While Indian ethnicity became a major contributing element in Gandhi's basic ideas, Blacks did not figure in his mental map.

Gandhi's major involvement in South African politics centred round the franchise question during the late 1890s. During his short stay in India in 1896, Gandhi published a pamphlet, known as the Green Pamphlet, on the grievances of the British Indians in South Africa. In this pamphlet, and in fact throughout his career in South Africa, as Maureen Swan has argued, Gandhi was more or less concerned with the interest of upper class Indians. Pointing to the ill treatment of Indians at the hands of the police authority, Gandhi wrote:

There are, again, the Christian-educated youths – a most sensitive class – who do not wear robes. They are constantly molested. ... An Indian lady, a teacher, the wife of the Indian Interpreter at Ladysmith, was, a short time ago, on her return from the church on Sunday evening, arrested by two Kaffir policemen and roughly handled so much so that her dress was soiled, not to speak of all sorts of bad names she was called.[5]

The Green Pamphlet served its purpose admirably. It made the Government of India aware of its responsibilities towards their Indian subjects in South Africa. Moreover, it stressed the policy of non-violence for the Indian settlers to follow in their struggle against White discrimination. However, the Europeans in South Africa became extremely enraged, and in 1897 a white mob nearly lynched him in the streets of Durban. Yet, Gandhi urged the Indians in South Africa to espouse the cause of Britain during the Boer War to prove their loyalty to the British Government. Once the War had broken out, he organized the Indian Ambulance Corps to nurse the wounded British soldiers. Gandhi had his own arguments in favour of the Indians supporting the British Government during the Boer War:

Our existence in South Africa is only our capacity as British subjects. In every memorial we have presented we have asserted our rights as such. We have been proud of our British citizenship, or have given our rulers and the world to believe that we are so proud. Our rulers profess to safeguard our rights because we are British subjects, and what little rights we still retain, we retain because we are British subjects.[6]

Thus, until 1906 the striking feature of his ideology was 'not merely his reliance upon Western examples and values but his dependence on them to the exclusion of anything Indian'.[7] Gandhi therefore began his career as what Denis Dalton calls 'a loyalist, totally committed to the values and institutions of the British empire'.[8]

III

The Asiatic Law Amendment Act 1907 of the Transvaal Government marked the launch of the passive resistance movement under Gandhi's leadership. The Act required all Asians of Transvaal to be compulsorily registered by 31st July 1907, and to carry certificates marked with their fingerprints. Gandhi formed the passive Resistance Association and began to wage

Satyagraha. By January 1908 Gandhi along with many passive resisters was arrested and sent to the Johannesburg jail. After his release, his next move was to resist another attempt of the same government to make a fresh inroad on the rights of Indians by passing the Asiatic Registration Amendment act (No. XXXVI) 1908, which prohibited the movement of Indians from Natal into Transvaal. The violation of the Act was organized by Gandhi and his followers with the result that Gandhi and his 'law-breaker' followers were again arrested and put into the jail. His release in December ushered in the beginning of constitutional movement by the Indians in South Africa. From 1909 to 1912 Gandhi mobilized various sections of upper class Indians to wage a series of constitutional agitation against the systematic discrimination of the British Government towards Indians in South Africa.

The Indian Immigrants Regulation Act of 1913 gave a fresh affront to the Indian community and marked the beginning of another Satyagraha movement in October-November 1913. The movement led to the appointment of an enquiry commission under the chairmanship of Mr. Justice W.H. Solomon. The commission was required to enquire into, and report on, the general grievances of the Indians in South Africa. Although Gandhi did not take part in the proceedings of the commission, in a letter to the Secretary to the Minister of the Interior, he drew the Government's attention to the points on which the Indian community sought relief. The points in question included the repeal of the 3-pound tax, the marriage question, the cape-entry question, the Orange Free State question, and an assurance that existing laws specially affecting the Indians would be administered justly and with due regard to vested rights. Especially, Gandhi took a serious view of the 3-pound tax and demanded its immediate abolition. His abhorrence of the tax and his unflagging determination to fight for its abolition are reflected in the letter he wrote on 28th September 1913 to Mr. Georges, Secretary to the Minister of the Interior. 'This step', wrote Gandhi, 'consists in actively, persistently and continuously asking those who are liable to pay the 3-pound tax to decline to do so and to suffer the penalties for non-payment and, what is more important, in asking those, who are now serving indenture and who will, therefore, be liable to pay the 3-pound tax on completion of their indenture, to strike work until the tax in withdrawn.'[9]

The Solomon Commission gave a careful consideration to Gandhi's demands and submitted a report to the Union Parliament on 17th March 1914. It recommended therein

certain measures toward removing the grievances of the Indian community, which provided the basis of the Indians' Relief Act, No.22 of 1914. Gandhi separately discussed certain administrative matters with General Smuts, which were not considered by the Indians' Relief Bill, and an agreement, known as Smuts-Gandhi Agreement, was finally reached between them. It was embodied in the two letters, which passed between Gandhi and Mr. Georges, secretary to general Smuts on 30th June 1914. Gandhi noted in his letter to Mr. Georges that 'my countrymen do not aspire to any political ambition .... I am quite certain that the Indian community throughout the Union will be able to enjoy some measure of peace and never be a source of trouble to the government.'[10]

According to Haraprasad Chatotopadhyay, 'Indians' Relief Act and Smuts-Gandhi Agreement marked a distinct triumph of the Gandhian technique of Satyagraha as applied to the Indian struggle in South Africa till 1914.' On the nature and significance of the settlement affected by the Act and by the Agreement Gandhi observed in a letter:

In my humble opinion the settlement is the Magna Carta of our liberty in this land (South Africa). I give it the historic name not because it gives us rights which we have never enjoyed and which are in themselves new or striking, but because it has come to us after eight years' strenuous suffering that has involved the loss of material possessions and of precious lives. I call it our Magna Carta because it marks a change in the policy of the Government towards us and establishes our right not only to be consulted in matters affecting us but to have our reasonable wishes respected.[11]

The Act and the Agreement, though described by Gandhi as the Magna Carta of the Indian community, failed to impress upon a large section of Indians, especially the Indian Muslims living in South Africa, who thought that the settlement of 1914 did not effect any substantial improvement in their condition. The Muslim community, in fact, resented the way in which the marriage question was settled keeping them disaffected. The secretary, Hamidia Islamic Society, which claimed to be the only representative society of the Muslims in South Africa, wrote to the Colonial Secretary on 30th July 1914:

We as a community are entirely dissatisfied with the Relief Bill. There are questions such as the marriage question, the colonial born question and others that were completely ignored

by the Trasvaal Government, and Mr. Gandhi who being a Hindu and not the authorized representative of our community and coreligionists did not try to get the necessary redress for us. We wish to strongly protest against any credit which might be given to Mr. Gandhi for any alleged settlement of the Indian grievances in South Africa, and I am directed to ask you kindly to put on record that, so far as Muhamedans are concerned (and they are the most educated and influential Indians in South Africa), the so-called Indians' Relief Bill is a complete farce and that we wish to dissociate ourselves entirely from Mr. Gandhi and his fellow-followers whose methods of passive resistance, strikes and violence do not appeal to us.[12]

The Secretary of All India Muslim League too strongly criticized Gandhi and the settlement:

The largest section of Indians in South Africa are dissatisfied with him. He has posed, while here, as the representative of all Indians, whilst all the time he was only the authorized representative of his own few followers. Gandhi is a Hindoo, and it is absolutely ridiculous to suppose for a moment that the Muhammedan community would trust him to settle their grievances for them. What Gandhi has done is by no means with the approval of the vast majority of leading Indians. He is mistrusted by us in all matters. He has failed to render an account of large sums of money which he was supposed to have used in the interest of all Indians and for the purpose of getting redress for them. He has been repeatedly asked by different societies to postpone his departure and first call a public meeting for the purpose of cleaning himself of all suspicions and charges which are directed against him, but he has refused. The Government imagine that by entering into agreements with Gandhi and afterwards giving him dinners and fine speeches they have settled the Indian question, but the Government have yet to learn that our grievances are far too real and serious to be settled in such an off-handed manner, and Gandhi will find that he is not the great hero that the Government and his few followers wish to make the world believe he is .... The marriage disabilities and one or two other points will have to receive the serious consideration of the Government before they can make up their minds that there is going to be a final settlement.[13]

IV

Gandhi's contribution to the Indian movement in South Africa was great indeed. Given the heavy odds Gandhi had to fight against, he had to evolve a strategy to suit the situation

facing him in South Africa. 'If the black population did not figure in Gandhi's campaign', argues B.R. Nanda, 'it was partly because it did not suffer from the specific disabilities against which Indians were protesting.'[14] In some ways, he goes on to argue, ''such as the eligibility of the ownership of land, the natives of Africa were indeed better off than the Indians.'[15] Nanda also expresses doubts whether at the turn of the century the black population in South Africa would have readily accepted a young Indian barrister as its leader. He therefore appreciates the sound instinct which guided the young Gandhi to wage a battle against racialism on a limited front.

But his role should not be over-dramatized as some nationalist Indians do under the impact of the story of Tolstoy Farm and later, of media culture. First of all, Gandhian movement was more or less concerned with the interests of the upper class Indians. When the issue of the Natal Indian workers was brought into focus in 1913, Gandhi was about to leave South Africa. More importantly, Gandhi played little part in black politics in South Africa since he was least concerned with the interests of the black Africans. True, Gandhi appreciated the bravery of the Kaffirs for their denial to pay taxes, and hoped that this would inspire the Indians there.[16] But he, in his subconscious, committed himself to a derogatory assessment of the black Africans. Just as the whites in South Africa used the terms 'Coolie', 'Girmitiya' or 'Sami' deliberately to insult or ridicule the Indians, they called the blacks 'Negro' or '*Kaffir*' with the same purpose. Yet, Gandhi, while objecting strongly to the use of pejorative connotations towards the Indians, never tried to criticize the same in case of the black Africans. Rather, he quite often used the same objectionable terms while describing the blacks there. As he stated in his Green Pamphlet: 'if any of the Indian High Court Judges came to South Africa, ... I am almost positive that he will have to travel from Charlestown to Pretoria in a *Kaffir* compartment, unless he is dressed in European clothing from top to toe.'[17] This remark clearly reveals that the young Gandhi, in his subconscious, considered Indians as racially superior to the black Africans, and consequently attributed the latter a lower social status. Gandhi's inherent belief in social/racial hierarchy became more apparent when he complained in 1904 that Indians were compelled to live with the black *Kaffirs* in certain shanty towns. In 1906 Gandhi favoured the proposal to reserve seats for 'Indians' and 'Coloured' on the first floor of electric trams in Johannesburg,[18] keeping absolutely silent on the rights of the blacks. Again, when in 1907, in

the Johannesburg jail the Indian Satyagrahis were given the clothes assigned to the Negro convicts not punished with hard labour he did not seem to be too satisfied.[19]

In fact, throughout his South African career the astute politician in Gandhi was always careful enough to serve only the Indian interests in South Africa. This was probably to assure the British Government of India and South Africa of the Indians' loyalty to them, and in turn ensure their sympathy for the grievances of Indians in South Africa. Nanda also points out, if Gandhi had clashed head-on with the Boer-British combine on the all-embracing issue of racial equality, he would have been bundled out of South Africa. In that event, he feels, the cause of racial equality would have suffered in the long run.[20] But as I have tried to show by citing Gandhi from his own writings, despite the political imperatives of Gandhian movement in South Africa, he accepted the racial hierarchy of society in his subconscious. In fact, the young energetic M.K. Gandhi was then only maturing into a prudent politician, testing his political strategies to a safe, limited concern, far away from becoming an icon in the eyes of Indians all over. He was still to tread all the way to the glory of becoming the 'Bapu' or 'Mahatma'.

Gandhi left South Africa with the hope that Indians would remain loyal subjects of imperial rule. He later wrote in the *Indian Opinion*: 'To my countrymen I ... said: "Nurse the Settlement, see to it that the promises made are being carried out. Attend to development and progress from within."'[21] But the history of twentieth century-South Africa shows that majority of the Indians did not follow the advised path of Gandhi. Large sections of non-mercantile Indians were radicalized, and started identifying themselves with the interests of the Black Africans. The rise and growth of African nationalism, the stroke of the South African communist Party and the ideals of radical Indian leaders like Yusuf Dadu guided the Indians in South Africa to join hands with the Black nationalists. Despite that, only a small section of Durban-based Indian mercantile community retained their adamant loyalty to the White rulers. It was the unhealthy self-interest of this particular group of Indians that created problems in contemporary South Africa.

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Notes and References

1. Gandhi's political career in South Africa has been a subject of immense historical interest to scholars. Hence, a number of studies appeared from time to time on the subject. The most important of these works are: Mahatma Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa: The Making of Mahatma Gandhi: The Story in His Own Words* trnsl. By V.G. Desai (New Delhi: Freehand Books, 1997); Surendra Bhana and Golam H. Vahed, *The Making of a Political Reformer: Gandhi in South Africa* (Delhi: Manohar, 2005); Satyagraha Hoerip Soerprobo, *M.K.Gandhi in South Africa 1893-1914* (New York: Tanam Press, 1980); Robert A. Huttenback, *Gandhi in South Africa* (New York, Cornell University Press, 1971); Bridglal Pachai, *Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1969); Constance DeJong and Philip Glass, *Satyagraha: M.K. Gandhi in South Africa: 1893-1914: The Historical Material and LibrettoComprising the Opera' Book* (New York: Tanam Press, 1983); Burnett Britton, *Gandhi Arrives in South Africa* (Texas: Greenleaf Books, 2000); J.N. Uppal, *Gandhi, ordained in South Africa* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1995); P.S. Joshi, *Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa* (P.S. Joshi, 1980); S.R. Bakshi, *Gandhi and Indians in South Africa* (New Delhi: Antique Publishers, 1988); Joseph J. Doke, *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa* (Obscure Press, 2006); James D. Hunt, *Gandhi and the Nonconformists: Encounters in South Africa* (Columbia: South Asia Books, 1986); Iqbal Narain, *The Politics of Racialism: A Study of the Indian Minority in South Africa down to the Gandhi-Smuts Agreement* (Agra: Shiva Lal Agarwala, 1962); E.S. Reddy, *Gandhi, Nehru and Freedom Struggle in South Africa* (Edinburg: Mainstream, 1988); Susan Joan Kovalsky, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Political Influence in South Africa, 1893-1914; A Selective Bibliography* (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand, 1971); Shanti Sadiq Ali, ed. *Gandhi and South Africa* (Columbia: South Asia Books, 1994); Judith M. Brown and Martin Prozesky, eds. *Gandhi and South Africa: Perspectives and Prospects* (Natal: University of Natal Press, 1996).

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3. Cited in Dennis Dalton, *Non Violence in Action: Gandhi's Power* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.15.

4. M.K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. In English by Mahadev Desai, Vol. I (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1927), p.264, cited in ibid., p.173.
5. *Green Pamphlet*, in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. II (Ahmedabad: Publications Division, Govt. of India, 1959), pp.9-11, cited in Chattopadhyay, *Indians in Africa*, p.146.
6. M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, transl. by V.G. Desai from Guajarati (Ahmedabad: Navajiban Publishing House, 1928), pp.72-3, cited in Chattopadhyay, *Indians in Africa*, p.171.
7. Dalton, *Non Violence in Action*, p.13.
8. Ibid.
9. Quoted in Haraprasad Chattopadhyay, *Indians in Africa* (Calcutta: Bookland Pvt. Ltd., 1970), p.156.
10. Cited in ibid., p.165.
11. Cited in ibid., p.168.
12. Cited in ibid., p.175.
13. Ibid., pp.175-76.
14. B.R. Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.31.
15. Ibid.
16. *Indian Opinion*, 6 October 1906, cited in Dhruba Gupta, 'Imagining Africa', *Anushtup* (Sharadiya 1992), p.103-04.
17. *Green Pamphlet*, in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. II, pp.5-8, cited in Chattopadhyay, *Indians in Africa*, p.145. Emphasis added.
18. *Indian Opinion*, 10 February 1906, cited in Gupta, 'Imagining Africa', p.103..
19. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, pp.149-52, referred to in Chattopadhyay, *Indians in Africa*, p.152.
20. Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics*, p.31.
21. Cited in Chattopadhyay, *Indians in Africa*, p.169.