

Mahatma Gandhi and South Africa

Syerramia Willoughby describes how Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence evolved and influenced events in South Africa. [Read more articles in the "Why India-Africa relations matter" blog series.](#)

For as long as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi lived, he never forgot the events of 7 June 1893 for they lit within him the first political stirrings that would dominate the rest of his life. By the time of his death in 1948, he would be acclaimed as one of the greatest figures of the twentieth century and as Bapu (or Father) of the Indian nation. Yet when he arrived in South Africa in 1893 he was a timid, modest man whose attempts at establishing a law practice in Bombay failed because he was too shy to speak up in court, according to his biographer Dinanath Tendulkar.



Gandhi (centre) is pictured with other Indian resistance leaders in South Africa

On that evening in 1893, the young Gandhi was forcibly removed from a whites-only carriage on a train in Pietermaritzburg and spent the rest of the night in a cold waiting room. Nearly forty-six years later he would say,

"I was afraid for my very life. I entered the dark waiting-room. There was a white man in the room, I was afraid of him. What was my duty? I asked myself. Should I go back to India, or should I go forward, with God as my helper and face whatever was in store for me? I decided to stay and suffer. My active non-violence began from that date."

Natal – the province of which Pietermaritzburg was the capital – had just been granted self-government the previous month and growing anti-Indian sentiment was spreading through the Province. By the following year, Gandhi had formed the Natal Indian Congress. So began the fight to block discriminatory legislation by the Natal Parliament which sought to disenfranchise Indians.

In his paper, *The Mahatma Gandhi and South Africa (1996)*, Brian M Du Toit described Gandhi's role at the time, "It is fair to state that the Indians in South Africa at that time were primarily interested in their status as traders, and many lacked not only education, but also political sophistication. Gandhi activated their political consciousness by regular comments in the Indian Opinion (his newspaper) and by drafting petitions to the Governments of Natal, India and Britain.

He was also in long-term negotiation with the Attorney-General of Transvaal, Jan Smuts, first on behalf of Indians in that Province and later, after the establishment of the Union in 1910, on behalf of all South African Indians.”

In all, Gandhi remained in South Africa for 21 years. By the end of his stay, the government passed the Indian Relief Act granting several of the demands of Gandhi and his comrades. It was now time for Gandhi to return to India “to confront British rule there, to reform the caste system and to restore village culture and industry, until his assassination in 1948.” (Du Toit)

Those years in South Africa also featured the evolution of his ideas. By the end of his life, Gandhi was famed for his philosophy for “satyagraha, the force of truth of love for which he had coined his own term.” But as Du Toit goes on to assert, “we are all continuously exposed to the views, criticisms and rewards meted out by others. Essentially this implies that it is extremely rare if not impossible to encounter a ‘self-made man’ or a completely new idea. We are all products of our social, intellectual and political times and our opinions and theories derive from, and consist of, recombinations of earlier stimuli. No doubt some persons make more of their conditions by reading and discourse, while others may stagnate in their private universes. Those who grow and reach beyond themselves learn from personal experiences, and also expose themselves to the ideas and contributions of others. Such intellectual cross-fertilisation may result in stimulating innovations or reinterpretations.”

As Gandhi himself said,

“It was the New Testament which really awakened me to the rightness and value of Passive Resistance. When I read in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ such passages as resist not him that is evil, but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek turn to him the other also’, and ‘Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father which is in heaven’, I was simply overjoyed, and found my own opinion confirmed where I least expected it. The Bhagavad Gita deepened the impression, and Tolstoy’s The Kingdom of God is Within You gave it permanent form.”

If there was any disappointment in Gandhi, it was that he never included the plight of the Africans in his struggle. He certainly “had advised Indians to keep their issues distinct from those of other non-White groups”. This would only change after World War II when Dr Yusuf Dadoo became the leader of the Transvaal Indian Congress.

For the first time in the 1950s, all the racial groups united to protest against the apartheid government via the Defiance Campaign, also the largest non-violent resistance ever seen in South Africa. This landmark campaign also marked the emergence of a new generation of leaders within the African National Congress which included Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo. Mandela would go on to write about Gandhi’s influence on this grand campaign.

“I saw nonviolence in the Gandhian model not as an inviolable principle but as a tactic to be used as the situation demanded. The principle was not so important that the strategy should be used even when it was self-defeating, as Gandhi himself believed. I called for nonviolent protests for as long as it was effective.”

Later, Mandela would declare that “Mahatma Gandhi ‘had exerted an incalculable influence’ in the history of the people of South Africa”.

Yet, after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, Mandela lost faith in non-violence resistance and was instrumental in setting up the armed wing of the ANC. Could Gandhi’s philosophy marked by truth and love have a truly lasting effect on him?

South African academic Brian M Du Toit says it best, “It is not hard to see a residue of Gandhism when a man who was prosecuted, banned, insulted, and jailed on Robben Island for 27 years emerges and asks South Africa to look to the future and not the past, to work together for the country, to forgive the oppressors.”

This post is based on the paper, [The Mahatma Gandhi and South Africa](#) by Brian M Du Toit.

Other References

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