

The Laboratory of Mahatma Gandhi's Experiments: South Africa

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With Gandhi, to believe was to act. The ideas that seized his mind found their concrete expression in the field of action. A proper appreciation of Gandhi's philosophy can only be made in the background of the epic struggles he led in South Africa (1893-1914) and then, afterwards, in India. But because of obvious limitations these accounts of heroism and selfless dedication to a cause cannot be recounted here. One may only profitably refer to pages of his 'Autobiography' and 'Satyagraha in South Africa' which happen to be the best commentaries on origin and development of his ideas and early experiments. Hiren Mukerjee said: "This is no wonder, for his career in South Africa is, within limitations, quite an epic, and as it became known, a deserved halo settled round his head."¹

In 1893 Gandhi was called to Pretoria of South Africa on an important case. He was not familiar with the situation in south Africa, but from the very first he met with illuminating experiences.² Gandhi, a Hindu of high race, who had always been received with the greatest courtesy in England and who until then had looked upon the whites as his natural friends, suddenly found himself the butt of the vilest affronts. In Natal, he was thrown out of trains and insulted. Then he learned the art of self-control.³ This time South African Government was planning to pass a bill depriving the Indians of the franchise. The Indians in South Africa were helpless, unable to defend themselves; they were completely unorganized and demoralized. They had no leader, no one to guide. Gandhi felt that it was his duty to defend them. He gave himself up to it and remained in Africa.

Then began an epic struggle between spirit on one side and governmental power and brute force on the other. He established the Indian Congress at Natal and formed an association for Indian education. A little later he founded a paper, Indian Opinion, published in English. In 1904 he founded at Phoenix, near Durban, an agricultural colony along Tolstoian lines.⁴ He called upon his compatriots, gave them land, and made them take the solemn oath of poverty. He took upon himself the humblest tasks. In 1899 during the Boer War, he organized an Indian Red Cross, which was twice cited for bravery under fire. When the plague broke out in Johannesburg in 1904, Gandhi organized a hospital. In 1908 the natives in Natal revolted. Gandhi organized and served at the head of a corps of brancardiers, and the Govt. of Natal tendered him public thanks. For twenty years he struggle lasted, reaching its bitterest phase from 1907 to 1914. His famous little book, 'Hind Swaraj', published in 1908. Romain Rolland said, "This pamphlet of Indian home rule is the gospel of heroic love."⁵ Although the most intelligent and broad-minded Englishmen in Africa were opposed to it, in 1906 the South African Govt. hastily passed a new Asiatic Law. This led Gandhi to organize non-resistance on a large scale. In 1914 an act abolished the three-pound poll-tax, while Natal was opened to all Indians desirous of settling there as free workers. After twenty years of sacrifice non-resistance was triumphant.

South Africa made him a new man. The shy, timid, introvert Mohandas was transformed into an extrovert and dynamic personality rare to be equaled. He at last found his métier in action. He found his purpose in life. Buddhadeva Bhattacharyya also said that, "The characteristics that marked his life afterwards—self-transcending service and sense of loyalty and responsibility to the community – found their first expression in South Africa."⁶

It was in South Africa again that his indoctrination in nationalism was confirmed. Gandhi wanted to decentralize political power over the floor, not from above. That's why he told about the establishment of village-Swaraj. Since the simple ordinary people of the village do not understand the theories, then he came to the principle of 'Sarvodaya'⁷. Wanted to establish genuine people-sovereignty through the good of all people. In this way, he wanted to introduce real mass nationalism by combining coordination with Swaraj and Sarvodaya, which he originated in South Africa.

Throughout his South-African-days, as Hardyman holds, Gandhi "refused to play by the largely unwritten rules of discriminations—he insisted on his right to equality as a citizen of the empire."⁸ His knowledge in jurisprudence strengthened his conviction. Anthony J.Parel said," was as much jurisprudential as ethical."⁹ Gandhi himself, in retrospect, thank God for his South African experience. "...God laid the foundations of my life in South Africa and sowed the seed of the fight for national self-respect."¹⁰ But

compared to the prevalent streams of nationalism in contemporary India, Gandhi's nationalism to a different course from the beginning.

There was, however, uniqueness about Gandhi which the South African story stresses in every syllable. He went there as a barrister, very conscious of his difference from the commonalty, but Maritzburg gave him a new revelation. Slowly, and sometimes in spite of himself, he merged with the life of his people, subjecting himself to the discipline of work at once by hand and by brain, fighting pride and the passions till he was as much master of them as he could be, espousing poverty and a stark simplicity of living which he did not hesitate to impose on his comrades, straining with all his soul for the quality of fearlessness. The heroes he discovered in South Africa were common people, from every community, from both sexes, and from every layer society—the Kacchalias, the Adajanas, the Nagappans, and Narayanaswamis—a discovery that informed all his actions subsequently. Hiren Mukerjee wrote that: "He was fortunate in his European friends who must have helped him remain strikingly free even from a stealthy chauvinism."¹¹ Few people, indeed, in history have so dedicated themselves to living in mankind as this stupendous Indian.

In South Africa Gandhi got a new life—not only political but religious and spiritual. When he arrived in South Africa, his religious roots were not strong enough. His knowledge about his own religion was superficial. His ideas about other religions were no better. Politically he had to encounter a multi-ethnic situation. His interactions took place with the Muslim and Parsi merchants, indentured labor of both Hindu and Muslim communities representing different linguistic groups. Gradually he gathered many Christian and Jew friends. Ranjit Chaudhuri said that, "this exposure to heterogeneous groups of people encouraged him to know about different religions."¹² It gradually transformed into the harmony and integrity of all human being. He commented: "Both my continence and non-violence were derived from personal experience and became necessary in response to the calls of public duty."¹³ His South African days moulded his entire life, his politics and his religion.

The communal problem was not totally absent among Indians in South Africa. But it remained within manageable limits. From this time on, Gandhi became more Indian than Hindu and flexible and accommodative of other religious views. J. J. Doke (the first biographer of Gandhi), who was sincere Christian, discovered that "his views are too closely allied to Christianity to be entirely Hindu; and too deeply saturated with Hinduism to be called Christian, while his sympathies are so wide and catholic that one would imagine he has reached a point where the formulae of sects are meaningless."¹⁴ With the Muslim the problem remained complicated. In his 'Autobiography' Gandhi mentions: "But my South African experiences had convinced me that it would be on the question of Hindu-Muslim unity that it would be put to its severest test, and that the question presented the widest field for my experiments in Ahimsa."¹⁵ It may be mentioned here that in 1906 the Muslim League was formed in India when in the same year Gandhi started his Satyagraha in South Africa with the joint effort of Hindus Muslims. Throughout his life the question of Hindu-Muslim unity remained supreme. Gandhi was confident his role in this regard. He declared: "if not during my lifetime, I know that after my death both Hindus and Mussalmans will bear witness that I had never ceased to yearn after communal peace."¹⁶

Another point needs to be examined here. A critic professing himself to be a Marxist has alleged that Gandhi's Satyagraha movement in South Africa was "started and carried on solely with the purpose of safeguarding the interests of the (Indian) traders."¹⁷ The Gandhian Satyagraha, it has been alleged, was not primarily concerned with the indentured labourers; their support was mobilized only in order to enhance the strength of the movement, and so on. This we hold to be an erroneous 'Marxist' interpretation of the South African problem in the period under review. Such an interpretation betrays a subjective prejudice and does not lay much store upon an objective assessment. As a matter of fact, the Indians irrespective of their class situation—were subjected to insults and humiliations and were deprived of the elementary human rights. True, the merchants had their own axe to grind, but they also suffered. The participation of the Indian merchants in this movement did not itself make it a movement of and for the merchants.

The movement in South Africa was a multi-class movement as it could only have been at that time. The very compulsion of reality made this movement multi-class in content and character; class question obviously remained in the background. Fighting the arrogant White supremacy was the historic task that confronted Gandhi and his fellow-countrymen in South Africa. Marxism teaches that history should be viewed in concrete background and tasks formulated accordingly. Ideologically viewed, the content of the movement was bourgeois in character as nationalist movements have always been. But this should not be stretched too far to advance the thesis that the working class should avoid these movements. In this multiclass movement his bias remained on the side of the downtrodden and suffering people. It is relevant here to record that it was in 'Hind Swaraj', written during South Africa days, that Gandhi first declared that

power should vest with the 'working classes', though term was used in a broad sense to mean the toiling people as a whole. What is more important, in our opinion, is not look about for 'the capitalist agent'¹⁸ in Gandhi but to note how this experiments of multi-class movement impressed Gandhi in his further elaboration of the theory and practice of satyagraha.

Quite a few times, of course, he deviated from principal and found excuses for it. He was a utopian, running what he imagined were model settlements, where equality and fellow-felling should prevail. But he was capable, at the height of enthusiastic struggle, of sudden descents into direction, of bargains and compromises that went against the grain. This was because he was, like all men possessed, fanatically convinced of being in the right, and you had to take him or leave him. He was in some ways the most lovable and considerate of men, but his wife seems to have had from him scantier sympathy than she deserved, and when he punished with a blare of publicity minor deviations from a rigid sex-code, he was ineffectual and merely squeamish. All in all, however, he was cast in a mould that one very rarely sees, and when with his South African aureole he appeared on the Indian scene, his people hailed him spontaneously as 'Mahatma'.¹⁹

Source

1. Hiren Mukerjee: 'Gandhiji: A Study,' people's publishing house, New Delhi, 1958, p.16
2. Romain Rolland: 'Mahatma Gandhi', Ministry of Information, Government of India, London, p.7
3. M. K. Gandhi: 'An Autobiography', Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1927, p.63
4. A long letter from Tolstoi to Gandhi is published in the 'Golden Number' of Indian opinion. It was written in September 7, 1910, shortly before Tolstoi death. He praised their campaign and says that non-resistance is the law of love, and aspiration to form part of the communion of human souls. Mahatma Gandhi', p.8
5. Ibid, p.9
6. Buddhadeva Bhattacharyya: 'Evolution of the Political Philosophy', Calcutta Book House, Calcutta, 1969, p.60
7. Good for all
8. David Hardiman: 'Gandhi: In HIS Time and Ours', Permanent Black, Delhi, p.12
9. Anthony J. Parel: 'Introduction' in Gandhi's 'Hind Swaraj', Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1997, p.xxxiii
10. 'An Autobiography',p.101
11. 'Gandhiji: A Study',p.34
12. Ranjit Chaudhuri: 'Fragments of Gandhian Mind', Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2002, p.44
13. 'Harijan', 03/10/1936
14. Rev. J.J. Doke: 'M.K.Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa', Publication Division, Government of India, p.106
15. 'An Autobiography',p.368
16. Raghavan Iyer(ed.): 'The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi', Oxford University Press, 1991, p.245
17. 'Evolution of the Political Philosophy', p.61
18. Ibid, p.62
19. 'Gandhiji: A Study', p.34