

# India's Voice in the *Satyagraha* Campaigns in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** In 1913 Indians living in the Union of South Africa engaged in one of the biggest mass demonstrations against unjust and racist laws. Over 20 000 Indian men, women and children participated in the *Satyagraha* campaign seeking redress from discriminatory legislation which aimed at curbing their economic, social and political mobility. The incarceration of hundreds of Indians, their brutal treatment of Indian workers on the coal mines and plantations and deaths of several workers created an international outcry, particularly in India. This paper traces India's support and involvement in the affairs of Indian South Africans, particularly during the *Satyagraha* campaigns between 1906 and 1913. India's tireless and ceaseless campaigning in support of Indian South Africans played a crucial role in stirring mass consciousness of the South African Indian question in India and abroad. India's involvement was motivated not only for the 'honour of the motherland' but also for the 'honour and well-being of Indians in other parts of the world'. This paper will make an important contribution in understanding Indo-South African bilateral relations at the turn of the century.

## INTRODUCTION

The settlement of Indian communities in the British Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is indicative of India's complex migration histories. The desire for cheap labour led to the export of Indian labour to South Africa, Mauritius, Fiji and the Caribbean (Tinker 1974; Carter 1994). In South Africa the arrival of indentured Indians in 1860 and later free Indians (immigrants unencumbered by contractual obligations) to Natal undoubtedly paved the way for not only altering the demographic landscape of South Africa but also laid the seed for India's historical ties to South Africa. India showed significant interest in the settlement and well-being of its people despite their settlement abroad. In colonial Natal this was most noticeable with regards to treatment of indentured labourers. The latter were incorporated in various spheres of Natal's economy – mines, plantations, domestic and agricultural sectors. They were also subjected to poor working and living conditions and at times with little redress from employers. However in 1866 India temporarily ceased importation of labour to Natal as a result of dissatisfaction on the ill-treatment of indentured Indians. After renewed negotiations the importation of labour was resumed in 1874 (Joshi 1942). However, protecting the interests of the indentured labours was not the only reason for India's involvement in South Africa's affairs at the turn of

the century. By 1900s Indians became a permanent and visible feature of the South African demographic and economic landscape. The free Indians in particular the 'passenger' and ex-indentured Indians successfully competed in trade with local colonists. The latter sought to curb their economic competition by a series of discriminatory legislations. The Indian community protested and embarked on two *Satyagraha* campaigns. During these campaigns India displayed political will, diplomatic ingenuity and was the moral consciousness of its people. It is this Indo-South African involvement in the context of the *Satyagraha* movements that is explored in this paper.

Studies on the *Satyagraha* movements in South Africa have been the subject of many scholarly works (Bhana and Dhupelia 1981; Beall and Coombs 1983; Swan 1984). In these works some scholars have illuminated Gandhi as the protagonist in the struggle whilst others have sought to locate their analysis within a broader socio-economic framework. More recent works (Mongia 2006; Hiralal 2009; Hiralal 2010; Bhana and Shukla-Bhatt 2011) have sought to highlight 'the role of the masses' so that the 'less silent and less ignored in South African history' (Bhana and Dhupelia) are rightfully acknowledged. Bhana and Shukla-Bhatt (2011) illuminate the struggle via poems written in Gujarati, English and Hindustani during the *Satyagraha* movement. They highlight not only the endur-

ing spirit of resistance of the Indians involved in the struggle but also the role of poetry in understanding historical movements. Mongia (2006) and Hiralal (2009) locate their analysis in the context of gender and agency and the honour of Indian womanhood thereby debunking the myth of the passive and docile Indian women in the diaspora.

### **Disabilities on Indians in South Africa**

Indians arrived in South Africa after pressing appeals from the authorities in Natal to the Indian government from 1860 to work as indentured (contract) labour on plantations, mines and industries. They were promised security and land after the completion of the five-year contracts. Many workers opted for the land offer rather than returning to India. Indentured workers were followed by some traders, especially from Gujarat. By the 1880s there was agitation that Indians were competing with Europeans in trade and agriculture. A series of laws and regulations were adopted in Natal, the Transvaal, the Orange Free State and the Cape in ensuing years to harass the Indians, to segregate and restrict Indian business and to force the workers to accept further indenture or return to India. In the Orange Free State Indians were barred from farming, trading and residing in the colony. In the Cape restrictions were imposed on trade and immigration. It was in Natal and the Transvaal, which had the largest settlement of Indians, where anti-Indian sentiment began to grow (Hiralal 2000). Whites were not keen to accepting Indians as permanent residents but only as labourers.

Both Natal and the Transvaal once they had acquired responsible Government swiftly introduced legislation aimed at curbing the political and economic rights of the settled Indian population. For example, the first parliament under responsible government in Natal instituted a series of discriminatory measures. In 1894 the trading activity of Indians was restricted by Act 22 of the Powers of the Municipal Corporations Bill which was introduced to empower Town Councils to regulate sanitary conditions in Natal's boroughs (Hiralal 2000). The Act was also used as a means of refusing trade licenses to Indians on alleged sanitary grounds. This was later reinforced with the introduction of Act 18, the General Dealers' Licences Amendment Law

of 1897 which empowered local bodies such as the town councils or town boards with discretionary powers with the issuing of trade licenses. Moreover licenses were denied if applicants did not comply with sanitary regulations and if the applicant was unable to fulfil the condition of the Insolvency Law no. 47 of 1887 which required account books to be kept in English. In addition, there was no right of appeal to any court of justice if the licence was refused (Hiralal 2000). The 'Act was general in its application but aimed at restricting the Asiatic trade' (Joshi 1942). In May 1896 the Franchise Bill was passed which denied immigrants the franchise if they came from countries not in possession of elective representative institutions. India was considered to be one of them (Hiralal 2000). The Immigration Restriction Bill of 1897 imposed a language test on immigrants. The immigration measures seriously affected the Indian trading class who made periodic visits to India for both business and personal reasons. Moreover it created difficulties for Indian merchants seeking to recruit assistants from India to assist in their businesses in Natal. In 1895 the Natal government keen on sustaining a labour force on the plantations introduced the £3 tax which was imposed on ex-indentured labourers who refused to return to India (Joshi 1942; Hiralal 2000).

Many Indians moved to the Transvaal as traders and hawkers. They obtained certificates by paying £3 and were subjected to restrictions under Law 3 of 1885 which stipulated that they could only trade, reside and own fixed property in designated areas. In 1899, Britain went to war against the Boer Republics in the Transvaal (called the South African Republic) and the Orange Free State mainly to gain control of the gold mines which were discovered there. One of Britain's charges against the government in the Transvaal was that it was persecuting the Indians. Discrimination against Indians became more acute under the British administration following the war. After the British administration was established Indians were required under the Peace Preservation Ordinance to register and pay three pounds. The Boer-British Government of the colony gazetted an Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance on 22 August 1906. It was compulsory registration of all Indians and they were required to give finger and thumb impressions, including information such as race, age, name, height, residence and marks of identification. The Ordi-

nance was ostensibly intended to register lawful Asian residents of the Transvaal on the excuse that there was an influx of Indians in the Colony after the end of the war. The registration certificate had to be carried always and produced on demand by the police or other officials. Persons failing to produce the certificate would be arrested and expelled from the Transvaal. Permits issued under the Peace Preservation Ordinance would no longer be valid. The Indian community in the Transvaal saw it as an affront to the dignity of Indians and to the honour of India and subsequently agreed that the law should be resisted (Joshi 1942).

### **SATYAGRAHA IN THE TRANSVAAL- 1906-1911**

A mass meeting was held in the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg September 11 1906. The meeting adopted a resolution calling for the withdrawal of the Ordinance. Another resolution decided on sending a deputation to London to make representations to the British Government. A decision was also made to go to jail rather than submit to the Ordinance.

H. O. Ally and Gandhi went on a deputation to London from October 21 to December 1, 1906. The deputation met the Colonial Secretary, Lord Crewe and the Secretary of State for India, Sir John Morley. It addressed a hundred members of Parliament – and fifty Liberal members of Parliament met the Prime Minister in support of their representations. A South Africa British Indian Committee was set up with Lord Ampthill, former Governor of Madras as President to continue support for the rights of Indians in South Africa. As a result of these efforts the British Government withheld its approval to the Asiatic Ordinance. But the deputation was warned that the Transvaal would receive self-government at the beginning of 1907 and may enact its provisions into law (Gandhi 1961).

After self-government was attained in 1907 the Transvaal's Parliament enacted the Asiatic Law Amendment Act (Act 22 of 1907), also known as the Asiatic Registration Act (or Asiatic Act) on March 22. The Indian community denounced it as the 'Black Act'. The law came into force on July 1 1907. A huge mass meeting was held in Pretoria on July 31 1907. Close on to three thousand people were present and resolved that when the Ordinance became law Indians

would face imprisonment rather than submit to it. Satyagraha in the Transvaal had begun. In August 1907 the Transvaal Legislature enacted the Immigrants Restriction Act (Act 15 of 1907) and it received assent by the Imperial Government and came into force on December 27 1907. It was the second legislation passed by the Transvaal since it received responsible government (Gandhi 1961). These two laws were complementary. Section 2 (4) of Immigrants Restriction Act implied that those who did not register under the Asiatic Act would be considered prohibited immigrants. On December 28 twenty-five persons including Gandhi appeared before courts in Johannesburg and Pretoria and were ordered to leave the Transvaal within a few days. They were considered leaders of the movement. On January 10 1908 Gandhi was sentenced to two months imprisonment while others were sentenced to three months with hard labour and fines. Thambi Naidoo, P. K. Naidoo and Leong Quinn, a Chinese, were among the prisoners. The imprisonment of the leaders was followed by open defiance by others and almost two hundred were in prison by the end of January 1908 (Gandhi 1961).

The imprisonment of the Indians and the seeming inflexibility of the Colonial Secretary, General Smuts, led to criticism in India and Britain. At this time, Albert Cartwright, an editor of the newspaper, *Transvaal Leader*, acted as an intermediary to promote a compromise. Gandhi, Thambi Naidoo and Leong Quinn signed a letter to the Colonial Secretary offering to organise voluntary registration and accepting thumb impressions if they were essential for identification. General Smuts accepted the offer. Gandhi believed that the Asiatic Act would be repealed when Indians registered voluntarily, though the response of General Smuts was rather vague. Gandhi and all his colleagues were released from prison. Gandhi explained the provisions of the agreement at several meetings of Indians. By the end of May more than eight thousand Indians (out of a total population of less than 12 000) voluntarily applied for registration – and most of them gave fingerprints. Six thousand received certificates. But talks between Gandhi and Smuts during that month about the repeal of the Asiatic Act failed. The solution proposed by Smuts – to amend the Immigration Act before the repeal of the Asiatic Act – was unacceptable as it did not provide for the immigration of persons

with domicile in the Transvaal who had left during the war. It had no provision for the admission of educated persons. Smuts was later prepared to agree to allow former residents but was adamant that there should be no further Asiatic immigration. On August 11 1908 the government published the Voluntary Registration Validation Bill signifying its intention not to repeal the 'Black Act'. Satyagraha resumed. Essop Mia, Chairman of BIA, and Harilal Gandhi were among the first to defy municipal bye-laws, by hawking fruit without a licence and were subsequently arrested. On August 16 1908 the Indian community held a huge rally near the Hamidia Mosque in Johannesburg. Registration certificates, trading licenses were collected and burnt in a huge cauldron in a demonstration of defiance. By early 1909 enthusiasm for Satyagraha had dwindled among the traders. Most of those who defied the law were only prepared to go to prison once – for one or two weeks for hawking without a licence (Gandhi 1961).

In 1909 the four colonies agreed to form a Union of South Africa. General Botha and General Smuts went to London to ensure smooth passage of the Union of South Africa Bill. Delegations were sent to London by both African and the Coloured population. The Indian community decided to send a delegation to Britain and another to India. The government detained most of the delegates chosen by the community. Only Gandhi and Haji Habib went to London and H. S. L. Polak to India. The mission to London was mainly concerned with the problem of admission of educated Indians to the Transvaal under the Immigrants Restriction Act. Gandhi approached Lord Ampthill, Lord Crewe, the Colonial Secretary and others to try to persuade Smuts to reach an agreement with the Indian community. Smuts was prepared to agree to the admission of former residents of the Transvaal. Gandhi was anxious for the admission of a few educated Indians and was willing to accept that the number can be restricted administratively so long as the law was untainted by racism and did not refer to special restriction of Indians (Gandhi 1961). Smuts agreed to the repeal of the Asiatic Act and to admit six educated Indian a year as permanent residents but refused to accept any change to the immigration law to remove reference to Indians. The efforts towards an agreement failed. For Gandhi this was a matter of honour for

India. The *Satyagrahis* were not going to prison for their personal interest but for the honour of India. He could not accept a settlement in which Indians were not accepted, even in theory, as equals. Speaking at a farewell meeting in London on November 12 1909, Gandhi said that people in the Transvaal had chosen to go through sufferings for the principle of equality, the very bedrock on which the foundations of the British Constitution rested. It would be impossible for him and his countrymen to owe allegiance to an Empire in which they were not accepted, even in theory, as equals (Gandhi 1961).

The formation of Union of South Africa in June 1910 did not result in a more liberal attitude but in more repression in the Transvaal. Prison conditions became worse. The authorities began to deport resisters to India under miserable conditions on the decks of ships with little allowance for food. Botha and Smuts recognised that they could not break the Indian resistance though the number of *satyagrahis* dwindled. They were also under some pressure from Britain which could not ignore opinion in India. Smuts reached a provisional agreement with Gandhi. The Botha-Smuts government of the Union gazetted an immigration bill on February 25 1911 to consolidate the immigration laws of the different provinces. It provided for the repeal of the Asiatic Act in the Transvaal and the introduction of a very difficult education test for immigrants to the Transvaal so that all but a few Indians could be excluded. It also restricted inter-provincial movement. The bill although meeting some Indians demands as regards the Transvaal was very unfavourable as regards immigration to Natal and the Cape. It retained racist exclusion of Indians from the Orange Free State. Because of continued disagreements and other problems it became impracticable to proceed with the Immigration Bill in 1911. The government prepared a revised version of the Immigration Bill in October 1911. Gandhi felt that although the Bill was better it had several objectionable provisions. On the other hand Smuts faced strong opposition in Parliament. So the Bill was postponed to the next session. Meanwhile there was a Cabinet reshuffle. Smuts became the Finance Minister and Abraham Fischer, who was anti-Indian, became Minister of the Interior.

### INDIA'S RESPONSE TO INDIAN GRIEVANCES IN SOUTH AFRICA 1906-1912

India's reaction to the Indian disabilities was swift and immediate. One of the key bodies taking up the cause of the Indian grievances was the Indian National Congress (INC). From its inception on December 28 1885 the INC played a pivotal role as a prominent Indian public organization in not only raising the hardships of the Indians abroad but also in defining influence of the Indian Independence Movement. Although initially and primarily a political body, the Congress transformed itself into a national vehicle for social reform and human upliftment. The Congress was the strongest foundation and defining influence of modern Indian nationalism.

The discriminatory manner in the way Indians abroad were treated, especially in South Africa and Australia, led to scathing comments from senior members of the INC. For example, in 1897. Sir C. Sankaran Nair, the president of the INC stated.

*The disastrous consequences of this race question are already apparent. Englishmen and other European colonists in South Africa and Australia refuse to treat us on terms of equality and justify their refusal on account of our dreaded position in our own country..... On this race question no concession is possible. No compromise can be accepted as far as it lies in us. We must insist on perfect equality.....(Joshi 1942).*

By the 1900s NG Chanavarkar, the Congress president stated, 'let not Indian subjects going to Natal or the Cape Colony be treated as if India had no part or lot in the Empire' (Joshi 1942). In 1902 Surendranath Banerjee made scathing attacks on the myriad of disabilities on Indians in South Africa.

*It is melancholy to have to reflect that the South African legislators should have so little knowledge of India and the circumstances of Indian life as to confound the coolie with the cultured Indian, the aboriginal inhabitant with the representative of a civilization older than any the memory of man can recall and in comparison to which the civilization and culture of Europe are but of yesterday (Joshi 1942).*

By 1908 there were calls for legislative changes in the importation of Indian labour. At a mass meeting in Bombay in 1908 a resolution was

adopted which called for the cessation of indentured labour to South Africa pending the settlement of the grievances of Indians. The Hon. Gokhale asserted that the stoppage of recruitment would paralyse the industries of Natal and this was now the most vulnerable point of a federated South Africa (*Indian Opinion* 18 September 1908). In February 1910 a resolution moved by Gokhale in the Imperial Legislative Council in India to the effect that the Governor-General in Council be empowered to bar indentured labour from going to Natal was accepted (*Speeches of Gopal Krishna Gokhale*). Gandhi reiterated that 'No Indian can claim that the indentured is happy' (*Indian Opinion* 12 March 1910). The Indian Emigration (Amendment) Act 1910 was enacted and the Government in India was empowered to designate countries to which Indian emigration could be prohibited. The Government of India's decision to stop indentured emigration to Natal was conveyed to the Legislative Council in India on January 3 1911 (Joshi 1942; *Speeches of Gopal Krishna Gokhale*). The new law became operative from July 1, 1911. Indentured labour ceased in South Africa in 1911.

Public opinion all over India was aroused by reports from South Africa and was united in support of the struggle in the Transvaal. In 1909 H. S. L. Polak, a European sympathiser to the Indian struggle in South Africa, who had gone to India as a one-man deputation from the Indian community, played a key role in mobilising support. He was very effective in explaining the nature of the struggle in South Africa, the reasonableness of the demands of the Indian community and the sufferings of the people. His speeches and writings were given wide publicity by the Indian press. He reinforced the efforts of Gopal Krishna Gokhale and G.A. Natesan, editor of *Indian Review* in Madras, to ensure political and financial support to the struggle in South Africa. The moderates in the INC, who were wedded to constitutional struggle for freedom in India, were persuaded by Gokhale that in the situation in the Transvaal, refusal to acquiesce in an unjust law when there was no other course left for the people and accept suffering, was fully justified. Financial contributions for the struggle poured in. At the session of the Indian National Congress in Lahore in December 1909 delegates were so moved by Gokhale's speech on the resolution on South Africa that they contributed 18,000 rupees. Many women donated

their jewellery to the South Africa Fund. At the session of All India Muslim League delegates contributed three thousand rupees. Contributions were received from the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Maharajas of Mysore and Bikaner. Aga Khan donated £600. Sir Ratan Tata made a contribution of 25,000 rupees with a letter urging passive resisters on and hoping that the Union Parliament will grant an honorable settlement (*Indian Opinion* 10 December 1910, *Indian Opinion* 17 December 1910).

In 1910 GA Natesan of Madras cabled £400 for the Transvaal Passive Resistance funds. Ratan Tata of Bombay sent a cheque for 25,000 rupees (*Indian Opinion* 10 December 1910).

### **Gopal Krishna Gokhale Visit to South Africa 1912**

Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a respected Indian leader and member of the Viceroy's Council visited South Africa, on the invitation of Gandhi, from October to November 1912. He was received by the authorities in South Africa at the suggestion of the British Government. On November 10 thousands of poor Indians attended a meeting at Lord's Ground in Durban and presented their grievances – including the three pound tax on completion of their indenture and the annual one pound tax. He understood after a two-hour meeting with Union government officials that the Asiatic Registration Act would be repealed, discrimination in the Immigration Act would be removed and the £3 tax would be abolished. Gokhale's visit drew special attention to the problem of the three pound tax.

In 1895 Natal introduced a law imposing a three pound tax on all Indians who had completed their indenture. In 1903 it was imposed on boys over the age of sixteen years and girls over thirteen years. (It had intended to levy 25 pounds but compromised with the Government of India on three pounds.) It was intended to force Indian workers to continue indenture or leave South Africa. This tax was burdensome and it cost some families over £20 a year. Many ex-indentured labourers were not paying the tax as they could not afford it. In order to collect the tax the government passed a law in 1905 prohibiting employers from employing a person who did not produce the receipt for the tax. The

employers were required to deduct the tax from the wages. The government could recover the tax by civil process by auctioning the possessions of the labourers. There was no provision for imprisonment. The government devised a way around this. The magistrates would order the families to pay the tax and if they did not pay they would be charged with contempt of court and sent to prison. Gandhi denounced this tax. It caused enormous suffering after 1905. Many colonial born Indians took up the issue and demonstrated against it (*Indian Opinion* 16 November 1907, 29 August 1908; Bradlow 1970).

Gandhi preoccupied with the *Satyagraha* in the Transvaal was somewhat slow in taking up the issue except for publicising the suffering of former indentured workers and their families in *Indian Opinion*. But after it had been taken up by the youth in Natal he wrote to A.H. West on November 27 and December 8 1911 suggesting a well prepared and organised campaign. He suggested a petition to the Natal Prime Minister signed by at least 15,000 people, obtaining support from Europeans, a mass meeting, an appeal to the British Government – and if all these failed they would refuse to pay the tax. The visit of Gokhale and refusal of the Union Government to repeal the tax led Gandhi to include the tax as one of the main issues of the passive resistance campaign in 1913. This was a matter of honour of Gokhale and of India.

### ***Satyagraha* 1913**

By 1913 the stage was set for *Satyagraha*. There were multiple issues. Some amendments to the Immigration Bill were made in Parliament. The Act passed in the middle of 1913 was an improvement but did not satisfy the minimum demands of the Indian community. Gandhi entered into correspondence with General Smuts to ensure that existing rights were preserved under the Immigration Act but no agreement was reached. He sent a telegram to the Secretary of the Interior on September 10 1913 that revival of the struggle had become imperative. Gandhi remained pessimistic and his fears were justified when Smuts announced that the £3 tax would not be abolished. This announcement and a judicial decision in the Cape Supreme Court on March 14<sup>th</sup> 1913, which invalidated non-Christian marriages steered the *Satyagraha* struggle of 1913.

A mass meeting held by the BIA on 28 April 1913 at the Hamidia Hall in Johannesburg adopted a resolution that if the Indian demands were not met, passive resistance would be revived. The meeting was chaired by AM Cachalia, Chairman of the BIA, who said that the Immigration Bill of 1913 'cuts at the very root of existence and must be resisted by those affected by it at any cost'. He stated that if the Government did not heed to their demands »they were bound after exhausting all their resources by way of petition... to take up the well-trying weapon of passive resistance' (*Indian Opinion* 3 May 1913).

### **India's Support for the Satyagraha Campaign of 1913**

The passive resistance movement attracted great deal of local and international support. Politicians, businessmen, the press, clergymen in South Africa, India and England admired the stic demonstration by Indians. However, the most vociferous international protest came from India. Protest meetings were held all over India. Ramsay Macdonald who was then on a visit to India, wrote in the *Daily Chronicle* of London:

*I attended various meetings - as a mere spectator - called for the purpose of collecting money and passing resolutions about the South African situation and I have rarely been so impressed by the earnestness and determination of masses of men. Mahomedans vied with the Hindus in their speeches and offers of help and I should not be at all surprised if in time to come this will mark a very decided departure in Indian politics. Its general effect is to make Indians feel that they were not a part of the Empire and that they receive no protection from it (*Indian Opinion* March 18, 1914).*

Dadabhai Naroji known as India's 'Grand Old Man' was an active social reformer and supported the Satyagraha campaign in South Africa. He wrote on September 22 1913:

*Once again the situation of our countrymen in the Colonies and particularly in South Africa stirs us with deep emotion. They have suffered long and suffered much and have so borne their misfortune as to entitle them to the better regard and protection of His Majesty's Government. I have viewed with deep concern the indifference of the Imperial Government in regard to the recent Act in South Africa. But I still hope for justice and action.*

On 27 November the Natal Indian Association received the following cable from Agra: »Demonstration Agra with you heart and soul. Raising funds. Rev. Davies President' (*Indian Opinion* 3 December 1913). GA Natesan, Hon Secretary of the Indian South Africa League in Madras and an ardent supporter of Gandhi and the Indian struggle in South Africa, publicized the struggle in *Indian Review*. He published two pamphlets by Polak on the disabilities of Indians in South Africa and distributed the biography of Gandhi by the Reverend J. J. Doke. He set up an influential committee in Madras – the Indian South African League – to support the Indian struggle in South Africa. He collected substantial amounts of money for the struggle and was able to obtain contributions from the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Maharaja of Mysore and the Maharaja of Bikaner (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 10, 1909-1910). Gandhi stated in *Satyagraha in South Africa*:

*In those days Shri Natesan perhaps stood alone in India as a student of the grievances of Indians abroad, their valued helper and a systematic and well-informed exponent of their case (*Gandhi* 1961).*

Natesan sent a telegram to the British Indian Association from the Madras League on November 18 1913 which read as follows:

*Monster meeting emphatically protested against cruel treatment of Indians; demanded Imperial Government immediately intervene; Government India advised retaliation; Boer perfidy condemned appeal for £3000 first thousand cabling (*Natal Witness* 20 November 1913).*

Polak wrote in 1933:

*I recall G. A. Natesan's generous activities on behalf of Mr. Gandhi and his other countrymen in South Africa and how his heart flamed within him at the knowledge of the hardships and indignities to which they were being subjected by an unsympathetic and hostile Government. He was tireless in his efforts and restless in his energy. His vigorous speeches and writings on behalf of his suffering compatriots compelled attention by their obvious sincerity and accuracy of statement. ....Most of all I have to recall the loving service that Natesan gave to the South African Indian and Chinese deportees whom I had been able to rescue at Colombo and divert to Madras. I well remember*

*how he devoted himself to them, day and night, during the whole of their stay in that hospitable City; how he sometimes slept and ate with them though some of them were possibly untouchables; how he fraternized with them; helped them to restore confidence in themselves and pride in the cause they represented; and then I remember clearly how when he came to the station to bid farewell on their journey to Bombay and thence back to South Africa with me he burst into tears as the train left the station (Souvenir of the Sashtiabdha-Poorthi 1933).* Among those who were particularly helpful in Madras in support of the Indian struggle were V. S. Srinivasa Sastri and C. Rajagopalachari who became life-long friends of Gandhi.

Support for the struggle was also evident in large cash donations. For example, a large number of donations were received for the Passive Resistance fund. The Gaekwar of Baroda donated £360; the Aga Khan £660; Sir Dorabji Tata £330; Lady Tata £66; the Maharaja of Cooh Behar £66 (*Indian Opinion* 17 December 1913). Among the most prominent contributors to the South African passive resistance funds were His Highness Thakore Saheb of Gondal 10 000 rupees; Her Highness Ranees Saheb 2000 rupees; His Highness the Nizam 5000 rupees and Her Highness of Gaekwar Rs 5,500 (*Indian Opinion* 11 March 1914); H.E.H. the Nizam - Rs. 5,000; Sir Valentin Chriol, member of the Indian Public Service Commission - £5 (*Indian Opinion* 11 March 1914).

### **Support from Women's Organizations in India**

The Satyagraha struggle in South Africa not only rallied support from government officials and political organizations in India but women's organizations were also at the forefront of vociferous protests. Women in India were particularly concerned about women's incarceration in prison and the hardships families endured during the struggle.

In the Satyagraha movement in South Africa Indian women were at the forefront of the struggle (Hiralal 2009, 2010). Women's support began as early as 1907. While women did not court imprisonment in the Transvaal during the first Satyagraha movement of 1906-1908 they were very much involved in the struggle. They held meetings to denounce the unjust laws and the repression against the resisters. They collected

funds to help families in need. They supported and encouraged the *Satyagrahis*. Women's organisations became the platform for denouncing government racial policies and for galvanizing support amongst women in the struggle. *Indian Opinion*, in an article on February 8 1908 cited two cases of women pressing their husbands to fulfill the pledge taken on September 11, 1906:

*One of the men arrested at Pietersburg was in Pretoria when the Pretoria men were sentenced so barbarously, terrified at the thought of heavy penalties, including hard labour, he hastily proceeded to Natal where his wife lay upon a bed of sickness whence she might never again arise. Upon his arrival in Durban, however, she demanded of him the cause of his departure from the Transvaal and when she heard the cause peremptorily ordered him to return by the next train and submit to his punishment. He returned surrendered to the police in Pietersburg and was sentenced to three months' imprisonment with hard labour. Another man in Pretoria who had disobeyed the magisterial order to leave the Colony was to appear before the Court to receive sentence. His courage began to leave him but his wife informed him that if he were a coward she would don his clothes and herself receive punishment on his behalf. He went to gaol. The Madrassi women of Pretoria informed their husbands, sons and brothers who had undertaken picket duty that they need not be alarmed for them. If the men were arrested and sent to gaol they themselves would at once take their places in the pickets' ranks and warn the people of the perils awaiting them... In the light then of these incidents who shall say that the Transvaal Indian community was without its heroines (*Indian Opinion*, 8 February 1908)*

In 1909 the Transvaal Indian Women's Association was formed at a meeting held on March 25 at the Hamidia Hall in Johannesburg. Mrs. Rama Moodaly was elected chairman (*Indian Opinion* 15 March 1909). Miss Sonja Schlesin, former secretary of Gandhi who devoted herself to the Indian cause was elected honorary secretary. The Association was active in support of the movement and the rights of women. In 1910 it protested the prosecution of Mrs. Rambhabai Sodha by the immigration authorities in the Transvaal. The work of the Association was duly acknowledged by women's organizations in In-

dia who were sympathetic to the struggle. For example, in 1910 Mrs. Jehangir B Petit, a prominent member of the Parsee community in Bombay chaired the Bombay Ladies' meeting on August 26 in support of the passive resistance struggle in South Africa. A telegram of support was subsequently sent to the Transvaal Indian Women Association. The Association made the following statement on receipt of the telegram:

*This meeting of Transvaal Indian women hereby tenders its warm and grateful thanks to the women of Bombay for their generous support and sisterly sympathy given to the families of the Transvaal Indian passive resisters in their time of trial (Indian Opinion 26 November 1910).*

In 1912 the Association held a reception in honour of Gopal Krishna Gokhale at the Independent School, Main Street, Johannesburg. In response to their address Gokhale said he knew what they had to go through during the dark days of the struggle. *Indian Opinion* reported:

*As he was speaking he could almost see before his eyes a great meeting that was held in the Town Hall of Bombay at which their delegate Mr. Henry Polak described to the people of India the suffering of and disgrace to which they had been reduced in the struggle. At that meeting hardly an eye was dry or a heart untouched by their sacrifice and suffering... The Indian women of the Transvaal had come forward courageously to take part in the struggle, to cheer their menfolk and send them forth and it had been an object lesson to their sisters in India (Indian Opinion 9 November 1912).*

The judgment of Justice Malcolm Searle of the Cape Supreme Court on March 14 1913 denying legitimacy to marriages under religions which allow polygamy posed a direct challenge to Indian women. The judgment had broad implications. Firstly, it degraded the legal status of Indian women within Hindu, Muslim and Parsee marriages by branding the wives as concubines. Secondly, it sought to illegitimize the children of such marriages and deprived the rights of a wife and her children with regards to ownership and inheritance on the death of her spouse. Thirdly, it practically prohibited the immigration of Indian wives to South Africa. The judgment was a special affront to women as it affected women more than men. The reaction of women in South Africa was swift and bold. One of the first to protest boldly and swiftly was the Transvaal Indian Women's Association (*Indian Opinion*

10 May 1913). Sonja Schlesin sent a telegram on behalf of the Association to the Minister of Interior, General J. Smuts, calling for a legislative remedy to restore the situation failing which they would embark on passive resistance. The first group to offer Satyagraha consisted of 16 individuals from the Phoenix Settlement on September 15 1913 to defy the immigration laws. It included four women: Kasturba Gandhi; Mrs. Kashi Chhaganlal Gandhi and Mrs. Santok Maganlal Gandhi - wives of two nephews of Gandhi - and Mrs. Jayakunwar Manilal Doctor, daughter of Pranjivan Mehta, a friend of Gandhi from his student days in London. They were sentenced to three months imprisonment with hard labour. The harsh imposed sentence on women engaged in peaceful protest stirred India. Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, a prominent leader of Bombay who was known as 'the lion of Bombay' and who had not supported the *Satyagraha* until then, roared in a speech at Bombay Town Hall that »his blood boiled at the thought of these women lying in jail herded with ordinary criminals and India could not sleep over the matter any longer' (*ES Reddy n.d.*).

In Johannesburg a group of eleven women, along with six babies who had not yet been weaned or were incapable of being looked after formed the first batch of volunteers. Accompanied by Hermann Kallenbach, a European sympathetic to the Indian struggle, they went from Johannesburg to Viljoen's Drift in the Orange Free State but were not arrested. They re-crossed the border of the Transvaal at Vereeniging and were again not arrested. They decided to cross the Natal border. They were accompanied by Thambi Naidoo. Bhawani Dayal and other resisters joined them in Germiston. At Volksrust the women were detained for a few hours and released. They then took a train to Charlestown and headed for the coal mines in Newcastle to explain the position regarding the £3 tax to the coal miners and encourage them to suspend work until the Government assured them that the tax would be abolished (Nayar 1989). The women were later arrested and charged under the Vagrancy Act as 'idle, disorderly or suspicious persons'. They admitted that they had come to Newcastle peacefully to advise the Indians on the mines to suspend work until the government had given an undertaking to repeal the £3 tax. They were sentenced to three months with hard labour (Hiralal 2009).

Immediately after the arrest of the 11 Transvaal women another group of women from the Transvaal came to the strike area. Their mission was to mobilize support among the workers on plantations in Natal. The women visited different centers and addressed meetings. They were arrested when they hawked in Durban without permits but to their great disappointment they were discharged on reaching prison. In another attempt to go to prison they crossed the border from Natal to the Transvaal. They were deported to Natal but re-crossed the border and were sentenced to three months imprisonment with hard labour (Hiralal 2009).

Women also formed part of the 'Great March' to the Transvaal. The plan for the march of Indian workers from Newcastle to the Transvaal envisaged that the men would go by foot while women and children would be transported by train. But many women insisted on joining the march with their children and endured great hardship. Two women in their early twenties lost their infants during the march. One died 'of exposure' due to inclement weather and the other 'fell from the arms of its mother while she was crossing a spruit (a small tributary stream) and drowned'. Despite this tragedy they were not deterred and continued with the march. One of them stated: *'We must not pine for the dead who will not come back to us for all our sorrow. It is the living for whom we must work'* (Gandhi 1961).

### Women in Prison

In prisons women *Satyagrahis* were incarcerated with ordinary criminals and were subjected to many difficulties. In Newcastle women were forcibly vaccinated by having their blouses removed. This practice was stopped after Gandhi sent a telegram to the Minister of Interior on October 30 1913. Prison food was of the worst quality. Staple food such as beans was 'undercooked' and at times cockroaches and maggots were found in food. Women went on a hunger strike for four days in protest. Family and friends were not allowed to bring home-cooked meals. Several women suffered from dysentery as a result of the poor quality of food. Gandhi recalled:

*The women's bravery was beyond words. They were all kept in Maritzburg jail where they were considerably harassed. Their food*

*was of the worst quality and they were given laundry work as their task. No food was permitted to be given them from outside nearly till the end of their term. One sister was under a religious vow to restrict herself to a particular diet. After great difficulty the jail authorities allowed her that diet but the food supplied was unfit for human consumption. The sister badly needed olive oil. She did not get it at first and when she got it was old and rancid. She offered to get it at her own expense but was told that jail was no hotel and she must take what food was given her. When this sister was released she was a mere skeleton and her life was saved only by a great effort... (Gandhi 1961).*

News of the strike and women's arrest in 1913 aroused widespread resentment in India. Sympathetic meetings and protests were held by various women's organizations particularly in Western India, mainly in the cities such as Bombay and Ahmadabad. An inter faith gathering representing Hindus, Muslims, Parsee and Christian women rallied to the support of Indian women in South Africa in December 1913. They praised the fearless courage of the women who sought not only to defend and protect their womanhood but also the womanhood of all Indian women:

*All honor to these brave women for their self-sacrifice and suffering spirit! Who would have believed that Indian women were capable of such heroic conduct standing shoulder to shoulder with their husbands, fathers and brothers! Really and truly our hearts bleed for them and go out to them in their hour of harm, pain and suffering. They have the courage to leave behind them their families and their children, unprotected, unprovoked and starving (Indian Opinion 7 January 1914).*

Mrs Jamnabai N Sakkai, President of the Gujarati Hindu StriMandal who was sympathetic to the passive resisters in 1913 wrote:

*Bombay Gujarati Hindu StriMandal appreciates Indian ladies' part passive resistance. sympathizes urges vigorous continuance. Whole India with resisters (Indian Opinion 3 December 1913).*

A meeting of ladies assembled at Bombay, India on November 20 1913 at the Servants of India Society Hall. This meeting consisting of women from different faiths: Hindu, Muslim, Parsee, Christian and Jain. Lady JB Petit, the newly elected President of the Indian Ladies at

Bombay read several messages of sympathy to the men and women and children of South Africa. For example:

*Public meeting women Bombay, held Saturday expressed sympathy for sufferings of Indians and admiration for self-sacrifice, courage, patience Indian women have shown in struggle. Meeting also entered protest against harsh laws particularly marriage clause urged for inquiry into alleged barbarities and intervention by Imperial Government and thanked Viceroy for his firm and sympathetic stand (Indian Opinion 3 December 1913).*

They also proposed to collect funds »to support our brave sisters'. A Committee consisting of the following women was established to collect funds for the purpose of 'alleviating the distress of our suffering sisters in South Africa and of helping the Indian cause in that Colony generally'. The committee consisted of: Lady Jamssetjee Jeejibhoy, Lady Petit, Lady Mehta, Lady Currimbhoy, Lady Jagmohandas, Dilshad Begum Saheba, Mrs Heaton, Mrs Ramabhai Ranade, Mrs Jamnabhai Sakkai, Mrs Dehdustia, Miss Serenebai M Kharsetjee and Mrs JB Petit (*Indian Opinion* 7 January 1914). On December 31 1913 a women's conference was held at Karachi and was attended by some 200 ladies of various religious and linguistic groups. The meeting supported the men and women in the struggle in South Africa and made an appeal for funds to assist their brothers and sisters (*Indian Opinion* 18 February 1914). Another meeting was held at the Premabhai Hall, Ahmedabad to express sympathy towards the men and women of South Africa in their struggle for equality and justice. Miss Dhanbai Wadia chaired the session. Resolutions were passed strongly disapproving the cruel and unjust laws of the Union Government and objecting to the personnel of the Commission of Inquiry that was set up to look into Indians grievances. The resolution was communicated by wire Lord and Lady Hardinge, Gandhi and Kasturba Gandhi. They also decided to raise funds for the struggle (*Indian Opinion* 18 February 1913).

#### **Demand for a Commission of Inquiry**

In view of the alarming reports of brutality against passive resisters and strikers, Gopal Krishna Gokhale called for an impartial commission of inquiry with Indian representation. The

Indian community at several mass meetings supported this demand. Public opinion in India was outraged at reports of ill-treatment of women in prison and the violence against striking workers and there were protests all over the country. Responding to these sentiments, Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy, wrote to the Governor-General of South Africa expressing his concern over the violence against the Indians. Gladstone denied any ill-treatment. Lord Hardinge felt it necessary to make a public statement expressing sympathy with the Indian passive resisters and supporting the demand of Gokhale for an impartial investigation with Indian representation to assuage Indian opinion. In a speech in Madras on November 24 1913 he referred to demands for retaliation against South Africa and said:

*... unfortunately it is not easy to find means whereby India can make its indignation felt by those holding the reins of Government in South Africa. Recently your compatriots in South Africa have taken matters into their own hands organising passive resistance to laws which they consider invidious and unjust, an opinion which we who are watching their struggles from afar cannot but share. They violated those laws with a full knowledge of the penalties involved and are ready with all courage and patience to endure the penalties. In all this they have the deep and burning sympathy of India and also of those who like myself without being Indians sympathise with the people of this country but the most recent developments have taken a most serious turn. We have seen the widest publicity given to allegations that passive resistance is dealt with by measures which would not be tolerated for a moment in any country claiming to be civilised... I feel that if the South African Government desires to justify itself in the eyes of India and the world the only course open is to appoint a strong impartial committee wherein Indian interests will be represented to conduct the most searching inquiry... (Indian Opinion 3 December 1913).*

The British Government expressed support for an impartial inquiry. It could not ignore the mass protests all over India, the largest colony in the Empire. Sentiment in Britain as reflected by major newspapers, was highly critical of the South African Government. Under pressure from Britain and India, the South African Government announced in early December 1913 the appointment of an Indian Inquiry Commission but with-

out Indian representation. The Commission was composed of Sir William Solomon, a judge as Chairman and two members who were notoriously anti-Indian – Ewald Esselen, a leading member of the Bar in the Transvaal and J.S. Wylie, a member of the Provincial Executive of Natal. After much deliberation a compromise settlement, the Indians' Relief Act of 1914 was passed. The provisions of the Bill were as follows: the £3 tax was abolished, Indian marriages were legalized and one wife and the minor children of an Indian marriage - even if it was polygamous - were given the right to join their husbands residing in South Africa (Swan 1985).

### CONCLUSION

The greatest effect of the *Satyagraha* campaign was that it became a valuable heritage and instilled pride in the Indian community. India's pervasive support for the *Satyagraha* movements and her sustained efforts at improving the conditions of South Africans of Indian origin at the turn of the century is testimony of India's commitment of protecting the interests of her overseas communities. Moreover India encouraged Indians to make South Africa their home. Gokhale had advised the Indians born in South Africa - the 'colonial born Indians' - to seek their own salvation as South Africa was their home. In time, the Indian population in South Africa grew and became a permanent part of South African society. In the contemporary period India's engagement with its diaspora communities is symbiotic, seeking to create a resilient and robust bond. In South Africa the ties which were established in 1860 has over a period of time grown strong and led to sustained engagement in the field of education, culture and tourism.

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